

**BJP CHURN IN UTTAR PRADESH  
YOGI & DELHI PLAY CAT & MOUSE GAME**

**EXCLUSIVE: P. CHIDAMBARAM  
THE JOB CRISIS IS REAL**

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AUGUST 4, 2024

# THE WEEK



**OLYMPICS SPECIAL**

## PARIS, HERE WE COME

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS**

**THOMAS BACH**  
IOC PRESIDENT  
Not letting our  
guard down

**MANSUKH MANDAVIYA**  
SPORTS MINISTER  
Our athletes reflect  
a fearless India

**P.T. USHA**  
IOA PRESIDENT  
Will help athletes  
tackle pressure

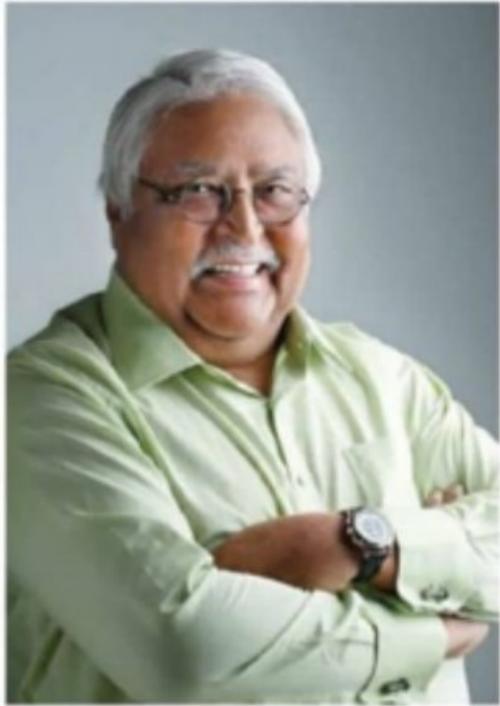
**RAFAEL NADAL**  
No better partner than  
Carlos Alcaraz

**LEON MARCHAND**  
Next Michael Phelps?

**SWAMI NATESHANANDA**  
Indian basketball player in  
the Olympics, now a monk!

Contenders  
(top, clockwise)  
Neeraj Chopra, Sreejesh,  
Chirag and Satwik,  
Vinesh Phogat





**PHYSICAL LITERACY. THOSE** two words jumped out of Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya's interview in this issue. The minister said "a large percentage of our population does not play recreational sport, let alone competitive sport". I agree with the minister; few families make fitness or sport a habit. So, the Union ministry wants to focus on making Indians physically literate.

Most of our students are forced to compromise on health and follow an endless cycle of regular classes, private tuition and coaching classes for competitive exams. Even what is marketed as 'extra-curricular' is competitive... dance, music and sports classes with quotas and points in mind. I accept that it is the crunch of resources in a populous country like ours that drives this competition.

The result is that fitness is often forced upon middle-aged Indians when they get concerned about looks or lifestyle diseases. At that point, it is not a choice, but a compulsion. Olympic medals are never born of compulsion. They are born of passion, of that fire in the belly that refuses to be put out by adversity.

As a young football enthusiast, I learned some of life's hardest lessons on the field. On some days, the team could play its heart out and yet fail. Such is life. You learn to accept that there are events beyond your control that will change your life. You accept that even when you are the best version of yourself

someone else could outplay you. Physical literacy is all this and more, and I wish the minister the very best in his endeavour.

The cover story is a composite of a curtain-raiser and 10 articles on India's medal hopefuls, put together by Chief Subeditor Anirudh Madhavan and Senior Subeditors Karthik Ravindranath and Bechu S.

We have many other big-ticket interviews in this issue:

◆ Olympic gold medallist Thomas Bach, who is now president of the International Olympic Committee, talked to Marc Ventouillac about everything from the political situation in France to the shadow that geopolitical tensions cast over the Games.

◆ P.T. Usha, head of the Indian Olympic Association, talked to Jomichan Jose, the *Malayala Manorama's* representative to Paris 2024.

◆ Tennis legend Rafael Nadal talked to Victor Lengronne and promised that he and the sensational Carlos Alcaraz were going for a medal.

Senior Correspondent Nirmal Jovial wrote the story of how a member of India's sole Olympic basketball team became a monk. N. Amarnath is now Swami Nateshananda Saraswati. Turn to Page 85 for more.

To give you a little more than sports, we track political developments across the country, and in @leisure Special Correspondent Anjuly Mathai interviews diplomat-author Vikas Swarup on his latest novel.

I kept the best interview in the issue for the last. It is a conversation between French swimmer Leon Marchand and journalist Celine Nony. He has won five world titles and broken Michael Phelps's world record. Yet, he talks about family, and how his parents shun media attention while managing his career. He says, "I call them every week and we always talk about the same things." Among the things he talks about are his younger brother's math grades. He does not seem weighed down by the medals, but he admits that they motivate him to jump into the cold water at 6am.

I wish I had that kind of clarity about life at 22!

Philip Mathai,

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## COVER STORY

# DESTINATION PARIS

The Olympics is back. Ahead of the opening ceremony, THE WEEK takes a look at the stars who are ready to shine in France. In addition, we look at the 10 Indian athletes who could win medals.

