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Krishna Shastri Devulapalli
Off the beaten track

Let's mistreat some robots, what say?

At a party I attended a while ago, a friend of mine, self-admitted dotting dad, was having his daily phone conversation with his daughter, currently studying in the US. (Funded entirely by him, of course.)

'Yes, sweetie, no, sugar,' my friend went, giving the soon-to-be-laid-out dessert section a complex. Choochie pies, puppy dolls, babykins and honey boo boos were flying like missiles, as our Father of the Year took large sips of his Scotch.

Meanwhile, a small-made girl from the north-eastern part of our great land (shame on me for categorising her thus, I ought to have known which state she was from), of about twenty, twenty-two, stood by with a large platter of chicken something-or-the-other. Quietly, somewhat fearfully, worried she might drop the platter.

Our friend, still in the throes of long-distance filial love, selected a couple of minutely examined pieces and put them on his plate. The girl took this as a cue to leave. Friend snapped his fingers and pointed at his plate. Because, you see, if he spoke to the young waitress, it would mean breaking his conversation for a second. And he couldn't do that, could he? What would his Princess Rasagulla Poopins in distant California think if he wasn't giving her his complete attention? But he needed a third piece of chicken, too, obviously. For his opening gambit, snack-wise, was always three pieces. His wife knew it. I knew it. Everyone knew it. It was written in stone. And it was as good a time as any to let the waitress know what to do when she brought the next platter.

The young woman took the piece our friend had magisterially pointed at with his fork and served it to him. Her hand trembled. Friend nodded his head to say he was done. For now. He would be beckoning her soon enough with raised hand or finger snap obviously, when his next requisition needed to be dealt with on a war footing.

'Well,' my friend said, a minute later, his conversation with Butter Bonbon done, his mouth full of poultry. 'What's the news, man?'

The irony of his darling daughter being the exact same age as the young waitress seemed to have whooshed past him like an outswinger. I stuck my hand out and shook his.

'What?' he said.

'I think we're officially ready for the robots, man,' I said.

'You do say the strangest of things, you know,' he said, laughing.

Personally, as a nation, I think we'll adapt only too easily to robots. Because certain humans don't exist for us at all except for their utility value. We consider their feelings about as much as we consider the feelings of, say, microwaves, hairdryers or bottle openers. The one issue with robots I do foresee, though, is that mistreating them — that quintessentially Indian need of needs — may not give us the same amount of pleasure as mistreating a warm-blooded human seems to. But I'm sure our tech guys will figure out a way to make robots feel pain and humiliation soon enough.

The recent conviction of the Hinduja by Swiss authorities for the treatment they meted out to their domestic help, sadly, didn't shock (or even surprise) me one bit. Because it's just one more example of how most of us view those who help us with our daily lives. For every headline-making Hinduja or Khobragade, there's the friend who makes his driver stay up Saturday nights as he bar-hops, the neighbour who makes the caregiver of her octogenarian father bring her own tiffin carrier, the colleague whose nanny waits in the lobby as the family dines at an exclusive restaurant or the sibling who has his 'gofer' take off his shoes when he returns from work. We are, after all, the nation that individually abandoned our domestic help during lockdown by abruptly cutting off their salaries, and betrayed our guest workforce collectively as we watched them walk hundreds of kilometres, back to the homes they had left behind.

On a slightly upbeat note, for nearly ten years, we've been the grateful beneficiaries of this kind, patient and forever-jovial woman who cooks for us. A couple of days ago, her daughter came by to assist us with some proofing/indexing work on a book we are putting together. (I hasten to add that we can't take any credit for young woman's current position as a freelance editor. Her path to a better life was the result of her mother's resilience and foresight long before she met us, and the education that was put in place by our earlier leaders, who we are being told did nothing for us.)

You would think this was justice, right? It is a step in the right direction perhaps. But justice it isn't.

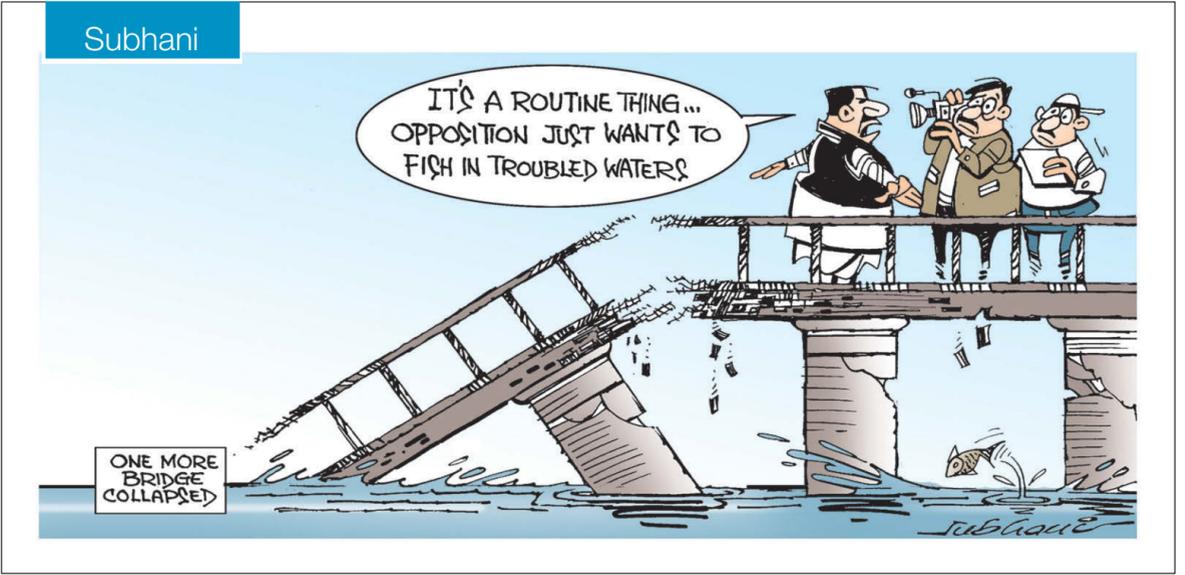
Justice is when my kid works for her kid. Or better still, if I'm employed by her. Soon. Tomorrow.

As for poetic justice, that would be the father of the young waitress, now the CEO of an international hotel chain, being served hors d'oeuvre by my friend's daughter, currently laid off from the job Daddy's connections got her.

Krishna Shastri Devulapalli is a humour writer, novelist, columnist and screenwriter



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Balance of power is key to leash China, Russia, Israel



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

History tells us that geo-strategic transitions are never easy. They are always accompanied by uncertainty, fear, insecurity and bloodshed — not necessarily in that order. However, what every transition brings with itself are certain conceptual constructs that then underpin the strategic landscape over the next decade or even centuries that usher in an era of sustainable tranquility that is usually accompanied by prosperity, the forward march of the human race and above all stability and a modicum of happiness.

If one takes a deep dive into history, the Thirty Year War that commenced in 1618 between the Roman Catholics and Protestants devastated much of Central Europe. Out of the ashes of that destruction that attained quietus with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a new principle emerged that underpinned European statecraft for a century or more. It is called *raison d'état*. Coined by a prince of the church Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, First Minister of France from 1624-1642, it was practised by most European powers for an epoch thereafter.

Raison d'état was premised on the fact that security and primacy of a nation state warranted the deployment of all means essential to preserve, protect and promote it. It envisaged that supreme national interest must eschew all archaic notions of universal morality.

Raison d'état, therefore, was predicated on a convoluted hypothesis that every nation state while pursuing its own selfish and narrow interests would in some manner underwrite the collective safety and progress of all the others.

However, by the 18th century, Great Britain had articulated the concept of balance of power that then dominated European diplomacy for the next two hundred years. It had its genesis in the British desire to prevent any one single European power from dominating the European continent. In pursuit of maintaining an equilibrium it required Great Britain to throw its weight behind the vulnerable or the more feeble side in any conflict.

The concept of balance of power was utilised by Prince Von Metternich of Austria and other European statespersons to construct the concert of Europe at the Congress of Vienna in September 1814. It ensured that no war at all took place among the Great Powers for 40 years and after the Crimean War of 1854 there was no general war for another 60, thereby ensuring a century of relative peace that helped Europe to materially, culturally and imperially flourish. Unfortunately, a subsequent German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck disassembled the Concert of Europe and recast European high statecraft into a ruthless pursuit of power politics — a 'realpolitik'.

The reason I have chosen to enunciate these three principles, namely, *raison d'état*, balance of power and realpolitik, is because many centuries after they were conceptualised and applied by statespersons of that era, they still continue to operate, albeit under different nomenclatures, as the world faces perhaps its biggest challenge to collective peace after the Second World War in the form of active conflicts across three continents.

In the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict or the Russian aggression on Ukraine, both the classical concepts of *raison d'état* and balance of power are at play. A concerned or even overly

Even though its economy is slowing down now, the legacy buoyancy that translated into hefty military spending is now being leveraged by China to reclaim its mythical status as the Middle Kingdom...

distrustful Russia at the ostensibly eastward expansion of Nato decided to put its narrow national interest above everything else, thereby violating the sovereignty of Ukraine. While that fulfills the first part of the *raison d'état* postulate, as far as the second leg of that hypothesis is concerned, i.e., it should underwrite the collective safety of others, if it would lead to the reordering of the security architecture of Europe, thereby bringing back sustainable peace in Europe, remains to be seen. The jury would be out on that for quite a while.

Conversely, in this very conflict, you also have the template of the balance of power at play. Nato has weighed in squarely on Ukraine's side as have other democratic nations around the world. Given that Ukraine is the weaker power, the balance of power in Europe has to be maintained. The desire to maintain this European equilibrium has in fact impelled both Finland and Sweden to become members of Nato. Something both refrained from doing after the devastating Second World War.

In the Israel-Hamas conflict, you see the first postulate of the *raison d'état* squarely at play with Israel deploying elevated levels of violence to neutralise the Hamas threat even if it involves the bombing of hospitals and the wanton killing of innocent men, women and children.

This, by no means, should be construed as any justification of the horrific terror attack by Hamas on innocent Israeli civilians or the taking of hostages, the argument simply being that the Israeli response, disproportionate in every sense of the word, is predicated upon the

fact that security and primacy of the nation state justifies the employment of every imperative howsoever iniquitous considered essential to defend it.

Paradoxically, you do not have the balance of power paradigm at play in the Israel-Hamas conflict for no nation state of any consequence in the greater Middle East has even attempted to weigh in on the side of Hamas, leaving aside Iran and Syria that both support the Hamas and Hezbollah. However, that hardly qualifies as any substantive balancing of power in the purely classical sense of the term.

Coming to the Chinese power play on the Line of Actual Control qua India and its belligerence in the larger Indo-Pacific region, both ruthless realpolitik and *raison d'état* are at play insofar as China is concerned. Fuelled by three-and-a-half decades of unprecedented economic growth, China has established a power differential across the board qua its neighbors.

Even though its economy is slowing down now, the legacy buoyancy that translated into hefty military spending is now being leveraged by China to reclaim its mythical status as the Middle Kingdom that, in its estimation, was disrupted by the century of humiliation in 1839-1949.

Apposite to that, the principle of balance of power is also operating in the Indo-Pacific, with the QUAD, AUKUS, ASEAN Regional Forum and various other groupings and quasi-alliances being energised to ensure that the Chinese influence, malefic that it is, does not become toxic to the extent that it leads to an eminently avoidable conflict.

As the adage goes, the more things change the more they remain the same. Situations may change, times may move on, but grundnorm concepts endure.

The writer is a lawyer, MP and former Union minister. The views expressed are personal. Twitter handle @manishtewari.

LETTERS BP BASELINE

The European Society for Cardiology's decision to raise the blood pressure (BP) baseline from 130/80 to 140/90 has evoked mixed reactions. I believe that this new guideline may lead to confusion and misdiagnosis among patients, healthcare professionals, and the public. Raising the BP baseline might result in under-treatment for those who genuinely require medication, while others may be unnecessarily prescribed drugs with potential side effects. This could have far-reaching implications on global public health. The ESC should provide clear explanations and justifications for this change, and consider the opinions of the medical community and patients in its decision-making process.

TS Karthik Chennai

RUCKUS IN LS

The Opposition demanded a discussion on the 'Neet issue' and irregularities in the exams conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) in Parliament. Both the Houses of Parliament were adjourned for the day due to disruptions and pandemonium. The Prime Minister talked about consensus and cooperation in running the government. Opposition wants the government to be more accommodative. We are back to square one with disruptions and pandemonium. Neither the BJP nor the Opposition seems to have learned any lesson. Why not political parties be made accountable for the loss of business hours of the House?

Sravana Ramachandran Chennai

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com



M.P. Nathanael

A proven force is better than taking new inductees to secure Parliament

The "unprecedented misbehaviour" of Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel with Rajya Sabha MP M. Mohammed Abdullah on June 18 has led to his lodging a complaint with vice-president Jagdeep Dhanekar, the Chairman of the Upper House. He was questioned by the CISF personnel about his "purpose of visit" to Parliament. The "incident has deeply affected me," the MP said.

Last month, another DMK MP, Tiruchi Siva, was asked to show his ID thrice inside Parliament. Reports of misbehaviour by CISF personnel have been reported in the past, but no severe action seems to have been taken against those responsible, to be a deterrent to others.

On June 6, CISF constable Kulwinder Kaur slapped actor-MP Kangana Ranaut at Chandigarh airport before she was to board a flight for Delhi. Kulwinder nurtured a grudge against the actor for her unpalatable comments on the farmers' agitation from November 2021 to December 2022 on the Delhi Haryana and Delhi-UP borders. The actor had said women agitators had been paid Rs 100-200 each for participation.

Kulwinder Kaur's mother and brother

were among the agitators, with the latter spearheading the agitation as secretary of Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti.

In August 2020, a CISF officer had the temerity to ask DMK MP Kanimozhi at Chennai airport how she could claim to be an Indian when she couldn't speak in Hindi. Though Ms Kanimozhi walked away and showed maturity by not engaging in a fracas with the CISF man, she took to Twitter to express her annoyance, which drew media attention. Hindi imposition on South Indians became the subject of a media debate.

On December 12 last, Sharmila Rajasekaran, an engineer, was mocked at by a CISF lady officer for not knowing Hindi at Dabolim airport. At the security check, she was asked to pick up a tray, but she didn't understand Hindi. To this, the CISF officer asked her if Tamil Nadu was in India, and if so, she should learn Hindi as it was the national language. Ms Sharmila corrected her, saying that it was official language. She googled to prove her point. In her complaint to the CISF head at the airport, she said the way she "was treated was inhuman and culturally insensitive". Condemning the incident, Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K.

Stalin said that non-Hindi speaking air passengers often face such harassment by CISF personnel. The extent of insensitivity of CISF personnel can be gauged from another incident at Kolkata airport in January this year, when Arushi Singh, a wheelchair-bound passenger, was asked thrice to stand and walk two steps despite her explaining about the disability from birth. Following the breach of security in the Parliament building on December 13 last year, when two men jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the visitors' gallery and lobbed smoke canisters they managed to smuggle in, by placing them in cavities of shoes, a thorough survey was done on the security of Parliament by a team led by CRPF director-general Anish Dayal Singh.

While Parliament's security falls within the domain of responsibilities of The Lok Sabha Speaker, the Union home ministry replaced the Delhi police, CRPF and even the Parliament Security Staff (PSS) with the CISF. This despite the fact that the CRPF and the PSS acquitted themselves exceedingly well.

A daring attack on Parliament House on December 13, 2001, by five heavily-armed terrorists was effectively warded

off by alert personnel of the CRPF and who prevented them from entering the main building. They were all shot dead by CRPF personnel, who were manning various gates. While taking on the terrorists, Lady Constable Kamlesh Kumari was fatally hit by bullets. For her derring-do, she was awarded the highest peacetime gallantry award, the Ashok Chakra. Five other CRPF personnel were awarded the Shaurya Chakra. The citadel of democracy was saved from what could have been a catastrophic event if even one of the terrorists had sneaked into the main Parliament building.

Six terrorists who made a daring attempt to enter Srinagar airport, then guarded by the CRPF, on January 16, 2001 were neutralised before they could enter the airport. Four CRPF personnel including a lady constable were martyred in the fierce encounter just outside the airport. For their valour, five were honoured with gallantry medals.

The CRPF has proved its mettle in securing high-risk buildings umpteen times since its raising in July 1939. The withdrawal of the CRPF from Parliament is not a step in the right direction. It will be much better to deploy a tried-

and-tested force than to induct a force which hasn't had the exposure or experience to handle daring attacks on important high-security buildings. With the CISF taking over the duties of the Parliament Security Service, uncertainty looms large on the latter's future. With their long experience of dealing with MPs and other staff, PSS personnel are better placed to recognise everyone and must continue with the duties they were performing. They can be either taken on deputation with the option for permanent absorption in the CISF as they had been with the Delhi police. They could be permanently posted in the Parliament security set-up till retirement by making an exception to the transfer policy of the CISF, which necessitates the replacement of personnel by new inductees periodically.

The security of Parliament can't be compromised in any way and the best of security manpower and apparatus must be deployed. A tried and tested force is always better than any new inductions.

The writer is a retired IPS officer who had served as IGP in the CRPF

Opinion

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REUTERS

Sport thrives on underdog stories

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

BIG STARS AND marquee names drive the sports industry, which is why they are the darlings of sports administrators. But the most memorable sports stories often are of underdogs prevailing over more fancied opponents, fighting against the odds.

The T20 World Cup and the ongoing European football championship have provided several heart-warming moments, even if they may not be to the wholehearted approval of the marketing personnel.

Afghanistan was widely acknowledged as a dangerous cricket team that could do some damage on their day if conditions were to their advantage. But in the Caribbean, they can rightly claim to have come of age having made their way to the semifinals, even toppling the all-conquering Australians. They can now genuinely claim to be the second-best Asian team behind India, at least in the 20-over format, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh enduring a bit of a tough time of late.

In Rashid Khan, they have an inspirational leader who seems to rise to the big occasion. He had always been recognised as a quality leg-spinner but in the shortest format, a few hits to and over the boundary in the closing stages of an innings could make a vital difference.

Significantly, Afghanistan now also has a robust opening pair in Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran, who can hold their own against the best of bowling attacks. Young Azmatullah Omarzai showed what he is capable of at the 50-over World Cup and along with Mohammad Nabi and Gulbadin Naib, gave the team all-round depth.

For a team largely reliant on their spinners, it was heartening to see them getting wickets with the new ball through left-arm pacer Fazalq Farooqi and the feisty Naveen-ul-Haq. Finishing among the top four at a World Cup could just be the fillip for Afghanistan to take their game to the next level in terms of consistency and depth. For an emerging team such as them, it's vital that they seize the moment and not let the opportunity go by.

Cricket has been just a fringe sport in the United States over the decades, played largely by expatriates, but till the next big event is staged in the country or India comes to play a few games, it will be the US team that has to carry the baton to ensure the sport occupies a foothold in the market.

Towards that end, the performances of the co-hosts were an unexpected breath of fresh air, making it to the Super Eight stage at the expense of Pakistan. They were always expected to struggle there in the company of England, South Africa, and West Indies, but if the cricket administrators hope to have a few players in the team who do not have roots in traditional cricketing countries, they have to ensure that the sport is played at the grassroots, in schools and colleges.

Nepal and Scotland also caught the eye in the tournament and were close to scalping major teams in this competition. They have the advantage of close proximity to major cricket hubs, and it's important that they don't have to wait till they make it to their next big ICC

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir...

THE BJP-LED GOVERNMENT under the Hon'ble Mr Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9, 2024. It did not have a happy start. Mr Modi had to share the head table with the leaders of the TDP and JD(U) and allot portfolios to them and other allies. In the election of the Speaker he had to go through the motions of consultation. Both were unusual experiences for Mr Modi in his 22 years as head of government.

Several setbacks

There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir. The prices of tomato, potato and onion increased, year on year, by 39, 41 and 43%, respectively. The Sensex and Nifty soared to historic highs while the dollar-rupee exchange rate plunged to a historic low. Toll tax on highways was raised by 15%. In an apparent censure, Mr Mohan Bhagwat, the *sarsangchalak* of RSS, admonished those who displayed "arrogance"; the BJP's leadership squirmed but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Local mutinies broke out in several state units of the BJP.

In the first session of Parliament, save the election of the Speaker and the President's Address, there was no substantive business. But even the routine business had its share of controversies. By convention, the member of Parliament who has been elected most times to the Lok Sabha would be nominated the *pro-tem* Speaker to preside over taking the oath by elected members. That person, undisputedly, was Mr K Suresh (Congress-Kerala) who has been elected for the 8th time, though with a break. However, the government nominated Mr B Mahtab (BJP-Odisha) for the office although he has been elected only 7 times (six times on the BJD ticket and, after he crossed over, the 7th time on the

event to make their presence felt.

Underdogs bite back

International football has largely been dominated by the traditional powerhouses, but upsets are more likely in The Beautiful Game than in cricket, where individual class and quality can often make the difference. In football, a well-coached, disciplined, and committed team can frustrate an amalgamation of more talented individuals. That's what has been on display at the Euros.

Other than a handful of players, the Austrian squad doesn't boast of many household names outside their country. But they topped a group featuring France and the Netherlands, a big credit to manager Ralf Rangnick. They are fast starters and press the opposition high up the pitch. Their results in the group stage will ensure that they fear no team.

As far as feel-good stories, not much can top Georgia and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. The team is the lowest-ranked outfit at the Euros, but that didn't prevent them from beating Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal in their final group game to seal their passage to the knockout rounds. Kvaratskhelia scored in that game, a significant event in itself, as a picture from 2013 soon emerged showing the then 12-year-old in the same picture frame with Ronaldo when the Portuguese superstar, already acknowledged as an all-time great of the game, visited the Dinamo Tbilisi Academy in Georgia, where Kvaratskhelia developed his game in his formative years.

Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia when they were crowned European champions in 1976, but as a separate nation have had few team successes to celebrate — till they beat World No. 3 Belgium in their opening match of Euro 2024. A draw against Romania got them to the next stage and a meeting with England. Slovenia, part of erstwhile Yugoslavia — a region that was a perennial source of high-quality football talent — emerged unbeaten from a group featuring high-profile England, Denmark, and Serbia.

These results attest to the competitive nature and all-round quality of European football and show that there's some substance to Kylian Mbappe's claim that winning the Euros is, in some respects, tougher than winning the World Cup. Upsets are more likely and even if there has been a lack of too many high-scoring games, there's no chance that any of the matches will be taken lightly by any fancied side.

Big guns dominate

In comparison, across the Atlantic, Brazil's goalless draw with Costa Rica in the Copa America was considered almost a disaster by supporters of the five-time world champions. That's because apart from Brazil and Argentina, none of the teams from that continent have been a major factor at recent World Cups and are expected to sail through their initial Copa games without much trouble. Argentina are the current world champions, but that was the first for South America in two decades. The match timings in the United States are not finalised keeping in mind Indian viewers — in contrast to the T20 World Cup — but even with Lionel Messi in the tournament, the lack of relative competitiveness is also a big factor making the Copa America a less attractive option than the Euros for casual football fans.



The BJP-led government under PM Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9

FILE PHOTO: PTI

What has changed? Apparently nothing

BJP ticket.

Why did the BJP kick up the avoidable controversy? Possible answers are: BJP wanted to signal that the results of the LS elections have not dented its supreme leader's way of doing things, namely, 'it's my way or highway'. Another answer could be that the controversy-courting Mr K. Rijiju, the new minister of parliamentary affairs, wanted to signal his arrival. The most plausible answer is that the nomination was a reward for Mr Mahtab's defection from the BJD to the BJP and to encourage more MPs to defect to the BJP.

Stale assurances

Although the election of the Speaker concluded on a sour note, the rest of the session need not have been affected. But the Hon'ble Speaker added more bitterness when he moved a resolution from the Chair excoriating the Congress for the imposition of Emergency 49 years ago (yes, 49 years, not 50)! Next, Parliament may 'teach' other history lessons by condemning Pakistan for the invasion of Kashmir in 1947, China for the war in 1962 and the United States for sending an aircraft carrier to intimidate India in 1971. The resolution was an unwarranted provocation.

The President's Address to the joint session of both Houses was an opportunity to restore civility after false starts, but the opportunity was missed. The speech could have recognised the changed com-

position of the Lok Sabha, the fact that the leading party (BJP) was short of a majority by 32 seats, that the prime minister was the *primus inter pares* of a *coalition* government and that, after 10 years, there would be a Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Disappointingly, the President's Address made no reference to the altered circumstances.

The speech was a litany of claims made by the BJP before and during the elections. The claims were rebuffed by the vast majority of the people. The new government is not a BJP government but a *coalition* government. The BJP has refused to acknowledge the bittersweet fact and the President echoed that view. The word '*coalition*', did not occur in the speech. Other words that were conspicuous by their absence included '*consensus*', '*inflation*', and '*parliamentary committee*'. There were references to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes but all others — especially the minority communities — were clubbed in the catch-all phrase 'social and religious groups'. There was no reference to the tragedy of Manipur. As a small mercy there was no reference to '*Agniveer*' or '*Uniform Civil Code*'. Finally, India is no longer a *Vishwa Guru*, and is content to be a *Vishwa Bandhu*!

More of the sameness

Apparently, in the view of the BJP, nothing has changed, not even the mood of the people.

Hence, it is the same Cabinet, the same ministers, the key ministers hold the same portfolios, the same Speaker, the same principal secretary to the prime minister, the same National Security Adviser, the same chief of the Intelligence Bureau, the same government law officers, and many others remaining in the same positions. Besides, I am told that the social media is full of the same paid trolls who are semi-literate, diversionary, proficient in the science of scatology, and obvious losers. That, I am afraid, is conclusive proof that nothing has changed despite the verdict of the people!

In the run-up to the Budget, the top concerns of the people remain (1) unemployment and (2) inflation. According to, the CSDS' post-poll survey (*The Hindu* dated June 25, 2024), '*price rise/inflation*' and '*growing unemployment*' got 29% and 27% as the most 'disliked' work of the BJP government. On addressing the top two concerns, the formation of the Cabinet and the President's Address let down the people. Will the Budget for 2024-25, due in July, awaken the Modi government? Parliamentary etiquette requires that we keep our fingers crossed.

Website: pamidambaram.in
Twitter: @Pamidambaram_IN

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Emergency reruns

LAST WEEK, THE anniversary of Indira Gandhi's draconian Emergency was commemorated in Parliament. But the outpouring of condemnation from the ruling party seemed more about scoring political points than genuine concern over the real issues involved. Having written a book on Emergency, I am often asked about my first-hand experiences. I always find it ironic that many of those who commemorate June 26 and regret the horrors of suppression of the media and fundamental rights, seem oblivious that a dark cloud still hangs over freedom of expression and liberty even today. For instance, in the last Lok Sabha session, parliamentary correspondents were never so ruthlessly restricted, except during the Emergency. The difference today is in the style of operation, but not the basic effect.

All rulers want to control the narrative. Indira, despite her liberal upbringing, used sledgehammer

tactics, announcing upfront that she was suspending fundamental rights and introducing censorship. Subsequent governments have resorted to less in-your-face methods. Strong-arming individuals and groups funding the media, unjustly applying laws concerning terrorism and corruption, raiding media offices and arresting scribes without following due process, denying visas to foreign journalists, using the CBI and the ED to settle scores are some of the more draconian methods of media regulation of late. But control of news emanation can even be effected by simply shutting out legitimate sources of information. Scribes who don't toe the line are cut out from the loop of newsgathering, like background briefings, interviews, and entry to Parliament and government offices. The media starts introspecting less than it should on official claims. How, for instance, did so many scribes get it wrong in the recent poll results?

Strong govts vs weak ones

Politicians tend to lump the media into two categories: those who are with them and those who are against them. Unhappily, the middle ground of objectivity in journalism has practically disappeared. I personally believe the thumb rule generally is

that the stronger the government, the more overbearing it is, both in state or at the Centre. The media is far more free and fearless under unstable governments. PM Modi and Indira were similar in terms of mass appeal, unilateralism and a deep suspicion of newsgathers. Some may question my theory, citing the example of Rajiv Gandhi who, despite his huge majority, was unable to suppress the Bofors exposé that led to the fall of his government. But that may have been less due to lack of intent than because his media controllers were ham-handed and some newspapers remained defiant. Also, a hostile President Zail Singh was in the Rashtrapati Bhavan for much of his tenure. I recall first-hand back in 1989, when a shell-shocked Vijaypat Singhania was ordered by a Rajiv aide to shut down his newly started newspaper, *Indian Post*, where I worked then, because a damaging lead story had appeared against one of the PM's close friends. Earlier, then editor-in-chief Vinod Mehta was provided a list of people who were not to be written about negatively, which he shared sheepishly with me.

Past governments far more tolerant of a free press included those of Morarji Desai and Deve Gowda. But perhaps their *laissez-faire* attitude was more because they lacked a clear majority and many from within their own ranks were plotting their downfall.

Can't control the narrative

Despite total censorship, with a few courageous exceptions like *The Indian Express*, Indira lost the 1977 elections because news of her regime's excesses spread throughout the country by word of mouth. In 2024, the age of social media, aspersions were cast on '*godis*' and '*pappu*' scribes in traditional media, but the most effective counter to government propaganda may have come from irreverent YouTubers and influencers, curiously some of whom started out as travel writers and bodybuilders. The new entrants attracted millions of viewers. And thousands of aspiring writers dashed off disrespectful WhatsApp campaign messages that went viral. The Modi 3.0 regime should learn from Emergency — that you cannot control the narrative, particularly in the 21st century. Devising new IT laws to monitor the Internet and earning international opprobrium is definitely not the answer, but Rabindranath Tagore's powerful poem, 'Where the mind is without fear' is the soundest advice. If PM Modi were to restrain some of his overzealous media advisers (unofficial censors), it would go a long way in restoring goodwill and confidence in his image as a benevolent, strong ruler. Indira learnt this lesson the hard way, with her ignominious Emergency defeat.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



'Blame Game' on SCCL 'much ado about nothing'

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

A weird 'Blame Game' by INC, BJP, and BRS leaders accusing one another of allocation of coal mines of Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL) to private companies sounds ridiculous, immature, childish, and obvious ignorance of facts.

In fact, the coal mines were allotted to large and small industrial companies, not following procedure, during the UPA tenure, but subsequently the Supreme Court cancelled the allotments. Auctioning of mines by BJP is an open secret. That outsourcing 90% of 'Over Burden' in opencast coal mines led to average wages to employees at just one-third of what Singareni regular employee gets is well known. Curiously, SCCL is exploring mining outside the State, and even bidding for mining abroad to become the biggest supplier of coal in the globe. In essence, the difference in all these accusations is one of degree not kind.

SCCL started mining operations in Telangana since 1886, through Hyderabad (Deccan) Company Limited, and met with success and reasonable failure for obvious reasons. Politically motivated accusations, may lead to apprehensions among employees of likely privatisation, and if and when it happens, the profit-driven approach of private companies may adversely affect them. SCCL is currently operating 17 opencast and 22 underground mines with manpower of nearly 42,000.

In this context, in an interesting, informative, and plain-speaking conversation, the former Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) of SCCL and former Chairman of Coal India, Singayapally Narsing Rao, presented a concise, precise, but comprehensive account of the company, dovetailing his personal experience. His path-breaking narration of SCCL's ups and downs, crisis management skills by a few former Chief Ministers and CMDs, and reforms during Chandrababu Naidu tenure are interesting.

"Monopoly business character, early bird advantage, and control free administration lead to success of any public sector undertaking (PSU), and SCCL is no exception, and hence presenting any particular PSU as successfully running is sheer euphemism," said Narsing Rao. He listed three reasons for PSUs not running successfully; namely, doubling the normal wages to employees, recruiting more than adequate employees, and absence of incentives and disincentives.

He quoted Karl Marx as saying, 'From Each According to his Ability, to Each According to his Needs,' meaning free access to and distribution of goods, capital, and services. He said 'Management of PSU SCCL has been deprived of absolute control in many aspects, and government decided wholly. Unit cost of coal production in SCCL, being a heavily loaded labour-oriented organization, is closely twice that of a private entity.'

SCCL as Hyderabad (Deccan) Company Limited was



Writer is seen with former SCCL CMD and former Coal India Chairman S Narsing Rao

SCCL continued its losses and operational problems, till Nara Chandrababu Naidu became the Chief Minister. As he was playing key and 'Kingmaker Role' in national politics when Deve Gowda, Gujral and Vajpayee were Prime Ministers, he successfully managed to get the loans rescheduled. For the first time, first of its kind significant reforms were introduced by Chandrababu Naidu. 'Concept of One Single Union,' a major contribution to the company, was implemented in SCCL, followed by holding first elections in 1997. Parallely as part of administrative process, emoluments of employees were directly credited into their accounts to infuse discipline among workers. Industrial culture thus ensued

listed on 'London Stock Exchange' during the British Rule until 1923. In 1945, the Hyderabad government nationalised it, acquired controlling interest, and renamed it as SCCL. Mir Osman Ali Khan, the Nizam VII, purchased shares and his government evinced keen interest in coal mining. The takeover marked the first step towards formalising and expanding operations under a single administrative framework. Despite nationalisation, two-three thousand shareholders still exist, who

infrequently attend meetings, said Narsing Rao.

Originally in the initial days, revealed Narsing Rao that, coal requirement was largely for use in Railway engines and for industrial purposes. Later, the need expanded to efficiently explore, mine, and supply coal, to adequately meet demands for thermal electricity generation. In addition, steel, cement industries, and various manufacturing sectors also depended on coal as raw material. After Independence, during the 1950s when

SCCL was in deep financial crisis, the Government of India supported by extending timely loans, but SCCL could not repay. As a result, it was converted into equity, with Telangana (erstwhile AP) holding 51% equity and Government of India holding 49%. By 1960, it became a 'Joint Venture,' facilitating comparatively better resource allocation and strategic planning. However, difficulties continued to haunt due to less demand for coal and price fixation by Government of India.

When Jalagam Vengal Rao was the Chief Minister, he helped company's expansion in Khammam district and facilitated liberal sanctions. That was a bit of solace. When Kotla Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy was Chief Minister in 1992-94, there was a near threat of closure of SCCL, and the proposal was processed and referred to BFIR (Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction). With Kotla's timely intervention and his goodwill with PV Narasimha Rao government, it was deferred. A Valliappan, the CMD at about the same time, played a great supporting role in CM's initiatives.

SCCL continued its losses and operational problems, till Nara Chandrababu Naidu became the Chief Minister. As he was playing key and 'Kingmaker Role' in national politics when Deve Gowda, Gujral and Vajpayee were Prime Ministers, he successfully managed to get the loans rescheduled. For the first time, first of its kind significant reforms were introduced by Chandrababu Naidu. 'Concept of One Single Union,' a major contribution to the company, was implemented in SCCL, followed by holding first elections in 1997. Parallely as part of administrative process, emoluments of employees were directly credited into their accounts to infuse discipline among workers. Industrial culture thus ensued.