### INTERVIEWS

**Thomas Bach**  
president, International Olympic Committee

**Leon Marchand**  
French swimmer, called the next Michael Phelps

**Rafael Nadal**  
Spanish tennis player

### PLUS

“Despite sustained efforts, some athletes seek shortcuts to success”, says **Mansukh Mandaviya**, Union sports minister

“Neeraj Chopra is our prime hope,” says **P.T. Usha**, IOA president

**Ayaz Memon** on his memories of watching the Ben Johnson-Carl Lewis showdown at the 1988 Seoul Olympics

The story of **Swami Nateshananda Saraswati**, aka N. Amarnath, a former basketball player, who participated in the 1980 Moscow Olympics

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Sitharaman addresses new political realities  
 ♦ The job crisis is real, says former Union minister **P. Chidambaram**



I have always wanted to write something closely connected with my country. That is why all four of my novels are rooted deeply in the Indian milieu," says former diplomat **Vikas Swarup** as he talks about his latest novel *The Girl with the Seven Lives*

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"More seriously, America has wrestled with structural sexism. **Their inability to have a female president for all of these decades—and now their regressions on abortion laws—makes the Kamala story all the more critical.**"

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Taking Indian beats to international heights



COVER IMAGING **BINESH SREEDHARAN**

Printed at Manorama Building, K.K. Road, Kottayam - 686 001, Kerala, and M P Printers, Noida, and published from Manorama Building, K.K. Road, Kottayam - 686 001, Kerala, by **Jacob Mathew**, on behalf of the Malayala Manorama Company Private Ltd., Manorama Building, K.K. Road, Kottayam - 686 001, Kerala. Editor **Philip Mathew**, Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi - 682 036, Kerala. Place of Publication: Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi - 682036, Kerala. • Focus/Infocus features are paid marketing/PR initiatives



**Settle disputes**

How nice it would have been if India and China had settled all their disputes. Together they can create magic. It is time the two countries talked to each other and made a genuine attempt to iron out the differences ('The dragon-tiger tango', July 21).

The boundary question cannot be settled overnight. But once that is done, neither China nor India should raise it up. It should be done and dusted. India's and China's strategic goals are somewhat similar. There should be newer areas of cooperation that both countries can together work on. India and China should stop looking at each other with suspicion.

**Ranjan Kumar,**  
On email.

for cooperation across different sectors.

**Tapasya Pal,**  
On email.

We all have a few neighbours who poke their nose into our business. India also has one—China. By land area, China is one of the largest countries in the world. It has already peaked as an economic power. Surprisingly, it wants more.

I have failed to decipher the logic behind China trying to reinforce its dominance as a global superpower again and again, and enhancing its power.

China, from here on, cannot stop its decline. Soon, China may face a Soviet Union-style implosion.

**Geetika Narayanswamy,**  
On email.

in a draw. China will think twice before engaging in any misadventure with 'new India'. Narendra Modi is known to give it back in style. China paid a very heavy price for its Galwan misadventure. They know well that this is not the India of 1962.

**Govind Kishore,**  
On email.

**Need strict rules**

The Hathras tragedy is a reminder of disasters in large gatherings and raises serious questions about safety measures and crowd control. Despite repeated incidents of such nature, there are no lessons learnt ('Heap of faith', July 21).

India's large population, and the cultural and religious practices that draw huge crowds, make effective crowd management a difficult task. To thwart such tragedies, the government must enforce stringent regulations for organisers, like compulsory risk assessments, proper infrastructure, and sufficient emergency services. The organisers should get the no-objection certificate after fulfilling these criteria.

Authorities and

I agree with Lieutenant General (Retd) S.L. Narasimhan that China is somewhat ahead of India in military might, but India will bridge that gap soon. China these days is concerned about the quick modernisation of India's armed forces. If there is war between India and China at the moment, it will result

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Almost all countries accuse China of bullying and they don't trust China. This is more so after the pandemic, which many say originated in China. China has border and maritime disputes with almost all its neighbours. As long as Xi Jinping continues to be the president, I smell danger.

Having said that, the people of China desire close ties with India. They want to visit India more often. There is so much in China that we Indians want to see. Cultural and economic relations between India and China date back to ancient times. So there is a huge potential

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organisers must be held responsible for lack of safety measures. Penalties for failure to act in accordance with safety norms can ensure better compliance.

**Sanjay Chopra,  
Mohali, Punjab.**

Your report is a reminder to the Indian population about its growing blind faith in self-styled preachers. The Hathras tragedy could have been averted if proper security arrangements and crowd control mechanisms were in place. The apathy to lost lives and the alarming rise in cases of stampedes in such venues indicate the lax attitude of civic bodies entrusted with maintenance of law and order.

I feel the only reason for the blind faith of people in the growing herd of preachers is the loss of faith in the government and the system.

**Tanmay Mehta,  
On email.**

### Roy's problems

Your article on Arundhati Roy was interesting ('The passion of the scribe', July 21). Even though she is a great writer, I don't like Roy. She has the right to criticise any action of the government, but she has no business to use that right to disseminate lies about India and thereby give an avoidable benefit to an enemy nation. Roy is selective in her so-called fight for human rights. And this is totally unacceptable.

**Radhika Iyer,  
On email.**

I have no problems in Roy being a Narendra Modi hater, Amit Shah hater or a Hindu hater, but she cannot be an India hater. India is her motherland and she should love India.

Modern India is one of the most diverse countries in the world. Like it or not, India has transformed big time in the last decade. And she will soon be the third largest economy in the world.

**Sriparna Batra,  
On email.**

No doubt, Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, was a noteworthy one. It will continue to be a popular one for a long time to come. I would rather ascribe its success to the adage that everyone has a book inside them. Every author puts his heart and soul on the first work. It's usually based on one's own life experiences. The gestational period is a considerable one. After the first one is a success, the challenge lies in the subsequent work.