This transformation saw the end of unhealthy practice of going on 'More strikes than the number of days in a Year' in SCCL. Narsing Rao commented on this and said

that it was the dawn of important "industrial relations and union-management healthy relations." Subsequently around that time, 'Concept of Administered Price' decided by Government of India, was dismantled and SCCL was given freedom to determine its own coal price. With the advent of more thermal power plants, the demand for coal by late 1990 increased substantially.

In early 2000s, during Chandrababu tenure, from out of modest profits, employees were awarded share in profits, apart from usual bonus, the first of its kind then in SCCL and not even till today in any other coal company! Revealing this, Narsing Rao said that, unfortunately, from a 'Stage of Reasonable Profits and Reasonable Share to Employees in Profits' political interference over a period led to the indiscipline of 'Hype through Elevated Profits' leading to undesired results!!! Despite pressures, some of the CMDs demonstrated independence in management, and had the courage and guts to differ with the Chief Ministers of their time, said Narsing Rao, preferring not to disclose their names.

In conclusion, touching rather subtly on the relevance of current controversy, Narsing Rao quipped, "every political party is trying to take advantage." He recapped earlier instances of talk of allocation and auction of coal mines. For instance, during his time, when the Union government proposed to take over a few mines, he cleverly recommended unviable mines which could

never be auctioned. Since 2016 till now, despite auctioning mines (Like Pinagadapa, Parukula Chelaka), as expected, there were no takers!!! Even if someone adventures now, when auction takes place, he or she will be surrounded with enormous problems like land acquisition, LTR-related issues, forest diversion or permission, exorbitant cost of production, not so good quality coal, huge capital investment etc.

Evolution of SCCL into 'Open-Cast Mining' utility from 'Traditional Underground Mining Operations,' utilising manual labor and rudimentary tools, itself, is a 'Grand Success Story' thanks to significant leadership of some CMDs and CMs who made a 'Huge Difference' in elevating SCCL to higher levels, and new heights.

Narsing Rao commended the significant expansion during BN Raman, increased Production during GP Rao, and First Time Reforms during APVN Sharma tenures etc. specifically. Narsing Rao revealed that, during his six years tenure, for the first time in 2007, in the 'History of SCCL there were no strikes' that enabled substantial increase in production. During his tenure, he recalled that, once after 7-8 days strike, employees without any agreement called off strike, an ample proof of lessening 'Bargaining Power of Trade Unions' not to speak of 'Improved Industrial Relations.'

Is 'Blame Game' of INS, BJP and BRS leaders on Singareni Collieries Justified? Is this a necessary evil or 'Much Ado About Nothing'?

Climate-driven flooding threatens millions in US

JESSICA CORBETT

AS Americans endure extreme heat and wildfires exacerbated by fossil fuel-driven climate change, an analysis revealed Tuesday that rising seas threaten infrastructure critical for millions of people in hundreds of U.S. communities.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) report notes that "the nearly 90 million people living in U.S. coastal communities depend on an array of critical infrastructure," which the group defined as "assets and facilities that provide functions necessary to sustain daily life," including "schools, hospitals, public and affordable housing, energy infrastructure, and wastewater treatment plants."

"We also include known sites of industrial contamination that, if they were to flood, could expose people to toxic or hazardous pollutants," UCS explained. "The resulting list of critical infrastructure analyzed here is in some instances more expansive than the types included in the U.S. government's definition but does not include all the types that are likely of concern to individual communities."

Kristina Dahl, the report's lead author and a principal climate scientist at UCS, pointed out in a statement that "if these facilities are flooded even just once, it can be incredibly disruptive or even paralyzing to daily life."

"Communities don't have long to prepare before their vital coastal assets are routinely under threat from climate change-caused flooding," she said. "Our analysis shows that by 2030, the amount of critical infrastructure at risk of repeat flooding along U.S. coastlines is expected to grow by 20% compared to 2020 conditions."

The group analyzed three scenarios for the rest of this century—seas rising by 1.6 feet, 3.2 feet, and 6.5 feet—and also found that "between now and 2050, climate change-driven sea-level rise will expose more than 1,600 critical infrastructure assets coastwide to disruptive flooding at least twice per year."

That's "a near doubling from 2020 exposure and a 53% increase relative to 2030 exposure," the report states. "Of those assets, nearly 1,100 are expected to flood monthly, on average, in this time frame."

The states facing the highest



The states facing the highest threats of disruptive flooding are Louisiana, New Jersey, Florida, Maryland, and California. Already, some insurance companies are bailing on coastal communities due to the rising disaster risk. The new publication says that "future flooding particularly threatens public and affordable housing"

threats of disruptive flooding are Louisiana, New Jersey, Florida, Maryland, and California. Already, some insurance companies are bailing on coastal communities due to the rising disaster risk. The new publication says that "future flooding particularly threatens public and affordable housing."

Erika Spanger, a report co-author and director of strategic climate analytics at UCS, noted that "even if their homes stay dry, disruptive flooding of vital infrastructure could leave people essentially stranded within their communities or enduring intolerable and even unlivable conditions."

"The amount of infrastructure in jeopardy late this century will depend heavily on countries' choices about global heat-trapping emissions," the publication stresses. "Policymakers and public and private decision-makers must take

immediate, science-based steps to safeguard critical infrastructure and achieve true, long-term coastal resilience."

The report includes sections for six specific recommendations: Use science and innovation to plan for near- and long-term risks; Scale up public and private sector funding for infrastructure resilience; Reduce historical inequities and prevent future harms; Protect affordable housing; open just pathways to retreat; Start informed, flexible, adaptive planning now for later-century potential outcomes; and Cut heat-trapping emissions to limit the pace and magnitude of sea-level rise.

"There is a narrow window of time for federal, state, and local policymakers to provide funding and resources and for local decision-makers to use this backing to implement changes in their communities in preparation for an inevitable increase of regular disruptive flooding," the document warns. "Investments in resilience, equitably shared, can help build a safer, fairer future for all."

(<https://www.commondreams.org/>)

Muddled answers, outright lies

What the Biden-Trump debate says about the dire state of US politics

EMMA SHORTIS

THERE are no parallels for the first debate of the 2024 US presidential election cycle. From the moment Joe Biden walked across the stage, stiff-backed and straight-armed, disaster unfolded for the sitting president.

The bar Biden had to clear as he squared off against former president Donald Trump was always unfairly high. The election had already been framed as one largely about age, rather than, as Biden himself has argued, an existential fight for American democracy.

The debate was no different. Trump, supportive right-wing media and even much of the mainstream coverage focused overwhelmingly on Biden's ability to just get through the 90 minutes coherently and strongly.

A generous interpretation – and one Biden supporters will no doubt push – is that he did get through it. Some have been saying that he did so with a cold.

But that messaging is unlikely to be successful.

From the moment the president coughed and gasped his way through his first answer, he likely confirmed the worst fears of even his staunchest supporters that he is simply too old to run again.

It is very difficult to see how Biden recovers from here.

Lack of fact-checking

The current president struggled to find his feet from the beginning.

One of the first questions from the CNN moderators focused on reproductive rights, a subject that should have been a clear winner for Biden.

Both his campaign and his administration have made this issue a big focus of the 2024 election since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade two years ago. That decision was a clear mobiliser for voters in the 2022 midterm elections, in which Democrats performed much better than many analysts had expected.

Today, one in three American women live under total abortion bans. Democrats have been working hard to lay the blame for that squarely with Trump, who had repeatedly bragged about his role in



Biden's performance meant the actual policy substance of the debate, alongside the real stakes of this election, will be completely overshadowed. But the blame for that does not lie entirely at Biden's feet. Also, shockingly, it was not until half an hour into the debate – once Biden had already lost – that the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol and Trump's threats to American democracy were raised

upending reproductive rights in America.

After Trump told egregious lies about late-term and even "after birth" abortions during the debate, however, Biden stumbled in his response, failing to land on a clear message.

From there, Trump knew he had him.

Biden's performance meant the actual policy substance of the debate, alongside the real stakes of this election, will be completely overshadowed. But the blame for that does not lie entirely at Biden's feet.

The format of the debate saw the two CNN moderators reel off thematic questions one after the other without fact-checking the responses, or in some (but not all) cases, pushing the candidates to respond directly to the questions.

Shockingly, it was not until half an hour into the debate – once Biden had already lost – that the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol and Trump's

threats to American democracy were raised.

The choice not to fact-check the candidates – and not to prioritise democracy as a central issue for the election – had the effect of placing the January 6 insurrection and Trump's authoritarian tendencies on equal footing with the two men's golf handicaps (which came up later in the debate).

That was a disaster for Biden's attempts to frame this election on his terms. More importantly, it's a potential disaster for American democracy.

Trump's lies about the insurrection – such as his suggestion it was a false flag operation or that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was somehow to blame – were allowed to stand because neither the moderators nor Biden were able to effectively push back.

Trump was also allowed to say he will only accept the results of the election in November if it suits him, without be-

ing challenged directly by the moderators.

What does the debate mean? A significant portion of the debate focused on the world beyond American shores, making clear how much this election matters globally.

As in domestic issues, the two candidates stand far apart in their policy positions on issues from climate action to Ukraine. Questions about Biden's ceasefire plan for Gaza, for example, brought forth one of the more astounding moments in an already astounding debate – Trump suggested that Biden had "become like a Palestinian," but a "bad" one.

At one point, attempting to recover and get ahead of Trump, Biden pushed back on what he sees as Trump's overwhelming negativity about his own country.

The United States is, Biden said, the "most admired country in the history of the world." Like the rest of the debate, the assertion wasn't fact checked, either.

And after this showing, it's very hard to argue that it is true. Biden's reputation, too, has likely taken a disastrous hit. His poor performance already has Democrats scrambling.

Former Obama administration official Julian Castro, for example, posted on X (formerly Twitter):

Biden had a very low bar going into the debate and failed to clear even that bar. He seemed unprepared, lost, and not strong enough to parry effectively with Trump, who lies constantly.

Other Democrats have already begun discussing whether Biden needs to drop out of the race. An open convention would be an enormous, and surprising, risk for the Democratic Party to take.

But the pressure on Biden's candidacy will now be immense. And whether he can turn it around is much less clear now than it was before the debate.

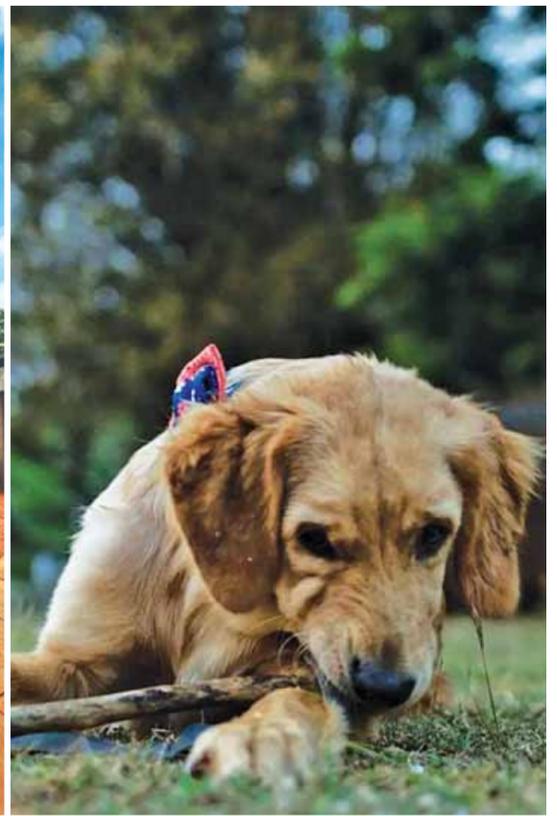
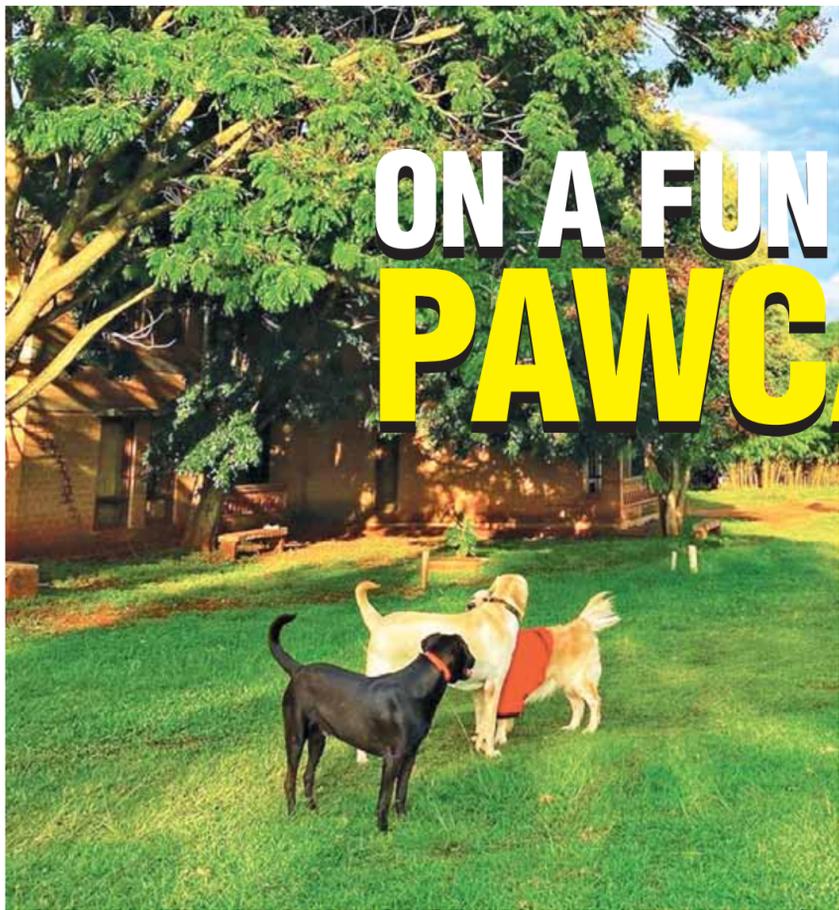
There are no real parallels for what unfolded in Atlanta today. And there are likely none for what comes next.

(Courtesy: <https://theconversation.com/>; the writer is Adjunct Senior Fellow, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University)

"Disease is an experience of a so-called mortal mind. It is fear made manifest on the body"
— Mary Baker Eddy



ON A FUN FILLED PAWCATION!



Indulge in exciting activities with your pets and make a holiday with them truly special, writes SHARMILA CHAND

Whether indulging in gourmet cuisine for your pets, celebrating their birthdays, pampering them with grooming sessions or participating in fun activities, there's something to enrich every experience during a vacation with furry members. There are a range of pet-friendly hotels and resorts that are more than happy to welcome you and your loyal companion. From luxury resorts to cozy retreats, these properties ensure complete comfort and are a haven both for you and your four-legged buddy.

COMFORT MEETS LUXURY AT PRESIDENT, MUMBAI - IHCL SELEQIONS

Looking to celebrate your pet's birthday? Go for a Pawcation at President, Mumbai - IHCL SeleQions.

"We have curated a well thought out pet-friendly vacation concept known as Pawcations," says Afzal Khan, General Manager. "We understand that pets are cherished members of the family, and we strive to create a comfortable and enriching environment for them during their stay. Hence we provide pet-friendly amenities like plush pet beds and bedding, engaging toys, and a gourmet pet menu crafted by our culinary experts." Embracing a pet-friendly policy, the hotel team makes sure the guests' comfort is enhanced by offering the services of on-call pet caretakers, as per specific requirements. Moreover, if there is any health related issue, there is a specialist veterinarian on call. Not to forget pet grooming services with prior appointments, exclusive pet toiletries, and designated pet-friendly zones. "We not only organize elaborate party with delightful high tea and fun outdoor activities for furry birthday boys and girls but also make sure the service is professional with warmth and care. Our team undergoes regular comprehensive training programs to understand animal behavior, hygiene protocols, and proper handling procedures. We also invite external pet trainers and behaviorists to train our staff regularly, ensuring they are well-equipped to interact with pets and provide top-notch service. Hence, we take great pride in being a pet-friendly destination," concludes Khan with a smile.



PAMPERING PETS AT 'OUR NATIVE VILLAGE ECO RESORT', BENGALURU

At 'Our Native Village Eco Resort', nestled in the serene village of Hesaraghatta, guests can indulge in a memorable vacay with the joy of bonding with their beloved pets amidst nature's embrace. "Whether exploring our sprawling grounds or immersing yourself in our cultural experiences, every moment promises a harmonious blend of luxury, responsible tourism and eco-conscious living, adhering to our pet-friendly policy," tells Antharaj A, The Operations Manager. He adds, "We get repeat guests who have enjoyed their staycation in seamless harmony with their furry companions. As a proud pet-friendly establishment, the retreat provides essential amenities, including a variety of dog foods, water bowls, leashes, floor mats, and cozy blankets. The sprawling grounds offer ample space for pets to roam freely amidst lush lawns and village paths, perfect for leisurely strolls and bonding moments." Designed with meticulous care, the dedicated pet bathing area combines comfort with rustic charm, ensuring a refreshing bath experience for furry companions. Specially prepared food ensures pets receive nutritious meals, supporting the commitment to sustainability by minimizing environmental impact. "Complete with all necessary amenities, the resort's natural charm

reflects our dedication to pampering pets just as we do for our human guests. While the guests rediscover childhood joys playing village games like gilli danda and kite flying, their pets act as best cheerleaders!" Antharaj says with a smile.

DISCOVER PET-FRIENDLY RETREAT AT MYSA ZINC JOURNEY BY THE FERN

Pet parents looking to take a break and hit the road with their fur babies, look no further than MYSA Zinc Journey by The Fern, a premier resort located in Nani Devati, Gujarat. Renowned for its serene ambiance and top-notch amenities, this resort stands out as a haven for pet lovers, offering an exceptional blend of comfort, luxury, and pet-friendly hospitality. Naveen Vaishnav, Squad Champion at the Resort says, "Committed to pampering four legged guests, at MYSA Zinc Journey by The Fern, pets are warmly welcomed and cherished. Furthermore, the property offers a range of facilities, making this resort the ideal choice for travellers with pets. The resort offers 24 elegantly designed rooms and villas, each providing ample space for you and your pets to relax." Spread across 9 acres within the scenic Glade One Golf Resort, the resort features beautifully landscaped gardens and open spaces perfect for the four legged to explore and enjoy. For a leisurely stroll or a brisk walk, the serene pathways and green expanses offer a perfect retreat for them and their owners.

"At the resort we offer dedicated services and facilities that include comfortable bedding and special dietary options for your furry friends. Our chefs cook as per pets' liking and specifications, we don't have printed menus as we believe in curating for them. While your pets enjoy the outdoors, you can indulge in a variety of resort activities. From the challenging 9-hole Gary Player-designed golf course to rejuvenating spa treatments and a sparkling swimming pool, here is the unique blend of luxury and pet-friendly hospitality. Located just a short drive from Ahmedabad, this resort provides a tranquil retreat where you and your pets can relax and rejuvenate," adds Vaishnav.

BONDING IN A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

Nestled amidst the serene landscapes of Taj Fort Aguada Resort & Spa, Taj Holiday Village Resort & Spa and The Yellow House, lies a haven not just for humans but also for their beloved furry companions. Embracing the bond between pets and their owners, we proudly declare ourselves a pet-friendly resort, where wagging tails and happy barks are as much a part of the atmosphere as the rustling of leaves and gentle lapping of waves. "As the pet's comfort is paramount, we provide cozy & comfortable beddings to ensure their good night's sleep. Offering a range of soothing amenities such as gentle shampoo, conditioner, and nourishing paw and nose butter - these products are carefully chosen to keep your pet looking and feeling their best throughout their stay. Beyond physical comfort, we cultivate a nurturing environment where every aspect of your pet's experience is thoughtfully considered. Our dedicated staff is trained to provide attentive care and ensure that all pets receive personalized attention and affection, says Sanchita Banerjee Rodrigues, MarCom for North Goa Resorts. Fitness is of utmost importance. Whether it's a leisurely morning walk or an evening romp under the setting sun, the scenic surroundings provide the perfect backdrop for the pets to stay active and happy. "Understanding that pets thrive when they can engage in physical activities, we offer a variety of opportunities for them to stay active and happy amidst our scenic

surroundings. Whether it's a leisurely morning walk along our lush trails or an energetic romp during the enchanting sunset hours, every moment outdoors is tailored to keep pets healthy and stimulated. Providing designated areas where they can engage in interactive play and socialize with other furry companions under the watchful eye of our attentive staff. These supervised activities not only keep pets physically fit but also mentally stimulated, ensuring a well-rounded experience during their stay." When it comes to pets' dining, Chef Nishant Diwakar Executive Sous Chef of Taj Fort Aguada being a pet parent himself takes keen interest in designing and planning of the pet menus of Taj North Goa Resorts. He firmly believes as important a balanced diet is to us humans, our furry friends require the same amount of attention. We provide specially curated menu for them to get the perfect amount of nutrient & a tasty treat. From dishes made with bacon & chicken bones to drool over to waffles made of yoghurt, banana & pumpkin. The team goes beyond basic sustenance to provide culinary experiences that enhance their stay and contribute to their overall enjoyment.

A PERFECT GETAWAY WITH PETS!

At Bengaluru Marriott Hotel Whitefield, there are special pet fiestas and brunches that create memorable moments for pets and owners alike. For long-staying guests, there is a unique touch of companionship—a small fish in a pot to keep them company. "At our hotel, we pride ourselves on providing an immersive experience with cozy beds, engaging toys, and meticulously sanitized play areas, creating a haven for our four-legged guests," tells Anjali Naik, Director of Sales and Marketing. She adds, "Pets have access to our dining outlets and lush lawns, where they can relax and play freely. Our exclusive pet menu offers health-centric, salt-free options for their dining pleasure. Our commitment to creating a pet-friendly environment goes beyond mere accommodation, offering a truly immersive and delightful experience for both you and your beloved companion."

—Sharmila Chand is an author and independent journalist who writes on Travel, Food and Lifestyle



FROM THE PEN OF A GROUNDED POET

It is important to note that Neerada is as much a Nature poet as she is a people's poet, says SWATI PAL

How many of us have had to be admonished for things not being aligned? The books in our book case in the days when books were bought and read? The clothes in our cupboard? The shoes in the closet? How many of us were ticked off at school perhaps for the tie being askew or the pair of socks not climbing up at the same place on each leg? Or the writing in our notebooks being asymmetrical? For the better part of my childhood and those of my friends, there was a constant, relentless push and shove towards alignment and well, we certainly rebelled at it as young people! A part of me still does and thus when I chance upon a poppy flower for example, in a neat bed of chrysanthemums in the college gardens, I cannot deny that my heart lights up with joy at this break in the order of things!

So when I was invited to read and speak on this utterly delightful collection of poems called 'Alignment' by Neerada Suresh, I cannot deny that my interest was instantly piqued by the title and I immediately read the title poem. Rohan Kaul's home and his partner, Promilla simply came alive by the word picture painted by Neerada Suresh in her rib tickling comparisons between the state of the house in the absence and presence of Rohan. There is a certain glee in the air when Rohan is away as things lie unaligned and unfettered; the same things, to quote, *But when Rohan Kaul is in, Newspapers stand stacked, Compressed, breathing in. Shoes align themselves Awed, open mouthed.*

Paintings, curtains, Cushions, sofas All tell a tamed tale. The fact is that while alignment is not only, politically speaking an important credo that nations strive for and while it may have its merits, alignment can often come at great cost. It may be the cost of freedom, it may be about being 'tamed' as Neerada put it; it may leave us in gaping fear and thus 'open mouthed'. The hope perhaps lies in Promilla who, as the poem ends with *defies A certain kind of alignment.*

Don't let the light and bubbling language deceive you, this poem has far greater implications if we read it closely and it is this deceptive mirth that the

poem has which makes the poem, like many others by her, such a joy to read. Neerada is a grounded soul. Her poems reflect that and she makes poetry out of the ordinary quirky eccentricities and foibles that fill all of our lives. A poem that really clicked with me is *Of Lists*. It has that elegant humour that seems to be a characteristic trait of Neerada's, the wonderful ability to laugh at one's self. It begins with the declaration *I am one For lists.*

And then, with great good humour she narrates how fishing out her list from her bag full of things makes the list redundant as she involuntarily lists from memory and then she swears, *Under my breath Now to list down A set of instructions How not to forget Getting across The list you make.*

I cannot recall the uncountable times that I have had to strip my entire bag to find a list and then found it much later. It is such a relatable experience and that is what endears the reader to Neerada's poetry, the sheer relatability of the experiences.

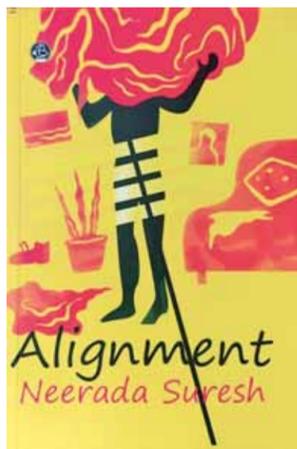
Life and the times as we live them are the focus of Neerada's poetry. We talk for example about how communication between people now is held ransom by the cell phone. Neerada converts our trite conversations into a poem which she entitles, *The New Normal.*

New normal is Sitting side by side On a sofa With no eye contact Chatting of this and that These are the first few lines and the poem ends with the sad fact that the new normal is:

And at all times Not facing each other But thumb twitching On the mobile through Inane vicarious clips Of far and near ones And total strangers Never once glancing Directly or even sideways Smiling at each other.

Modes of communication or rather the language of communication comes up again in another poem called *Version 3.0* where the poet talks about her journey from the deep south up north 'travelling light with nothing/more than

ALIGNMENT
Author:
Neerada Suresh
Publisher: DC Books
Price: ₹199



a bilingual tongue'. Subtly yet strongly commenting upon the Rashtrabhasha issue, she says, *At the workplace, monolingual, mute Biding time mastering a language National though notional, Opening floodgates of ecstasy mouthing My own tongue, my mother tongue, At regional gatherings.* This is such striking comment upon the way in which so much in our relationships with people, so much of our identity, so many of our needs, are determined by the fluency with which we speak different languages. But are we accepted because we speak the required language or do we remain strangers divided by our regional differences, not explicitly stated but always there? Do we, in turn, become one with the region of our profession or adoption or do we still dream of lands we associate most with the tongue that comes easiest and naturally to us, our mother tongue? These are questions to think about. Neerada makes you think.

She makes you laugh and cry as well, sometimes together. One such poem is *When my brother fell sick* in which the poet describes her brother who was bedridden after a botched up eye surgery. She writes about his courage, *He still smiles as always.*

Not once did he Lament this plight, foul mouth The surgeon or contemplate Suing. Resigned at once To a possible, partial vision In his bad eye, pacified His wife, my raging sisier in law. His expressive eyes Now inscrutable Behind the dark glasses. But his smile had the same texture and tinge Of the smile he sported When Mother died And he lingered by her one last time. The poem is such a beautiful reminder that warriors are not found only on the battlefield; there are many who soldier on heroically confronted by the vicissitudes of life. The brother you read about will surely capture your heart and become your hero.

One of the characteristics of Neerada's poems in 'Alignment' is that there is a lot said through implication which is sometimes sensuous and can get your heart beating a bit faster. For example, in the poem *Delete*, the poet writes about

Your unsolicited Picture on FB And she goes on to say, The familiar contours Of your face Traced out a trillion times Through summer and winter Stood out embossed On my finger tips. The best option now For the photo shopped version, Press delete To wipe out that sting Of dormant memories Off my fingertips. This is a brilliant use of synesthetic imagery and one can literally feel the tingling in the tips of one's fingers. A poem that ends with a delightful twist is *Chrysanthemums* where the unnamed 'he' always came when the chrysanthemums bloomed and he always asked if they were dahlias or marigolds, and the poet says *Too polite to correct She'd smile- a wide smile*

Her lashes lowered and The chrysanthemums paled Into insignificance. The evening Stretched to its elastic limits Catapulted into night. What she didn't know was That he had always known They were chrysanthemums. There is the sweetness of romance in these lines that is unmistakable and so appealing; one can almost imagine the whole scene played out in one's head. Tea I carries the same fragrance of romance very delicately framed, implied through such lines as *While I made tea On a rusty stove He stood watching Leaning by the door Aand then said, I like the cut of your dress As though it were a cue To turn the stove on to sim And let the simmering within Come to a boil.*

Coming back to the pictorial quality of the poems, a reason why many of the poems in fact can be almost dramatically played out in the imagination is the kind of detailing that Neerada works into her poems. Take the poem *Of Haystacks*. This entire poem is literally painted with an eye for the minutest of details and it reads

The cotton tree stood In its slender trunk With its bursting pods Of parachuting blobs As the turbaned, earth hued Cart man, cushioned On bales and bales Of golden yellow straw Came swaying, swinging Whistling to the orchestra of The hoof clicking clap dance Of the ambling bullocks. Colour, sound, movement all seemed fused almost like a motion picture being played out on the printed page. And of course the symbolism, the personification is discernible, as is the use of alliteration in the swaying swinging, cart cushioned, clicking clap. This lends a wonderful rhythmic motion to the scene and has been really cleverly used. Again, in *The Breadfruit Tree*, the poet describes the tree, *We didn't make much Of the breadfruit tree That stood sentry like*

By the boundary wall Spilling its bickering spread Over the neighbour's roof Dropping yellow leaves Plopping crow eaten messy fruits Like I said, the tree, pretty much like the haystacks in the previous poem, comes to life in the mind's eye.

If brevity is the soul of wit, Neerada really aces it in her short poems, two of which are *Absence* and *Sorrows*.

Absence, Distance Were surefire Terminators Of whatever was Between us I thought, But they Like rings in trees Add girth, depth Linking the past With the present, Casting shadows Of decay Into the future

Direct and simple, the simile is so apt and new- the rings on the trees and the passage of time. It's important to note that Neerada is as much a Nature poet as she is a people's poet. In *Sorrows* she says, *Sorrows Like a newborn Arranged itself In my arms Purring in content As if to say Never let me go For the reward Of great truths To be reaped And revealed In the future.*

Those who carry their sorrows with them will feel that the poem is made for them. But that's the magic of Neerada's pen, she will make her readers feel that the people, places, thoughts and experiences are theirs that she writes about. Read her, you will feel at home.

— Swati Pal, Professor and Principal, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, has been a Charles Wallace; John McGrath Theatre Studies and Fulbright Nehru fellowship, scholar. She has published on theatre, creative and academic writing, education and translates from Hindi to English. In *Absentia* is a collection of her poems

Journey to an expanded self awareness

The book opens in the present-day scenario, where a rather unsure Loveena of mid-thirties is boarding a train to Pathankot.

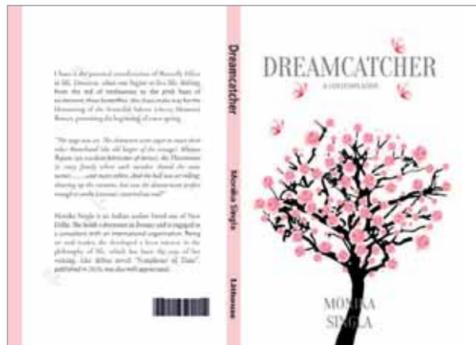
Her already raw senses are over burdened by the onslaught of experience of a train station environment.

Yet her insecurities are deep seated in her psyche and are result of the generational trauma she endured during her growing up years by the hands of her equally tormented mother Neena, reviews **DEEPAK KUMAR JHA**

The ("Dreamcatcher") is the story of Loveena, the protagonist of the book who is a sensitive soul. It beautifully narrates the journey through her trials and tribulations, her realisations, her pains and her metamorphosis and an ultimate 'coming of age' which leaves her in a state of expanded awareness of self as well as her surroundings and people there in. Author Monika has orchestrated her sound knowledge of literature, language and the subject & object to bring on paper the story of a child Loveena, till she finds solace passing through life's labyrinth, unfortunately all nurtured in close walls of her family. The just published book revolves around Loveena's mother Neena who attained motherhood through Loveena after a long wait of ten years. Neena's intensity

thus shifted to being extra protective about her daughter from the negativities of the world. Having brought up in a rather affluent and rich family, she desires nothing less for her daughter. And even though Loveena had both her parents-Neena and her father Dev, it was her mother and mother's stories which were to carve her life and make her the person that she would become. And the story's trajectory thus turns to Loveena's mother Neena's life.

Neena's husband Dev was a victim of his own sense of helplessness for his lack of understanding the business of Neena's father and inability to take it up for posterity, even though he was the sole son-in-law the family had. His job as an assistant professor of history in the university projected him as most suitable boy for Neena, when a friend of Neena's



father told him about Dev and his docile nature. Quite obviously Neena's father believed it to be the significant trait suitable for her pampered daughter. As Neena entered Dev's life and his house after her wedding, it was bustling with Dev's family. Neena was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number

DREAMCATCHER
Author:
Monika Singla
Publisher: ISPCK
Price: ₹295



of people and was unable to adjust to this new environment which was totally unlike her solitary and exclusive upbringing in an affluent household. Sensing Neena's hesitation and reservations, Dev's family too accepted her into their family but without completely absorbing her into their lives. So, even though

Neena was married into Dev's family she could never truly become a part of it. Dev's detachment or lack of desire to correct this situation further acerbated the relationships. Troubled relations with in-laws, Dev's indifference clubbed with an anguishing wait of ten years to attain motherhood further fed Neena's sense of mistrust and suspicions and her belief that the world was a dangerously bad place. Loveena who was born as a happy child with a calm, pleasing, innocent disposition was always eager to embrace everybody, never earned approval for her behaviour from her mother. Neena always dismissed these traits as incompatible with the ways of world. Thus, growing up, Loveena's world protected by her mother, remained confined within the four walls of the palatial house with the house help Babli as a constant companion who

too gets married leaving behind a void in Loveena's life. Finally, Loveena finds her suitor in Sanand and her engagement to him was greeted as the most welcome news by everyone later on which did not worked due to triggers of Neena's fears. For Loveena this incident proved to be the one which augmented her belief in Neena's words that world is a bad place. Her father Dev too gone followed by passing of Neena. Loveena finally married, not to start a family but only to drown the haunting hollowness of her soul into joys and laughter. Vikram was a colleague of Loveena and the only thing she knew about him was that he was a divorcee with two grown up kids. Soon this too developed a marital conflict. Unable to handle this situation any longer Loveena decides that she needs to get

respite from her choppy life that and decides to leave the house and Vikram. She goes looking for solitude in a place away from the chaos of the city, away from the prodding eyes of the society. Her life's journey takes a new turn as she arrives at Pathankot where she embarks upon a spiritualistic journey. Armed with the strength of her soul and her renewed faith in life and self and the world in general, Loveena finally finds herself ready to go back to place from where she herself had once run away from all her life challenges a long time back. Her tumultuous relationship with Vikram's place was when she had shunned everything to cross over into next phase of her life. She was now ready to go meet Vikram as a new person. But this time she isn't running away. This time she is running towards meeting life head-on.

TANGRA TALES

Kolkata, Bengalis the world over, and Tangra, share a very special culinary heritage and culture, going far back in history. **SHOBORI GANGULI** got to relive the bond at the Westin Gurgaon recently



Most people familiar with the trademark Chinese cuisine of Kolkata would know about Tangra. An erstwhile tannery on the eastern outskirts of then British Calcutta, soon to become famous as the city's Chinatown, this tiny colony was populated by Hakka origin Chinese folk who came to India to work in the tanneries, their craft and art soon to become synonymous with the finest leather accessories in the subcontinent. The womenfolk worked home kitchens to supplement meager household incomes. Today, the tanneries are all gone but Tangra has left its signature on a cuisine now globally known as Hakka Chinese. Recently, I had the fortune to relive some childhood memories of anniversaries and birthdays most often spent at some restaurant or the other in Tangra, wolfing down Golden Fried Prawns, Chicken dimsums, Hakka noodles, prawns sauted in garlic and red chillies, the list goes on. The Westin Gurgaon, New Delhi, hosted a



CHEF HO CHI MING

nine day culinary pop up aptly called Tales of Tangra which promised an "explosion of flavours" from Kolkata's Chinatown. The event featured a specially curated menu by Guest Chef Ho Chi Ming from The Westin Pune Koregaon Park. By sheer geography, one can easily identify the unique Kolkata-Chinese culinary bond, the two regions in such close physical proximity, underlining the very special nature of the food not be found anywhere else in the world despite Tangra's journey as an Oriental cuisine beyond the frontiers of Bengal. The menu at Westin was indeed meticulously planned by the Chef to capture the essence of this legendary fusion cuisine, tracing its roots back to an era long ago when Chinese immigrants in then Calcutta, blending their traditions with Indian culture to script and create Chinatown's culinary

proress. Unfortunately, none of that history now remains, except in the hands of home and professional chefs, who still keep the history of Chinatown resonating with contemporary approaches, and of course, special twists given to recipes long lost. While Chef Ho did put up a great show with his Scallion Crepes, Homestyle Taro Cakes, Kari Fish Dumplings, Sweet and Sour Prawns, Four Season Green Beans, Crispy Chilli Garlic Potatoes, Tangra style authentic Hakka noodles, the menu had a huge vegetarian accent. With the world turning to vegetarianism each passing day, this is only understandable. But one fervently hopes that Hakka Chinese seafood will always have its patrons surviving in some corner or the other in the world. Chef Ho's passion for Asian cuisine was apparent in the innovations he brought to each dish. His approach, affability and commitment to authenticity were truly welcome. Chef Amit Dash, Multi Property Executive Chef for The Westin Gurgaon, New Delhi said, "We are



excited to host Chef Ho Chi Ming and present Tales of Tangra to our patrons. This pop-up is a tribute to the rich cultural tapestry and culinary excellence of Tangra and a testament to our commitment to continue offering our guests diverse and exceptional dining experiences." The soups ranged from Manchow, Assorted Vegetables, Ginger, Cilantro Broth, Hot and Sour soup, non vegetarian bits like prawns and chickens were only add-ons. Personally, I feel a soup or broth must stew in its original juices and not be relegated to add-ons for a vegetable broth. It makes a critical culinary difference in terms of taste, texture and aromas. All in all, it felt good to taste a bit of Tangra far away from its original shores of Kolkata right in the heart of Delhi. Long live Tangra's signature Hakka cuisine.



Disappointing Service Mars Fine Dining Experiences



PAWAN SONI ventures to The China Kitchen at Hyatt Regency, New Delhi, famed for its peking Duck. While the star dish impressed, but the experience is marred by inattentive services

I recently visited The China Kitchen at Hyatt Regency New Delhi, renowned for its exquisite Peking Duck, which I consider among the best in the National Capital Region. Some might argue that Hakkasan in Mumbai outshines it, but my personal experiences at Hakkasan in Abu Dhabi and a pop-up at Shangri-La Delhi didn't include the duck, so I can't compare. Nonetheless, my recent dining experience at The China Kitchen, despite the superb duck, left me dissatisfied, primarily due to subpar service. The evening began on a sour note with a lackluster welcome. We received no warm greetings or guidance to our table, and no one offered us menus or water, despite the sweltering Delhi summer. The absence of hospitality was in stark contrast to the standards one expects at a 5-star property. When we ordered our first dish, a gomai salad, I specifically requested extra sesame dressing on the side, a preference I had made clear to the server. However, the salad arrived without the extra dressing and was neither cold nor flavorful, lacking the acidity and vibrant tastes I anticipated. The China Kitchen could learn a thing or two from China Garden, which excels at this dish in the city. Fortunately, the other dishes like chicken shao mai dumplings, edamame dim sum, and honey chilli lotus roots were much better. Yet, the service remained mechanical and impersonal. There were no smiles, no proactive plate changes, and no clearing of the



table. Even the chef who came to carve the duck remained silent, possibly due to a language barrier, but a smile would have gone a long way. The hostess who prepared the pancake rolls also wore a stony expression while she stood near our table for some time preparing the pancakes. Despite enjoying most of our meal, we quickly finished and left, paying over Rs18,000 (including a 10% service charge) without any drinks. I contemplated asking for the service charge to be waived but refrained, considering how dependent the staff might be on these tips. I was particularly disappointed when my request for duck salt and pepper was denied because we had ordered only half a duck, a decision that seemed unnecessarily rigid. A little more flexibility and hospitality could have made all the difference, especially when very few order it. Attentive and friendly

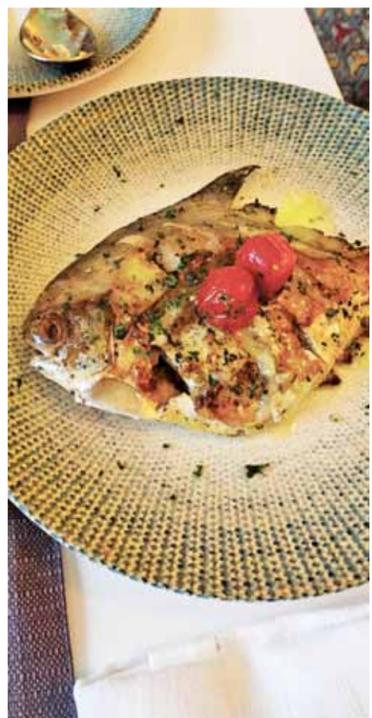


service could have transformed our dining experience. Even though the food was largely enjoyable, the lack of warmth and attention overshadowed it. Similar was our experience just a day prior at Pullman hotel where a friend hosted his daughter's



birthday party at their all-day dining restaurant Pluck. Orders were mixed up, a sparkling wine cork flew in the air missing the patrons without any apology from the server, prawns vanished from the buffet spread, and orders either took a lot of time or were

completely missed. Something has happened to that smiley and polite star hotel service, especially after COVID. Fresh batches are seeing fewer takers, most experienced staff have either left the industry or are moving abroad for better wages and work



conditions. What remains is the new service levels. Either we will get used to it or start paying them the wages they truly deserve to retain deserving candidates. — Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com

Balancing Act

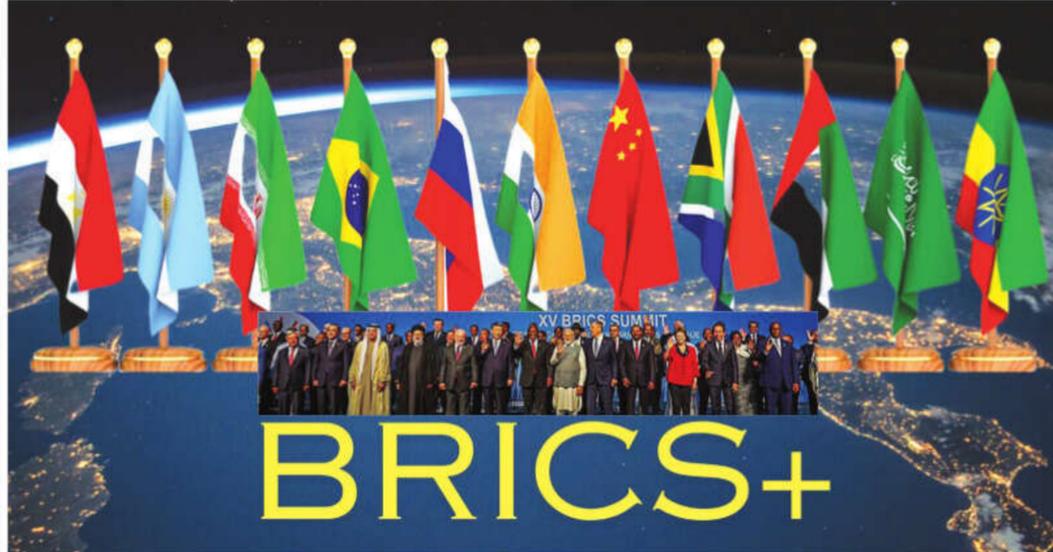
The intricate dynamics between India, the United States, and Russia have come into sharp focus with recent developments highlighting the complexity of this trilateral relationship. With US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell expression of concern over India's close ties with Russia potentially affecting the sharing of high technology, it becomes evident that India's foreign policy strategy is under significant scrutiny. Simultaneously, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's assertion that the US is attempting to pull India into an anti-China coalition adds another layer to this geopolitical conundrum. India's historical ties with Russia, dating back to the early days of Indian independence, have been a cornerstone of its foreign policy. This relationship has been characterised by substantial cooperation in various sectors, including defence, energy, and space technology. However, the shifting geopolitical landscape, marked by the rise of China and the deepening US-China rivalry, has placed India in a delicate position. Washington's concerns are not without basis. India's acquisition of Russian military hardware and its significant imports of Russian crude oil in the midst of the Ukraine conflict have raised hackles in Washington. The apprehension that sensitive technologies shared with India could inadvertently end up in Russian hands is a genuine strategic concern. Yet, Mr Campbell's comments also underscore a broader confidence in India's ability to navigate these complex relationships without compromising its strategic autonomy. India's membership of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside the US, Japan, and Australia is often viewed as a counter-balance to China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. However, New Delhi has consistently emphasised that the Quad is not a military alliance but a platform for promoting economic, technological, and infrastructural cooperation. Mr Lavrov's scepticism about the Quad, viewing it as a potential military and political tool against China, reflects Russia's anxiety over losing its strategic partner to a US-led bloc. India's approach to its foreign policy has always been marked by careful balancing. Its refusal to publicly criticise Russia over the Ukraine invasion and its significant purchases of Russian oil are indicative of its desire to maintain a multipolar world order. Simultaneously, India's deepening ties with the US in areas such as defence, technology, and energy signify its recognition of the importance of a robust partnership with Washington in countering regional threats, particularly from China. The proposition to revive the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral format, despite India's hesitance due to border tensions with China, points to a possible avenue for India to maintain its strategic autonomy. The RIC grouping, a precursor to the BRICS forum, could serve as a platform for fostering dialogue and cooperation on key issues affecting the Eurasian continent and the global agenda. However, the success of such an initiative hinges on the resolution of bilateral issues, particularly the on-going border dispute between India and China. The challenge for India will be to maintain this delicate balance, ensuring its national interests are safeguarded while contributing to a stable and multipolar world order.

Far-Right Surge

As France heads into the first round of parliamentary elections today, the surge of the far-right National Rally (RN) under Ms Marine Le Pen has captured global attention. The RN, long a marginal force in French politics, now stands on the brink of a historic breakthrough, potentially securing a majority in the National Assembly. This development is not just a seismic shift for France but a moment of reckoning for Europe and democracies worldwide. The polls indicate that the RN could secure up to 37 per cent of the vote, a rise that reflects deep-seated discontent with the current political order. The centrist bloc, led by President Emmanuel Macron, appears to be losing ground, and the left-wing New Popular Front remains stagnant. This fragmentation of traditional political forces underscores the growing polarisation in France. Several factors have contributed to this surge. Mr Macron's presidency, marked by pro-business reforms and a perceived aloofness from the struggles of ordinary citizens, has left many feeling alienated. Issues like the rising cost of living and deteriorating public services have created fertile ground for populist rhetoric. Ms Le Pen has skillfully capitalised on these grievances, softening the party's image and broadening its appeal beyond its traditional base. The implications of an RN-led government are profound. For France, it would mean a dramatic shift in domestic and foreign policy. Despite efforts to moderate its stance, the RN's core positions remain deeply Eurosceptic and nationalistic. A government led by the RN could strain France's relationship with the European Union, posing a significant challenge to the bloc's cohesion at a time when unity is crucial. The RN's fiscal policies also raise concerns about economic stability, as promises of increased public spending clash with the need for fiscal responsibility. Moreover, the potential for political paralysis looms large. Should the RN fall short of an outright majority, France could face a hung Parliament. This scenario would lead to a fraught "cohabitation" between Mr Macron and an emboldened far-right, creating legislative gridlock and undermining effective governance. The stakes are high, and the uncertainty is palpable. The rise of the RN is not an isolated phenomenon. Across Europe and beyond, far-right and populist movements are gaining traction, fuelled by economic anxiety, cultural shifts, and a sense of disenfranchisement. This trend poses a direct challenge to the liberal democratic order established after World War II. It calls into question the effectiveness of mainstream political parties in addressing the needs and concerns of constituents. The outcome of France's Parliamentary elections will resonate far beyond its borders. It is a pivotal contest that could reshape the country's future and alter the trajectory of European politics. The rise of the RN reflects broader global trends that challenge the foundations of democracy and demand a renewed commitment to addressing the root causes of populism. The world holds its breath, contemplating the implications of this critical juncture in history.

Expansion of Brics ~ II

Every nation crafts its foreign and foreign economic policies based on its national interests. India's position on Brics' expansion is no exception. It is for this reason that India stressed on the consensus principle with a view to block some countries aspiring to be in Brics, as it feels their presence in the group would be unpalatable to its interests. The core point is the strained relationship with China, which remains the primary driving force in determining its stance on the membership issue



When South Africa hosted the 15th Brics Summit from 22 to 24 August 2023 in Johannesburg, several world leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended. The issue of the bloc's expansion was extensively deliberated.

Russian President Vladimir Putin decided not to travel and thus skipped the summit. In a move to strengthen its claim of being a 'voice of the Global South', six countries - Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE - that had shown interest were invited to join the alliance.

As mentioned, this decision raises hope as well as fear of China's increasing dominance. It is however a truism that the addition of the developing nations to the bloc indicates establishing a solid coalition to serve the interests of the Global South.

In this scenario, it would be relevant to examine India's position and what it means for New Delhi when some members of the Asean group have evinced an interest to join.

Some reports say that more than 40 nations have indicated an interest in joining the bloc of major developing economies. Other reports claim that 30 countries have conveyed their willingness to join the group, with 22 of them applying formally.

This figure might increase with the interest of some countries of the Asean grouping. The fact is that many countries see that being a part of Brics is a major opportunity.

It was China that first initiated the conversation in 2022 about expanding the body as it tried to build diplomatic clout to counter the West's dominance in the United Nations and push forward its economy after the Covid slowdown.

While China and South Africa support the expansion and Russia should fall in line with China, India and Brazil are concerned that their own influ-

ence will diminish.

India views such a rapid expansion of the group with suspicion, but has not opposed it in public. India's official position is that BRICS' expansion process should go through "full consultation and consensus" among members of the bloc.

External affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has clarified in the past that the expansion of the Brics bloc is still a work in progress and member countries are approaching the idea with a positive intent and an open mind.

India suggests that if Brics intends to expand, it should consider emerging economies and democracies like Argentina and Nigeria, rather than Saudi Arabia with its autocratic rule. New Delhi is also sceptical of the inclusion of new members as it could tilt the bloc more towards China. What does the expansion mean for India? That is a moot question.

India is cognizant of the perception that the expansion move is a direct challenge to the West, as the move supported by China and Russia is seen as a way to counter Western dominance and the global trade in dollars.

The expansion of Brics could serve a major blow to the US dollar, which is currently the world's reserve currency. If Brics were to launch its own currency, it could provide an alternative to the dollar and could reduce its dominance.

When the Ukraine war broke out and the West imposed sanctions on Russia, a number of countries including India started using alternate currencies for trade.

New Delhi also used Chinese yuan to make payments for Russian oil imports. Because of

this experience, it could be a good idea if member states start exploring the possibility of launching a Brics currency.

If done successfully, it could be a major step towards a more multi-polar world economy. The New Development Bank (NDB), which was established by Brics countries, can play a crucial role in providing funding for infrastructure projects, sustainable development initiatives and other priority areas.

Every nation crafts its foreign and foreign economic policies based on its national interests. India's position on Brics' expansion is no exception.

It is for this reason that India stressed on the consensus principle with a view to block some countries aspiring to be in Brics, as it feels their presence in the group would be unpalatable to its interests.

The core point is the strained relationship with China, which remains the primary driving force in determining its stance on the membership issue.

For example, it is a truism that India's alignment with the West remains a major factor for its decisions regarding certain states. For example, India's decision to block Belarus from joining the Brics stemmed from its stance on Ukraine and sanctions from the West.

Another example is its stance on Cuba as India endorsed the US position that Cuba provides a safe haven for Chinese spies and thus blocked the South American developing economy in the Brics framework. As can be discerned, India is opposed to several countries that hold anti-Western positions aspiring to be in the Brics fold.

India's stance on Pakistan is not surprising. Given China's

interest in Pakistan's integration into the Brics framework and against the Indo-Pak rivalry over a host of issues, India is not expected to endorse China's efforts to rope in Pakistan to develop Brics as a geopolitical rival to the Western group.

On its part, Islamabad is aware that India is committed to its principle of unanimity in the expansion mechanism of Brics and therefore knows that India would resist Pakistan's inclusion at all costs.

Also, India would not yield space for China's designs to bring countries subscribing to its policies into Brics, as that would undermine its own interests. India is sensitive to the possibility that China could utilise Brics to expand its strategic influence in the developing world, which might undermine India's growing engagement with these nations.

Pakistan needs to be aware that India maintains its policy of Neighbourhood First minus Pakistan, which stems from its historical experiences.

So long as India-Pakistan relations are not brought to normal, India is likely to block any effort by any other Brics member to bring Pakistan into the framework.

Critics might argue that India's stance on Pakistan or that of any other country obstructing inclusion into an economic bloc meant to further the interests of third-world countries contradicts the very principles underlying the formation of the alliance.

But when national interests and security comes into play, there cannot be any compromise and India must not be expected to deviate from its stance.

India is unlikely to concede an inch to China's design to rope in Pakistan into the Brics framework, and thereby expand its strategic influence in the developing world which would be detrimental to its interests.

(Concluded)



RAJARAM PANDA
The writer is a former Senior Fellow at Pradhanmantri Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Biden fumbles

SIR, Please refer to today's report "A halting Biden tries to confront Trump at debate". US President Joe Biden is 81, his challenger Donald Trump is 78. In the first debate between the US presidential candidates, the age gap seemed much larger.

The most important job for President Biden was to put to rest concerns about his biggest vulnerability - his fitness for office, given his age. He failed, and badly at that. Mr Trump pressed his case for a second term with limited

resistance as Mr Biden meandered and mumbled through answers. At one point, after Mr Biden had trailed off while defending his record on border security, Trump said, 'I really don't know what he said at the end of that sentence. I don't think he knows what he said, either.' The debate was a setback for the Democrats, who expected Mr Biden to turn the election into a referendum on Mr Trump, reminding voters of the chaotic nature of the latter's presidency.



The President's dismal show is sure to lead to a blame game within the Democratic party over whether handing him a second nomination with only nominal opposition was the right move. Some may be thinking about how they still could put up a different nominee. However, the Biden campaign has two months to calm the waters before the second debate in September. For now, more people will be talking about Biden's performance in the debate than Trump's as President.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 29 June.

RONALDO'S CLOUT

SIR, Apropos the article, "Euros 2024: Cristiano Ronaldo registers unfortunate record during loss to Georgia," in today's edition, it is remarkable how much attention the talismanic striker receives when he does not do something as much as when he does. Undoubtedly, he is the star with the most name recognition in the tournament due in part to his appearance in every edition since

INDIA CRUMBLES

SIR, Come the much-awaited monsoon period, and India goes into a panic mode. Bill-boards fall, roofs leak, rivers overflow, roads crack, potholes reappear, sewers spill over, fields flood, villages inundate, trains collide, boats capsize, bridges collapse, flights divert, lightning strikes, mosquitoes bite, flies buzz, power snaps and chaos reigns. Meanwhile, our netas (leaders) are at their quibbling and quarrelling best, trying to divert the blame and responsibility for all the hardships caused by nature's fury and man's negligence. The common man, with uncommon patience, continues to suffer for no fault of his.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 29 June.

2004. While the very talented Portuguese team is one of the favourites to win this competition, Ronaldo's presence may indeed be more of a liability than an asset. Fernando Santos, the previous Portuguese coach, was sacked in some measure because he dared bench Ronaldo mid-way through Portugal's FIFA World Cup campaign in Qatar. Though this move initially proved to be successful in terms of Portugal's 6-1 win over Switzerland, Portugal's subsequent defeat to Morocco in the quarter-final of that contest was swiftly blamed on the

trainer's decision to make Ronaldo a substitute.

The same saga continues, and Ronaldo's clout may adversely affect the new manager Roberto Martinez's game plans for Portugal. Ronaldo's declining abilities have been amply evident during the group stage of the championship.

It may prove to be a costly mistake to be hindered by his past record and influence in making decisions about the starting eleven in the knockout phase.

Yours, etc., Animesh Rai, Noida, 28 June.

Mental health of students

When Ms Matin saw Mamun after a decade since his kindergarten years, she was appalled. The child she knew was happy and energetic: what became of him in his adolescent years? Mamun looked frail, lacked energy, and had a distant and troubled expression on his face. His father recounted how Mamun had withdrawn from his friends and social activities, had difficulty concentrating on studies, and suffered bouts of headaches and other ailments that did not respond well to treatment. His friends seemed to have abandoned him and his teachers left him alone, whispering among themselves about this strange and alien being. Here was an adolescent child drifting away, far from friendly shores, alone and helpless.

Mamun's mental health situation is not uncommon and probably reaching contagion proportions in schools worldwide. In Bangladesh, the subject is taboo. Lack of understanding, fear, and social stigma often prevent school children and their families from seeking timely help.

This exacerbates the child's difficulties and hinders her/his overall well-being. Unfortunately, a child like Mamun is often told, "get over it" or "it's all in your head." The problem gets quickly swept under the rug with its attendant burdens and severe consequences.

Troubled school children suffer mental stresses for a variety of reasons: The competitive education system, family and societal expectations, em-

The Daily Star

phasis on academic success over learning, authoritarian teachers, and insensitive peers who make life miserable.

Many children find themselves struggling with high academic standards without guidance or support, abused by the acerbic tongue of some teachers, and being bullied day in day out by peers. It's a rough world for the throbbing little hearts, yearning to be free like the butterfly; yet being battered constantly by the whirlwinds of family, teachers, and peers.

Family dynamics and expectations are the starting point of the travails of many children. High expectations, strict parenting styles, pressures to conform to societal norms, and career aspirations deemed prestigious or financially rewarding begin to build pressure at home with crushing force.

Some children find their achievements constantly compared with the children of other family members, friends, or peers. Constant criticism or disapproval when the child is unable to perform leaves her/his self-esteem in tatters and contributes to feelings of rejection.

Families also have specific expectations for how boys and girls should behave and what career paths they should pursue even if their abilities and interests are at cross-purposes. Beyond academics, families may also expect their children to excel in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, or music. In some families, the emphasis on success is so high - to claim "first boy" status - that "second boy" is not acceptable! Expressing vulnerability, seeking emotional support, or even giving up under the circumstances is not an option and severely discouraged. The constant demands of family expectations can significantly impact, even cripple, the mental health of school children, sometimes leading to suicidal inclinations.

Parents must understand the weight of their words on their children and take a balanced approach to academics, emphasising individual growth over strict achievement targets.

How should world deal with AI transformation?

ANDREW SHENG

The world is in a mess, and the acceleration of AI usage is disrupting every business and the way we live. We are struggling to understand what the AI transition means for each of us as consumers, parents, teachers, businesses or government leaders. The debate over the pros and cons of AI is raging, especially in its dual military-civilian usage. AI will guide the next drone or missile at you with faster accuracy than ever imagined. It can also develop the next miracle drug to change our health. We simply do not know what whether AI is ultimately good or bad, only that the bandwidth of risk and opportunity is widening at frightening speed.

We have never seen technology being adopted as AI in daily activities in terms of speed, scale and scope. The AI revolution has pushed the Nvidia and other AI platform stock valuations into the trillion-dollar league. Big Powers and Big Platforms are all investing in AI, trying to figure out how to beat the competitors in achieving scale and domination.

The digital divide means that those who are ahead in AI will be richer, faster, smarter and more powerful, whereas those who don't implement AI tools are being marginalized. Clearly, the rich and advanced economies stand to gain more from AI and technology, whereas emerging and developing market economies (EMDEs) are still struggling on how to use AI to help them develop or at the minimum, tackle their myriad problems of people and planetary injustices.

The most obvious benefit of AI is that it could improve productivity, which has declined globally across the board for several



decades. McKinsey research suggests human-centric generative AI adoption may well automate up to 30 per cent of business activities across occupations by 2030. Analyzing 63 user cases, they estimated that generative AI could add roughly \$2.6 trillion to \$4.4 trillion annually to the global economy, equivalent to adding 2.5-4.2 per cent to current global GDP, which has been forecast by the World Bank to slow down to half the growth before the global crisis in 2008.

The potential for turning around development in multiple directions using AI looks huge. How can this be achieved?

AI is essentially a human-invented tool for learning and using for change. Given the right amount of data, it can help make better decisions and eliminate inefficiencies in the system. It can also do bad things at scale. Ethics in the usage of AI is at the heart of the current debate. In the wrong hands, AI is what rockstar historian Yuval

Noah Harari calls "data colonization and digital dictatorship".

Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz pronounced that the job of governments was to create a learning (knowledge) society, since knowledge is a public good. Fellow Nobel Laureate Robert Solow (1924-2023) first quantitatively identified that the most important determinant of economic growth was technological change. Kenneth Arrow (1921-2017) showed that markets by themselves do not yield efficiency in the production and dissemination of knowledge. More recent case studies on building tech ecosystems showed that learning is really about copying or imitating global knowledge and adapting these to local needs. Korean Professors Kim and Lee (2022) showed that Taipei and Shenzhen evolved into tech powerhouses by first importing foreign technology through welcoming multinational companies (MNCs) and then developing local champions that increased research and develop-

ment, primarily in process engineering, and then moving to original ideas, products and services that began to rival foreign competitors.

In short, human learning is always about copying others and then personalizing or internalizing such knowledge to create new ideas and actions. This "copy-learn-adapt-innovate-scale" approach is exactly the path that AI usage is following.

When we face something totally new, we have four essential choices. The first is to deny or reject because we fear the unknown. The second for those who are curious is to learn and experiment. The third is to do nothing or simply follow the crowd, because that appears to be the safest way out of disruptive change. The brave and risk-takers are those who decide to leap into the unknown and become innovative or entrepreneurs. They become the change agents.

In today's existential threats of nuclear war, ecological collapse and technological disruption, doing nothing or business-as-usual is not an option. You either eat lunch or be lunch.

There is no complacency shown in the financial sector, with the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) and Citi (AI & Finance: Bot, Bank & Beyond) recently warning about the profound impact and opportunities and threats of AI on the financial landscape.

The amount of start-ups working on implementing AI in different domains is staggering. In 2023, close to \$315 billion was invested in tech companies globally, a large chunk being in AI applications. The World Economic Forum has

been promoting application of AI in social innovation to tackle social and ecological issues. Although the WEF report stressed that "Artificial intelligence has the potential to scale impact in several domains but requires collaboration to help social innovators realize its maximum potential", the greatest barriers to successful AI implementation are lack of trust, partnerships and funding. The pattern in adopting AI in every domain, from personal to communities, businesses and government is common. You must approach change from a complex system perspective, noting that there are no simple one-size-fit-all solutions. Change management is not rocket science - it is about changing mindsets, addressing vested interests, and having the passion and management skills to execute change.

An excellent Japanese study on regulation shows that 20 per cent of staff time is spent on compliance issues, so that small and medium enterprises face overwhelming costs and barriers to deal with daily regulatory and bureaucratic issues. Just simplifying overlapping silos in bureaucracies using AI tools could increase productivity by 8 per cent.

In sum, we all need to adopt AI tools to generate the productivity that is needed to achieve more with less. Although change is best tackled bottom-up, it needs leadership, courage and passion to engineer change. That takes human intelligence, with AI as a tool, but impactful change is never about one individual, but about the whole and all of us.

The writer, a former Central banker, is a Distinguished Fellow of Asia Global Institute, University of Hong Kong. Special to ANN

NOW AND AGAIN

On the grid

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

My deepest and most abiding puzzle romance is with The Statesman crossword. I average a couple of puzzles per day, a simultaneously mindful and mindless diversion, a way to keep half my brain busy while the other half unpacks experiences and emotions for which there is no language, or no language yet.

I started doing crossword puzzles in my early 30s, thanks to my uncle, who was an avid reader of The Statesman, a regular contributor to the Calcutta Notebook, Letters to the Editor and a master of solving the crossword. The crossword filled gaps in my cultural and historical education, gave me an edge in bar trivia.

Solving crosswords was like working out, something I got better at the more I did it. But while I acquired some niche familiarity with puzzle arcana, I never felt that I was getting smarter about the world that I lived in. In the past several years, as puzzles have evolved from slightly esoteric entertainment to work that's more quirkily personal, the experience has changed, so that doing a crossword today is less a quiet test of mid-20-century minutiae and more a spirited conversation with modern culture.

The reasons are manifold. The technology used to make crosswords has improved, the online spaces where people commune over puzzle-making and solving have proliferated, and there has been an industry-wide effort to increase constructor diversity. Now, crossword puzzles regularly include modern slang, internet speak, references to memes and films that weren't shot on celluloid. This has, for me, resulted in a puzzle that's more exciting, but I've spent enough time on online crossword forums to know that every long-time puzzler's reaction might not be so enthusiastic.

When I began doing puzzles, I didn't question whether they were meant for me. It wasn't until I started seeing clues and answers more relevant to my everyday life that I understood how much of a tourist I was then. Of course, you don't need to see yourself in a puzzle in order to enjoy it or complete it. A well-constructed puzzle is solvable, even if there are niche entries. Those niche entries are what make the newer puzzles so much fun for me.

I'm not just calling up esoteric words from my weird-puzzler's lexicon. I'm participating in an activity that feels relevant to my everyday life. That doesn't mean I'm not a little wistful for the days when I felt I'd established a sort of mastery of the crosswordese that comprised every puzzle, when solving a crossword was a bit dutiful, like reciting a memorized poem. I'm less sure-footed in solving these days, but I'm also more often delighted, which seems like a respectable trade-off.

100 YEARS AGO

"EULOGY OF MURDER"

COMMONS AND LEGAL ACTION

IN the House of Commons to-day, replying to Mr. Thomas Johnston (Lab.) with regard to the Madras Government discharging officials who were sympathizers with the non-co-operators, in which connection Mr. Johnston instanced the discharge of Subba Rao from the Telegraph Department, Mr. Richards said he had no official knowledge of the case or of any general orders of dismissal, but Government servants were prohibited from subscribing to or aiding any political movement in India.

Colonel Howard Bury (Cons.) drew attention to Mr. C. R. Das's support of the Swarajist resolution at the Serajganj Conference paying homage to the murderer of Mr. Day and to the indignation of Europeans in India at the eulogy of murder as a political weapon. He asked whether the Government of India contemplated taking any legal action against the movers of the resolution.

Mr. Richards replied that he had not received any official intimation that legal proceedings were contemplated.

Colonel Howard Bury asked whether Mr. Richards dissociated himself from Lord Olivier's statement in his letter to Mr. Satyamurthi that the Swarajists were using a perfectly constitutional weapon and whether he considered murder a constitutional weapon.

Mr. Richards in his reply drew attention to Mr. Gandhi's condemnation of the resolution.

DELHI AFFRAY

OFFICIAL REPORT OF DISTURBANCE

IN connection with the fracas reported yesterday between Arya-Samajist Hindus and Moslems the Senior Superintendent of Police has communicated his report to the Press. The inquiry classifies the disturbance as a minor affray, the immediate cause of which was that while a party of Arya-Samajist boys and girls was returning from the Samaj a Moslem got mixed up in the party, and some Moslems raised a cry that the boy was being kidnapped and went to rescue him. Seven Arya-Samajist Hindus and two Moslems were injured in the affair. Of these one Hindu was admitted to hospital. No arrests have been made as there was no sufficient cause for such a course.

The foregoing official account of the cause of the disturbance is approved in other responsible quarters.

POLITICAL DIARY KALYANI SHANKAR

Can we expect discourse without acrimony?

How will the 18th Lok Sabha function? Will the Government and the Opposition seek consensus or confrontation? Will the Government be more conciliatory and the Opposition less belligerent? The prediction is pending, although at the start of the session, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi said the appropriate words to show they wanted consensus.

The 18th Lok Sabha is interesting because, for the first time in ten years, Modi is facing a Parliament in a weaker position. He has to run a coalition and face a resurgent opposition.

Modi stated that in his third term, his Government would aim to build consensus. Before the session, Modi sought agreement on all matters and criticized the Opposition for causing problems, thus setting the tone. Despite this, the first session of the new Lok Sabha saw animosity between the Government and the Opposition.

Rahul Gandhi also emphasized the importance of the Opposition's role in representing the voice of the people in the House. He expressed willingness to assist in the House's functioning and stressed the need for trust-based cooperation.

The Lok Sabha has shown potential for positive functioning, but confrontations have already begun. Signs of animosity between the BJP-led Government and the

Opposition were visible within a week of the first session. Contentious issues will likely include the Uniform Civil Code, One Nation One Poll, the National Register of Citizens, the Agnipath scheme, census, and delimitation.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi has remarked, "There is no evidence that the Prime Minister has come to terms with the electoral outcome or has reflected on the message sent to him by voters." She said Modi preaches the value of consensus but continues to value confrontation.

The BJP aims to show that Modi 3.0 is firmly in control. However, the Modi government now relies on crucial support from two key allies - JD(U) and TDP. This means decisions are made together, and the NDA allies greatly influence the Government's plans and actions. In 2019 and 2014, the BJP had a substantial majority. The increased presence of the Opposition in various parliamentary panels is expected to generate greater engagement.

The first session of the 18th Lok Sabha began with a strong Opposition asserting its rights. Before the session even started, there was a dispute over the appointment of BJD MP Bhartuhari Mahtab as the pro-tem Speaker to administer the oath of office to the newly elected members. The Congress and the INDIA bloc members felt that Congress MP Kodukkunil Suresh, elect-

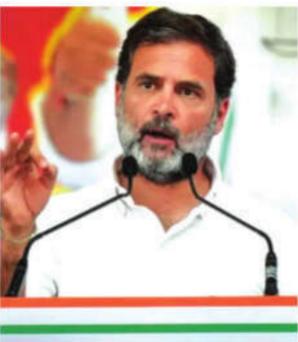
ed eight times, should have been given the position.