The sad fact is that in order to stay in the news, Roy began to take loonier stand on the Narmada project, the Kashmir issue, the trial of Afzal Guru and the Maoist insurgency.

How I wish, Roy—like many of her fans including Anjuly Mathai had strongly wished for—had simply basked in her first novel's laurels and stopped making political comments in order to stay in the limelight.

**Jothindra P.L.,  
On email.**

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AFP

A paid nurse is a far better option than to marry for being looked after in old age. The nurse will do it as a paid job, whereas a wife will make the old man feel eternally guilty. Considering the super high rate of divorces today, the biggest idiots are the poor parents who spend through their noses for the marriage.

**Ram Gopal Varma,**  
filmmaker

Dear Democrats of USA. If you ask anyone who has a reasonable level of intelligence and respectable IQ to give you the name of three [people] who can defeat Trump undoubtedly. Those three names will be: 1) Michelle Obama. 2) Michelle Obama. 3) Michelle Obama.

**Javed Akhtar,**  
lyricist, on X

For a police officer, there is only black and white. Either someone has committed an offence or not. So decision making was easy. But politics was more about compromise. Even if someone slanders you, you can't react. I would wonder if I should continue in politics. Every day there would be a dilemma.

**K. Annamalai,**  
BJP leader and former IPS officer

Everyone knows who won the Lok Sabha election. But we have seen the arrogance of the Congress. And the acts of Rahul Gandhi in Parliament. People don't get so much arrogance even after winning two-thirds of seats.

**Amit Shah,**  
Union minister



AFP

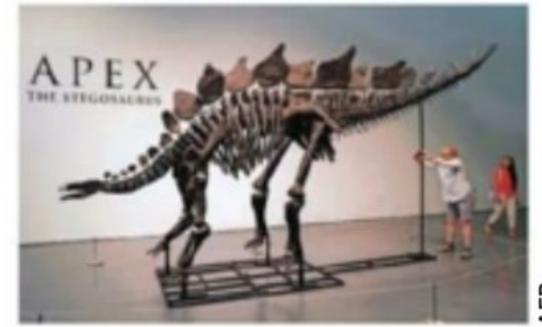
At my age it is not about heartbreaks any more. I invest in a relationship: love, care, energy. And because everyone is involved, I am hugely protected. If anything becomes toxic in that environment, I walk away faster than you can take my name and I don't miss it. My world is built around trust.

**Sushmita Sen,**  
actor

**WORD PLAY**

Once a vulgar slang for unprotected sex, **rawdogg** is a trending word now, but with an entirely different meaning. It is a self-imposed challenge where you endure an entire flight without entertainment or distraction—no music, screen, books, food, water and sleep.

**MILESTONES**



AFP

**JURASSIC STAR**

The skeleton of a plant-eating stegosaurus nicknamed Apex, 11ft tall and 27ft long from nose to tail, fetched \$44.6m at a Sotheby's auction in New York City, the highest ever for a fossil.



SHUTTERSTOCK

**DARK OXYGEN**

Scientists have discovered that huge quantities of oxygen are being produced in the deep ocean, apparently by lumps of metal on the seafloor. About half the oxygen we breathe comes from the ocean, but it was thought to be made entirely by the photosynthesising of marine plants.



**AHEAD OF THE TIME**

Prabhas's *Kalki 2898 AD*, directed by Nag Ashwin, has become the highest-grossing foreign film in North America this year, surpassing *Demon Slayer* and *Godzilla Minus One*. It has grossed \$18.3 million and is second on the list of highest-grossing Indian films ever in North America, after *Baahubali 2*.



## Guns for Lakshadweep

Remember the guns of Navarone that threatened all the Allied shipping that passed through a narrow strait, in the Alistaire Maclean novel and film? It needed a team of the toughest British, Greek and American commandos to sneak in and destroy the guns and secure the seas. Maybe fiction, but it showed us the kind of threat that a force in control of a choke point can project in sea warfare.

A choke point is to sea warfare (there are choke points on terra firma martia, too) what a high ground is to land warfare. Military Machiavellis say, you need eight-to-twenty times the force to dislodge an enemy sitting on high ground with a machine-gun dog, a pair of binoculars and a good dog.

More, I would say. Look at Siachen. With all their snow-trained Northern Light Infantrymen and Frontiersmen, the Pakistan generals haven't dislodged about a brigade of our boys sitting like frozen colossuses on the Saltoro heights for the last 40 years. For two reasons. One, our boys are tougher and braver, as we would like to believe. Two, our commanders are smarter. They knew way back in 1984 that the only way to hold Siachen was to occupy the higher peaks.

Flip the coin, and you get Kargil. It took more than two infantry divisions, several score batteries of Bofors guns spewing thousands of 155-mm shells, and several squadrons of MiGs, Mirages and Mi-17s to evict a few hundred unwashed insurgents and uniformless Pakistani troops sitting in a few sangars of rubble atop the Kargil, Dras and Batalik heights, exactly a quarter century ago. That wasn't 1:8 or even 1:20.

Not much different is a choke point in sea warfare. With a few long-range guns and missile batteries, anyone sitting at a choke point can threaten all the

shipping that falls within his firing range. And believe me, the seas around us are dotted with such Navarones. None with the kind of craggy hills for a Captain Mallory to climb (thank God!), but there are scores of chapati-flat islets that offer ideal gun positions and pirate hideouts.