However, the BJP argued that they followed the rules. Mahtab was elected to the House seven times in succession, while Suresh lost two elections.

Secondly, Rahul Gandhi said he would back Om Birla, the NDA candidate, but only if the Deputy Speaker position, usually given to the Opposition, was assured. In the 17th Lok Sabha, there was no Deputy Speaker. Article 93 says that two Lok Sabha members should be chosen as Speaker and Deputy Speaker. But the Government disagreed.

Om Birla has been re-elected as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, bringing continuity and stability to the House and solidifying the position of the Modi government.

Thirdly, what happened next was surprising. After receiving congratulations, the newly elected Speaker took a paper out of his pocket and read a resolution against the 1975 Emergency imposed by late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This provoked the Congress. The Government's decision to have the Speaker pass a resolution on his first day in office shows an inclination towards confrontation. This led the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, to lead a delegation to the Speaker to convey their objection to a political reference from the chair.



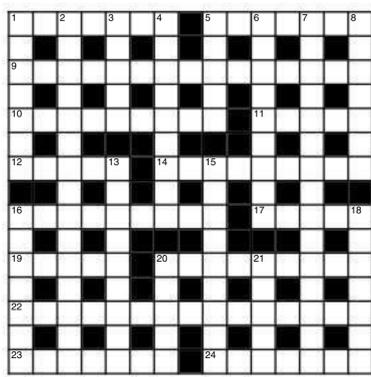
Fourthly, some opposition parties thought the president's first speech to Parliament ignored the country's most serious problems. Also, other opposition parties called for removing the Sengol, which the Prime Minister had installed with much fanfare earlier.

Fifthly, Rahul and other Opposition MPs proposed discussing the NEET matter first. The Speaker, however, insisted that a discussion on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address be taken up first.

The first week's confrontations show that despite the decrease in numbers, the BJP is unlikely to change its working methods. An energized opposition will also make itself heard loudly. The Government will face many more challenges.

CROSSWORD

NO-292826



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

RULE LUMBERJACK
U A T P A I V I
B A S I S T R E D F O R D
B A G U B C S
E A G L E R E A P P E A R
R N R N D U D I
B R A I S E W O L F D O W N
A H O S F
N O R M A L L Y A P O L L O
D E R I C A A M
W A L K O V E R S U R G E
T L E E T C S
A G I T A T O T O R P E D O
C S C I A Y N R
O I N T H E B L I N K E Y I O T

ACROSS

- Bread from dining room sent back after tea (7)
- Excellent sects from the east in island nation (2,5)
- Rotten people sin to produce malicious missile (6,3,6)
- Black couple to protect composer reversing in road (9)
- One bounding area that separates two major cities (5)

DOWN

- Russian female revolutionary in American election (5)
- Quietly detests being involved in key software trial (5,4)
- Neglected animal given signal amid tangled gorse (6,3)
- God needing name for Germanic character (5)
- Net profit at last drawn that voids margins (5)

- Approaches snooker table but loses form? (4,2,3)
- Two kids lost? New angle: three lads lost (6,3,6)
- Time pressure on in war zone (7)
- Characters seen in flannelette or cotton garment? (7)
- Old man cutting wire with skill (7)
- Intense musicale disrupted contemplative period (1,7,7)

- Relaxed game ends on schedule (5)
- Block caught out, venture being random (9)
- Yankee stops lecturers travelling up for meeting (5)
- We initial changes to prepare ambush (3,2,4)
- Doctor at this place? Go to small medical institution (7,8)
- American Satan devouring Republican alongside (7)

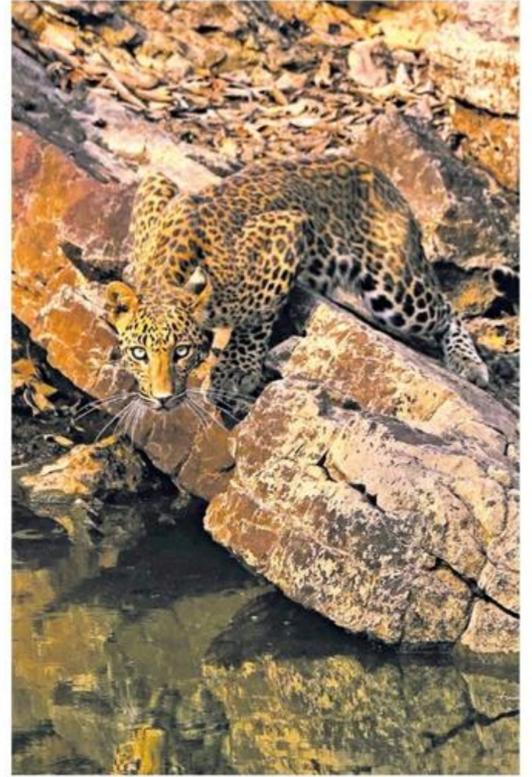
- Diversion giving an essential cover for English soldiers? (9)
- Revolt animals were so stubborn! (3-6)
- Mechanical device skinned fantasy author (7)
- Folded card husband lost in TV fundraiser turned up (7)
- Peer outside entrance to Lords in coat (5)
- Finnish port one from Ankara found acceptable (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

Living with Leopards

THE DIMINISHING POPULATION OF LEOPARDS SERVES AS A REMINDER OF THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

N SHIVA KUMAR



In the dying daylight, a dazzling delight developed as slanting sunrays lit up the dappled pelt of a female leopard. The golden glow on the leopard's healthy hide was enhanced as she lay sprawled atop a rocky outcrop surrounded by the lush green jungles of Bandipur National Park in Karnataka. By the time, I positioned and pointed my heavy zoom lens camera towards the animal, it swiftly slithered away into the jungle. A few years ago too in Ranthambore National Park of Rajasthan, just as our gypsy entered Zone-4, a leopard was basking in the warm winter sun, lethargically resting and perfectly camouflaged on a large boulder. This time, I managed to take a few high-speed shots before it detected my presence and vanished into the bushes.

Equipped with a lithe body wired with high tensile ligaments and corresponding flexible muscles, the leopard can leverage its power-coordinated limbs and climb any timber tree without much effort. The smallest of the big cats, it is comparatively cautious, unlike the tiger, and exhibits plenty of stealth and silence making sightings in the wild a rarity. They occur in a wide range of habitats, including plains, deserts, grasslands, wetlands, rocky slopes, mountains and rainforests, but are dramatically declining in numbers due to the loss of conducive habitats.

KNOWN FOR ITS INCREDIBLE ADAPTABILITY, THE LEOPARD HAS THE LARGEST RANGE OF ALL THE BIG CATS, SPANNING 60 COUNTRIES ACROSS THE GLOBE

Living under the shadow of its big brother, the magnificent tiger, leopards are often ignored and neglected in wildlife conservation policies. In Indian jungles, leopards avoid tigers and lions during the day, preferring to hunt at night. Relatively, leopards are smaller in physique than tigers and lions but have powerful neck muscles, immense strength and raw power to carry a 70kg sambar deer or chital deer right up a tall tree. This strategy is to evade tigers, lions, hyenas, dholes (packs of wild dogs), wild bears and other predators eager to grab a free meal. Leopards, being solitary mammals, rarely share their kill-meal with kith and kin, except their young growing cubs.

Wealth of Stealth

Seventeen years ago, while on a jungle journey to Dhikala Forest Rest House, deep inside the thick forests of the Corbett National Park, I was thrilled to witness a leopard in action 20 feet up in the air on a tree, relishing a sambar kill. The forest guide stated that the leopard had been up on the tree for three days devouring the kill, making it one of the rarest sightings atop a tree. Occasionally, it came down for a drink in the Ramganga River, to answer nature's call or to seek slumber on a thick branch.

Leopards use their inherent agility and insane ability to hunt and devour a vari-

ety of animals such as sambar deer and spotted deer, nilgai (blue bull) and chinkara antelopes, hares, peacocks, and monitor lizards. They kill their prey either with a suffocating bite using large canines to the throat or by breaking the back of the neck with lethal claws and jaws. Small or big prey makes no difference, and this adaptability helps them survive in diverse landscapes avoiding humans.

ONLY TWO SUBSPECIES, AFRICAN LEOPARD AND INDIAN LEOPARD, STILL HAVE VIABLE POPULATIONS AND DISTRIBUTION RANGES, WHILE THE REST LIVE PRECARIOUSLY. AMUR LEOPARD IS ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION

Indian leopards have a higher hunting success rate than the mighty tiger because of their stalking skills with strong sturdy legs and a long tail for providing body balance when chasing prey. Their broad muzzle, short ears for keen hearing and ocular bulbs for intense eyesight engage with precision. Its coat is less spotted and adorned more with rosettes on a yellowish-brown pelt that merges well with surroundings, and rosettes are unique to each feline. Leopards are not only elusive, solitary and largely nocturnal but are also powerful swimmers. They are very agile and can run at over 58 kph, easily leap over 20 feet horizontally and jump up to 10 feet without exertion.

Fatal Attraction

The Indian leopard, one of nine subspecies of leopards in the world, is found throughout the subcontinent. Although the majority of Indian leopards — about 95% — are confined to India, small populations are found in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan.

Today, leopards are threatened by hunting, illegal trade for their skins and other body parts, conflict with local people, rampant poaching and depletion of their natural prey. Increasing agricultural lands, and growing cities and towns have eroded much of the pristine forests where leopards thrive. Road kills are on the rise as we build superfluous highways and roadways in the name of development deep into forest areas where wildlife dwells peacefully. Regular human intrusion has contributed to the ever-increasing human-leopard conflict due to fragmented ecological niches.

Bountiful to Doubtful

Historical hunting records and British Gazetteers reveal that India had a substantial population of leopards before World War II. These dossiers state that approximately 1,50,000 leopards were hunted over 50 years (1875-1925). It is estimated that the leopard population was nearly 1,00,000 around a hundred years ago. However, it has drastically declined, reaching its lowest level in the 1960s when the renowned naturalist EP Gee estimated that only 6,000-7,000

leopards remained in the Indian jungles as of 1964.

Regarded as vermin, even today leopards are detested in certain rustic locations in the countryside as they grab goats, sheep, poultry and even pet dogs as fast food. Protection and conservation measures, such as establishing a network of protected areas and enacting laws, have contributed to the recovery of the leopard population. However, extensive poaching two decades ago slowed this recovery rate. As poaching declined, the leopard population has consistently increased across all the States since independence.

Dr Ravi Chellam, wildlife biologist and conservation scientist, says: "The majority of the leopard population in India occurs outside protected areas, much of which are human-use areas including sugarcane fields, tea gardens, man-made ravines and also in natural habitats like rocky outcrops and other non-forest areas. This has been corroborated by the Government of India report *Status of Leopards in India*." Only 35% of the leopard population is found within designated national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, with the rest counted beyond protected areas' boundaries.

THE LEOPARD POPULATION REACHED ITS LOWEST LEVEL IN THE 1960S WHEN THE FAMOUS NATURALIST EP GEE ESTIMATED THAT ONLY 6,000 TO 7,000 LEOPARDS REMAINED IN THE INDIAN JUNGLES AS OF 1964

As prolific breeders, leopards are increasing in numbers but are also being exterminated at a faster rate. Last year, when I visited the last bastion of the Asiatic lions in the Gir National Park, Gujarat, I saw more leopards than lions. Every 30 km, we sighted a leopard wandering about, which is a good sign for the wilderness of the Gir National Park. In my earlier four visits there in the 1990s, I could only view a fleeting glimpse of one leopard covertly treading the dusty ground and very sure of its camouflage.

Countryside Carnivore

The sprawling rock-strewn countryside on the hoary hillocks of Bera and Jawai River in Pali district of Rajasthan is a fascinating example of wildlife conservation without any animal-human conflict. There seems to be an unwritten dictum among venerating villagers and stealthy leopards, a truce that literally says, "You live your life, we live our life, a law without a flaw."

A study by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) reiterates the strange behaviour of why leopards live in groups. "The relaxed nature of these animals with human ethos is indeed unique. It's probably been prevailing for many years according to local lore. Instances of leopard attacks on humans, despite this remarkable proximity, are unheard of, and the villagers are unfazed by the presence of big cats in their daily lives. Leopards are worshipped as demigods here,

and villagers will not take revenge even if a calf, goat or pet dog is killed by it. Unlike in other parts of India, these Leopards don't reside on trees; actually, there are hardly any trees or forest patches. They take refuge in the rocks and boulders that have ample cosy caves in the various hills of the Aravalli range that abound in the vicinity."

ACCORDING TO THE WILDLIFE PROTECTION SOCIETY OF INDIA, 544 LEOPARDS DIED IN INDIA IN 2023 WHILE 518 DIED IN 2022

Strangely, most of the diet of wild leopards living in the surrounding villages is not their natural prey, which is scarce, but heavily depends on sheep, goats, wild pigs, stray dogs, cow-calves, young camels, etc that belong to the villagers. The villagers consider the loss of their livestock as an offering to the gods; in this case, it is the countryside carnivore, which is the holy entity that lives in harmony. "Populations of large carnivores in human-dominated landscapes are often suppressed by management action because of the potential risks they pose to people and domestic animals. The Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai has a good number of leopards but the wild prey base is insufficient to support it. As a result, the leopards are venturing into human-dominated habitats to prey on domestic animals, especially dogs and also to scavenge on carcasses," says Dr Chellam.

According to some scientists, leopards can also provide beneficial services to human societies, even in urban surroundings like Mumbai. They suggest that by preying on stray dogs, leopards reduce the large number of people bitten by dogs, the risk of rabies transmission, and the costs associated with dog sterilisation and management.

Road-kill Disasters

In recent times, the biggest killer of leopards is death on rural roads, State highways and national highways. Human encroachments and developmental activities continue to threaten wildlife by fragmenting their habitat and isolating residential animals. At current road-kill rates, the leopard population in North India is at an 83% higher risk of extinction due to roadkill, according to an international study published in the *Global Ecology and Biogeography*. (bit.ly/3CMuvkb). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) also recognises roadkill as a threat to numerous wildlife species that live on the fringes of road networks. Collective action by citizens and authorities is imperative to create a world where humans and animals can coexist peacefully.

No official countrywide population estimate is available in real terms, but within the 17 tiger-bearing States of India, the leopard occupies an area of around 174,066 sqkm, nearly double the area occupied by the tiger. However, the rising human-animal conflicts have experts concerned. Recently, a leopard cub was left paralysed after it was injured in

a road accident two months ago while trying to cross a road near Nashik. The seven-month-old female cub was rescued by the forest department.

Healthy Healing

Dr Sakshi Verma, a practising physiotherapist in Lucknow and Hyderabad, asserts that regular physiotherapy, including leg massages and assisted walks, can significantly help leopards injured in road accidents. Wildlife animals have a natural tendency for self-healing and physiotherapy, combined with appropriate medication, can enhance their ability to repair injured musculature effectively for locomotion. Animal physiotherapists work alongside a multidisciplinary team as they do in conventional physiotherapy. However, they do not have first-line practitioner status in most countries.

"We often receive calls about animals that have been injured in road accidents across India. Such incidents are on the rise due to little or no provision for wildlife corridors or underpasses that allow animals to cross roads safely. Many unsuspecting animals put their lives at risk as they often wander for water onto these busy highways and end up getting injured or killed," says Kartick, CEO of Wildlife SOS.

WITHIN THE 17 TIGER-BEARING STATES OF INDIA, THE LEOPARD OCCUPIES AN AREA OF AROUND 1,74,066 SQKM, NEARLY DOUBLE THE AREA OCCUPIED BY THE TIGER

The number of leopards in Uttarakhand has come down from 2,276, which is 652 less than last year, according to the WII. Forest fires are a significant factor contributing to the diminishing population of leopards as tigers tend to inhabit dense forests, leaving leopards to hunt in settlements near forested areas. The forests in Uttarakhand that leopards inhabit have been increasingly impacted by natural and manmade fires.

One of my best sightings was last month while on a safari into the Ranthambore National Park with temperatures scorching at 44 degrees. After an hour of scanning the dry jungle for 10 km in an hour-long journey, we took a detour to a rocky natural culvert with a cool pool. Fleeting, I sighted a perfectly camouflaged leopard which had come to quench its thirst. I went blazing with rapid firing shutter speeds of my camera and captured nearly 700 shots alternating with two cameras.

The story of leopards in India serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between nature and human development. By fostering coexistence and protecting these magnificent creatures, we can ensure that future generations will continue to marvel at the sight of a leopard basking in the golden glow of the setting sun, just as I did all those years ago.

(The author is an independent journalist and documentary wildlife photographer)



NSD director's solo show 'Gunno Bai' wins over audiences, in China too

ARTS PAGE 3



Two snow leopards and their mother are the stars of Kibber village in Spiti valley

REFLECTIONS PAGE 5

CHANDIGARH | 30 JUNE 2024

SONIA WIGH

IN 1799, at the age of 19, Ranjit Singh conquered Lahore and began his campaign to bring the diverse *mists* of Punjab under his control. Over the subsequent four decades of his rule, the Maharaja resisted strong aggressors, including the Afghans and the British, as well as created an enduring legacy as a powerful warrior, astute statesman, and flamboyant monarch of a cosmopolitan empire. This legacy is highlighted and celebrated by the exhibition, 'Ranjit Singh — Sikh, Warrior, King', at the Wallace Collection in London. The exhibition (on till October 20) has been co-curated by Wallace Collection's director, Dr Xavier Bray, and scholar of Sikh art, Davinder Toor.

Scholarly research on Ranjit Singh demonstrates how his court is of value for the cosmopolitan, eclectic and syncretic space it fostered for an ethnically and religiously diverse population. It also shows the remarkable stability of the state, centralised institutionalised mechanisms, diligent record-keeping, and managing European incursive intents. All these aspects are explored through five sections of the exhibition: 'Prelude to Power', 'Masters of War', 'The Lahore Durbar', 'Firangis' and 'Legacies'.

The opening section, 'Prelude to Power', has a map of the subcontinent highlighting the extent of the Sikh empire at the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which orients the viewer's perspective from the get-go. Comprising mostly paintings from the Toor collection, this section addresses the key moments of the making of the Sikh politico-religious edifice in the 18th century. By juxtaposing the paintings of Guru Arjan Dev expounding on the *Adi Granth* with another of a heavily armed Guru Hargobind holding a hawk, the curators cleverly project the making of the Sikh warrior tradition in the 18th century, or as Purnima Dhawan has shown, how 'sparrows became hawks'.

The most substantial section in the exhibition is 'Masters of War'. It consists of arms and ammunition, full-body armour, paintings depicting the Sikh martial form, and even a *dastar bunga*, a towering version of the turban preferred by the Nihangs. It is in this section that the curators display objects directly referencing the 'Sikh' martial body. For instance, the steel 'turban helmet' explains how space was made in a traditional helmet (*taup*) for the Sikh turban and top-knot — a cultural-bodily marker, especially as they were worn by the exclusive, elite, 800-strong dragoons within the general Sikh forces. The section also engages with Ranjit Singh's relations with the Marathas — another political force as powerful and capable of encroachment as the British with whom the Maharaja signed a treaty of 'perpetual friendship' instead.

The curators then turn towards the space within which Ranjit Singh received all his visitors, friends and foes: 'the Lahore Durbar'. Through a curious blend of paintings, fabrics, manuscripts and medals, this section offers a range of perspectives of looking at the cosmopolitan court created by Ranjit Singh. The visitor will be able to see the impressive 'Golden Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh', borrowed from the Victoria and Albert Museum. For anyone interested in the transformation of cities, the 'Panoramic View of the Walled City of Lahore' (1845) makes for fascinating viewing. Taking up an entire wall, the painting captures the essence of the city of Lahore, from the 'mosque of Shah Jahan' dominating the right corner to the 'haveli of Sardar Ahluwalia' on the left. The visitors' eyes will be immediately drawn to the journal of Frances Eden, sister of the Governor-General of India, who sketched two views of the Koh-i-Noor diamond, prized possessions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh — now in the British royal treasury. Ironically, the diary is framed by a fabulous emerald girle of Maharaja Sher Singh, 'lent' by His Majesty the King.

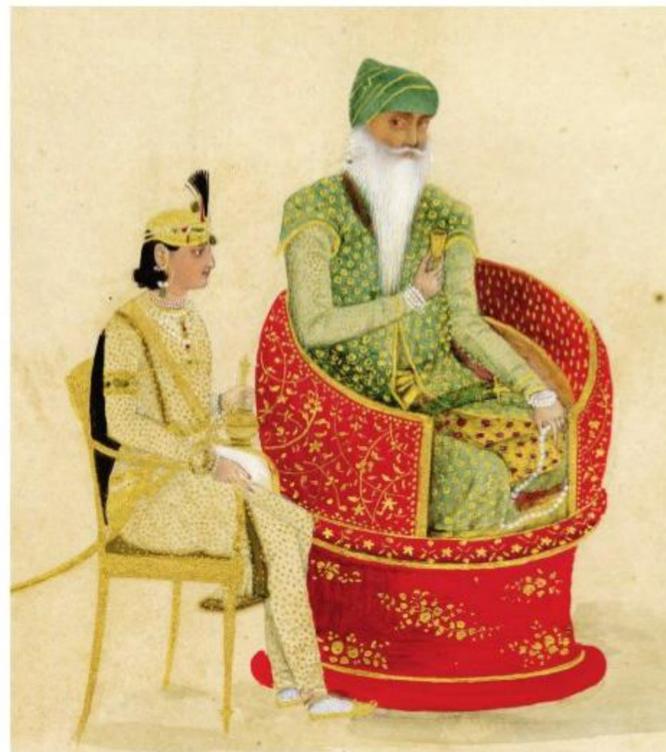
The story of Ranjit Singh is equally a story of strong women who supported and helped create the Sikh edifice celebrated by the exhibition. The recent spate of work by Anshu Malhotra, Priya Atwal and Radha Kapuria has highlighted how the actions of women — from machinations of individual queens safeguarding the empire to everyday feminine interactions — shaped the Sikh social order. Yet, the women are curiously short-changed here. Their presence is limited to two portraits of Rani Mahtab Kaur, and Maharani Jind Kaur — whose jewellery is also showcased, almost as though that was the extent of their contribution. It was interesting, however, to read about how Maharani Jind Kaur's personal jewels and possessions were captured by the British and only a small portion was returned after protracted negotiation by Duleep Singh, to be eventually retailed by Frazer and Haws. Apart from the famous loss of Koh-i-Noor, it was at this moment when the his-



An exhibition in London explores the Maharaja's reign and its cosmopolitan, syncretic value

Ranjit Singh's WORLD

The Maharaja's throne on display at the exhibition titled 'Ranjit Singh — Sikh, Warrior, King' in London. © Cassandra Parsons & the Trustees of the Wallace Collection.



Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799–1839) with his favourite, Raja Hira Singh (1816–1844), attending as a cup-bearer, c 1835–1838. © Toor Collection.



Turban-helmet, probably Lahore, Punjab, 19th century. © The Trustees of the Wallace Collection.

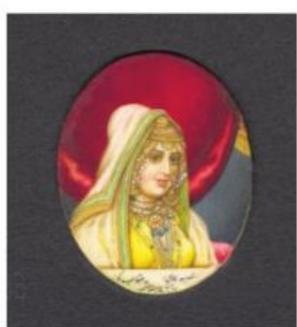


Sword associated with Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Awadh, late 18th or early 19th century. © The Trustees of the Wallace Collection.

tory of loot and coercive acquisitory practices that have led to staggering displays of 'South Asia collections' (or worse, 'Oriental collections') in Western museums was rendered visible. Ironically, the only painting where women feature predominantly is the one depicting 'The Cremation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with Four Queens and Seven Maidservants'. The painting was meant to depict the act of *sati* (self-immolation) by the four high-born Hindu Rajput wives of the Maharaja. The plaque accompanying the painting acknowledges that the act of *sati* was condemned by the third Sikh Guru and banned by the British, but even the audio accompanying the painting does not note how this act was a way of symbolising kingship, borrowing from the Rajput traditions.

In fact, there is also a subtle tension in the exhibition between acknowledging the links of the Sikh empire under Ranjit Singh with the Timurid-Mughal empire and establishing it as the enemy responsible for the emergence of Sikh martyrdom. The exhibition displays objects belying the profusion of Persian documentation, liberal usage of Persian script in the administration, and adaptation of Persianate (and even Rajput) forms of kingship by the Sikh rulers — and shies away from exploring the connection.

Much of what we know of Ranjit Singh's court comes from European travel accounts. The section on 'Firangis' showcases not only the visitors but also those employed by Ranjit Singh to compete and outsmart competitors like the East India Company. The paintings of Ranjit Singh commissioned by European officers offer



(By Rattan Singh) Rani Mahtab Kaur (1782-1813), Lahore or Delhi, c 1810-1830. © Toor Collection.



(By Alfred Dedreux) 'Ranjit Singh Baadour, Roi de Lahore' (Ranjit Singh the Brave, King of Lahore) commissioned by General Ventura, Paris, c 1837. © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre), Stéphane Maréchal.

an insight into how he was visualised by European officers in Sikh service. An 'Ornamental Letter of Credence' from King Louis Philippe I of France to Maharaja Ranjit Singh not only underscores his political relevance in the shifting alliances of the 19th century, but also the necessity to cultivate him as a 'dearest friend' by other powerful monarchs of the time.

My favourite piece from the whole exhibition is in the last section, 'Legacies'. The 1870s painting titled 'The Golden Temple of Amritsar and the City Beyond' attributed to Bishan Singh immediately transports you to Hamandir Sahib. The vivid colours and the vibrant hues used to render the everyday lives of the pilgrims to the sacred site fill you with euphoria. To anyone who has been to the Golden Temple, the skill of the painter is so fine that one can almost hear the cacophony of the scene, the coolness of the water as the devotees take a cleansing dip, the conversations while getting ready, and the warmth between a child and his mother holding a toy. It makes one yearn for home.

At some point, I thought the exhibition was struggling with the unenviable burden of being the first and different. The exhibition is extremely important inasmuch as it's the first attempt to historicise the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and bring his substantial achievements to the public through an impressive series of artefacts. And yet, it seems to be geared towards the Sikh diasporic community or those with prior knowledge of the subcontinent and its history. I wonder how much a non-specialist would take from it. They will remember Ranjit Singh, but the nuances of what is in the

material might be difficult to grasp, especially as the cast of characters that populated his world is not fully sketched out. Maybe a helpful timeline of the Sikh faith and empire could have accompanied the map at the beginning of the exhibition, or a list of *dramatis personae* to better contextualise the material would have been helpful.

While some of the plaques describe the contents in the display cases, there is little attempt to transcribe and translate the non-English material. This would render some articles incomprehensible to the non-specialist viewer beyond just being objects. Even the articles that are in English would need palaeographic skills to read. For instance, the 'True copy' receipt marking the formal transfer of the famed Koh-i-Noor diamond from the Sikhs to the British elicited much interest in the viewers when I was visiting the exhibition, but they struggled to decipher the script and the content.

For me, all the elements of the exhibition came together in the 'Sword Likely to Have Belonged to Maharaja Ranjit Singh', with intricate scenes of kingship and piety, zoomorphic symbols as well as inscriptions on the knucklehead in Gurmukhi calligraphy (from the 'epic narrative on life of Krishna') which the audio tells us reads: 'May the cauldron and the sword flourish in the world, grant your protection so that no other can kill me.' By emphasising that feeding and protecting the unfortunate is the highest virtue for a Sikh, the exhibition connects our past and present — to the heart of Sikhi and Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

— The writer is a British Academy postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge

An illustrious diplomat who was a class apart

RAMU DAMODARAN

MUCHKUND DUBEY passed away on June 26, the 80th United Nations Charter Day. He was 12 when that foundational document was signed by 51 countries, including his still not Independent own. Less than three years earlier, his father had been imprisoned during the Quit India movement, he had awaited his return in the family's single-room home, in today's Jharkhand, on whose wall was written, in Sanskrit, "Do not come in my way. I can hear the fear in this terror-stricken world."

The resolve to help assuage that fear led him to the Indian Foreign Service and the United Nations, as a delegate and an international civil servant. The breadth of possibilities he saw in fresh ideas was vast, as was his impatience when they were narrowed. In a memorable intervention at the United Nations in 1985, as Chair of the preparatory committee for the conference on disarmament and development, he said, without the least indication of irony, that the committee "has been able fully to discharge its mandate. In fact, it has gone beyond that mandate and made a series of recommendations on other vital aspects of the preparation for the conference".

Nor did he acclimatise to laziness and custom in drafting. As a UN delegate in the Sixties, faced with an Eastern European proposal that "men and women should be equally entitled to maternity leave", he suggested (a half century ahead of his time; it was a word determined by the UN in 2022) that it should be "parental" and not "maternity". (Drawing rapping rapier response from the Soviet delegate, the redoubtable Madam Flutseva, that it was astonishing that the land of Indra Gandhi and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit should be represented by so chauvinist a male.)

That diplomacy demands anonymity of face, he proved wrong, aided by the Shakespearean actor mobility of his features. When he laughed, each nuance of his face's cheer burst into good humour that was the little boy he once was in Jasdih. When he approved, his eyes and lips mellowed into gentle, gnostic grace. And when he was angry, every element of expression seethed. As did his writing on the world he lived in, where "the major powers that have exercised hegemony in the world order since the Second World War, along with their allies, started a concerted, planned and coordinated effort to weaken the United Nations and whittle down its role and functions".

He saw that role as that of conscience, and arbiter of grievance and fear. Nations should feel free to approach it, nations that had nothing to hide should welcome the opportunity to state publicly their position in response. Not everyone agreed, nor will agree. When he headed the Foreign Office division dealing with Bangladesh, he accepted that country's placing on the agenda of the United Nations

First Committee (dealing, of all things, with global security and disarmament), in 1976, the sharing of the Ganga's waters at Farakka, and the subsequent UN resolution which "urged India and Bangladesh to negotiate on this issue seriously with a view to finding a speedy solution". Discussions with Dhaka did lead to an agreement with a concession that, in his phrase, "was regarded as a great achievement for Bangladesh. For India, it meant getting out of the way a recurring problem in dealing with one of our most important neighbours".

My only opportunity to work directly with him was at the Harare non-aligned summit in 1986. He supervised our dealings with international organisations in the Ministry of External Affairs. I was a three-month-old cub in our delegation in New York. He invited me to dinner the first evening. As I reached to open my menu, he placed his hand on mine and said, "Leave it to me. Pretend you're having dinner with Shankar Bajpai," a reference to the legendary goudam of the Foreign Service. The 'tiger fish cutlets' he ordered were as light as our initial conversation, buoyancy in every bite.

Suddenly, the tenor changed. "Have you ever watched tango?" he asked. I cautiously admitted I had. "It's like international relations," he continued. "You dance with one partner and think you have one partner alone. Then you look around the room and see so many couples, but all are in coordinated movement, moving clockwise or counterclockwise. And you are part of that much, much larger dance."

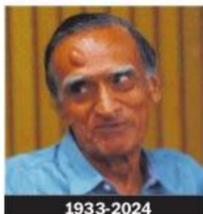
"Nations," he continued, "are persons. Not people. Each with her own likes, faiths, prejudices. And the qualities of warmth, of compassion, of understanding, that make us who we are."

The restaurant had thinned and, declining dessert, we returned to our rooms. Our day was to begin early the next morning when the disarmament committee was to meet, with Dubey presiding and I in India's seat — at least metaphorically, since there were no signs with country names.

It worked well, with a constant flurry of notes from him on the podium, to me in the hall, with instructions on what I should say, gamely carried by an agile Zimbabwean conference aide. Until a new aide came in. "Give it to the Indian man," Dubey instructed. The aide looked around, zeroed in on his destination and handed the note to Pakistan's delegate, Munir Akram.

Akram unfolded the paper and read it, a slow smile unexpectedly gentling his features. His eyes met the anxious Chair's. He slowly refolded it, gave it to the Pakistan aide sitting behind him and asked that he bring it to me. A nation had become a person.

— The writer is non-resident Senior Fellow at Centre for Economic and Social Progress, New Delhi



1933-2024
A tribute to former Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey

Khawaja Khizr's tomb symbolises the composite culture the Bhakti and Sufi movements nurtured

ALKA RAZA

THE tomb of Khawaja Khizr at Sonapat in Haryana is not on the tourist map of Delhi-NCR. It comes up rarely in conversations of heritage enthusiasts. Yet, the historical landmark, built during 1522-1524 by Ibrahim Lodhi, has a lot of a significance attached to it. Considered the last monument of the Lodhi dynasty era, what also makes it special is the structural composition — built with *kankar* blocks, red sandstone and Lakhauri bricks.

Khawaja Khizr was revered as a Sufi saint. A spiritual leader of the Lodhi period, he had renounced court life in search of the 'real meaning of life'. It was the time when the Sufi and Bhakti movements were at their peak. He was frequently consulted on matters of importance by nobles and royals of the time.

I first visited the tomb in January 2019 in a quest to locate the centuries-old trees by the pond in Jatwara, a historical locality in the city of Sonapat. The 500-year-old tomb is surrounded by lush green gardens, next to a pond and many 'heritage trees'.

Reaching this 16th-century monument through the busy, narrow streets of Jatwara village is an experience. Completely hidden by the semi-urban structures, the road, which has all kinds of shops, ends suddenly, and the *maqbara* of Khawaja Khizr rises like a phoenix. A beautiful, picturesque heritage building greets you to take you back to an era gone by — the Lodhis of Delhi Sultanate!

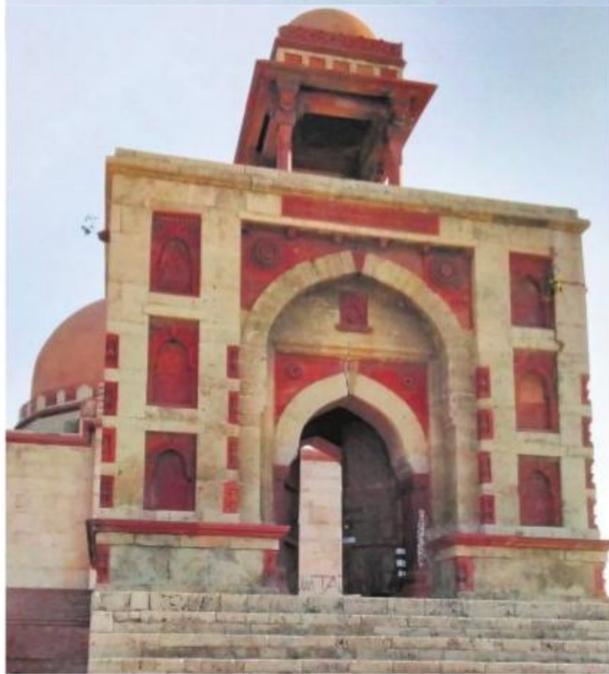
According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), not much is known about this tomb of Indo-Islamic architecture. Built in honour of Khawaja Khizr, it stands on a high platform and is reinforced with square projections at the corners. A flight of steps leads to the gateway, which consists of two arched openings on either side of a central passage decorated with panels, recessed arches, mouldings, lotus medallions and inscriptions.

A *chhatra* is located on the top of the gateway. The main structure is square in plan, with four openings on all sides, except the western wall where a *mihrab* is located. The ceiling of the chamber is decorated with floral designs executed in blue, yellow, green and dull red colours. The burial chamber is surmounted by a hemispherical dome, resting on an octagonal low drum, crowned by a final sitting over an inverted lotus flower.

According to the Persian inscriptions on the tomb, Khawaja Khizr was the son of Darya Khan Sarwani, an influential noble in the court of Sikandar Lodhi.

For many decades, the residents of Jatwara and nearby areas have been taking care of this lesser-known heritage of Haryana. They never fail to offer flowers, food and light incense and

Sonepat's hidden treasure



The 500-year-old monument is dedicated to Sufi saint Khawaja Khizr. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER



Threads tied for seeking blessings.

oil lamps every Thursday and Friday, and pay their respect to the *pir*.

"No one goes empty-handed from here," say Angooree and Shanti, narrating to me the people's belief and some magical stories, insisting that I too make a wish and tie a thread. At 45°C, I could not concentrate on any 'mannat' and thought that perhaps

Khawaja Khizr wants me to come back and pay my regards in a more appropriate manner! The Bhakti and Sufi movements of medieval India played a crucial role in creating a composite culture, and the legacy can be seen to this day. The *dargah* is frequented by people of different faiths, travelling from far and near distances, like a family I met from Kashmir, especially to pray for good health. I was also greeted by local women during my recent visit to the Khawaja Khizr complex, which is becoming a social space to meet, exercise and do yoga. Needless to say, young cricketers were also making good use of the complex.

According to the ASI, a part of the boundary is being re-constructed, and hopefully then, this monument will be better taken care of. One wish I do have — that a heritage festival is organised on the lawns of the tomb so this site gets the recognition it deserves.

— The writer is ex-chairperson of XLRI Centre for Gender Equality and Inclusive Leadership, Jamshedpur

CAPTION CONTEST 1465

HIMANASHU MAHAJAN



Entries invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. It should only be in English, witty, not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, The Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers should attach an epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number in your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1464



JUNE 23 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Bull dozed — Daljit Kaur, Chandigarh

Guarded parking — Inderjit Kaur Anand via epaper, Manimajra

Bullish tenant: parking on the house — Mahima via epaper, Chandigarh

Freebies with market risk — Ashwani Kalia, Ferozpur city

Brief respite from the usual bullying — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Bhindi from another world

RAHUL VERMA

A NEPHEW who runs a restaurant in the United States introduced me to Creole-Cajun food, an interest that I later honed with the books of James Lee Burke. It helped me answer a riddle that had been plaguing me for long. I had often wondered what "Jambalaya" and a crawfish pie and a *filé gumbo* referred to in the song "Jambalaya". I knew "Jambalaya" was a Creole-Cajun rice dish, and crawfish was seafood. But just what was *filé gumbo*?

I learnt that 'gumbo' is a stew prepared mostly with okra. *Filé* is a powder made with the dried and ground leaves of the Sassafras tree. The word 'gumbo', of West African origin, translates into a veggie we know well — 'bhindi'. 'Gumbo' is also the name of the dish, in which okra or 'bhindi' stars, along with seafood and other tasty morsels.

The British called it *lady's fingers*, and the Americans know it as okra. For us, it's 'bhindi' in Hindi and other northern Indian languages, possibly derived from the Sanskrit *bhinadaka*.

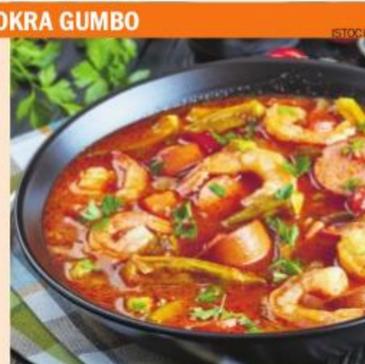
'Bhindi' is cooked in India in so many ways. We have it 'karkuri', deep fried after dusting it with some 'besan' — or stuffed with *masalas*. We cook it soft with onions, or flavour it with mustard paste. It adds taste and flavour to 'sambhar' and meat dishes. Some even like to eat it boiled, with salt and mustard oil. 'Poriyal' is another popular dish, prepared with 'urud dal', 'channa dal', and spices.

What interests me is that okra is much loved in other parts of the world, too. Southeast Asia and East Asia have some interesting okra dishes. Myanmar is known for its okra-and-egg curry, while China has different kinds of dishes, including stir-fried okra. Japan's okra *ohitashi* is a delicious salad. For this, okra is chopped, put in boiling water and blanched. It is then put in cold water, drained, and transferred to a flat dish. A sauce is prepared by heating *mirin*, Japanese

SHRIMP AND OKRA GUMBO

INGREDIENTS	
Bhindi/okra (chopped)	4 cups
Tomatoes (chopped)	1 cup
Onion (chopped)	½ cup
Celery (chopped)	2 tbsp
Bell pepper	½ cup
Garlic (minced)	1 tbsp
Salt	To taste
Red chillies	To taste
Shrimps	1 kg
Chicken broth	4 cups
Water	1 cup
Oil	For cooking

METHOD
Sauté the chopped okra in oil in a heavy-bottom pan. Brown for 45 minutes or so, adding water to ensure it doesn't stick to the pot. Add the onions, then the bell pepper, celery and tomatoes. Cook till the veggies are soft and brown. Add garlic and



cook some more. Add salt and chillies. Add the cleaned and deveined shrimps, and stir now and then until the shrimps are cooked. Add the broth and the water. Let the broth simmer for 20 minutes on low heat. Serve in bowls with cooked rice.

soup stock, and light soy sauce. This is poured over the okra while still hot. You let it rest, and then serve it as salad.

Food writer Madhur Jaffrey mentions in one of her books a Malaysian dish called 'Sambal bendi', prepared with a paste of dried prawns (soaked in water and then drained) shrimps, shallots, red chillies, garlic and salt. She fries some okra, takes them out, and fries the paste. The okras are added back, and then cooked with some water. She adds black pepper and cooks it for five more minutes, and then finishes with lemon juice.

You will find okra in Africa, too. Nigeria has an okra soup prepared with pounded okra, bell pepper, chillies, onions, goat meat, shrimp and spinach. The Ethiopian *bamya elicha* is simple to cook. In a pot, sauté chopped onions (1.5 cup,

chopped tomatoes (2 cups), 2 tsp of chopped garlic and 2 tsp of chopped ginger. Add ½ tsp cardamom powder to it, and then 4 cups of chopped okra. Cook on low heat, uncovered, until done. Mix in chillies and salt and then cook for another five minutes.

Louisiana's 'gumbo' has all kinds of delicious stuff — from chicken, shrimp and prawns to Andouille sausages. And, of course, there is okra to give body and a certain consistency to the dish.

I love 'bhindi' cooked in various ways. And I love it for the humour it evokes. Did you hear about the man who went to buy 'bhindi', and waited patiently while the vegetable seller kept sprinkling water on the pods to make the veggies look green? Finally, the customer said, respectfully: "Once the 'bhindi' regains consciousness, will you please give me a kilo of it?"

और सभी न्यूज़ पेपर मैगजीन प्राप्त करने के लिए सर्वप्रथम इस टेलीग्राम ग्रुप को ज्वाइन करें नीचे दिए लकि पर क्लिक करके ज्वाइन टेलीग्राम

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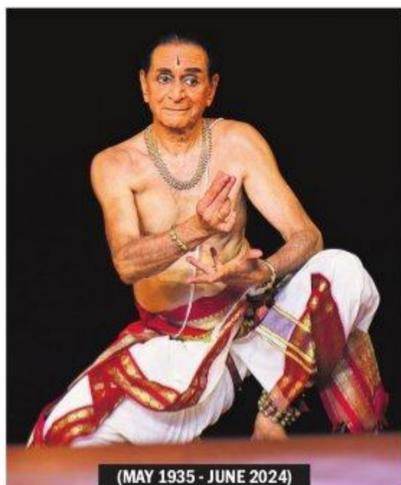
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(MAY 1935 - JUNE 2024)

CV Chandrasekhar was a rare Bharatanatyam dancer trained in North India. PHOTO COURTESY: SUNIL AWMADAM

Ambassador of Bharatanatyam

SREEVALSAN THIYYADI

THE pine trees at Mussoorie reminded young CV Chandrasekhar of the hill-slopes in Shimla where he grew up as a child. The lanky artiste had just reached the Himalayan range, travelling 2,500 km from Madras. The metropolis was where the Tamil-origin boy learned Bharatanatyam, on the cusp of the country's Independence, at the nascent Kalakshetra, where the classical dance was gaining fresh identity. Now in the Garhwal town that gave him a job, language was no issue. Chandrasekhar was fluent in English and Hindi his colleagues and students spoke at the boarding school. After all, Delhi was mostly where he had lived till age 10.

At Mussoorie's Manav Bharati, Chandrasekhar taught dance along with a couple of other subjects. This lasted just a year. Varanasi became his next stop, with Chandrasekhar enrolling for a PhD in botany. A "misunderstanding" with the guide led him to discontinue research. That gave Bharatanatyam a full-fledged practitioner. At age 27 in 1962, he married a dancer-lawyer, Jaya Chandrasekhar, too, was cosmopolitan: born in Bombay, raised in Kanpur and ancestral Tamil Nadu, before shifting to the national capital.

For the couple, artistic life bloomed around Kashi. Chandrasekhar worked at Banaras Hindu University, while Jaya's official tryst was with Rajghat Besant School on the outskirts of the ancient city. The family harmony showed in their penchant for co-opting North Indian aesthetics into Bharatanatyam. The husband and wife were getting exposed to Hindustani classical in a big way. The silken quality of the *khayal* concerts prompted Chandrasekhar to employ those *ragas* as background scores. He selected themes that suited the literary tastes upcountry. Soon, CVC and Jaya became the ambassadors of Bharatanatyam across the Ganga-Yamuna belt.

In any case, Chandrasekhar was exposed to Hindustani music as a kid in Delhi even as he learned the fundamentals

Long teaching stints upcountry earned CV Chandrasekhar eclecticism and gave the dance form new ornamentations

of Carnatic. In 1945, when the Grand Trunk Express took him down south, his aspiration was to become a vocalist. Kalakshetra was studied with Carnatic maestros such as Mysore Vasudevacharya and Budalur Krishnamurthy.

Yet, the poetry sculpted by human movements lured Chandrasekhar into Bharatanatyam. After the first year, he became a dance student. A while later, Dagar brothers Moinuddin and Aminuddin happened to stay briefly in Kalakshetra. Chandrasekhar was enticed by the grandeur of their *dhrupad*. His capacity to converse in Hindi led the teenager to be the favourite errand boy for the titans all through their three months at Adayar. Their reposeful *alaap* and *pakhavaj*-assisted invocations found resonance in Chandrasekhar during his 30s at Varanasi. When he danced on stage, Jaya sang. And vice versa. The partnership gifted Bharatanatyam with 20 milestone productions.

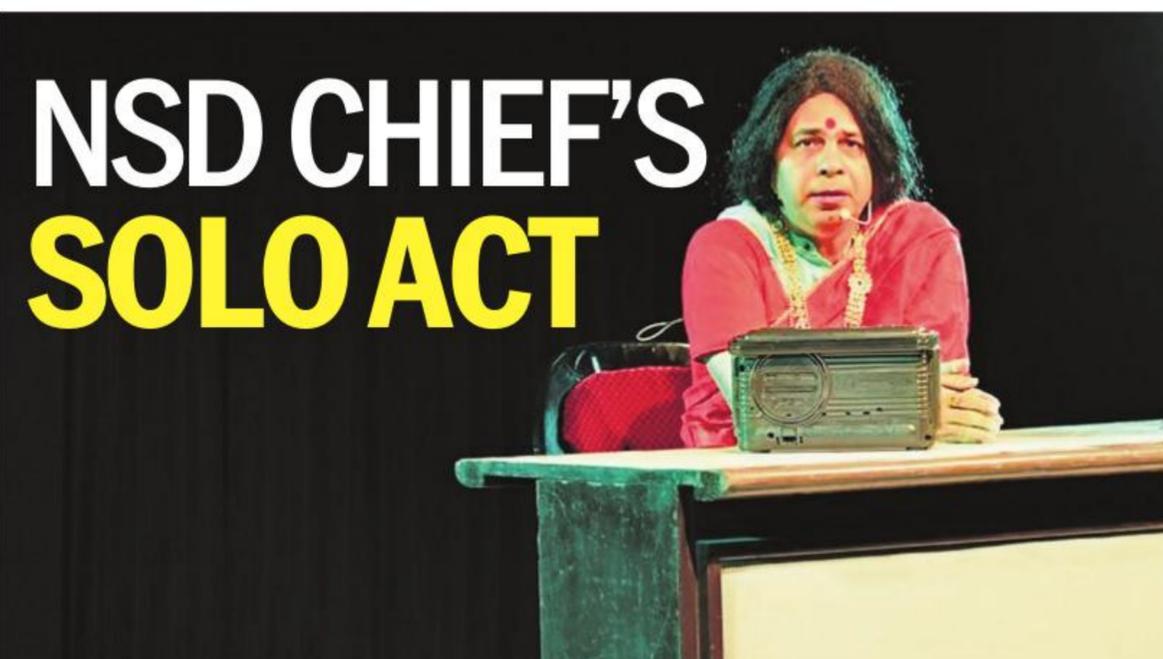
Their works evolved also in the country's west, as CVC and Jaya shifted to Gujarat, concluding Chandrasekhar's 25 years of BHU association from 1964. For 12 years from 1980, MS University in Vadodra became his creative studio. From Bhojpur to now Gujarati, the linguistic change prompted Chandrasekhar to experiment in a spectrum of subgenres. "Any art keeps changing, however slowly and subtly," he used to say.

For CVC, thorough knowledge of the ancient *Natya Shastra* treatise was not important to imbibe the spirit of classical dance. Towards the end of the century and aged 65, Chandrasekhar chose to return to Madras, which had by then got renamed. At Chennai, he set up Nrithyasree. His mentor and Kalakshetra founder Rugmini Devi Arundale (1904-86) was no more; so were chief *gurus* K Saradambal and Dandayudhapani Pillai. The Bharatanatyam repertoire had grown multifold since the second half of the 20th century. Chandrasekhar would fondly recall his nine years (1945-54) in Kalakshetra, which also let him undergo college education.

"I was into my fourth year of dance, when *athai* (Rugmini Devi) suggested the idea of my debuting on stage," the Padma Bhushan awardee would say. Excited but cautious, he presented the *Todi-raga varnam Rupamu joochi* as the centrepiece on the campus in 1950. A lot of buffs and scholars had turned up for the show, curious about the rare sight of a boy dancing. Those were days when the males largely remained tutors for girls doing Bharatanatyam.

Staying engaged had been "very important" for CVC. As danseuse-actress Vjayanthimala notes, Chandrasekhar, who died on June 19, maintained "highest standards, never compromising".

National School of Drama director Chittaranjan Tripathy shares his vision for the institute and why his solo show 'Gunno Bai' continues to win over audiences, now in China too



NSD CHIEF'S SOLO ACT

MAIHIKA KAUL

IT'S been almost six months since Chittaranjan Tripathy became director of the National School of Drama (NSD). An ex-student of India's premier theatre training institute, Tripathy continues to have mixed feelings about his role as the NSD head. "NSD has a golden legacy," he says. Stepping into the shoes of some of the famous directors of NSD (Ebrahim Alkazi, BV Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, Ram Gopal Bajaj) can be burdensome. Tripathy is also overwhelmed — this is his moment to contribute to his alma mater and give it fresh direction.

Tripathy hopes to be the "Renaissance man" — looking for inspiration from *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Sanskrit text focused on drama, music, dance and other performing arts. The treatise offers the building blocks of theatre, he declares. It establishes the timelessness and prowess of Indian theatre. He believes that the NSD ignored this Indian treasure all these years and now the drama school has imbibed its rich heritage and aesthetics. Tripathy is also excited about opening regional repertoires; introduce more meaningful partnerships with organisations and individuals outside the NSD; start a BEd programme in theatre, and invest in the scholarship of child psychology and theatre education. In the turbulent world of Artificial Intelligence, he dreams of creating a niche for Artistic Intelligence.

Originally from Odisha, Tripathy studied sociology before joining the NSD. One of his most successful productions has been *Taj Mahal Ka Tender*, a satire challenging the political history of humans and corruption in a government system.

He also learnt music, an art he hopes the NSD will excel in and eventually stage some musicals.

Tripathy's recent success, *Gunno Bai*, a solo presentation, is a theatrical exploration of a man (Ghanshyam Pathak) who comes to Delhi to study and become an IAS officer. The city is harsh. His father is a fugitive connected to a suspected case of caste violence. Ghanshyam has to take a series of tuitions to survive and there is no time to prepare for an examination. The narrative arc of *Gunno* is similar to thousands of aspirants who spend precious years of their lives trying to crack the civil services or other competitive exams. Many do not even qualify for the first round of an all-India exam as poverty and exploitation prevent them from achieving their dreams.

But Tripathy's *Gunno Bai* is not a failure.

He does not make it to the civil services, but becomes famous for his music and rhetoric. During a walk at the India Gate lawns, he discovers the appeal of a man performing while dressed in a *scarf*. People shower the performer with money, and *Gunno* cracks the formula to earn a living with ease. He now dresses often in feminine attire — part eunuch, bit of a man and bit of a woman. No more sleeping empty stomach and lamenting why he ran away to Delhi. Instead, this young man from a village in Bihar gains popularity after a leading newspaper features him reciting Kabir and other established poets. He soon becomes the go-to person if you want to listen

to great poetry or have philosophical discussions. *Gunno* is now part of the Page 3 circuit!

A large part of the solo show blends music, poetry and humour but is actually a satire on our times, where the quest for goals is blinding and often breaks the human spirit. Tripathy has written the play and also composed all the songs. If the production budget is promising, he says he is assisted by a group of musicians for the stage performance. But, on a shoe-string budget, Tripathy is a one-man army, travelling with all props and dresses in a suitcase, with only a local tabla player to assist. Of course, this time he stages a shorter version of the play for the audience.

Gunno Bai has already had 100 shows, including a recent one at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing in May. After every performance, Tripathy faces similar comments and queries: "Is this your story?" "I know someone who faced a similar struggle."

Tripathy says the play relates to the experiences and emotions of several people. And this, he adds, is the key to its success both within India and abroad. The story of a village boy in search of a dream that does not materialise, but exposes him to the harsh and tragic realities of life and forces him to negotiate his space, identity and survival, is indeed a compelling narrative.

For Tripathy, theatre is a means towards a larger goal of social transformation. The world is a stage and he is playing many parts.

Tripathy wants to open regional repertoires of the NSD.

From the fringes, another gem

'Lakshmanrekha', about a man who revived his village's water sources, has received two IDPA awards

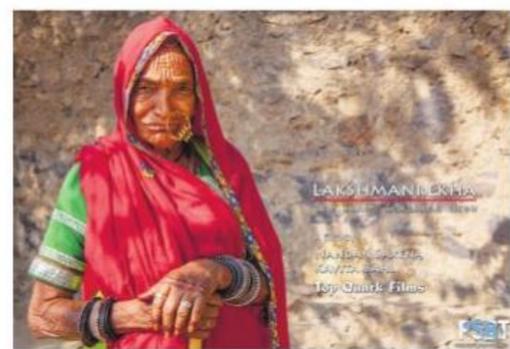
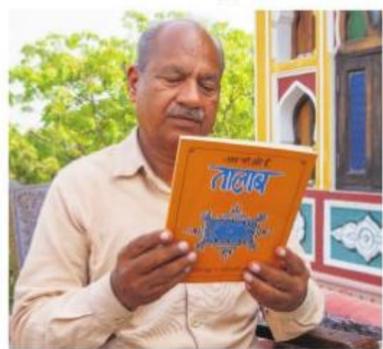
RENU SUD SINHA

VETERAN documentary makers Kavita Bahl and Nandan Saxena picked up yet another award recently for their latest project, *Lakshmanrekha*, that tells the story of a school dropout who revived his village's water sources in the deserts of Rajasthan using traditional methods. It received two Indian Documentary Producers Association (IDPA) Awards 2024 — silver award in the environment and wildlife category and gold for cinematography.

With three National Film Awards to their name, awards are not something new in their 30-year journey. "But to be recognised and awarded by your peers feels special," says Kavita.

Their oeuvre of nearly 40 documentaries has always focussed on people living on the fringes and how traditional wisdom has kept them as well as their ecosystems alive.

For these former journalists,



these cinematic stories from the ground are a continuation of the people's journalism they practised in their 'previous life', as Nandan calls it. "We didn't choose our films, the films chose us."

Their first film, *Agraria: The Sons of Fire*, was about the Adivasis of Chhattisgarh, while *Cotton for My Shroud* dealt with the issue of farmer suicides in Vidarbha. "Cotton... only focussed on the men. But what happened to the women who were left behind? *Candles in the Wind*" told the stories of widows of Punjabi farmers dealing with the burden of their husbands' debts, taking care of children, ageing parents and the chemically-abused fields," says Kavita.

"We shot in Mansa, Sangrur and Bathinda, where maximum suicides had taken place. Despite hardships, these resilient women were re-negotiating the rules of engagement with courage and dignity," recalls Nandan about the documentary, which also won the National Award.

"After *Candles...*, we were exploring a topic for our next documentary. We had met Anupam Mishra, an eminent environmentalist and Gandhian, many times and read his book, *Aaj Bhi Khare Hai Talab*, a seminal work on water harvesting based on traditional methods. We wanted to make a film on his inspiring work. He directed us, instead, towards Lakshman Singh," says Kavita.

Motivated by Mishra's book, a resolute but

simple man had turned drought-hit Lapodia, a village near Jaipur, into an oasis with his unorthodox idea of filling the dry ponds by harvesting rainwater. *Lakshmanrekha* documents Singh's unrelenting efforts — how he convinced the villagers to join him in digging shallow pits or *chaukas* that slowed the surface runoff of rainwater, maximising ground water recharge. When the crops eventually flourished, nearly 60 more villages adopted this *chauka* system. A sheepish government, initially unconvinced and indifferent, adopted the system for 700 villages.

Most of the projects of these independent filmmakers, who have also made documentaries for Prasar Bharti, United Nations Development Programme, Al Jazeera English and the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, are a labour of love and majorly self-funded. "Sometimes, the grants only recover travel expenses," says an undeterred Nandan. The self-taught duo has been holding filmmaking workshops to generate funds. But funds or not, work on their next documentary, *Whispers of the Desert Wind*, has already started.

"We are also venturing into feature films. Two scripts are ready and one of them is based on the legend of Meera," says Nandan. These stories may become movies in the coming years, but making documentaries will remain their first love. As Nandan puts it simply, "It is our life."

'Gunno Bai' is a theatrical exploration of a man who comes to Delhi to become an IAS officer.

(L) Lakshman Singh, the inspiration behind 'Lakshmanrekha', and a poster of the award-winning documentary.

<< Nandan Saxena and Kavita Bahl with IDPA awards for their documentary 'Lakshmanrekha'.

Guru, the evolution of a species

MRINAL PANDE

I HESITATED somewhat before agreeing to review this rather sombre-sounding door stopper of a book, 'Gurus and Media'. Despite the introduction beginning in a somewhat ponderous Shashi Tharoor-esque style, one will be pleasantly surprised by the various perspectives on the Vedic concept of a *guru* and how it has mutated and grown and produced so many avatars. The volume is a carefully-chosen collection of 13 papers by Indian and western scholars. They got involved in a joint effort at bridging the gap between the original concept of a *guru* and, over time, its various forms visible in the media and popular visual culture today. They help the readers understand how an original concept of a *guru*, as a fountainhead of learning imparted verbally by the teacher to his disciples, was able to mesh almost seamlessly with the audio-visual media and produced the multifaceted popular concept of a *guru*.

The writers investigate the mutating *guru* iconographies by combining arthistory, films and even important work done on the caste system to help locate a hidden, troubled history between various *gurus* like Dronacharya and Kautilya and their non-caste disciples. It is interesting to see them join some puzzling dots to show how India's political systems over thousands of years have chosen to patronise and help sustain ancient Brahminical hierarchies in learning. Also, how in the secular State created by Baba Sahib Ambedkar's Constitution and with reformers like

Periyar, the pre-democratic concept of *guru* is being given a new political spin that reshapes it to match the Sangh's dream of a Hindu Rashtra, yoked to the Brahminical version of Hindutva and the *guru*.

The etymology of the word '*guru*' stretches back to the Proto-Indo-European root '*gwere*' (Patrick SD McCartney and Diego Lourenco). In Sanskrit, *guru* means the heavyweight. But across time and space in India, it has had many avatars. Central to all is the act of handing down knowledge. Arko-tong Longkumer's essay on 'The Sonic Guru' should also interest ethnographers and music lovers. The sound and appearance that singer Guru Mashangva uses encompass a whole culture, rituals, politics, tradition, geography and identity of a people.

The present leadership, authors David Landau and Nina Rageth feel, aims to project a traditional version of *Raj Guru*, a king and *guru* in one, heading a Brahminical version of a Bharat full of ancient wisdom and religious thought where cows, *gurus* and mothers are venerated. The goal, ultimately, is to sell to Indians a whole new exercise in nation-building and globally to tap a rich market in a world full of anxieties and stress. Yoga tourism to toys and dolls to western disciples of Indian *gurus* like Tagore, Vivekananda and Gandhi are all being promoted in a big way. As *gurus*, the new India offers not merely spiritual *gurus* living in the Himalayas, but also master craftspeople, traditional dancers, musicians, multiple-language media and market-savvy *gurus*.

Given the ambition to market the *guru* as a



GURUS AND MEDIA: SOUND, IMAGE, MACHINE, TEXT AND THE DIGITAL
Edited by Jacob Copeman, Arko-tong Longkumer, and Koonal Duggal.
UCL Press.
Pages 482. ₹5,894

Perspectives on Vedic concept of a guru and how it has mutated and produced many avatars

commodity, the methodologies for first ensuring the *guru*'s presence among global disciples are also being subjected to a major change in outfits, speaking patterns and language used for profundities he/she may utter. Hindu *gurus* and Hindu nationalism have a long history: Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission, Tagore and Gandhi all shared a strong agenda of religious reform and social transformation so that India could free itself

of colonialism and its deep sense of inferiority to the white man. Early association between the governing body of the BJP, the RSS, and its crafting of a militant Hinduism is part of that historical yatra. Modi's orchestration of this *guru* image and using a pliant media has helped the Sangh create a Hindu-dominant society and polity, which is an organic development of the genre. This has, in turn, guaranteed his indispensability to the father organisation.

Here is where the book makes some interesting points: to see the evolution of a *guru* is to see continuity in the innovations, how they may be rooted in the socio-economic and, lately, political needs on the ground. Particularly interesting is Amanda Lucia's paper ('Flooding the Web, Media Strategies of Nityananda's Digital Empire'). The insights could well apply to controversial *gurus* such a churning has been throwing up: Asaram Bapu, Ram Rahim and Baba Ramdev. There are regular reports on how a *guru*'s manipulative performance while disseminating specialised knowledge and historical perspective may be actually a dangerous tool for political manipulation of simple trusting folk and creating vote-banks. The messages such *gurus* send out for mass consumption vastly compromise the moral and spiritual registers of real received wisdom, while making the devoted followers believe in the concept of *guru* as an embodiment of divinity.

Trust is the keyword. Srirupa Bhat-tacharya and Jacob Copeman and Koonal Duggal's papers underscore how a *guru* can simultaneously be many things to many

people. He is different from the *pujari* or temple priest as a teacher and trusted counsellor. Most Indian homes display photographs or busts of sectarian *gurus*, slick cosmopolitan *gurus* like Sadhguru and Sri Sri, high-profile tech and market *gurus*, and disciples can choose from the vernacular or Anglophone among them.

The media becomes a double-edged sword. It acts as an asset for the *guru* to draw disciples, gather more power and offerings, but the media also gives space when scandals involving *gurus* have been highlighted, leading them to jail from where they continue to exercise clout and are routinely released on bail to help political parties win elections.

Market-led development and liberalisation have brought much prosperity to a part of the Indian middle class. These *gurus* are popular among them and are called to bless them and hold *satsangs*. Performance and theatricality seem to be essential for a successful *guru*. Many frequently fly abroad to bless disciples, give lectures. All live glamorous lives in well-appointed *ashrams*.

The *guru* today thus needs to be seen as a meta person: more than human but also, all too human. David Landau and Nina Rageth deal with a powerful politician's shape shifting into a *guru* during the Covid-imposed isolation of the public overexposed to the media. And how this created a brand new image for a *neta* as an ascetic *guru*, who would meditate in caves and on sea shores.

What effect *guru*dom and its various successful representatives are going to have on a secular State only time will tell.

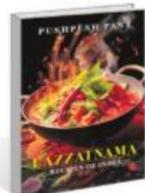
Chronicles of culinary legacy

FOOD historian and critic Pushpesh Pant is back with yet another book on Indian foods and recipes. 'Lazzatnama' is a cuisine-based chronicle of the diverse culinary landscape of the country.

The book, divided into nearly 25 sections such as rice, breads, meat, snacks, sweets, chutneys, *mittas* and drinks, etc, categorises recipes from the same genre or having the same ingredients. Some are staples from various regions and communities, while some are delicacies reserved for festivals.

Based on his experienced palate, he has picked up many representative recipes/dishes from the North, South, East and West of India. Many are seasonal; others utilise hyperlocal elements/ingredients. All sections begin with a short note about that particular dish, tracing its lineage. The brevity of interesting facts and anecdotes, however, leave you asking for more. In the Preface, Pant admits to 'many glaring omissions' because of the magnitude of our gastronomic heritage. He regrets not being able to adequately explore the vibrant food traditions of the Northeast, but promises a separate book on recipes from the region soon.

The book has a variety of recipes, some simple, some requiring a long list of ingredients, based upon Pant's decades of research, "tasting field work" and association with renowned chefs. — TNS



LAZZATNAMA: RECIPES OF INDIA
by Pushpesh Pant.
Rupa.
Pages 272.
₹395

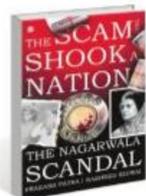
Mother of all scams of 1970s

GEETU VAID

LIVING in a world where online scams, frauds and political corruption are painfully common, one may underestimate a more than five decades old case of ₹60-lakh fraud committed on the country's biggest bank by a caller 'impersonating' the Prime Minister and her secretary. But the sheer dare, audacity and absurdity of the act is what makes the Nagarwala scam of 1971 worth a "revisit".

On May 24, 1971, the chief cashier of SBI's Parliament Street branch flung into action after getting a call from the Prime Minister's secretary, directing him to deliver ₹60 lakh to a courier for a secret mission in East Pakistan. With the PM herself coming on phone to issue directions, a gullible Ved Prakash Malhotra set out on the 'mission' with a trunk-full of 100-rupee notes. After delivering the cash to the person concerned, he was in for a rude shock on being told that no such instructions had come from the PM's secretariat. This is the starting point of the whole episode that snowballed into a major political controversy that kept on reverberating in the corridors of power for the next decade.

Though the money was recovered soon and the 'mastermind', former Army officer Rustom Sohrab Nagarwala, confessed and was sentenced in one of the fastest trials in the history of our country, conspiracy theo-



THE SCAM THAT SHOOK A NATION - THE NAGARWALA SCANDAL
by Prakash Patra, Rasheed Kidwai.
HarperCollins.
Pages 262. ₹399

ries were rife as several questions remained unanswered. The 'in custody' death of Nagarwala and accident of the main investigating officer, DK Kashyap, too, added fuel to the simmering fire of suspicion.

The authors have presented a clinical and objective account of the daring heist and the subsequent investigations by different agencies. They have tried to catch the multiple strings of the scandal through in-depth research of police records, files from National Archives and the report of the Justice Jagannathan Reddy Commission set up in 1978.

Breaking the narrative into different chapters to furnish the details of investigations, they have also put in perspective the political scenario of the time. The witness accounts of Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai, and exploring the Sanjay Gandhi angle further puts things into perspective for the 21st century reader.

Important insights are also offered into the personalities of Nagarwala and bank cashier Malhotra to give readers enough room to 'house' their own opinion and to ascertain if they should be categorised as victims or villains.

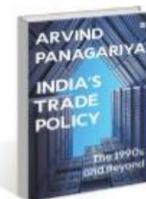
What was the role of the bank and the cashier? Was the trial a cover-up? Whose money was it and for whom was it meant? Was it a whim or a planned operation? The foreign hand? The barrage of questions raised and scoured in different chapters indeed becomes overwhelming, more so because most of these remain unanswered as one is sucked into the whirlpool of intrigue, conspiracy and political wrangling.

It is worth a read for the current generation brought up on a heavy dose of scams and corruption. But for those looking for clear-cut answers, the authors remind them of Winston Churchill's words to describe Russia's intentions in striking a Nazi-Soviet pact at the beginning of WW-II as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma". Ironically, the concluding remark of Justice Reddy in his report also said that the investigations had further deepened the enigma wrapped in the heart of the mystery.

The story, the case, the investigation, the lapses, the unsolved areas and the final conclusion — through it all, the authors have remained true to their promise of bringing an objective analysis of this "mother of all scams" of the 1970s.



BACKFLAP



INDIA'S TRADE POLICY: THE 1990s AND BEYOND
by Arvind Panagariya.
HarperCollins.
Pages 360. ₹599

Economist and chairperson of the Sixteenth Finance Commission Arvind Panagariya has closely observed the Indian economy over decades and written extensively about it. His writings from 1989 to the present day provide an overview from when liberalisation started to where it has reached.



BROKEN THREADS: MY FAMILY FROM EMPIRE TO INDEPENDENCE
by Mishal Husain.
HarperCollins.
Pages 298. ₹499

In 'Broken Threads', broadcaster Mishal Husain weaves an intricate family web that catches all the hope, optimism, disappointment and tragedy of the birth of Pakistan and Independent India in 1947. The meticulously researched book is dedicated to her mother.



SKY HIGH: THE UNTOLD STORY OF INDIGO
by Tarun Shukla.
HarperCollins.
Pages 231. ₹699

When IndiGo entered the low-cost airline business in India in 2006, the market already had many strong players. Today, IndiGo is the largest airline in the country. What did it do differently and right? 'Sky High' recounts a story of patience, planning and persistence.