Many of the people-less islands of Lakshadweep and the Maldives could turn into mini Navarones if somebody holds them with force. Our bombers and destroyers may take them out, but they can still bring global commerce to a standstill for a few days.

Exaggerated? No, if you get an idea of the kind of commercial shipping that passes through just one choke point that lies amidst our sovereign territories. All the ships carrying all the cargo and crude that are being traded between Europe, Africa and the Middle-East on the one side and South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Far East on the other, pass between two India-owned islands. I am talking of the 200-km wide Nine Degree Channel that separates our Kalpeni and Suheli Par from our Minicoy and through which 12 ships pass every minute.



The Nine Degree Channel is one of the nine choke points spotted by maritime strategists in the Indian Ocean, the others being the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Horn of Africa, the Malacca Strait, the Lombok Strait, the Sunda Strait, the Six Degree Channel, and the Cape of Good Hope.

We can't take chances. Mohamed Muizzu may have kicked out about a hundred of our boys from the Maldives. But we are positioning more of them just 50 miles off. Last week the government gave the go-ahead to build a military airbase in Minicoy and to extend the airfield on Agatti.



## JUMBO GIFT

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge recently sought treatment for knee and joint pain at a famed ayurveda centre in Kerala. As he was being discharged after the 14-day treatment, the centre gifted him a *nettipattam*—an ornamental covering for temple elephants in Kerala. A distinctly traditional gift, no doubt. Perhaps, it was also fitting, given that Kharge has the ‘elephantine’ task of steering the grand old party.

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### RATHEE AT RALLIES?

Youtuber Dhruv Rathee, who ran a social media campaign during the Lok Sabha elections urging people to vote wisely, seems to have taken a leaf out of the political campaigns he observed so closely. In a recent vlog, he said he was open to joining politics. “I might explore that option sometime; even if it is at 50-60 years of age,” said the 29-year-old, who has more than three crore subscribers on YouTube. “I don’t want to say never because if I do join politics, people will say he always said he wants to be away from politics.” Rathee’s videos criticising the government get a bigger audience than the content put out by most opposition leaders. Perhaps, he should just take the plunge already.

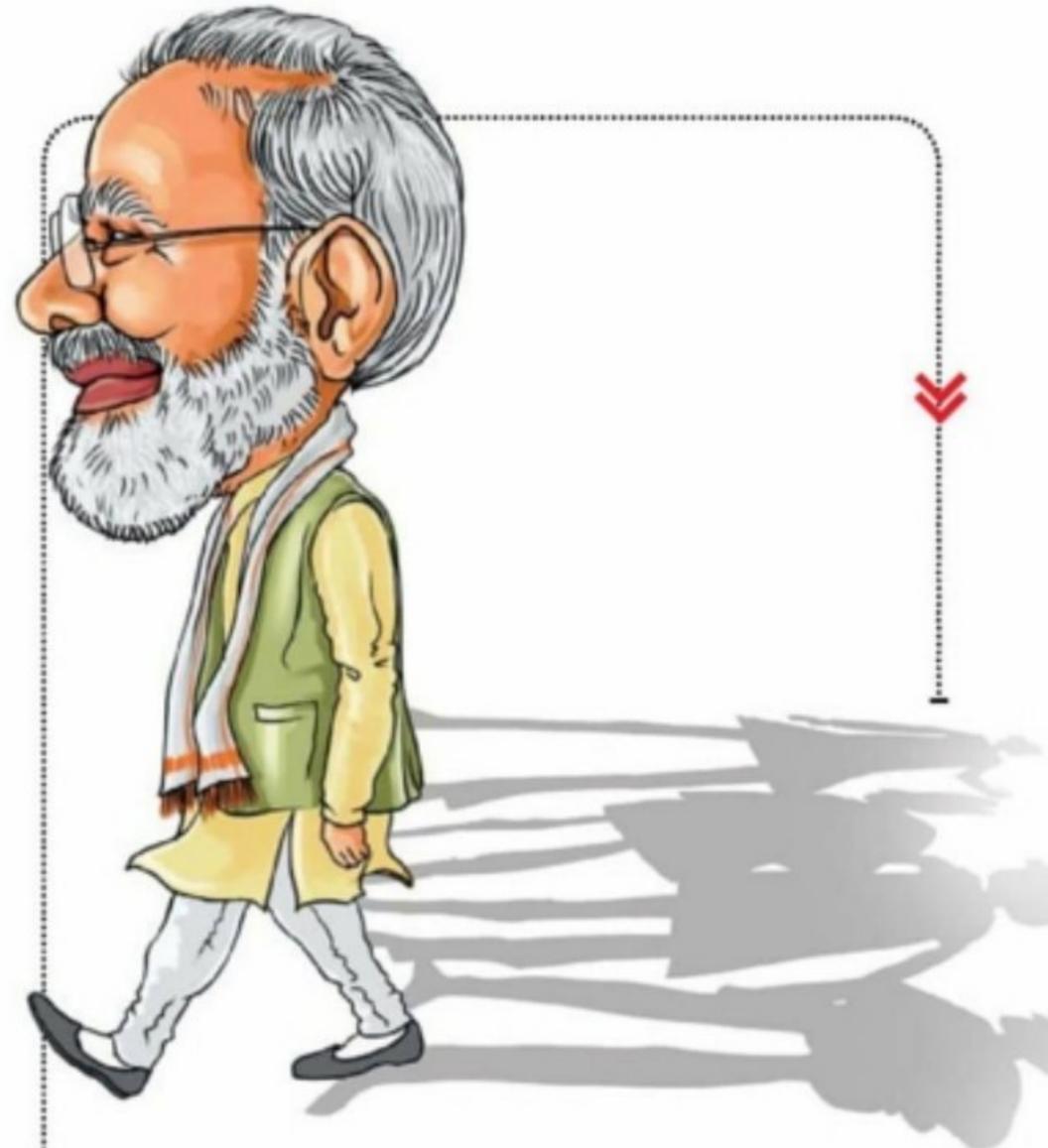
ILLUSTRATIONS JOB P.K.