Iconic Indian homes in diverse idioms

RAJNISH WATTAS

THE book is a lavishly illustrated compendium of select houses designed by architects both new and experienced, across the length and breadth of India, sited in diverse geographies. The rich anthology, curated by Gauri Kelkar, includes "hill-side holiday homes, modern apartments in large metros, beachy villas opening out to views of the rolling surf..." manifesting myriad architectural imaginations at work.

In any architect's repertoire, residential design is the most challenging and most fascinating of projects. A house is many things to many people — it's an intersection of a client's needs, aspirations, site attributes, budget and the architect's interpretation of these factors realised by his creativity.

Each work in this book is preceded by a short biography of the architect, followed by details of the house explained through sketches, text and photographs. Most projects are vacation houses located at scenic settings. They are free from stifling bylaws and controls, otherwise constraining creativity in urban areas. How architects turn them into opportunities is the real challenge.

The abiding influence of master architects of the 20th century is hard to miss. Many of these houses are reflections of Frank Lloyd



Three Court House at Alibaug, designed by RMA Architects.
PHOTO BY RAJESH VORA



20x20: TWENTY ARCHITECTS X TWENTY ICONIC HOMES OF INDIA
by Gauri Kelkar.
Roll Books.
Pages 362. ₹3,995

Wright's low-slung Prairie houses with their hallmark sweeping horizontal lines and cantilevers, such as the Robie House built at Chicago in 1909. His iconic Falling Waters house (1935) near Pittsburgh also resonates with its site and structure unity. Another visible influence is the use of large glass walls, maximising inside-outside communion, inspired by Mies van de Rohe's Farnsworth House, located outside Chicago.

The select architects challenge their own unique imaginations, ingenuity and design sensibilities.

Located at a hill slope in Kerala, the

Ledge House by boutique architectural practice Wallmakers is literally a daring cliffhanger of a house! Tucked into the hill with just its tip jutting out precariously, it demonstrates built form and nature unity.

Similarly, RMA Architects' Three Court House at Alibaug, Maharashtra, has an introverted plan that revolves around three courtyards, separating yet connecting the distinct zones of the house. A low, sweeping horizontal skyline of the house clothed in local stone with contrasting dabs of colours punctuates the facade.

There are houses in dense urban settings, too. Matharoo Associates' Cut Bld House is reminiscent of the beton brut concrete facades of Le Corbusier, with shuttering patterns left unpainted on the walls and ceilings. Ruggedness becomes the statement. Similarly, Black Perch House by Studio Sangath in Ahmedabad is another example of creativity in the tight city fabric. There are organic houses made with local materials and in vernacular traditions in the dry cold desert region of Ladakh by Field Architects, and by Abin Design studio in Bengal.

Finally, any anthology will remain a subjective choice of the curator. However, the discerning eye of Kelkar unearths homes to cherish. The volume would enrich both the professional architect's library as well as that of a layman who appreciates beautiful homes.

Dark spots on whites



GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

MANISH MISHRA, his yellowing cricket whites, grimy gloves, pads and bats lying by, grins at you — but no one grins back at him because he's dead. The photograph suggests that he may have been happy once, but he chose the death considered most disgraceful — death by his own hand. He had found the answer to the eternal question — to be or not to be. He wasn't going to be thwarted, so the night he hanged himself, he dragged the bed across the door in his tiny second-floor room in the small house he shared with over 20 family members in Lucknow. Researching stories of cricketers who'd died by their own hand 15 years ago, Mishra's absolute determination to defy help struck one as particularly sad — he didn't want to be saved.

Mishra, you'd never know, was a cricketer who played for Uttar Pradesh. Cricket didn't kill him — he killed himself because of marital discord and poverty and difficulties at work. But cricket defined his life, and he was scarred as a failure, for his talent was good enough for only a fourth-class job in the Railways.

Did David Johnson, who played two Test matches for India, think that he'd failed in cricket? Did he reach the conclusion that Mishra did in Lucknow? Johnson died after falling from the balcony of his fourth-floor

apartment in Bengaluru. Police suspect it was suicide; the trigger seems to have been depression, debt, hallucinations, loss of income — but underlying it all seems to be frustration at being a failed cricketer. "Sometimes, he wished he could have played, you know... more... so that we could have had a better life," his wife said. When he 'fell' to his death, Johnson's wife had to borrow money for the ambulance; he had dreamt of a life of a star cricketer and saw genteel penury at the end — own apartment, a pension from BCCI, but with no money at all.

Uttar Pradesh's Obaid Kamal, who came close to playing for India, swears he was haunted by a 'chudail' when he had fallen into particularly hard times — one night in Chandigarh, outside his window was an old woman: "She was glancing at me, like a mother busy with chores glances at her sleeping child."

Massive gulf between superstars and those who fail is a distinct Indian trait

In his worst days, Kamal contemplated suicide; he was saved by the words his mother had uttered when he was a child — "suicide is *haram*", a sin that won't be forgiven."

The underbelly of cricket is dirty. Corruption and favouritism mar selection, and players can be destroyed by an antagonistic coach or captain — a batsman can be ordered to play slowly or to attack wildly, and this could later be held against him; a bowler might not be given the ball when the conditions are helpful, and asked to bowl when the batsmen are set — and failure would be held against him. Kamal, for instance, said that when he played for Punjab

and lost the confidence of his coach/captain, he was asked to bowl only from the end which didn't offer pacers such as him assistance. Every cricketer knows there's grave injustice in cricket, every failed cricketer carries a heavy burden of injustice on his soul.

Kamal or Mishra would have given their left hands to play just one Test — but one always wants more, doesn't one? Johnson played two Tests and that's far too few; it's unjust that a player who's deemed good enough to play for the country is dropped after just one match, as Johnson was, and that was an abiding complaint.

British writer David Frith, whose seminal book *The Silence of the Heart* details death by suicide of over 150 cricketers, says that cricket "is unique in its propensity to take over a man's psyche" and, thus, cricketers are more vulnerable to depression than other sports persons. He writes that the suicide rate among British cricketers is nearly double the national average. Winter gloom could be a factor in Britain; the massive gulf between the superstars and those who've failed is an Indian trait.

Due to the stigma and secrecy, it's difficult to accurately compute figures of Indian cricketers who died by suicide, but many famous ones have said they did contemplate it — men such as Parveen Kumar, Mohammed Shami, Robin Uthappa, to name three.

Dodda Ganesh, Johnson's teammate for Karnataka, hit rock bottom after being dropped from the Indian team. Four years ago, he wrote: "I was dropped in 1997. And I did not step out of my house for a month... For me, it was the end of the world... It was a dagger through my heart to see bowlers who'd picked much lesser wickets than me being rewarded with the Indian cap." To those battling depression, Ganesh had some advice: "Live for your loved ones." Mishra and Johnson may have reached the conclusion they had none.

The two pillars of McLeodganj



RAAJA BHASIN

THERE have been repeated moments across history when people have had to leave their homes as a result of manmade scourge. Here is the result of one such. This, by fate, circumstance and event, has also bestowed an aura of sanctity upon a crowded hill.

Long before McLeodganj (Upper Dharamsala) became a smart city and a trash-maker's paradise, NN Nowrojee had a shop at the entrance to the *bazaar*. Even in the late 1990s, the shop lived in a world of its own and its owner, the affable Nauzer Nowrojee, carefully preserved a legacy that went back to the mid-19th century.

Placards of JB Mangaram's biscuits, cutouts endorsing Vimto, tins of Craven A cigarettes, all belonged to a time long gone. It was at the end of the Anglo-Sikh wars in 1849 that the lands that were to become the twin towns of Dharamsala and McLeodganj were absorbed into British India. When the Great Uprising of 1857 had come to an end, Nowrojee's ancestors moved up from Punjab to McLeodganj in 1860, with the British army. As the place steadily grew, for close to a century, the establishment of Nowrojee and Son were the primary purveyors of a variety of goods to the residents of the area.

NN Nowrojee belonged to the fifth generation. With the end of the colonial rule in 1947, many of the area's European residents emigrated and most left the keys of their properties with the man they had grown to trust and like. For a couple of decades, Nowrojee kept watch over the bungalows in his charge and was often called the 'unofficial custodian of McLeodganj'.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was compelled to leave Tibet and came to India, he began searching for a place for himself and his people. Seeing something fall into place, Nowrojee supposedly wrote to the Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, and suggested that the Dalai Lama take a look at McLeodganj. Soon after he had sent off that fateful missive, three large Landmaster cars drove up to his shop — and this was a time when a solitary vehicle in McLeodganj would have attracted attention. The men in the cars are believed to have gone up to the now rather nervous Nowrojee.

"Did you write a letter to the Prime Minister?" asked one.

"Yes," replied Nowrojee, as he recounted to me in 1996.

"We are from the government," said one of the now very-obvious sleuths.

They took a look at McLeodganj and returned to wherever they had come from. Then, the Dalai Lama himself came to inspect the place in 1960 and approved it. His Holiness, thus, became perhaps the most prominent of dignitaries that have made Himachal Pradesh their home.

Next came the issue of security. On July 11, 1963, a comprehensive set of

standing orders was prepared by the SP of Kangra. In the normal course of things, a set of these orders was sent to the DIG, CID, of Punjab, as Kangra was still a part of that state.

These standing orders noted that His Holiness had taken up residence at a house known as 'Swarg Ashram' and noted: "In view of the widespread sympathy for the Dalai Lama and the present strained Sino-Indian relations, it is necessary that proper security arrangements for the person of the Dalai Lama should be made."

The basis for these standing orders were the 'Rules and Instructions for the Protection of the Dalai Lama when in Residence and on Tour' that had been formulated by the Intelligence Bureau and had been received by the SP, Kangra, in 1960.

When the Dalai Lama came to India, NN Nowrojee supposedly wrote to PM Nehru and offered the vast estates he was looking after

A noting by hand on the file observed that rooms to be occupied by His Holiness were to be searched by the Private Secretary or by the Confidential Secretary. All mail and parcels were to pass through the hands of the Security Officer before being handed over to the Private Secretary — who, in turn, was expected to open these before handing them over to His Holiness. A special note was to be made of persons who were granted interviews with His Holiness. Not unexpectedly, the officer was told to be extremely vigilant as once a visitor passed the Enquiry Office, he could move unchallenged right up to the security cordon. An unarmed constable was detailed on duty both day and night by this point.

This section of the file ended with the observation that "it is particularly necessary for the Enquiry Office staff to be polite, courteous and tactful in their dealings with visitors". It added that they should abstain from entering into an argument that could lead to an embarrassing situation. As 'Swarg Ashram' was surrounded on all sides by woods, for safety, an outer cordon was marked on the ground and was divided into four patrolling beats, each with an armed constable.

Today, the issues of security and the world's political contours are somewhat different. Yet, as the years have gone by, in more ways than one, Himachal and McLeodganj have come to be closely associated with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The man who was supposedly responsible for bringing him there, Nauzer Nowrojee, passed away on October 24, 2000. The shop has also gone. His Holiness, the second pillaar, constantly challenged yet gently firm, unwaveringly wise and compassionate, still stands tall.

Selecting the first Army Chief



LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)

AT the end of World War II, there emerged approximately 20 "native" Indian Army officers in their forties, most of whom had led infantry battalions and a few tank squadrons, with utmost courage and distinction, over seething battlefields in Europe, Africa, Middle East, South Asia and South-east Asia. All of them except one were scions of elite feudal families or progeny of royalty, who were granted King's Commission on graduation from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, or the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, both in the UK. But the lone and in time the towering exception was a child of destiny, born into a modest but proud household in the erstwhile Coorg state (present-day Kodagu), who never left the shores of India till drafted for service in WW-II.

On the night of his birth (January 28, 1899), his maternal grandmother had in a dream "heard the sound of horses' thundering hooves and drum beats... She was convinced that the newborn was destined to be a great military man". Be that as it may, the child, KM Cariappa, born and schooled at Mercara village in Coorg, next joined the Presidency College, Madras. Soon after, he qualified for the first batch of teenagers to enter the 'Temporary School for Indian Cadets' at Daly College, Indore, in 1918. On grant of Commission as 2nd

Lieutenant in the Indian Army on December 1, 1919, he aggregated two decades of baptism under fire across the wayward North West Frontier. Concomitantly, he also burnt the midnight oil to become the first Indian to graduate from the Defence Service Staff College, Quetta, and by April 1942, on promotion to Lt Colonel, was placed in command of 17 Rajput battalion, becoming yet again the first Indian to attain that benchmark!

During the course of WW-II, he served in the operational logistics branch, first at HQ 10 Indian Infantry Division in Iraq and Syria, and later at HQ 26 Indian Infantry Division in General Slim's 14th Army in Burma. It was in this latter appointment that he imbibed the spirit of the 14th Army's dictum: 'We shall tackle the impossible immediately, the difficult later!' In recognition of his services, Lt Col Cariappa was Mentioned-in-Dispatches thrice, followed by the Order of the British Empire on April 5, 1945.

In the run-up to Independence, when it was decided to expose one Army officer and three bureaucrats to hone the politico-military duality paradigm of the higher defence strategem at Imperial Defence College, London, in 1946, here again Brigadier Cariappa was the chosen one. He was to put that learning to good use as shortly the subcontinent was driven into another savage war over J&K in October 1947.

As Pakistan had the advantage of the first mover, the Indian Army's initial response was found inadequate to the challenge and the fall of Ladakh seemed imminent. Maj Gen Cariappa, who at the time was overseeing the Army Reorganisation Committee, was promoted to command the newly created Western Command in January 1948 (once again, the first for an Indian!), charged to conduct the J&K war.

As was the General's wont, the very next day he was at Srinagar, providing inspiring leadership with a resolve that "we will not allow Gen Tariq to capture Leh. We have got to stop this and we will stop it... we have decided to take tanks up the Zoji Pass, a kind of operation which has never been done before." The rest is history.

The end of the J&K war on January 5, 1949, provided the much-anticipated moment for the Army to have an Indian C-in-C as the tenure of Gen FR Roy Bucher was about to terminate. The choice appeared obvious as among the distinguished pack of about 20, Lt Gen Cariappa stood out. Yet, "there were two other names that were proposed. The first was Lt Gen Maharaj Rajendrasinhji of the Cavalry, brother of the Jam Sahib of Nawanagar. The second was Lt Gen Thakur Nathu Singh of Dungarpur... That stated, it must go to the eternal credit of both General officers, who insisted that the honour of being India's first C-in-C should rightly be 'Kipper's' because he was the seniormost Indian officer" — this was placed on record by Air Marshal KC Cariappa (ret'd) in his father's biography.

The Government of India had not been lacking in grace as evidenced from Sardar Patel's letter: "...your record of achievements inspires our confidence in your ability to lead your men at such a critical period of the country's history and I can assure you that we on our part will extend to you all goodwill and cooperation."

So, on January 15, 1949, a ramrod straight man, along with a boy not yet in his teens and a seven-year-old girl were perhaps the first visitors at the Gandhi Samadhi. After dropping his children home, Gen KM Cariappa walked into the appointed high office sans any ceremonial trappings or Guard of Honour!

The Siblings, and their many adventures

KULBHUSHANSINGH SURYAWANSHI

SOLITARY, ghostly, shy, alone, hard-to-see, and even lonely, are some of the words that are often used to describe the snow leopard. But, the Siblings, as the two snow leopards of Kibber came to be known, were none of that.

Kibber is an idyllic village tucked on a rocky knoll at an elevation of 4,200m in the Spiti valley. To the north of it is the summit of Mt Kanamo, standing just 5m short of 6,000. To the south of it is the wide 'U-shaped' valley formed by the Spiti river. For the past 25 years, this village has been the epicentre of research on snow leopards and community-led efforts to conserve this species. Thanks to these efforts, Kibber is today one of the best places in the world to see snow leopards. This year, the stars of the show were the Siblings, or Chunu and Munnu, as some of the local people and tourists had started calling them.

The first time I saw the siblings was in February last year. That winter was mild, and temperatures barely dipped below -15°C.

There was little snow on the ground. My good friend, Prasenjeet Yadav, was filming for the BBC and I was playing an advisory role, given my 15 years of experience working in the region. The Siblings were then only a year old. We would see them almost every day. They spent most of their days sleeping under an overhanging rock or on a ledge high above a cliff. Their mother, also sleeping nearby, was always vigilant.

One evening, at around 4 pm, the mother and the Siblings twitched their ears, and all the tourists and filmmakers clicked away, which was the most exciting thing that had happened all day. Then, they woke up and stretched like house cats, and excitement built up in their audience. A cub walked a few steps and hunched down to poop, and only cats can look cute while pooping. I made a mental note to go down to that spot later and get a sample for genetic analysis.

A half-frozen stream flowed past the three snow leopards. We watched them from a cliff high above. Across a bed in the river, on a small grassy meadow, a herd of ibex were grazing in the golden light of the evening sun. We could see the



Two snow leopards, Chunu and Munnu, and their mother are the stars of Kibber village in Spiti valley

ibex and the snow leopards, but the ibex could not see the snow leopards. The mother, however, seemed to know

about the ibex, and she started walking deliberately and carefully towards them. She could not have seen them because of the bend in the cliff along the river. She either heard them or knew that they grazed there at that time. The Siblings followed her with equal care and attention. I was impressed with the discipline the cubs were exhibiting. As they got closer, the mother got into stalking mode, and the cubs followed.

This was the most important thing they would have to learn if they had to survive in the wild.

Tension built up, and we all watched it from across the bank from an overlooking cliff, as if watching a nail-biting cricket match from the high stands.

Now, the mother was within 30m of three big male ibex. With their scimitar-shaped horns, these goats are formidable prey even for a veteran snow leopard mother. The Siblings stayed back and watched their mother. I wondered how she communicated to them that they need to stay back now.

She got closer, 20m; the cubs were watching, and all of us were holding our breath.

The attack could come any moment now. This was going to be more spectacular than the cheetah coursing down an impala in the Serengeti. Now, 5m, and the ibex have still not seen her, she is only one leap away from making a kill. She is being careful to avoid those big horns of the ibex which can cause a serious injury.

And just the moment when we expected her to commit to the leap, the Siblings got impatient and started chasing the rest of the ibex herd in the open meadow which was still 40m away from them. The element of surprise was lost. There was chaos, 25 ibex running around and two year-old snow leopards bounding ungainly after them. The mother sat glum.

It was outrageous that the cubs had spoiled her hard work because of their impatience. After the dust had settled, the Siblings approached their mother with tentative steps. I was expecting her to reprimand them, but she was their mother after all. She licked them clean and the three walked away into the dusk that was spreading over the mountains.

— The writer is director of the India Programme of the Snow Leopard Trust



Rahul Gandhi's elevation as Leader of the Opposition, the first to occupy the post in 10 years, is a booster shot for him personally and the Cong, but he will be tested on both fronts — how he takes on the Modi govt and keeps the INDIA bloc intact

SHUBHADEEP CHOUDHURY

ON June 8, after the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution urging Rahul Gandhi to take up the post of Leader of the Opposition (LoP), he refrained from agreeing to the proposal there and then, saying he would think about it. This gave rise to speculation that Rahul was once again trying to evade responsibility. Names of various MPs, from the competent Gaurav Gogoi to some uninspiring veteran leaders, started doing the rounds. Just ahead of the inaugural session of the 18th Lok Sabha, it was announced that the Gandhi scion would take the plunge — a small step in the estimation of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance perhaps, but a giant leap for Rahul Gandhi personally and the Congress. His leadership skills will be put to test at once on how he takes the INDIA (Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance) bloc along.

The Lok Sabha has a Leader of the Opposition after 10 years. There's palpable enthusiasm and hope in the Congress rank and file that the BJP's favourite whipping boy could turn out to be a thorn in its flesh.

Rahul had sprung another surprise earlier by not taking off for a foreign trip soon after the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections got over and the results were announced. The former Congress president has often drawn criticism for going missing at crucial junctures. Rahul stayed put in the country after a hard-fought election campaign spread over nearly two months.

The 18th Lok Sabha, unlike the two previous Lok Sabhas, has an impressive presence of Opposition members. The INDIA bloc has 234 members (and has the support of three Independent MPs) in the 543-member House to NDA's 292. The numerical strength got reflected when a voice vote was taken for the Speaker's election. The sound of the Opposition MPs' "nays" quite matched the "ayes" from the treasury benches. Pro tem Speaker Bhartruhari Mahtab could promptly announce the verdict in favour of the NDA nominee only because he knew that the number of NDA MPs in the House was more than their INDIA counterparts.

NK Premachandran, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) MP from Kollam in Kerala, says the BJP can already sense the changed atmosphere in the House. "It is fearful of the large presence of Opposition MPs, signs of panic are visible," he claims. "They had Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla make a reference to the Emergency just to give the impression that nothing has changed. But the reality is different and the BJP cannot ignore it by pretending that there is nothing amiss," he adds.

HE IS NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY: BJP



"Rahul Gandhi is not taken seriously by members of his own party, not to speak of Opposition leaders. The Congress has been going downhill and has now hit rock bottom. Rahul as LoP does not augur well for the Opposition... every party learns something from results, we are reviewing ours."

Samik Bhattacharya, BJP'S MEMBER FROM WEST BENGAL

LEADING THE NEW OPPOSITION

'KEEP THE FAITH'



"Congratulations to the new Leader of the Opposition @RahulGandhi. May you always keep the faith. God bless... Om Birla Ji is NDA

Speaker candidate. Hope he realises that with 234 of us this time, his 'Naw Baiithiye' won't be as easy to implement"

TMC MP Mahua Moitra on X

'MATTER OF GREAT JOY'



"Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been elected as the Leader of Opposition. It is a matter of great joy that the Opposition parties will benefit from a personality with unwavering loyalty to the Constitution and the values of democracy. Congratulations to him and best wishes for future endeavours."

NCP(SP) MP Supriya Sule on X



Sonia Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav and Faizabad MP Awadhesh Prasad in Parliament. PTI & ANI

In the past two Lok Sabhas, the Congress lacked the numbers to stake claim to the post of LoP. This time, having 99 MPs (98, with Rahul Gandhi giving up his Wayanad seat in favour of Rae Bareilly), the Congress, the largest Opposition party, was eligible to claim the post.

ROLE CALL

The person holding the post of Leader of the Opposition is party to crucial appointments like those of the chiefs of the Enforcement Directorate, Central Bureau of Investigation and the Central Vigilance Commission. Analysts say Rahul donning the role of LoP would fuel talk of comparisons with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but with very different connotations than in the past, when any such conversation inevitably favoured PM Modi and lampooned Rahul. Not anymore, they point out.

"Age is not on Modi's side. Rahul has this advantage over him," feels John Brittas, the CPI(M) Rajya Sabha member from Kerala. Though any talk of PM Modi's retirement, when he crosses the age of 75, was firmly dismissed by Amit Shah during the election campaign, the party's lower-than-expected seat tally has fuelled speculation that the prospect of Modi leaving

space for a relatively younger person is no longer just an Opposition fantasy.

STATURE GROWS

First the two editions of his 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', then the turnaround in the Lok Sabha election results and now becoming Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi has grown in stature. The BJP's favourite moniker for him — 'Pappu' — seems to have lost its currency. There is now much reduced resonance to the memes and jokes portraying him as an immature politician who lacks seriousness.

Narendra Pani, political analyst and a professor at the Bengaluru-based National Institute of Advanced Studies, feels Rahul as LoP would create a link between demands raised outside Parliament and inside it. "He has created a pro-equality narrative with the help of his yatras. Now that he is the LoP, one can expect that the agenda of the yatras would be taken up forcefully inside the Lok Sabha also," Pani says.

The challenges Rahul faces are many, the biggest being finding common ground within the INDIA bloc and acting as a bridge. The Congress fumbled at the very start by not intimating the bloc constituents in advance about Rahul accept-

ing the post of LoP. Shortly before Congress general secretary KC Venugopal made the announcement about Rahul being made the LoP, a meeting of the INDIA bloc parties was held at Congress president and Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge's residence to discuss the alliance's strategy for the Speaker's election. Even though the Congress had already taken the decision to appoint Rahul as the LoP and Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi had communicated the decision to Pro tem Speaker Mahtab, the alliance partners were not informed about the decision.

"This is the problem with the Congress. There is often a communication gap. They could have easily told us about the decision, which was announced shortly after our meeting got over," a floor leader of an Opposition party said.

The Congress' propensity to not take its partners into confidence was also cited as the reason for the early hiccups from the Trinamool Congress camp. The TMC was upset about not being informed about the Congress' decision to field KSuresh in the election for the Speaker's post.

The issue of not keeping the alliance part-

ners in the loop is likely to get addressed with Rahul taking over as LoP, the alliance partners hope. "We think Rahul Gandhi will be mindful about the point of view of smaller parties and pay attention to what they say," opines Premachandran, the sole member of RSP in the Lok Sabha and a member of the INDIA bloc.

MAKING PRESENCE FELT

Gaurav Gogoi, the Congress MP from Jorhat in Assam, feels Rahul is the "natural leader" and his appointment as the Leader of the Opposition only amounted to formalising the position. "The two yatras and other campaign strategies devised by Rahul Gandhi proved very useful in the elections," Gogoi adds.

On the mood of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Gogoi, who was Deputy Leader of the Congress in the last Lok Sabha, said, "We are upbeat and robust. We will force the government to take up existential issues like unemployment and price rise."

Awadhesh Prasad, the Samajwadi Party MP who sprang a surprise by defeating the BJP nominee in Faizabad, feels Rahul is the most competent person to lead the Opposition. "I congratulated him. He has passion. He will be able to keep the nefarious designs of the Modi government in check. We are all part of the INDIA bloc and we are one," Prasad adds.

Dayanidhi Maran of the DMK and Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party are among the top Opposition leaders who would like to make their presence felt in the current Lok Sabha. While Sudip Bandyopadhyay is the leader of the Trinamool Congress in the Lok Sabha, all eyes will be on Mahua Moitra, the firebrand TMC MP from Krishnanagar in West Bengal.

Moitra, who was expelled from the last Lok Sabha following a complaint by a BJP MP, has made a triumphant return, vowing not to back down in her tirade against Prime Minister Modi.

While the irregularities in the NEET examination will be a rallying point for the Opposition in both Houses of Parliament, the recent train accident in West Bengal and the soon-to-be-implemented new criminal codes are other issues that the Opposition is likely to take up strongly in the ongoing session. Many Opposition parties, including the Congress and TMC, have demanded a review of the new laws.

IMPACT IN RAJYA SABHA

The upbeat mood of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha is likely to make an impact in the Rajya Sabha too. Manoj Kumar Jha, leader of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in the Rajya Sabha, promised fireworks in the Upper House. "Just wait and see," he said when asked about the Opposition's action plan. On the Biju Janata Dal's decision to act as an Opposition party in the Rajya Sabha, Jha said even occasional aid coming from any quarter during stand-offs would be a good thing.

Sasmit Patra, leader of the BJD, claimed the party had always been in the Opposition. "I do not know how the word spread that we were supporting the BJP," Patra said. He, however, admitted that their seating plan in the Rajya Sabha chamber got changed after it was announced that BJD would act as an Opposition party.

Other Opposition parties brush aside the Naveen Patnaik-led party's claim. "They supported the BJP on key issues in the past. Let's see what they do," a CPI(M) MP said.

Specific PET scan for TB for more effective treatment

The Hindu Bureau

A more accurate way to scan for tuberculosis has been developed by researcher based in the U.K. and the U.S. using positron emission tomography (PET).

The team has developed a new radiotracer, which is taken up by live TB bacteria in the body. Radiotracers are radioactive compounds which give off

radiation that can be detected by scanners and turned into a 3D image. The new radiotracer, called FDT, enables PET scans to be used for the first time to accurately pinpoint when and where the disease is still active in a patient's lungs.

The researchers have put the new radiotracer through extensive pre-clinical trials with no adverse effects and it is now ready

to go into Phase I trials in humans. The study has been published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

Currently, two methods exist for TB diagnosis: testing for the TB bacteria in a patient's sputum using smear microscopy or a molecular test. The other is the use of a PET scan to look for signs of inflammation in the lung, using the common radiotracer FDG.

While a sputum test can show a negative long before the disease has been fully treated in the lungs, which could result in patients finishing treatment too early, scanning for inflammation can be helpful in seeing the extent of the disease, but it is not specific to TB, as inflammation can be caused by other conditions. Inflammation can also persist in the lung after the TB bacteria has

been eliminated, leading to treatment continuing longer than necessary.

The new approach developed by the researchers is more specific as it uses a carbohydrate that is only processed by the TB bacteria. A key advantage of the new approach is that it only requires a hospital to have standard radiation control and PET scanners, which are becoming more available throughout the

world. The new molecule is created from FDG using a simple process involving enzymes developed by the research team. This means it can be produced without specialist expertise or laboratories and so would be a viable option in low- and middle-income countries with less developed healthcare systems. These countries currently see over 80% of global TB cases and deaths from the disease.

SNAPSHOTS



Anti-measles antibody prevents viral fusion: study

Cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) structures of an anti-measles antibody reveal its therapeutic potential by blocking the virus's fusion process, a new study reports. The work paves the way for the next generation of measles virus therapeutics and illuminates a mechanism that may be shared by antibodies against other viral pathogens. The structures generated by the researchers also revealed an important epitope that may provide a new druggable target for MeV as well as other paramyxoviruses like mumps.



Proteins in cerebrospinal fluid offer markers of Alzheimer's

By mapping out the landscape of proteins in cerebrospinal fluid, researchers have discovered potential markers of Alzheimer's disease that appear as many as 20 years before symptoms. The scientists generated a robust map of protein activity, consisting of 34 "modules". They identified three that correlated with disease and with the genetic risk factor APOE-ε4. Also, shifts in these modules in blood samples were linked to a risk of dementia more than 20 years before the patient was diagnosed.



Antibody shields hamsters from SARS-CoV-2 variants

Scientists show that a new antibody therapy for COVID-19 can neutralise the Omicron strain of SARS-CoV-2 in hamsters and is safe in humans, according to their research. The antibody (AZD3152) could provide an additional layer of protection to vulnerable groups at risk of severe COVID-19. The antibody binds to the back "left shoulder" of the receptor binding domain on the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, and is designed to be more potent against emerging variants.

India lacks diagnostic tests for emerging infectious diseases

Zika virus is a mosquito-borne pathogen belonging to the flavivirus family of viruses which also includes dengue; India's lack of significant Zika surveillance means we might never fully understand its spread

Bani Jolly
Vinod Scaria

A recent case of Zika virus infection in Pune has renewed concerns about India's preparedness for diagnosing emerging infectious diseases. After experiencing symptoms like fever and rashes, the 46-year-old doctor was hospitalised and diagnosed with Zika virus infection after his samples were sent for testing to the apex virology institute. Subsequent testing of his family members revealed that his 15-year-old daughter was also infected. This is not the first time Zika has been identified in India. Cases have been identified in multiple States in India in the past, with larger outbreaks occurring in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh as recently as 2021.

Zika virus is a mosquito-borne pathogen belonging to the flavivirus family of viruses which also includes dengue. Clinical symptoms of Zika infection in many cases could be mild and indistinguishable from other infectious diseases including dengue. However, for pregnant women, the Zika virus poses a significant risk as it can be transmitted from mother to child, potentially leading to microcephaly in the offspring.

Due to climate change, it is not surprising that multiple dengue outbreaks are making headlines. The same vectors that spread dengue could also spread Zika. However, India's lack of significant Zika surveillance means we might never fully understand its

Flying blind without diagnostic tests

There is over-reliance on apex institutes for diagnosis of Zika, Nipah and avian influenza due to lack of widely available diagnostic tests

Zika cases have been identified from multiple States in the past. Largest outbreaks occurred in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh in 2021

Since India lacks significant Zika surveillance, the actual spread might never fully understood

In March 2023, the drug regulator confirmed that there is no approved diagnostic test for Zika

Multiple avian influenza outbreaks in poultry have been reported this year. Human testing and surveillance have remained limited partly due to lack of diagnostic tests and over-reliance on apex institutes

Kerala has had Nipah outbreaks in 2018, 2021, and 2023. Each time, virus identification relied heavily on clinical suspicion. Some cases were missed initially as diagnostic facilities were not readily available

For the rapid development of diagnostics, whole genome sequences should be made available in the public domain soon after outbreaks



Dangerous vector: *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that spreads dengue can also spread Zika virus

spread. In March 2023, CDSCO, India's apex organisation for diagnostic approvals, confirmed that there is no approved diagnostic test for Zika. This limitation hinders our ability to diagnose Zika, relying only on classical symptoms and high clinical suspicion, making it complex as we see a concurrent upsurge in dengue cases across the country. Surveillance by ICMR on *Aedes* mosquitoes showed Zika virus positivity following human cases, indicating that many cases are likely being missed. Zika is not an isolated case. A case of avian influenza A/H5N1 was recently reported from Australia in a child who had traveled to India, hinting at more undetected infections. Despite multiple avian influenza outbreaks

in India this year affecting poultry, and an ongoing outbreak in Kerala, human testing and surveillance have remained limited. This is partially compounded by the lack of widely available diagnostic tests and over-reliance on a few apex institutes.

Consider the case of the Nipah virus, which has seen multiple outbreaks in Kerala. India has experienced several Nipah virus outbreaks, notably in West Bengal (2001 and 2007) and Kerala (2018, 2021, and 2023). In Kerala, identification of the virus relied heavily on clinical suspicion. Some cases were indeed missed during initial admissions due to the lack of routine testing. Rapid identification and isolation of cases, contact tracing, and targeted screening of con-

tacts are key to the effective containment of Nipah outbreaks.

While many countries grant emergency approvals for diagnostics based on synthetic genomic material, India requires validation on clinical samples, which are not readily accessible. These limitations hamper rapid development. Although there have been multiple publications on Zika and Nipah outbreaks over many years now, the genomes from these outbreaks are still not rapidly released in public repositories. For example, the Nipah virus genome from the 2023 outbreak in Kerala was only released last month. Even with ongoing avian influenza outbreaks in multiple States, we do not yet have the whole genome

inStem's fabric offers protection from pesticides

R. Prasad

Researchers at the Institute for Stem Cell Science and Regenerative Medicine (inStem), in Bengaluru have developed an anti-insecticide fabric that effectively neutralises organophosphate-based pesticides. In an earlier work published about six years ago, the team had developed a gel for topical dermal application to deactivate the pesticides. But considering that compliance might be poor, the researchers looked at another alternative that is as effective in deactivating the insecticide but at the same time does not reduce compliance.

When esters present in organophosphate-based pesticides enter the body they bind and inhibit an enzyme (acetylcholinesterase or AChE) critical for neuromuscular function from working. Therefore, inhibition of this important

enzyme is implicated in learning deficits, suffocation, paralysis, muscle weakness among others.

In a paper published recently in *Nature Communications*, the team led by Dr. Praveen Kumar Vemula from inStem coated the cotton fabric with small molecules, rendering the final product the ability to deactivate the insecticide. "The small molecules are covalently bonded with the cellulose of the fabric making the cloth not only breathable but also durable," says Dr. Vemula. The small molecules that are covalently bonded with the fabric are nucleophile in nature, and can detoxify the pesticides upon contact through nucleophile-mediated hydrolysis, says Dr. Vemula. "The fabric attacks the pesticide molecule and breaks it into non-toxic products. The pesticide is deactivated even before it reaches the skin



Right way: The fabric deactivates the pesticide and breaks it down into non-toxic products. AP

surface," he says. The fabric with covalently-bonded small molecules was developed in collaboration with Sepio Health Pvt Ltd, a spin-off company from inStem.

"The fabric retains the anti-insecticide property even after washing 150 times." Though the reusability after 50 cycles was reported in the paper, the researchers continued the reusability testing and found the effectiveness to last up to 150 cycles of

washing. "Unlike the gel, the reusability will make the fabric an affordable solution to prevent insecticide-induced toxicity to farmers. It will also increase compliance," he says.

According to Dr. Vemula, the small molecule-coated fabric does not act as a physical barrier to organophosphate-based insecticide. Instead, the fabric hydrolytically deactivates the insecticides, causing the preven-

tion of insecticide-induced AChE inhibition.

To investigate the efficiency of the fabric containing the small molecules, the active AChE in the blood before and three days after exposure to the insecticide was measured in rats. While direct exposure or when normal cloth did little to halt the drop in active AChE in blood, no reduction in blood active AChE level was observed in the presence of the fabric coated with small molecules. Several organs from the exposed and unexposed rats were studied and compared, and the researchers found that the active AChE levels in the organs did not drop in the case of rats that were exposed to the insecticide in the presence of the fabric coated with small molecules. Also, while rats that were repeatedly and directly exposed to ethyl paraoxon (an activated orga-

nophosphate insecticide) or through the normal fabric died within four days, none of the rats exposed to the insecticide in the presence of the special fabric died.

Farmers get repeatedly exposed to the insecticide due to frequent usage, and this can cause chronic toxicity and severe adverse health effects. The animal study results show promise that the fabric containing the small molecules can prevent chronic toxicity in farmers, he says.

"The design of one nucleophile that can deactivate a wide range of organophosphates and carbamates was challenging. Subsequently, optimising the industry-friendly chemistry to covalently attach on the fabric was the key in developing anti-pesticide fabric," says Dr. Ketan Thorat, a former research student at inStem and coauthor of the paper.



Question Corner

Marsquakes

Can meteorite strikes cause quakes on Mars?

Using seismic data, researchers have derived the first estimate of global meteorite impacts on Mars. Their findings indicate that 280 to 360 meteorites strike the planet each year, forming impact craters greater than 26 feet across. Using data from the seismometer deployed during the NASA InSight Mission to Mars, researchers found that six seismic events recorded near the station had been previously identified as meteoric impacts. Now, researchers have found that these six seismic events belong to a much larger group of

marsquakes, so called very high frequency events. The source process of these quakes occurs much faster than for a tectonic marsquake of similar size. Where a normal magnitude 3-quake on Mars takes several seconds, an impact-generated event of the same size takes only 0.2 seconds or less, due to the hypervelocity of the collision. By analysing marsquake spectra, a further 80 marsquakes were identified that are now thought to be caused by meteoroid strikes.

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

FAQ

What was the tussle over Covaxin IPR?

What are the rules for patenting the intellectual property rights of a vaccine? Why was the ICMR not included?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:
The maker of the indigenous coronavirus vaccine, Covaxin, Bharat Biotech International Limited (BBIL), has admitted to an "inadvertent error" in patent filings to protect the vaccine's Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). One of India's leading biotechnology companies, it had failed to include scientists from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) as co-inventors in the Covaxin patent filings.

What kind of rights govern vaccine patents?

India's patent laws govern both product and process patents. Product patents grant an inventor a monopoly over, say, a drug. Process patents bar competitors from making a similar drug using the same sequence of steps. In response to queries from *The Hindu*, Bharat Biotech said it had patented the process, namely of making a batch of vaccines from the virus strains that were provided by the ICMR-NIV (National Institute of Virology). This is the lab that has expertise in extracting viruses from blood samples, identifying its characteristics, conducting various tests to gauge its infectiousness and qualify it in comparison to related strains. However, preparing a vaccine out of this at an industrial scale is beyond the capabilities of a lab and requires a different

Bharat Biotech International Limited had collaborated with the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Virology for all the steps in developing a vaccine

order of facilities that only established vaccine manufacturers have. Covaxin is an inactivated version of COVID-causing coronavirus; once injected into the body it coaxes it into producing antibodies that can

potentially protect against severe disease from a coronavirus infection. To do this effectively, an 'adjuvant' is added which increases the vaccine's potency. Vaccine makers may have their own ways of bringing all of these steps together and, given the competitive nature of the field, strive to ward off competitors from imitating these processes to gain a temporary monopoly in the market and rake profits.

To be sure, while companies are free to file for a product or process patent in as many countries as they can afford, a patent is only granted after regulatory authorities grant them one or are convinced that this process is indeed novel or inventive. BBIL, as far as publicly known, hasn't yet been granted these patents.

What were the roles of BBIL and ICMR?

BBIL had collaborated with the ICMR-NIV for all the steps in developing a vaccine. The two organisations had signed an agreement that spelt out each entity's responsibilities. As ICMR is a public entity and because of the scale of the COVID crisis, there were Right To Information requests to make this agreement public.

However, it was only in July 2021, that parts of the agreement were made public in Rajya Sabha.

Beyond transferring the strains and making vaccines, the agreement said, ICMR would also test these vaccines on animals – rodents to monkeys – and then on people to establish that the vaccine worked as intended. The ICMR also funded these clinical trials – ₹35 crore – and incurred costs in developing Covaxin. In return it was to get 5% of royalties that BBIL earned from the sale of Covaxin. Since the announcement of the BBIL and ICMR collaboration, it was generally accepted that both entities would contribute to the vaccine and would therefore hold "joint intellectual property rights," as was stated in Parliament.

However, BBIL first told *The Hindu* that it made a distinction between the rights governing the making of the vaccine and the rights over the data generated from clinical trials. The ICMR hadn't invested in the actual making of the vaccine and so wasn't included in patent applications. However, a day after the matter became public, BBIL said it had made a mistake, and that it would be making amends by filing fresh applications that listed ICMR personnel as inventors. It is unclear what prompted this.

Why does being cited as an inventor matter?

IPR is a vast, complex domain and spans the minutest parts of the product invention process. As the development of pharmaceutical products involves a wide range of expertise, it is hard for single firms or entities to develop everything in-house. Just like the BBIL-ICMR collaboration, companies may enter into several licensing agreements – BBIL for instance had a technology licensing agreement with Virovax for the adjuvant – with other companies. If a single product thus involves multiple entities and collaborators, being listed as an inventor has a bearing on the sharing of intellectual property rights, royalties and even determining how a product can be used. There is no field of human activity that is untouched by disputes over IPR. In patent filings, not listing out all the inventors – in the U.S especially – could even lead to patent applications being rejected.

Why has the NTA failed to deliver?

How many examinations are under the charge of the National Testing Agency? Is it equipped to handle the large number of students and centres? What are the challenges? What are the loopholes in the system that can be manipulated by unscrupulous players?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The National Testing Agency (NTA) has come under intense fire over the past few weeks, with widespread allegations of cheating, paper leaks and other irregularities impacting flagship examinations such as the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) for undergraduate medical college admissions and the UGC-NET for Ph.D and assistant professor appointments. The agency's director general, Subodh Kumar Singh, has been removed, the CBI is probing irregularities, and a high-level panel has been set up to create a roadmap for a systemic overhaul.

What is the NTA?

The NTA was set up in 2017 as a specialist, self-sustaining and autonomous organisation under the aegis of the Union Education Ministry. Its director general and governing body are appointed by the Union government. However, it is registered as a society and is a separate legal entity, which raises questions about the government's legal liability for the NTA's actions. Its main mandate is to conduct efficient, transparent and international standard tests to assess the competency of candidates for admission, and recruitment purposes. Soon after it was established, the NTA took over the conduct of major all-India examinations, such as the JEE for engineering college admissions, NEET-UG, and UGC-NET (both of which had previously been conducted by the Central Board for Secondary Education or CBSE), as well as the entrance tests for Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University. The National Education Policy of 2020 envisaged a broader role,

Educationists propose broader pathways like equipping NTA better or dismantling the centralisation process

recommending that the NTA conduct an entrance or aptitude test for all universities across the country. In all, the NTA now has charge for more than 20 examinations.

Why have there been so many problems?

One of the main problems is that the NTA was originally intended to conduct computer-based tests only. "This will ensure that high volume can be processed in a short period of time," says the agency's website, claiming that such online testing will "eliminate the possibility of leakage of questions and question papers, post-test malpractice of filling in the OMR sheets, late entry of students to cheat in the test, subjectivity errors on descriptive testing, etc...In a short period of three years, all the tests administered by NTA will be computer adaptive. This will completely eliminate the problem of cheating," it declares. Thus, when the NTA took over conduct of the UGC-NET examination from the CBSE six years ago, it was converted from a pen-and-paper examination to a computer-adaptive test. This year, however, for reasons that are unclear, UGC-NET shifted back to the pen-and-paper mode. The day after it was conducted for over 11 lakh aspirants, the government cancelled the examination, citing inputs from the cyber crime unit. "Pen-and-paper is a heaven for scammers," said one former official, noting that the printing process is particularly vulnerable to leaks. It is interesting that when the government announced fresh dates for UGC-NET 2024 to be held again, it also stipulated that it would be a computer-adaptive test this time.

However, when the conduct of NEET-UG was taken over by the NTA, the Health Ministry flatly refused to allow it to shift to a computer-based exam, citing concerns about students in rural areas who would not be prepared for an online exam, as well as Supreme Court rulings on how the examination should be conducted. Hence, the NTA has been forced to run a major examination in a mode that it was never intended to implement by design.

Officials and educationists note that the agency is severely understaffed for the role it is currently being asked to undertake. According to a senior official, the agency was set up with only about 25 permanent staff positions. A number of its functions have also been outsourced to technical partners from the very beginning. Given that NEET-UG alone had more than 23 lakh candidates writing the examination in almost 5,000 centres across the country and abroad, this has left the agency stretched thin, according to some officials. "The NTA was set up to be a lean, professional organisation. The

more people, the higher risks. The NIC [National Informatics Centre] simply does not have the capacity or IT infrastructure needed, so it was always meant to engage third-party technical partners which have the robust cyber security expertise needed to run large-scale computer based examinations," said R. Subrahmanyam, former Higher Education Secretary who was in charge at the time the NTA was set up. However, some educationists have complained that engaging third-party players takes accountability out of the government's hands and leaves loopholes in the system which can be exploited by unscrupulous players.

Officials say the NTA has also failed to develop robust mechanisms needed to handle a large-scale pen-and-paper examination, including the setting of the question paper and its encryption, selection of external printing presses and exam centres, transportation to printing presses, storage and distribution to examinees at examination centres and then the collection and transportation of answer sheets to evaluation centres. Each of these is a stage where malpractice can occur without robust security mechanisms.

What is the way ahead?

The high-level panel headed by former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan has been given two months to recommend reforms in the examination process, improve data security protocols, and overhaul the NTA's functioning.

Educationists, however, propose starkly different pathways for the future. One option is to add manpower and infrastructure to the NTA to equip it to take on large-scale pen-and-paper examinations in an improvement to the CBSE system that preceded it. Those recommending this return to the past point out that pen-and-paper examinations are more equitable, especially for students in rural and remote areas with little access to technology.

Another option is to dismantle the centralisation process that seeks to move all testing in the country under the NTA. Some State governments, and professors from individual universities, notably JNU, have called for entrance tests for their institutions to be removed from the NTA and handed back to the institutions themselves, arguing that more decentralised structures are needed to meet the vastly differing needs of institutions.

However, others seek a more radical reform of the assessment system. They suggest systemic changes to remove the single, high-stakes entrance examination which results in extreme pressure on students, encourages an inequitable coaching industry, and incentivises malpractice. Instead, periodic assessments of knowledge, concept-based understanding, and aptitude can be conducted in the final years of school education as the precursor to the admission process, using online testing, and AI-based proctoring which can be overseen by the NTA.



Outrage and uproar: Members of the Students' Federation of India staging a protest in Vijayawada on June 22. G.N. RAO

What is holding up the Teesta treaty?

What has the Indian government told Bangladesh? What is the technical team going to look into? Why is Bengal Chief Minister protesting this development? What about the Ganga water sharing agreement? When does it come up for renewal? What is the state of both the rivers?

Shiv Sahay Singh

The story so far:

During the recent state visit of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 22 said: "A technical team will soon visit Bangladesh to discuss conservation and management of the Teesta river in Bangladesh." The remark triggered fresh speculation about the Teesta water sharing treaty with Bangladesh, a key bilateral agreement that has been pending between the two countries for over a decade.

What is India's stand?

After Mr. Modi's comment, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra told the media that the discussion "between the two leaders was less about water sharing per se, and more about the management of the water flows within Teesta". West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee took issue with the Centre's stand. On June 24, she wrote a letter to Mr. Modi conveying her strong reservation that no discussion on the sharing of Teesta waters should be taken up with Bangladesh without the involvement of the State.

Why is Bengal upset?

Ms. Banerjee pointed out that if Teesta's water is

Bengal claims if Teesta water is shared with Bangladesh, lakhs of people in north Bengal will get severely impacted

shared with Bangladesh, lakhs of people in north Bengal will get severely impacted. This is not the first time she has voiced her opposition to the proposed water sharing agreement of India with Bangladesh. In July 2019, the Trinamool Congress chairperson admitted that Bangladesh is hurt because the Teesta waters could not be shared and added, "If I had the ability, I would have definitely shared Teesta waters with them." In 2017, the Chief Minister had also referred to an alternative proposal of sharing waters of the Torsa, Manshai, Sankosh and Dhansai rivers but not Teesta.

In all, 54 rivers flow between India and Bangladesh and sharing of river waters has been a key bilateral issue. India and Bangladesh agreed on the sharing of waters of the Ganga in 1996 after the construction of the Farakka Barrage and by the 2010s the issue of sharing of the Teesta came up for negotiation. In 2011, during the United Progressive Alliance-II government, India and Bangladesh were close to signing an agreement on the Teesta but Ms. Banerjee walked out of the deal, and since then, the agreement has been pending.

What is the proposal?

In 2011, when the proposal for sharing Teesta water was drawn up, it was said India would get 42.5% and Bangladesh 37.5% of the river water from December to March.

A tributary of the Brahmaputra, the Teesta river originates from the Tso Lhamo Lake at an elevation of about 5,280 metres in north Sikkim. The river travels for about 150 km in Sikkim and 123 km in West Bengal, before entering Bangladesh from Mekhlignj in Cooch Behar district; it flows another 140 km in Bangladesh and joins the Bay of Bengal. Teesta is Bangladesh's fourth largest trans-boundary river and its floodplain covers an area of 2,750 square kilometres in Bangladesh. But 83% of the river's catchment area lies in India and the remaining 17% is in Bangladesh, supporting 8.5% of its population and 14% of its crop production.

What are the political considerations?

While the Awami League government in Bangladesh is facing questions from the

Opposition about the delay in inking an agreement on the Teesta, the dams for hydro-electric power generation in Sikkim and the Teesta Barrage Project at Gazoldoba in West Bengal is making the flow of the river erratic in Bangladesh, leading to either floods or scarcity of water. The visit of a technical team from India to discuss conservation of the Teesta in Bangladesh also comes amid the backdrop of China proposing major dredging work on the river and building reservoirs and embankments in 2020. The Bangladesh government has put the proposal on hold for the past four years.

Soon after returning to Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina announced that her country would accept India's proposal to develop the Teesta River basin. Ms. Banerjee raised questions about the health of the Teesta river after the construction of a series of hydropower projects in Sikkim, deforestation in upper catchment areas and impact of climate change. She expressed surprise that no concrete steps have been taken by the Ministry of Jal Shakti to restore the river to its original form and health on the Indian side when a bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh for restoration of Teesta in Bangladesh is being proposed.

Environmental activists have also been raising questions on the ecological impact of hydro-electric projects on the river. In October 2023, a glacial lake outburst triggered floods in the Teesta basin that claimed hundred lives and destroyed the Teesta III hydroelectric dam.

Sharing of waters of transboundary rivers have been mandated by international laws including The Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers in 1966. Article 253 of the Indian Constitution gives powers to the government to enter any transboundary river water-related treaty with a riparian state.

Why is Bengal talking about Ganga treaty?

The Ganga water sharing treaty with Bangladesh completes 30 years in 2026 and a renewal of the agreement is on the cards. The Trinamool Congress chairperson has pointed out that water sharing with Bangladesh has changed the Ganga's morphology and affected lakhs of people in West Bengal owing to river erosion.

"Lakhs of people have been displaced from their habitation rendering them homeless and also leading to their loss of livelihood. The reduced silt load in Hooghly has impeded the nourishment of the Sundarban delta," she wrote in the letter to the Prime Minister.



Extreme weather: The flooded bank of the Teesta river following heavy downpour, in Siliguri, West Bengal, on June 14. PTI



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

Soft power options to win and retain friends

How India can delay the backlash that its economic rise will inevitably bring

All rising powers face contestation and containment. How should India prepare for it? China had a 10-year honeymoon when it went from a \$1.2 trillion economy to a \$6.5 trillion economy between 2000 and 2010. The United States (US) facilitated China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) as US consumers benefitted from lower prices. US companies got cheaper supply chains, bigger profits, and ultimately a large market to sell into. It was only with Xi Jinping's appointment as general secretary in 2012 that there was a change in tone and tenor in China's attitude to the US. Xi mounted a challenge to US supremacy and sought a redrawing of the world order to accommodate China's rapid rise. This led to a growing backlash against China which is now at a fever pitch with tariffs and non-trade barriers imposed by the US with bipartisan support. What should India learn from this? Can it use its soft power to extend the honeymoon phase to 15 years rather than China's 10?

The 30-year globalisation phase post the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union is under major challenge today. The electorate in many countries is upset by what they believe globalisation has done to their lot.

Populist Right-wing leaders in many western countries have blamed globalisation for the stagnation in living standards, growing inequality, and joblessness in their country. So, there is a return to nationalistic jingoism and reaction against free trade and immigration, whatever the long-term costs. Supply chain disruptions during Covid have further spurred self-reliance and a return to industrial policy, witness the US IRA and our own production-linked incentives-type actions across the world. The WTO is giving way to regional and bilateral trade deals. Geopolitical agility is now a requirement for countries and companies alike.

India is in a bad neighbourhood. China and Pakistan are hostile nations. Other neighbours such as Afghanistan, Nepal and Myanmar are unstable. Despite this, geopolitically, this is India's moment. The US has shifted its attention to the Pacific and India belongs to useful US-led arrangements - Quad (US, Japan, Australia, India), I2U2 (India, Israel, US and UAE), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC). Yet it has retained workable relations with Russia and Iran. At the same time, it has strengthened its relations with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and has good relations with the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe. It has also reached out to African nations with success.

The backlash against China has created space and opportunity. Despite India's fast

growth and its ascent on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) league tables, today it is not seen as threatening as it only accounts for 3.6% of global GDP. It remains a poor country with a per capita income below \$3,000 and is not expected to reach developed status till 2047 even by its own estimates. India must use its soft power to extend this honeymoon period and be allowed to grow without containment for the foreseeable future.



Janmeja Sinha

A word on using soft power. Soft power is the ability to co-opt rather than coerce. It involves shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. Soft power is non-coercive, it uses culture, political values, and foreign policies to enact change. India has a long tradition of soft power, which originates with its ancient belief in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* or (the world is one family). During the Independence struggle against the British, Mahatma Gandhi's actions and the poetry of Ravindranath Tagore increased India's soft power and embarrassed the British, creating global goodwill for India.

The world sans China and Pakistan does not feel threatened by India's rise. India's soft power is rooted in the core Indian values of secularism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and assimilation of multiple cultures in its civilisation. So much so that William Dalrymple writes, "India has always had a strange way with her conquerors. In defeat, she beckons them in, then slowly seduces, assimilates, and transforms them." Today,



India's soft power is rooted in the core Indian values of secularism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and assimilation of multiple cultures in its civilisation. Today, this is enhanced by India's democracy, food, movies, music, inclusive non-missionary religion

this is enhanced by India's democracy, food, movies, music, inclusive non-missionary religion, the easy use of the English language, and respected higher education institutions. Its technology services companies and global capability centres (GCC) have created a strong services brand. In fact, the number of GCCs has doubled in the last 10 years.

Its diaspora in the US and UK is especially strong. It is rich and well-placed in academia, business, health care, technology, and politics. Top US companies have CEOs of Indian origin, the US vice-president and the UK prime minister belong to

the Indian diaspora. Just as an example, I was in a Seattle nightclub a few years ago and a mixed crowd were all dancing to Bollywood hits.

Yet we must recognise that the soft power of the US is, in fact, as strong as its hard power (nuclear, military, technology, economic, space). Despite major errors in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Gaza, US soft power cannot be underestimated. It is further bolstered by the opinion-shaping role of the Anglo-Saxon press and Hollywood movies. I don't know whether the US dollar is a soft or hard power — but it is clearly a superpower. The US still defines who the

bad guys are! We need to recognise that an "opportunity" is not the same as an "outcome". Our soft power needs constant strengthening. We must nurture our respected institutions and take steps to fix what is currently broken, like primary education, health care access and delivery, and strengthen corporate research and development further. Complacency, in today's context, is a death wish and yet the opportunity before India is like never before.

Janmeja Sinha is chairman, BCG India. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



Claim to prohibition is immoral, ahistoric

The truth is deaths caused by the consumption of spurious liquor are double tragedies. Not only are they horrific but they're also entirely preventable. Man has caused them but man can also ensure they do not occur. All it requires is the acceptance of a cold fact of reality. Not all human beings are teetotalers. Many want to drink. They enjoy doing so. And frankly, in any mature, sensible, democratic society, they have an inalienable right to do so. It is attempts to deny that right or place unacceptable curbs on it that cause the problem.

If safe, good quality and cheap or reasonably priced alcohol is available for all adults to buy, within all the acknowledged and accepted conditions of the law, few if any people would risk their lives drinking hooch. The vast majority of drinkers are not suicidal. They simply want to relax, ease their tension and tiredness, or spend

an enjoyable evening. It's because they can't buy what they want that they resort to what is dangerous and even likely to kill. But, remember, death was never their intention. It's just the unintended corollary of what circumstances have forced on them.

At the root of the problem is the belief that alcohol is bad and, therefore, its consumption must be stopped or, at least, severely discouraged. Article 47 of our Constitution says, "the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption, except for medicinal purposes, of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health".

No doubt, in excess, alcohol is bad. Only a fool would deny that. But so, too, is sugar, butter, cream and, indeed, even exercise. However, taken in moderation it becomes a different matter. And, anyway, adults are entitled to decide for themselves. Even make their own mistakes. Prohibition as

state policy (as in Bihar and Gujarat) is not just a deliberate denial of the rights of citizens but it infantilises them. The nanny State makes children of us and it doesn't know best. But governments that treat their people like toddlers in a nursery seem unable to accept that.

There is, however, a deeper problem. It explains this attitude to alcohol. It's why leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and, sometimes, Constitutions like ours seek to wean people away from what they consider human weakness or vice. It's the mistaken quest to make people perfect or, at least, to strive towards it. From a moral position, this may make sense. Perhaps from a practical standpoint, it could prevent problems. But from a human perspective, it assumes someone in authority is entitled to decide what's right and if you differ, you're wrong.

This is true of how Mahatma Gandhi and the governments of Bihar and Gujarat view alcohol. It's also true of Rishi Sunak's foolish proposal to ban people born after a particular year from smoking cigarettes. They believe that if protected from their own temptation, human beings can be transformed. But they're wrong.

True transformation comes from learning from your mistakes. But you have to first make those mistakes to learn. This is the difference between people who've given up smoking and those who never took it up. A lesson learnt from experience is deeper and longer lasting than one enforced by mummy.

TRUE TRANSFORMATION COMES FROM LEARNING FROM YOUR MISTAKES. BUT YOU HAVE TO FIRST MAKE THOSE MISTAKES TO LEARN. THIS IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO'VE GIVEN UP SMOKING AND THOSE WHO NEVER TOOK IT UP

The truly bizarre part is alcohol is part of our culture and ancient traditions. Soma ras was the nectar of the Gods. Indra was particularly partial to it. Prohibition, on the other hand, is foreign. America tried it in the 1920s and failed. And that raises another set of issues we need to address. Why don't we follow the way of our Gods? That would be the perfectly desirous thing to do. Why, instead, are we imitating the American way?

The moral of this piece is simple and straightforward. Good governance lies in making sure honest people can drink safely within the prescriptions of the law. Bad governance is making that difficult, if not impossible, and pushing them to alternatives that often kill.

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

For small islands, climate finance is about survival

This month, sadly, more than 100 people have died from oppressive heat in India. At the recent Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting, we considered how the climate crisis is increasing the spread of vector-borne diseases, including malaria and other dangerous diseases.

Commonwealth leaders have been calling for global climate action since 1989, before international negotiations even began. In line with their calls, climate scientists have long warned the world of the need to limit global warming to 1.5°C to avoid irreversible damage.

Worryingly, in February 2024, we breached this critical threshold. Global temperatures surpassed 1.5°C over the past 12 months, making it the hottest year on record. This increase has intensified extreme weather events, sea-level rise and other climate risks which disproportionately affect Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Despite covering only 3% of the world's land area, SIDS are vital for humanity and the planet we share. They safeguard 11.5% of the oceans' Exclusive Economic Zones, which include 20% of all terrestrial bird, plant, and reptile species. Yet SIDS experience five times more climate-attributable deaths due to extreme weather events, and when shocks hit, SIDS are hit hard.

A single cyclone can derail a small State's growth for years, if not decades. In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated my own country of birth, Dominica, destroying 225% of its Gross Domestic Product. The damage of such shocks is worsened by inadequate financial support.

Despite contributing only 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS struggle to unlock climate finance. In 2019, they had access to only \$1.5 billion out of the \$100 billion pledged to developing countries. With no alternative, these countries are often forced to obtain financing on unfavourable terms, resulting in high debt burdens, creating a vicious cycle where debt becomes unsustainable and access to finance becomes more limited.

The Commonwealth is home to two-thirds of the world's SIDS, and this exceptional convergence of hardships is at the heart of my motivation to support SIDS at every level. SIDS have also been saying enough is enough, and

are leading the charge to reset our climate finance ambitions. At the 28th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28), the Commonwealth SIDS were at the forefront of hard-won progress on Loss and Damage.

Samoa, the Commonwealth's incoming chair-in-office, joined other small islands and vulnerable countries at the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4), calling for "collective quantified finance goals and funding" to help them deal with intensifying natural disasters.

The Commonwealth is working to ensure that the SIDS' voices are heard at the highest level of the international system while providing practical support in critical areas. Our Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub has unlocked \$330 million for small States, with another \$500 million worth of project proposals in the pipeline. For years, we have seen these countries take the steps needed to transition toward low-carbon, climate-resilient development. But to scale up this action, reliable climate finance is key.

We will continue to advocate for increased funding for adaptation, mitigation, and resilience-building. Our commitment to the climate crisis is not new; it is part of the Commonwealth's DNA. The next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will take place in Samoa this October — the first summit in a Pacific Small Island State — with a focus on building resilience essential for our 56 nations. If we are to achieve this, the world must keep its promises. Every commitment to climate action and finance made by world leaders is vital. Every failure to meet those commitments is an insult to the vulnerable. Every example of inaction is an act of violence against those who need us to succeed, now and for generations to come.

The call to action on climate finance will continue to resound from Commonwealth SIDS at the UN General Assembly in September to the negotiations at COP29 in November. It must be heeded.

Patricia Scotland is the secretary general of the Commonwealth. The views expressed are personal

Colonial clubs and the fetish about dress code

Rajinath Singh, the raksha mantri, may be a little surprised that the Kasauli Club, whose chairperson is the serving brigadier of the cantonment, could well stop him from entering the Club. This is because the Club, founded in 1898, still persists with an antiquated dress code, which allows men to enter wearing lounge suits, safaris, and blazers, but not what is the impressive trademark dress of the minister — an elegantly worn dhoti with a starched kurta. He may find it difficult too because the Club also insists only on shoes with socks, and bans sandals, even closed Peshawaris.

Our British rulers set up a chain of clubs for themselves, and for long, they were for "whites only". When they left, Indians were admitted, but mostly "brown sahibs", who were, as Macaulay had prophetically predicted, Indian only in colour. This class of anglicised, English-speaking Indians was also the new power elite — members of the civil services, senior police and Army officials, the old rich, and some leading corporate figures.

Thus, nothing really changed in these exclusionist bastions. In Kolkata, the Bengal Club where Macaulay once lived, opened its doors to Indians only in 1959, more than a decade after Independence, and an Indian did not displace a Britisher as the president of the club until another seven years after that! In Mumbai, another leading club kept this notice outside its premises for many years after

1947: DOGS AND INDIANS NOT ALLOWED.

Such clubs have, therefore, become today the symbols of a cultural confrontation, between a new, less anglicised and more egalitarian India, and the colonial traditions of the past. The Delhi Gymkhana Club, founded in 1913, occupies 27.3 acres of prime land in Lutyens Delhi. But in 1991, when I went to the club, wearing a silk kurta, starched pyjamas, expensive buttons, and Peshawari sandals, I was asked by the burly doorman who had known me since childhood, to wear a Jawahar jacket as well. I agreed until I saw that people in jeans and T-shirts were allowed in, while I, dressed in formal attire in my own cultural traditions, could not. I protested strongly, and fortunately, the then president, Admiral Tahliani, revised the rules.

But old habits die hard. In 2013, the same club stopped a high-ranking Bhutanese monk from entering because of his traditional dress. The Delhi Golf Club, another elite citadel, had a shameful incident in 2017 when a Khasi lady from Meghalaya, Taiin Lyngdoh, invited there for lunch, was asked by club officials to leave because she was dressed in the *jainsem*, her state's formal attire. Apparently, the officials told her that it looked like a "maid's dress". The incident created public outrage, but colonial mentalities persist, and little attempt has been made to accommodate India's vast formal sartorial diversity. For instance, the popular Tollygunge Club in Kolkata, founded in



The Delhi Golf Club is an elite citadel

ARASTU GUPTA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

1855, and occupying 110 acres of prime land, does not allow a formally clad *pyjama-kurta* guest or member in any venue of the club but permits all varieties of T-shirts and jeans. Nor would it allow in former minister P Chidambaram, if he was wearing his elegant *veshti* and shirt.

I am a member of most of these clubs, and my criticism comes from an insider as cautionary advice on the need to change, especially since most of the members of the current ruling party, without an anglicised pedigree or felicity in English, would not qualify to become members, and quite understandably resent these remnants of cultural colonisation. The situation becomes worse because inbreeding breeds infighting. Allegations of financial irregularities

between rival groups in the clubs swirl around, literally inviting the government to take over, as has happened with the Delhi Gymkhana Club.

Clubs are entitled to their autonomy, but not to their refusal to change. It is not coincidental that after the government takeover of Gymkhana, Om Pathak was appointed the administrator. A member of the Bharatiya Janata Party national executive, he had applied for membership as far back as 1982 but never got it. Two of his decisions were to keep an open copy of the Bhagavad Gita in the library and have a performance of the Ramayana.

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY LETTERS

Education for future citizens

This is with reference to "Preparing our children to encounter the world" by Rajmohan Gandhi (June 23). The fact that political science textbooks are being "cleansed" or revised is a troubling notion. As Indians, we must introspect on the kind of education that should be imparted to our children.

Arun P

India cannot be compared with Quebec

This is with reference to "Seditious hearts and mature democracies" by Karan Thapar (June 23). Scotland and Quebec have a far less complex religious and ethnic spread than India. Therefore, Arundhati Roy's comments on the integrity of one of the most sensitive regions in India could be considered irresponsible.

Amol Subhedar

Good transport can bridge gender gap

This is with reference to "A pink auto router to empowering women" by Lalita Panicker (June 23). It is the duty and responsibility of the government to minimise the gender gap through a reform in transport.

Subhash Taneja

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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What has changed? Apparently nothing

THE BJP-led government under the Hon'ble Mr Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9, 2024. It did not have a happy start. Mr Modi had to share the head table with the leaders of the TDP and JD(U) and allot portfolios to them and other allies. In the election of the Speaker he had to go through the motions of consultation. Both were unusual experiences for Mr Modi in his 22 years as head of government.

SEVERAL SETBACKS

There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir. The prices of tomato, potato and onion increased, year on year, by 39, 41 and 43 per cent, respectively. The Sensex and Nifty soared to historic highs while the dollar-rupee exchange rate plunged to a historic low. Toll tax on highways was raised by 15 per cent. In an apparent censure, Mr Mohan Bhagwat, the *sarsangchalak* of RSS, admonished those who displayed "arrogance"; the BJP's leadership squirmed but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Local mutinies broke out in several state units of the BJP.

In the first session of Parliament, save the election of the Speaker and the President's Address, there was no substantive business. But even the routine business had its share of controversies. By con-

vention, the member of Parliament who has been elected most times to the Lok Sabha would be nominated the *pro-tem* Speaker to preside over taking the oath by elected members. That person, undisputedly, was Mr K Suresh (Congress-Kerala) who has been elected for the 8th time, though with a break. However, the government nominated Mr B Mahtab (BJP-Odisha) for the office although he has been elected only 7 times (six times on the BJD ticket and, after he crossed over, the 7th time on the BJP ticket).

Why did the BJP kick up the avoidable controversy? Possible answers are: BJP wanted to signal that the results of the LS elections have not dented its supreme leader's way of doing things, namely, 'it's my way or highway'. Another answer could be that the controversy-courting Mr K. Rijiju, the new minister of parliamentary affairs, wanted to signal his arrival. The most plausible answer is that the nomination was a reward for Mr Mahtab's defection from the BJD to the BJP and to encourage more MPs to defect to the BJP.

STALE ASSURANCES

Although the election of the Speaker concluded on a sour note, the rest of the session need not have been affected. But the Hon'ble Speaker added more bitterness when he moved a resolution from the Chair excoriating the Congress for the imposition of Emergency 49 years ago (yes, 49 years, not 50)! Next, Parliament may 'teach' other history lessons by condemning Pakistan for the invasion of Kashmir in

1947, China for the war in 1962 and the United States for sending an aircraft carrier to intimidate India in 1971. The resolution was an unwarranted provocation.

The President's Address to the joint session of both Houses was an opportunity to restore civility after false starts, but the opportunity was missed. The speech could have recognized the changed composition of the Lok Sabha, the fact that the leading party (BJP) was short of a majority by 32 seats, that the prime minister was the *primus inter pares* of a *coalition* government and that, after 10 years, there would be a Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Disappointingly, the President's Address made no reference to the altered circumstances.