## KOLKATA CONUNDRUM

Suvendu Adhikari, the leader of the opposition in West Bengal, recently delivered a strong anti-Muslim speech, and even rejected Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas'. But, the state BJP leadership swiftly distanced itself from Adhikari's remarks. For a party that prides itself on its clear messaging, West Bengal seems to be presenting a conundrum.

## MORAL OF THE STORY

Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat was a backbencher in school, barely managing to pass every exam. But, his sister was a topper, always scoring 99 per cent or thereabouts. Once, his sister dropped to 95. But, despite the drop in spirits, the family distributed sweets in the neighbourhood—it just happened that in that one instance, the young backbencher scored 70. Shekhawat recounted this at a recent meeting. Got the point? The Congress is the political backbencher, celebrating an election 'victory' after winning only 99 seats.



## REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The BJP is riding high on symbolism in Parliament, ensuring that its nationwide representation is highlighted. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears in Parliament, he is often accompanied by four ministers: Kiren Rijiju, Arjun Meghwal, L. Murugan and Jitendra Singh. The lineup is well thought out, with each minister representing a different region. Rijiju is from the northeast, Meghwal is from Rajasthan, Murugan is from Tamil Nadu and Singh is from J&K. The NDA is clearly on a mission to ensure that regional diversity shines through.

## TURNING PINK

After a resounding defeat in the Lok Sabha elections, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar has been trying desperately for an image makeover, both for himself and for his NCP. Towards that end, he even hired a political strategy and communication company. The firm's boss is said to have told Pawar to add a dash of pink to his wardrobe. As a result, Pawar has started wearing pink jackets. A birdie tells us that Pawar has stitched nearly a dozen pink jackets for his daily use.



# The Ugly Indian in Nepal

**N**arendra Modi is faced in Nepal with a failure of policy as Kathmandu looks increasingly to China and turns more and more resentful of India. Indeed, the political mood in Nepal is such that it is the current state of India-Nepal relations that is the principal reason behind Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli's return to office as prime minister in coalition with a party that had hitherto been regarded as our most reliable friend, the Nepali Congress led by the veteran Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Reports from Kathmandu indicate that this churning in Nepal is principally on account of the supine way in which Oli's immediate predecessor, Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', had surrendered to the virtually imperial demands made by the Modi government on Prachanda's official visit to Delhi in June 2023. On that visit, Prachanda eschewed the opportunity to pursue Nepal's principal concerns with Modi saying that it would have "ruin(ed) the atmosphere". His opponents, both within the alliance he had forged to become PM and among the commentariat and opposition in parliament, deplored such appeasement of a bullying 'big brother'.

Among the fierce reactions, the sharpest retort came from a former minister who described Prachanda and his cohort as *lampasabadis*—spineless cowards, crawling when they were only asked to bend! Others said India had reduced Nepal's sovereignty to the "third stratum", below even the "provincial establishments" in India. Indeed, Modi's hauteur and ill-treatment of Nepalese leaders, going back to the Modi sarkar's economic boycott of Nepal in 2015 because they had dared proclaim a constitution for Nepal without incorporating the amendments Delhi had suggested, has led even to our staunchest friend in that country, the Nepali Congress, joining in the chorus against Prachanda's pusillanimous failure to advance Nepal's interests against an India that seems determined to unilat-

erally and even whimsically trample on them. Finally, the Nepalese are not unaware of the BJP desire to see the Republic of Nepal revert to a monarchy that had proclaimed a Hindu Rashtra in Nepal and has had intimate ancestral links with Yogi Adityanath's ashram in Gorakhpur. Muddying the waters further is the *sangh parivar's* angry rejection of Oli's assertion that the Ayodhya of Lord Ram lies in Nepal and not India!

Principal among Nepal's current grievances is the Modi government's refusal to cooperate with Nepal in operationalising their Chinese-built international airports at Bhairahawa and Pokhara on the sole ground that China had helped build them. There is also burgeoning anger at India refusing to buy power from Chinese-assisted hydroelectric plants, despite China winning the contracts in international bidding.

"Hypocrisy" is what Nepalese commentators describe these prohibitions as, given the massive and growing imports and investments that India makes from China to keep its own economy chugging. There is also the simmering issue of whether the Lipulk-Limpiyadhura-Kalapani triangle belongs to India or Nepal. Moreover, the Modi government refuses to release the report of the joint India-Nepal Eminent Persons Group that reviewed the gamut of India-Nepal relations at the behest of both governments, only because the constructive recommendations made by the group in the common interest of the two countries are not in accord with the Modi government's colonial approach to Nepal. Nepal also resents India forcing into cold storage the multilateral SAARC initiative for bilateral Indo-Pak reasons. That is a formidable agenda which requires attention at the highest level, and not, as Prachanda had done, to be kept off the table for New Delhi to feel 'comfortable' as he put it with Kathmandu.