The speech was a litany of claims made by the BJP before and during the elections. The claims were rebuffed by the vast majority of the people. The new government is not a BJP government but a *coalition* government. The BJP has refused to acknowledge the bittersweet fact and the President echoed that view. The word '*coalition*', did not occur in the speech. Other words that were conspicuous by their absence included '*consensus*', '*inflation*', and '*parliamentary committee*'. There were references to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes but all others — especially the minority communities — were clubbed in the catch-all phrase 'social and religious groups'. There was no reference to the tragedy of Manipur. As a small mercy there was no reference to 'Agniveer' or 'Uniform Civil Code'. Finally,

India is no longer a *Vishwa Guru*, and is content to be a *Vishwa Bandhu*!

MORE OF THE SAMENESS

Apparently, in the view of the BJP, nothing has changed, not even the mood of the people.

Hence, it is the same Cabinet, the same ministers, the key ministers hold the same portfolios, the same Speaker, the same principal secretary to the prime minister, the same National Security Adviser, the same chief of the Intelligence Bureau, the same government law officers, and many others remaining in the same positions. Besides, I am told that the social media is full of the same paid trolls who are semi-literate, diversionary, proficient in the science of scatology, and obvious losers. That, I am afraid, is conclusive proof that nothing has changed despite the verdict of the people!

In the run-up to the Budget, the top concerns of the people remain (1) unemployment and (2) inflation. According to the CSDS' post-poll survey (*The Hindu* dated June 25, 2024), '*price rise/inflation*' and '*growing unemployment*' got 29 per cent and 27 per cent as the most 'disliked' work of the BJP government. On addressing the top two concerns, the formation of the Cabinet and the President's Address let down the people. Will the Budget for 2024-25, due in July, awaken the Modi government? Parliamentary etiquette requires that we keep our fingers crossed.

inside TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



EMERGENCY RERUNS

LAST WEEK, the anniversary of Indira Gandhi's draconian Emergency was commemorated in Parliament. But the outpouring of condemnation from the ruling party seemed more about scoring political points than genuine concern over the real issues involved. Having written a book on Emergency, I am often asked about my first-hand experiences. I always find it ironic that many of those who commemorate June 26 and regret the horrors of suppression of the media and fundamental rights, seem oblivious that a dark cloud still hangs over freedom of expression and liberty even today. For instance, in the last Lok Sabha session, parliamentary correspondents were never so ruthlessly restricted, except during the Emergency. The difference today is in the style of operation, but not the basic effect.

All rulers want to control the narrative. Indira, despite her liberal upbringing, used sledgehammer tactics, announcing upfront that she was suspending fundamental rights and introducing censorship. Subsequent governments have resorted to less in-your-face methods. Strong-arming individuals and groups funding the media, unjustly applying laws concerning terrorism and corruption, raiding media offices and arresting scribes without following due process, denying visas to foreign journalists, using the CBI and the ED to settle scores are some of the more draconian methods of media regulation of late. But control of news emanation can even be effected by simply shutting out legitimate sources of information. Scribes who don't toe the line are cut out from the loop of newsgathering, like background briefings, interviews, and entry to Parliament and government offices. The media starts introspecting less than it should on official claims. How, for instance, did so many scribes get it wrong in the recent poll results?

STRONG GOVTS VS WEAK ONES

Politicians tend to lump the media into two categories: those who are with them and those who are against them. Unhappily, the middle ground of objectivity in journalism has practically disappeared. I personally believe the thumb rule generally is that the stronger the government, the more

overbearing it is, both in state or at the Centre. The media is far more free and fearless under unstable governments. PM Modi and Indira were similar in terms of mass appeal, unilateralism and a deep suspicion of newsgatherers. Some may question my theory, citing the example of Rajiv Gandhi who, despite his huge majority, was unable to suppress the Bofors exposé that led to the fall of his government. But that may have been less due to lack of intent than because his media controllers were ham-handed and some newspapers remained defiant. Also, a hostile President Zail Singh was in the Rashtrapati Bhavan for much of his tenure. I recall first-hand back in 1989, when a shell-shocked Vajpayat Singhania was ordered by a Rajiv aide to shut down his newly started newspaper, *Indian Post*, where I worked then, because a damaging lead story had appeared against one of the PM's close friends. Earlier, then editor-in-chief Vinod Mehta was provided a list of people who were not to be written about negatively, which he shared sheepishly with me.

Past governments far more tolerant of a free press included those of Morarji Desai and Deve Gowda. But perhaps their *laissez-faire* attitude was more because they lacked a clear majority and many from within their own ranks were plotting their downfall.

CAN'T CONTROL THE NARRATIVE

Despite total censorship, with a few courageous exceptions like *The Indian Express*, Indira lost the 1977 elections because news of her regime's excesses spread throughout the country by word of mouth. In 2024, the age of social media, aspersions were cast on '*god*' and '*pappu*' scribes in traditional media, but the most effective counter to government propaganda may have come from irreverent YouTubers and influencers, curiously some of whom started out as travel writers and body-builders. The new entrants attracted millions of viewers. And thousands of aspiring writers dashed off disrespectful WhatsApp campaign messages that went viral. The Modi 3.0 regime should learn from Emergency — that you cannot control the narrative, particularly in the 21st century. Devising new IT laws to monitor the Internet and earning international opprobrium is definitely not the answer, but Rabindranath Tagore's powerful poem, 'Where the mind is without fear' is the soundest advice. If PM Modi were to restrain some of his overzealous media advisers (unofficial censors), it would go a long way in restoring goodwill and confidence in his image as a benevolent, strong ruler. Indira learnt this lesson the hard way, with her ignominious Emergency defeat.

History HEADLINE

CHAKSHUROY



How Lutyens Delhi became a home for MPs

Delhi churns every five years. The general election results decide the political fate of incumbent Members of Parliament (MPs), and there are new public representatives and their ideas for the country. Besides its broader impact on Parliament and governance, this churning has a personal dimension. Electoral loss means vacating the official housing that outgoing MPs lived in during their time in Parliament.

For MPs who were ministers or had longer tenures in the national legislatures, it means looking back at politics and their time in bungalows with spacious gardens, open verandahs and high ceilings. The incoming parliamentarians then start jostling for the most coveted housing in the heart of Delhi, these Lutyens bungalows.

The term 'Lutyens bungalow' is a misnomer. Contrary to popular belief, architect Edwin Lutyens did not design them. In the newly established capital city of Delhi, architects like Robert Russell, W H Nicholls, C G Blomfield, Walter Sykes George and Herbert Baker designed the residences of the colonial government officials. The allocation of these residences was straightforward — the higher an individual's position in the British government, the larger and closer their accommodation to the Viceroy's House. For instance, Teen Murti Bhawan, the residence of the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, was the largest and the closest.

During this time, the question of official housing for parliamentarians was not a significant issue. The Central Legislative Assembly, which started functioning in 1921, had 145 members and met for less than three months, splitting its time between Delhi and Shimla. Some assembly members also had official responsibilities in the colonial government and were entitled to government accommodation. The government also constructed smaller bungalows closer to Parliament House to house the other elected members. Some members, like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had the means to buy their bungalows. The first elected President (as the Speaker was known then) of the central assembly, Vithalbai Patel, was allocated the bungalow on 20 Akbar Road as his official residence. And nearly 100 years later, it continues to be the official residence of the Speaker of Lok Sabha.



A multi-storey apartment for MPs in New Delhi. Praveen Khanna

In 1946, the legislature secretariat faced the problem of accommodating almost 300 Constituent Assembly members tasked with drafting the Constitution of India. The end of the Second World War provided an opportunity in this regard. A barracks complex close to Parliament House, which had housed American armed forces personnel was now vacant and available. The assembly secretariat requisitioned these barracks, and the building was renamed Constitution House.

The secretariat ensured each unit had telephones and members had access to European and Indian food. Most Constituent Assembly members stayed in these barracks during their time in Delhi. Members also had the option to stay in private hotels like the Imperial and Maidens, where room charges were higher than those of Constitution House. The barracks and its dining hall became the forum for discussion on constitutional matters, and active members like Hari Vishnu Kamath and Shibban Lal Saxena exchanged notes on their amendments with their colleagues. By the end of 1946, a club for members called the Constitution Club started near these barracks and became another venue for these discussions.

However, not all Constituent Assembly members resided in the Constitution House. Rajendra Prasad lived on Queen Victoria Road (now named after him),

Jawaharlal Nehru's official residence during his time in the Constituent Assembly was on York Road (now Motilal Nehru Road), Vallabhbhai Patel on Aurangzeb Road (now APJ Abdul Kalam Road), etc. Post-independence, the government constructed houses closer to the Parliament House complex to cater to 400 plus MPs.

In 1952, Parliament also established procedures for allocating houses to MPs and set up a House committee to deal with these matters. The government also divided the different types of bungalows in Delhi into pools, such as those for ministers and officials, Lok Sabha, and Rajya Sabha members. The two houses' committees now decided on the housing allocation for their members. They use criteria like the number of tenures in Parliament, previous positions like ministers in state or union, etc., to decide whether an MP gets a large bungalow or a smaller residence. The presiding officers of the two Houses can also intervene to get an MP an accommodation higher than their entitlement. Contrary to public opinion, most MPs now live in single and multi-storey apartment complexes closer to Parliament.

Over the years, MPs have used and abused their housing privileges. Using official accommodation also means that members had to vacate the premises when they left public office. In the beginning, members were quite prompt in doing so. When B R Ambedkar resigned as law minister, he quickly vacated his bungalow. However, with time, former members and ministers started occupying these premises for long periods after leaving office and paying minimal or no rent.

The charm of the Lutyens bungalow has enabled the government to dangle it as a carrot to political leaders to win their support. Over the years, public angst against housing privileges has grown, prompting Tavleen Singh to comment, "...more privileged Members of Parliament live at taxpayers' expense in a style to which they should never have been allowed to grow accustomed. No modern democratic country pays through its nose to accommodate its officials and elected representatives in homes that only billionaires can afford".

The writer looks at issues through a legislative lens and works at PRS Legislative Research

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter: @tavleen_singh



Criticism we cannot ignore

LAST WEEK India faced censure that we need to take seriously. The US Secretary of State while releasing the Report on International Religious Freedom for 2023 said that some of the things that were happening to people belonging to minority religions in India were disturbing. Anthony Blinken's words as reported in this newspaper were, "In India we see a concerning increase in anti-conversion laws, hate speech, demolitions of homes and places of worship for members of minority faith communities." Usually, when India faces criticism from foreigners the reaction from high officials in the Government of India is to show fake disdain and fake bravado.

This is not a confident response from the 'mother of democracy'. None of the things that Mr. Blinken said are untrue. There are anti-conversion laws in ten out of twenty-eight states, says the report. And we do not need anyone to remind us of hate speeches that have called for genocide and bulldozers that somehow only find Muslim houses to demolish. Bulldozer justice worries me personally to such a degree that I have often written against it in this column. Every time the general reaction in the digital public square has been to berate me for not realising that the demolished homes and mosques were built illegally on government land. They ignore the horrible truth that bulldozers only arrive after there has been violence of some kind.

Demonising those of other faiths, especially Muslims, has become so routine in the past ten years that incidents of yet another 'cattle smuggler' being lynched now barely make the news. The tragic reality is that the killers are almost never brought to justice and always remain faceless. Now that there is a powerful opposition in Parliament, we must hope that this changes as do a few other practices that have given India a bad name.

Dissidents in the past decade have been regularly arrested under laws that were made for terrorists. It is beyond belief that Umar Khalid, a student leader, has spent four years in jail without being brought to trial. If the government has a good case against him, he should be tried in a court of law instead of being allowed to rot in a jail cell indefinitely. The laws under which dissidents like him are arrested are such that make it impossible to get bail, so officials get away with lying that it is for the courts to decide who and when someone should be given bail. Judges have no choice but to deny bail if the law has no provision for it.

The latest dissident against whom charges have been brought is Arundhati Roy. This is a lady I have known for many years, and I have never agreed with her political views. But she is not a terrorist. She is a rebel and often a rebel for any old cause. She is given to making reckless speeches. So, she once said that in her view the Indian Army had been more brutal with the Indian people than the Pakistani army had with that country's civilian population. Arundhati had clearly not heard of Baluchistan or noticed that the Pakistani Army executed an elected prime minister. It was not this speech that she could soon be put on trial for but a speech she made more than a decade ago in which she said that Kashmir had never been an integral part of India. She was obviously referring to 1947 and not Kashmir's ancient Hindu past. In any case it was a stupid remark. But this does not make her a terrorist.

One of the greatest achievements of India is that we have managed somehow to remain a liberal democracy amid countries that have been always ruled by military and Marxist dictators. In the old days when relations were better between India and Pakistan, I remember that every time I returned from the Islamist republic next door, I had this sense of suddenly being able to breathe again. Repression and religion so filled the Pakistani air (and still do) that it was difficult to do the most ordinary things. We need to be grateful that this has not happened in India yet, but I can report that I was part of a panel discussion on Kashmir at the Kasauli Literary Festival some years ago and a BJP busy-body reported me to the local police station along with a fellow panelist. He disagreed with our views.

These are not things that can or should happen in a democracy. Especially not when as the Prime Minister said last week, we must resolve to never allow another Emergency of the kind that Indira Gandhi imposed. It made me happy to hear him say this. But I feel the need to remind him that the only time, other than then, that I have seen foreign correspondents kicked out of India has been in the past ten years. The two French journalists who have recently been expelled had not just lived here for years but were married to Indian citizens. So, their families face being torn apart. When journalists, writers and dissidents are expelled, it damages India's democratic credentials.

Now that the Prime Minister has won a third term and there is a solid opposition block in the Lok Sabha, it is my fervent hope that we can go back to those days when India was confident enough to not be afraid of foreign correspondents or Indian dissidents.

On the LOOSE

LEHER KALA

leherkala@gmail.com



THE PRACTICE of polygamy (more than two people consensually in a marriage) has made a tumultuous debut on *Bigg Boss OTT 3*, where popular YouTuber Armaan Malik is a contestant, along with his 'wives' Payal Malik and Kritika Malik. "Behind every successful man there is a woman," quipped the host Anil Kapoor, "And sometimes there are two!" The women, onscreen at least, seemed to be on easy, good terms, and the nonplussed husband laughed alongside them. Of course, that they've decided to out their lifestyle on *Bigg Boss* suggests a canny plan of creating a stir; we know that on reality TV nothing succeeds like shock value. Sure enough, outraged reactions on Twitter

When three isn't a crowd

at this "gross, illegal and filthy" trio, blamed the producers for lack of ideas that lead them to focus on a "trashy" *ménage à trois* for entertainment.

It's a thought that because many of the users tend to be older; the Twitter landscape no longer accurately reflects the headspace of India's urban 20 to 35-year-olds. Young singles, it turns out, are less enamoured of old fashioned commitment, which is increasingly seen as not a one-size-fits-all model. A new generation is aware they needn't follow the same drill, the beaten path of school, college, job and marriage, the bane of Indian existence so far. Online dating has opened up a range of possibilities that subtly challenge traditional, Indian middle class ambitions of owning a flat, a car and having two children.

A quick glance through Tinder India's

website reveals that in 2023 they introduced a new feature called "Relationship Types" to allow users to be specific about what they're looking for. Choices include 'monogamy', 'ethical non-monogamy', 'polyamory' and 'open to exploring'. A significantly large proportion, 41% of users, are open to or are seeking non-monogamous relationships and multiple romantic connections, simultaneously. So, the data suggests the Malik family arrangement isn't quite that unusual; there are plenty of people out there disregarding conventional goals and redefining their romantic futures based on their individual needs.

Is this a cultural shift unfolding (in no small part due to cynicism about the myth of marital bliss), or are the youth today enjoying themselves so much they prefer to prolong this extended, responsibility-free

adolescence? Most likely, it's just a phase to notch up some life experience that will come in handy at the point of negotiating the complications within real relationships. The upside of financial security is having the freedom to choose, the only danger being dating apps are like a buffet at a five-star coffee shop: you want to try everything because it all looks sumptuous but nothing tastes especially good. The paradox of choice is that as options increase so does the difficulty of knowing what's best. But old habits die hard. In time, the majority will get around to marrying. At least, there is much more acceptance for the idea that there is no universally correct way to live. Pressures of timelines and labels have lost relevance. The Tinder tagline, 'It starts with a swipe', has captured imaginations and postponed the breathless hurtling towards the altar

that Indians have always favoured.

Interestingly, stories about couples in unconventional arrangements are an enduring theme on OTT platforms currently: in *Couple to Throuple* (Jio Cinema) single people become the third wheel to couples after a messy and long-winded process. In *Couples Therapy*, intense conversations between real couples in crisis features a polyamorous trio whose home lives are exactly as difficult as anybody in a fraught marriage. It makes one wonder whether the unforgettable stories of romantic love, dreamy sagas like *Doctor Zhivago* and *Gone with the Wind* are somewhat dated; a thing of the past, to be consigned to history. Alas, the novel of love will have to change dramatically to reflect the postmodern world of no-strings-attached and total freedom.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films



The Democrats say government will make you smarter, taller, richer... The Republicans say government doesn't work, and then they get elected and prove it

P J O'Rourke

TRUMP-BIDEN GERONTOCRACY AND THE WORLD ORDER

HEY say age is just a number. Not if you are in politics. This April, at a conference in Washington, Gordon Brown, the former chancellor and prime minister of the UK now in his early seventies, introduced himself as someone too old for European politics and too young to be an American politician. The point made only half in jest triggered some laughs and the hiss of resigned sighs.

On Thursday, the sighs of dismay were amplified as they resonated across the United States and the world as folks watched an 81-year-old in a face-off with a 78-year-old in the first presidential debate. The Thursday hustle between Joseph Robinette Biden and Donald J Trump was a validation of the worst fears—America's future and that of the world order was now hostage to oneupmanship in the race of geriatrics.

The 90-minute spectacle of rant and ramble was scarcely a debate and hardly presidential. Juvenile jibes chased coarse charges of the unverifiable variety. Try this for flavour: At one point Trump chided Biden, "Let's not act like children"; Biden retorted, "You are a child". As Biden stuttered and stumbled over words and thoughts, Trump paraded personal victimhood with superlative self-certification.

Fact-checkers had a field day—apparently, Trump had 30 lies while Biden had nine. Each called the other the worst president. Trump coined a new epithet as he called Biden a "bad Palestinian". Biden paid in kind, saying Trump had the morals of an "alley cat". Issues worrying folks, ranging from inflation and immigration to abortion, from tariffs to taxes, got cluster-bombed by puerile name-calling. Trump was coherent in marketing his claims and lies, while Biden was incoherent in presenting his facts.

Post the debate, the spin doctors went into overdrive. Trump Republicans rushed to declare victory since the ex-president didn't go rogue. Biden found comfort in orchestrated applause at an event where the banners said, "Let's go, Joe." Kamala Harris stepped in to argue the contest was about 40 months, and not 90 minutes. The calls asking Biden to step down have been countered—for now—by Barack Obama, but the angst is real.

It was verily an exposition of the state of American politics reflected in candidature. Trump faces multiple cases, has been impeached and was recently convicted in a felony case. Biden carries the legacy of u-turns and must bear the burden of his son Hunter Biden's actions and recent conviction. It is true that both Trump and Biden are being chosen by the process. It is equally true that this is a rematch people do not want—an ABC poll shows 59 percent of voters believe both Biden and Trump are too old, and a Pew report states nearly half the voters would like the candidates on the ballot changed.

Yet, people in the world's oldest democracy must suffer a no-choice race. The fact that neither candidate moved the needle on undecided voters underlines the pathos. In one of his last interviews, Henry Kissinger worried about the state of American politics and the extreme theory of 'America first'. The choice of contestants is worrying allies in Europe and Asia. Biden's brand of protectionism, the stalling of Nippon Steel's takeover of US Steel and Trump's threat to impose tariffs on all imports are manifestations.

History is witness to the split-screen American hypocrisy in the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and in the rushed abandonment of Afghanistan. In February 2021, Biden declared, "America is back"—but US influence is waning. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, an Israeli prime minister has ignored and defied a US president and leaders in West Asia shied away from meeting Biden in Jordan. The "what if" question about China's move on Taiwan is blowing in the wind.

The US has conveniently switched from its evangelism of the power of example, quoted by Biden in his November 2020 acceptance speech, to practise the example of power. Whether it is through tariffs or treaties, allies in the western hemisphere are crafting policies to Trump-proof their economies and geopolitics. Elsewhere, those wedded to the idea of strategic autonomy—for instance, India and some other emerging economies—would no doubt seek to double down on maintaining neutrality.

Soon after the debate, a news anchor asked in dismay, "How did we get here?" The question morphs into viral memes on the other side of the world. Minutes after the debate, X owner Elon Musk tweeted, "Tonight was a clear victory... for memes." One of the memes had Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un laughing on a conference call. In the real world, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman in the Kremlin, mocked with a cryptic line, "Putin didn't set his alarm to watch the debate." Farther east, the Chinese media found "the debate was very entertaining".

There is no question the rules-based world order is unraveling. China and Russia, collaborators in the propagation of a competing new world order, were front and centre in the questions on geopolitics. Did candidates Trump and Biden debate and deliver answers on geopolitics, on the usage of disruptive technology, on the climate crisis? The answer is a deafening NO.

Neither the choice of candidates nor the debate served as a beacon of inspiration for the concept of democracy. The question American people and politicians must ponder over is if this is the best the United States of America can present for what they proudly define as 'leader of the free world'!



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India* (shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

THE RISE, FALL AND RISE OF RA GA



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com
Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

A picture is worth a thousand words. A photograph is worth a powerful phrase: rigorous reinvention. The snapshot in question is a *mise-en-scene* of political theatre: the new Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi shaking hands with Speaker Om Birla, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju stand behind him. Modi and Rahul together had escorted Birla to the Speaker's chair—a convention followed since 1950, though there is nothing conventional about either leader.

So, do the tea leaves foretell the return of Gandhi? It took over two decades in politics for Rahul to make it to the front bench of the opposition. The Bharat Jodo Yatra tee and chinros were gone. Rahul wore a formal, white kurta-pyjama on Day One of the new Lok Sabha. DNA matters—father Rajiv Gandhi and mother Sonia were also LoPs, the latter for almost five years during the Vajpayee government.

Rahul will have a full entourage and Cabinet minister's rank. He gets a fully furnished office in the parliament building. He will be assisted by a phalanx of personal staff including a private secretary. He will be on numerous statutory panels that select the Lok Pal, CBI director, vigilance commissioners, information commissioners and election commissioners. He has the privilege of initiating any debate and responding to the PM's speeches. Like his mother did in 2004, maybe he listened to his inner voice by accepting and not rejecting: "It doesn't matter how much wisdom you have. If you don't have a position, you have noth-

ing. That's the tragedy of India."

Once, this entitled dynast treated parliament as a bagatelle—over two decades of being an MP, just 99 questions, participation in 26 debates, and an attendance record thinner than his own party MPs'. Rahul has mostly been AWOL at budget sessions since 2014, limiting himself to sudden dramatic Zorro-like appearances. The Congress failed to KO Modi because RaGa's nominees were ineffective. This time, the dynasty boy must become his party's buoy in the turbulent waters of parliamentary debate to take on Modi's guile. Will Rahul, like Alaric, become a hero of his people, or a royal wastrel like Bonnie Prince Charlie? Rahul's attitude and aptitude will determine his attitude in politics.

The Congress can't grab power on its own. It has not won a simple majority since 1984, when Rajiv won 404 seats. After wandering in the political desert for almost eight years, the Congress defeated the BJP in 2004. The credit goes to Sonia Gandhi; again in 2009, when she led her party to cross the 200 mark. Year 2014 was its Waterloo: just 44 MPs. In 2019, it was a few notches at 52. Modi decisively decimated the Congress by targeting the Gandhis more than their party.

Rahul must invent a toolkit for the next Gandhi era. He needs the skills of Arjuna and the wiles of Shakuni to bring the bunch of ideologically disparate and ambitious allies to support his cause. He has the advantage of age and social acceptability. All INDIA leaders are age-wise, socially and economically compatible. Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, Supriya Sule, Kanimozhi, Omar Abdullah, Abhishek Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal and Aadiya Thackeray are Rahul's natural allies. DMK and RJD have declared Rahul their PM choice. However, each has their own turf to protect

and expand. Rahul's advantage is that the Congress doesn't have much at stake in many states. He can afford to accept their dominance and make a tactical retreat in the short run. Sonia brought the Congress to power in 2004 by reconciling with former critic Sharad Pawar and giving plum portfolios to UPA allies. There is a lesson there.

Rahul's major political perturbation will be to blunt Modi's mettle in the Lok Sabha. Rahul isn't a forceful speaker. He must master the art of finding faults in Modi politics, Modinomics and Modiplomacy. Modi has run both state and central governments like an unchallenged monarch. His popularity prevents him from diluting his mantra. Since he has to pander to the avaricious demands of allies, he may either succumb or falter. Rahul can grab that crucial moment and can beat Modi only with substance, not style.

As the LoP, he would have to meet Modi word for word, argument by argument, with a narrative that transcends rhetoric. He will need a mainframe of expert researchers and advisors to brief him on economics, politics, government

management, defence, foreign relations and the environment. He needs spin doctors and oration to teach him how to effectively deliver counter-narratives. Is Rahul's untested ideology in sync with grandfather Nehru's? Going by his parliamentary questions and public speeches on social sectors, it seems he has inherited the Fabian socialist gene. The 'Two Indias' trope is Rahul's idea borrowed from Nehru. Modi's strength comprises mesmerising slogans, big numbers and vertiginous targets. Since both of them would be in a confrontationalist mood on a daily basis, Rahul must acquire new political and elocution skills to confront Modi on his own ground. Every Gandhi built their own new



PTI

A MUNDANE WISHLIST FOR MODI 3.0



OPINION

ANURADHA GOYAL
Author and founder of IndiTales.com
Follow her on X @anuradhagoyal

WITH the cacophony of the elections settled, the Modi-led NDA has started its third stint and second decade in power. Let me take this opportunity to ask for some mundane things that seem to have been missed in plain sight, but would give instant relief to a large section of common Indians.

Make all government websites more secure with an updated security certificate. As a small website owner, I ensure that my site is safe for my visitors even when there is no data collection or financial transactions done. GoI websites are responsible for providing first-hand, authentic information; they also collect crucial and sensitive data. Many of the websites are prone to easy hacks. It seems no one looked into it, else it is something that can be fixed in a day.

Stop official communication from Gmail or other free service providers. Today, most official communication is from personal or so-called 'official Gmail' IDs, including some from army

officers. This can be dangerous and is prone to scams. When I receive such emails, I am not sure if they are authentic. Two, the content is available to a third party in another country to be scraped and used in any fashion.

Use technology to make uploads of Form 26AS or similar documents on the income tax portal instant. The moment a company deducts TDS, it should be uploaded on the IT portal. So much productivity is lost in chasing the upload of this data every summer. It is a primary reason that delays the filing of IT returns. Even the biggest banks are guilty of last-minute uploads. I understand it is more because the authorities allow time, and we are a last-minute nation. We thrive in the chaos created. At least, put a penalty for late uploads or incentivise timely uploads so that people have a reason to act in time. While on income tax, remove double taxation on dividends; it will relieve the small tax payer.

Customer service calls must be trackable and accountable. Today, every such call takes data from customers with no trackability. We do not know who we are speaking to; they can disconnect the call or put you on hold forever. Make it mandatory to take complaints on email, so that there is traceability. Make it easy for the customers to be treated like customers and not lemons that are squeezed and then forgotten.

Strengthen the train network for short-distance travels and de-incentivise short-distance flights. This is good for the economy, as well as the ecology.

On a war footing, work on reducing

the pre- and post-flight times spent at airport, including the time spent in travelling to and from the airports. It is good to have swank airports, but if the buffer time on both sides for a 2-hour flight is 6-8 hours on average, the flights lose their utility. It is also an inconvenience for elderly and unwell people to go through so many steps at airports.

Make some simple canteen like food mandatory at airports. With so many people travelling, you cannot treat airports as luxury-only facilities for the



Some simple things that affect a large section of citizens need attention. They range from making government sites more secure and reviving libraries, to incentivising short-distance travel by train and making airports more efficient

elite. When we take pride in the fact that those wearing chappals can also fly, we must also cater to their basic needs during the time spent at airports.

I would like to see flexible fares go away, and fixed fares bringing predictability for travellers as well as airlines. At least put an upper limit to the fares for each sector. Stop convenience fees charged for work a customer ends up doing, which the airline staff once did. Do not extend this menace to the railways.

Congress. Nehru inherited a party overawed by his popular persona and Mahatma Gandhi's benediction. Indira split the Congress and created a Praetorian guard wearing dry-cleaned homespun; some of them became chief ministers and Union ministers. She wasn't eventually insecure because she was bigger than the party. Now Sonia has bequeathed it to her children.

"Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of Bharata," writes Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. The Gandhi family's discovery of India is continuity through tragedy: Rajiv's premiership was the by-product of Sanjay's death followed by his mother's. As the Bofors scandal escalated, Rajiv favourites moved to the BJP, which enticed them with cabinet berths and MP seats. Ironically, most of them were siblings of Congress leaders, and like Rahul, were to the manor born. With Sonia's tactical retreat, Rahul must keep the Congress together and turn it into a battle-ready army. Unlike the BJP whose mid-level state leadership is still learning the ropes, many Congress leaders are young or just middle-aged, while a few are only in their early sixties. A combo of Sachin Pilot, Revanth Reddy, D K Shivakumar, Gaurav Gogoi, Nana Patole, Deepender Hooda, Shashi Tharoor, Bhupesh Baghel *et al* can individually and collectively deliver electoral success in their regions.

In January 2013, Rahul told reporters in Jaipur: "[The Congress] is a funny party. It is the largest political organisation in the world, but perhaps does not have a single rule or regulation. We create new rules every two minutes and then dump them. Nobody knows the rules in the party." There is only one rule Rahul must follow: channel the lost Gandhi magic. He is just a step away from becoming the next prime minister. His transformation from Pappu to LoP became credible because of his two yaras. Gandhi 5.0 must remember that his cannot be a Congress of the Gandhis, by the Gandhis, for the Gandhis anymore. It has survived so far. But if the Congress has to thrive as well, it must become a Congress of the people.

Work on preventive wellness more than building hospitals. It may sound counter-intuitive for the pharma industry, but I think it is time we call it a wellness industry than a disease industry. It is time we incentivised preventive medicine and healthy lifestyles, so that fewer hospitals are required.

I see a lot of focus on the food processing industry, with the argument that it will enhance farmer incomes. But can we push both the Fit India movement and an increased consumption of processed food? Can we focus on local production and local consumption similar to the 'Vocal for local' initiative?

As a bibliophile, can we ask for reviving the state, city, district libraries as vibrant public places? We can also fill them with books that are relevant, that the area's populace wants in their libraries. We need to bring back the days of borrowing libraries and increase reading in the age of ubiquitous screens.

Make roads walkable. It will help reduce traffic and parking woes, especially in urban areas, if people can walk at least a 1-km radius around their homes and offices.

I want to say 'reduce corruption', but one must first acknowledge the problem. It might reduce the lure of sarkari naukri (government employment) and push entrepreneurship.

Finally, as a Bengaluru resident, may I throw a challenge that the Namma Metro's Blue Line be functioning before elections are back in 2028 and 2029? The pace at which the work is happening, it might still be a dreamy promise even then.

QUOTE CORNER



I did [go to a psychologist] for a while when I was at Barcelona, a long time ago. I was very reluctant at first. I'm someone who keeps everything bottled up. But the truth is, when I went, it did me a lot of good. I really liked it, and it helped me.

Lionel Messi, Argentinian footballer, about seeking help during his time playing for Barcelona FC (2004-21)

Mummy kehni hai 'greens khaad... Sun rahi ho na, Team India?' (Mom says eat your greens... Are you listening, Team India?)

Delhi Police, on its official X.com handle, referring to the T20 World Cup final with South Africa, a team that wears green jerseys

I've written this moment down and wished for it and dreamt it and worked so hard... Little me would just be beside herself right now.

Dua Lipa, 28-year-old British singer of Albanian origin, at her headline show in the Glastonbury festival, UK, where she voiced support for the Palestinian cause

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Mocking diversity

Ref: *Micro racism 2.0* (Jun 29). While youngsters from southern states used to migrate to the north mainly seeking office jobs, it is an irony that the current mass migration from the so-called 'heartland' is mostly for menial jobs. Lamprooning the language and culture of others is not limited to northerners. Their southern counterparts are not far behind in laughing at the language and habits of their neighbouring states. It's perhaps an inherent trait of our diversity.

A Kasu, Nemmara

Newfound love

Not many may remember that there was talk of changing the Constitution during the Emergency 50 years ago. Those indulging in this talk were Congressmen, including the then heir apparent, Sanjay Gandhi. Now we find a newfound love for the Constitution among the same people. The Constitution

is a dynamic document and has gone through more than 100 amendments. Whether these amendments should be considered as 'changing' it is nothing more than indulging in semantics.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Defining vegetarianism

I am based in Washington DC and happened to read C P Surendran's article, '*Debating empathy at the dining table*', at a public library in Visakhapatnam on a week's visit. It made my day and I shared it with friends. I liked how it took a humane approach to the question, not viewing it through the lens of caste or creed. Defining vegetarianism as that which produces the greatest pleasure with the least pain is a nice way to frame the topic.

Mohan P K, email

Sengol significance

That the Sengol, a golden sceptre symbolising monarchy, is placed in parliament is significant for the BJP, as its ultimate goal is to achieve a 'One Party, One Leader' system. It is incongruent in a demo-

cratic republic. A museum is its right place. The Sengol is also a symbol of righteousness in ruling. A Pandian king died the moment he realised his mistake of having killed an innocent Kovalan. Do we have such great personalities in the House?

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

Probe NTA

Ref: *Opposition stalls parliament to make NEET safe* (Jun 29). It is clear that the National Testing Agency has failed miserably in conducting and upholding the integrity of the prestigious national medical entrance exam. The entire system is mired in corruption and the rot runs deep. It is the duty and right of the opposition to press for a proper investigation. The government's line that the NEET discussion should follow protocols is out of sync with the gravity of the situation.

Biju C Mathew, Thonnakkal

Keep NEET

The government should not dismantle NEET. Reform its terms and conditions so that students can

appear for the exam without fear and doubt. But do not hand over the exam to state governments. Aspirants will have to face lot of inconvenience. And the standard of education will go in the drain.

Jayamani Atta, Chennai

Principal lessons

Ref: *CBI arrests 2 from Jharkhand, says origin of leak established* (Jun 29). After the NEET-UG paper leak, the CBI's probe of the likely role of a school principal and vice-principal along with an infamous gang exposes the rot in the education system. It underscores the need to impart moral lessons to schools principals in the first place.

Pallicheru V Prakash, Mumbai

Caste aside

With the leaders of two major castes in Karnataka commenting on the CM, the caste cauldron seems to be on boil again. The country has achieved stupendous progress, but is unable to unshackle itself from the clutches of a deep-rooted caste system.

R Sriramprasad, email

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