It was the image of the "Ugly American" that fundamentally caused the undoing of the US in Vietnam. We should never forget that Nepali sovereignty deserves respect as it occupies the central sector of the Himalayan chain that separates both countries from China.

Aiyar is a former Union minister and social commentator.



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■ **APERITIF** ■  
THE BIG PICTURE

## **BALANCING ACT**

A homeless child takes a break from selling balloons near the Shivaji stadium metro station in New Delhi. He seems to be enjoying his brief performance as an amateur gymnast even as the world prepares for Paris Olympics.

PHOTO BY RAHUL R. PATTOM

# Money matters

Chief Minister Shinde relies on welfare schemes for women and youth as Maharashtra steps into election season

BY DNYANESH JATHAR

**PRAMILA PAJVE EAGERLY** awaits ₹3,000 that she hopes to receive from the Maharashtra government by the end of August. The 53-year-old, who works as housekeeping staff at a private company, is one of the beneficiaries of Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana that aims to pay ₹1,500 per month to eligible women between 21 and 65, whose annual family income is below ₹2.5 lakh.

"Our corporator told my neighbour about the scheme as I was at work, and she asked me to apply," said Pajve. "But I worry that the scheme will be stopped if there is a change in government. So I will vote for this government to make sure the scheme continues."

Nisha Naresh Patole from Vasai applied for the scheme after one of her relatives told her about it. Patole, 35, said her experiences in the past with such schemes were not so good, but she hoped this one would work. She, too, wants the Shinde government to continue.

According to an official, around 46 lakh women have enrolled in the scheme, and the government has so far sanctioned ₹46,000 crore. A similar scheme was launched in Madhya Pradesh when Shivraj Singh Chouhan was chief minister, and it

benefited the BJP immensely in last year's assembly polls. "We wanted a similar scheme ahead of the 2019 assembly elections and had readied a plan. But our central leadership was talking about the [freebie] culture, so we did not announce it," said a Maharashtra BJP leader.

Shinde has also launched the Mukhyamantri Yuva Karya Prashikshan Yojana, known popularly as the 'Ladka Bhau (dear brother)' scheme, which provides apprenticeship allowance to the unemployed. Under the scheme, those who passed class 12 are eligible for ₹6,000 per month for apprenticeship, diploma hold-



## WINNING FORMULA

Women tie rakhi to Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde after he announced the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana

ers could get ₹8,000 and degree holders ₹10,000. The government has earmarked Rs 5,500 crore per year for the scheme, which was announced by Shinde on July 17.

Mahesh Tapase, chief spokesperson for the Sharad Pawar faction of the Nationalist Congress Party, said the scheme showed that the rulers remembered their “brothers and sisters” only at the time of elections. “They have been in power for more than two years now. Why didn’t they announce it earlier? Also, more important, they should explain how they are going to raise money for this,” said

Tapase. The overall debt burden of the state, he said, was around ₹8 lakh crore. “What is the government’s economic plan? We have been asking for a white paper on the Maharashtra economy.”

Maharashtra Congress general secretary Sachin Sawant said the government announced the two schemes only because it realised that it was going to lose the assembly elections. “There is no economic planning, these are politically motivated schemes. People have been suffering under this government. There is huge unemployment, farmers are facing big problems. The government will wind up this scheme if they return to power,” said Sawant.

Madhav Bhandari, vice president of the Maharashtra BJP, said the opposition tended to criticise every good decision by the government. “The schemes are getting a good response. There is detailed planning behind them. In fact, Congress legislators and district presidents are putting up hoardings about these schemes in their names,” said Bhandari. He alleged that Congress leaders were getting the forms filled from needy women, but instead of submitting those to concerned authorities, they were keeping the forms with them. “The Congress will then claim that the women are not getting any money and the media will highlight that. This is typical Congress strategy,” he said.

Bhandari said the Ladki Bahin scheme

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**There is no economic planning, these are politically motivated schemes. People have been suffering under this government.**

**—Sachin Sawant,  
Maharashtra Congress  
general secretary**

would take at least a year to reach every beneficiary because of the limitations of the system. “The servers crashed when the number of registrations crossed 46 lakh, such problems will have to be resolved,” he said.

Political analyst Nitin Birmal said the schemes could help those who were implementing it at the ground level. “Leaders of the Congress, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray) and the NCP (Sharad Pawar) are also getting the forms filled by women. For the beneficiaries, it is all about who are helping them and not about the government that introduced the scheme,” he said. “Whoever is helping them will reap the benefits. But it is true that such schemes have worked for the Congress in Karnataka and for the BJP in Madhya Pradesh.” ●



VIDYADHAR RANE

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# CAUGHT IN THE QUOTA

Siddaramaiah finds himself on the back foot after being forced to put the job reservation bill on hold

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

**CHIEF MINISTER SIDDARAMAIAH** is known for his affinity towards Kannada nela (land), jala (water) and bhashe (language) since the time he served as the first chairman of the Kannada Kavalu Samiti (Kannada watch committee) in the mid-1980s to supervise the implementation of Kannada as Karnataka's official language.

Four decades later, he finds himself in a mess after pushing for a long pending bill on job quota for Kannadigas in the private sector. The bill mandates job quota for locals—50 per cent reservation in administrative posts, 75 per cent for non-administrative posts and 100 per cent for grade C and D jobs. Following a pushback from the industries, however, Siddaramaiah was forced to put the bill on hold. It was not tabled in the assembly, as the government cited the need for “wider consultations”.

During his first stint as chief minister (2013-2018), Siddaramaiah had made Kannada a compulsory subject in schools and colleges. He tackled the BJP's nationalism card and the JD(S)'s regionalism card by



espousing the Kannada identity. He proposed a Kannada flag for the state and fought against what he felt was the Centre's “imposition” of Hindi. He had serious reservations about the metro train network in Bengaluru using Hindi on signboards, too.

But the changing face of Bengaluru as a global city that attracts billions of dollars in investment, and its reputation as a melting pot of diverse cultures, do not go well with the “Kannada first” pitch. Karnataka is home to people speaking several languages owing to the linguistic reorganisation of states and also because of migration for jobs and education.

The National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) said it was “disappointed” and “deeply concerned” about the bill. Several leaders of the tech world, too, expressed their concern. Said Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, executive chairperson of Biocon, “As a tech hub, we need skilled talent... There must be caveats that exempt highly skilled recruitment from this policy.” Mohandas Pai, former chief financial officer of Infosys, said the bill was “discriminatory, regressive and against the Constitution”.

Those who are opposed to the bill argue that it goes against Dr B.R.



**NO COMPROMISE**  
Members of the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike protest in Bengaluru against industry leaders for opposing the job reservation bill

Ambedkar's "common citizenship" principle established by the Constitution under Article 14 (right to equality), Articles 15 and 16 (prohibition of discrimination), Article 19 (freedom to practise any profession) and Article 21 (right to livelihood). But the same clauses also allow for affirmative action in favour of socially and educationally backward classes.

Amid speculation over the new bill hurting Brand Bengaluru, Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, who also serves as the Bengaluru development minister, said, "No investor needs to worry. If Bengaluru's pop-

ulation has reached 1.4 crore today, it is because we have welcomed outsiders from across the world. We will discuss the bill with all stakeholders and look at how and where to create opportunities for Kannadigas."

The sudden U-turn drew flak from pro-Kannada outfits and opposition parties. The BJP-JD(S) alliance, which is trying to corner the Siddaramaiah government over the Valmiki corporation scam (alleged embezzlement of ₹187 crore), Mysore Urban Development Authority's land compensation scam (involving allotment of 14 sites to the chief minister's wife, Parvathi) and the diversion of SC/

ST funds to the government's poll guarantee schemes, has found a new whip to flog the government. "The Congress government not tabling the historic bill has once again proven that the anti-Karnataka lobby opposed to Kannada pride and ethos has triumphed," said state BJP president B.Y. Vijayendra. He said the Congress high command had tied the hands of the chief minister to avoid a rift with its INDIA bloc allies. "We dare Siddaramaiah to table the bill in the current assembly session or face the wrath of the people. The government is playing with the lives of Kannadigas and has insulted them," said Vijayendra.

In Bengaluru, which attracts expats besides jobseekers from across the country, the growing hostility towards outsiders is worrying. The "Hindi-wala" taunts on the streets and also on social media and the concerns of Kannada activists about their language losing its primacy speak volumes about the fear of alienation felt by the local people. The demand for job quotas is not just a question of political compulsion, but also a matter of social and economic inclusion.

Several Kannadiga netizens have taken to social media to vent their anguish. "It is not merit, but nepotism at play in the IT sector. Most senior managers from north India or other states hire people from their home states. An unwritten policy is to keep local people away for fear of unionism, too. Some HR managers prefer outsiders as they clock in more hours at work," said a local techie.

The Karnataka Rakshana Vedike led by T.A. Narayana Gowda criticised the government for stalling the bill. "It is a betrayal. The corporate lobby has blackmailed the government which was elected by crores of Kannadigas," he said. "We will launch a statewide protest if the bill is not cleared in the next cabinet meeting." ●

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# Monk in a muddle

With the BJP facing a churn in Uttar Pradesh, **Yogi Adityanath** finds himself in a vulnerable position

BY PUJA AWASTHI

SALIL BERA

**UTTAR PRADESH CHIEF MINISTER** Yogi Adityanath's fortunes are swaying even more than the state's erratic monsoon. On July 22, the Supreme Court stayed his government's order that mandated shop-owners to display names outside shops on the Kanwar Yatra route.

This was strike three, and it hurt where it should—the unapologetically staunch hindutva stance of Yogi. Strike two had happened on July 17, when Yogi had to assure residents of Lucknow's Pantnagar and Indraprastha colonies that their homes would not be razed, and that civic authorities had erred in putting red marks on their houses, which meant that they stood on a flood plain. Barely a month earlier, multi-storey houses on a 24.5 acre plot were razed despite sustained protests. The structures had stood for decades on a flood plain. Strike one had happened on July 16, when an order that made digital attendance of school teachers mandatory was withdrawn after statewide protests.

Yogi no longer seems immovable now. Snapping at his heels is Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya, who met BJP president J.P. Nadda twice in 24 hours earlier this month. Maurya, a popular leader belonging to the Other Backward Classes, considers himself a natural leader in a state that has a significant OBC population.

It helped his case that alliance partner Apna Dal(K)'s Anupriya Patel (another OBC leader) wrote to Yogi asking why was it that posts in the reserved categories were not going to candidates and they were instead being rejected for being "unsuitable". On July 22, Maurya flagged the issue, albeit regarding outsourced jobs. In a letter to the appointments and personnel division, he said he had sought an

answer in the assembly as well, but had got no response.

Is the state BJP on the brink of a churn? Academic Prashant Trivedi said Adityanath still enjoyed the protection of the RSS, which now appears more focused on cutting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah to size. But if that tussle gets too rough, Adityanath might find himself in a corner. "For the RSS, political power does not matter. It is the organisation that matters," said a senior pracharak from Ayodhya.

The Sangh's vocal disapproval of

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## Adityanath still enjoys the protection of the RSS, which now appears more focused on cutting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah to size.

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the behaviour of BJP leaders has the party worried about the erosion of all the support it had built in the past few decades. Worse, the party could find itself split.

The RSS worry is more rooted—why did the party not do well despite the Kashi Vishwanath corridor in Varanasi and the building of the new Ram Temple in Ayodhya. And, what has emboldened leaders to openly voice complaints to Yogi? Union Minister Anupriya Patel, for instance, wrote two letters on issues that could

have been dealt with more quietly.

BJP leaders themselves had flagged the issue regarding digital attendance of teachers. "To be successful in 2027, our government will have to withdraw this [order regarding] digital attendance," wrote party MLA Devendra Pratap Singh. "If the government accepts our suggestions, then the BJP will form the government in 2027."

The attendance issue bought the government to its knees. Rajendra Prasad Mishra, vice president of the Madhyamik Shikshak Sangh, a teachers' body with around 52,000 members, said. "Teachers are natural allies of the BJP. Despite all our problems, we have stood with the party. Had the decision not been withdrawn, it would have been seen as open humiliation."

This is the same body, among others, that had lauded the state government for compensating the families of teachers who had lost their lives while on election duty in the local body polls during the pandemic. The government also compensated those who died much later because of Covid-related symptoms.

Yogi seems to be in a weakened position. "Yogi ji has lost the moral right to rule after the result," said a former MLA. "He might be pitching his brand of hindutva aggressively, but without party support he would not be able to pull it off."

Said Sudhir Panwar, Samajwadi Party: "If push comes to shove, and Yogi has to leave, it will be like the leaving of [former chief minister] Kalyan Singh. It will not be pleasant." Singh was removed by the BJP during his second tenure as chief minister. He quit and floated his own party a year later.

Yogi, however, is no pushover. He has already started making preparations for the bypolls in 10 assembly seats. The poll results would be crucial, because failure could well be the deluge that could sweep Yogi away. ●

**GUEST COLUMN**



# Saffron storm

## Dissension in UP has its roots in Delhi

BY SHARAT PRADHAN/Lucknow

**THE BJP IS A** divided house in Uttar Pradesh. The war within the party was out in the open earlier this month, when Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya, an influential OBC leader, spoke up against Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. His action reflected his antipathy to Yogi, whom he apparently wants deposed.

Maurya has the support of the party's Brahmin lobby under Brajesh Pathak, the other deputy chief minister. Their common grudge against Yogi is that the chief minister does not look beyond himself and his Thakur community.

If voices against Yogi are getting louder, it could not be happening without Delhi's blessings. But what turned the BJP's top brass against Yogi, whom it had anointed as chief minister in 2017?

Yogi was neither Narendra Modi's choice in the first place, nor could his success stories about "transforming" UP impress the prime minister. Union Home Minister Amit Shah had pushed Yogi's name in 2017 simply as a compromise candidate in place of Modi's choice, Manoj Sinha, against whom the powerful RSS leader Krishna Gopal

had strong reservations. And it was widely believed that both Modi and Shah had no plans to give Yogi a long stint.

However, backed by the massive following of his 'Nath' congregation, Yogi reinforced himself. He played the aggressive hindutva card in which his bulldozer policy came in handy. He retained power in the 2022 assembly polls, emerging as the only chief minister in decades to get a second consecutive term in Uttar Pradesh.

Maurya believed that he had the rightful claim to the top post in 2017, as he had led the BJP to victory as state party president. But in 2022, he even lost his own seat, for which his supporters blamed Yogi. However, Maurya was made deputy chief minister again, despite Yogi's opposition, largely because the BJP was desperate to woo the OBCs. But Maurya's frustration rose as Yogi entrenched himself even more deeply in Lucknow. That was disturbing for Modi and Shah, too, as they were against the idea of strong chief ministers, especially in a crucial state like Uttar Pradesh.

Not that Delhi did not try to cut

Yogi down to size. Modi's blue-eyed bureaucrat from Gujarat, A.K. Sharma, was made to take voluntary retirement from the IAS and was sent to Lucknow. Speculation was rife that Sharma would build a parallel power centre, but Yogi ensured that Sharma did not get anything beyond a minister's slot in his cabinet.

Delhi's next big move was the direct appointment of a chief secretary for Uttar Pradesh. Yet another Modi favourite, Durga Shanker Mishra, was handpicked for the job on the day of his superannuation. Initially appointed for a year, Mishra was granted a full year's extension, which went against All India Service Rules. The idea was to keep watch on Yogi. When this move also failed to rein in the chief



minister, Mishra's service came to an end.

Realising that bureaucrats were unable to tame Yogi, Delhi entrusted the task to the political class, which began its campaign by holding him responsible for the BJP's disappointing performance in the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP, which had bagged 62 of 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh in 2019, managed only 33 seats this time.

What started as a murmur, soon grew into a full-throated tirade against Yogi at the BJP's state executive meeting in early July. The party's national president J.P. Nadda flew down to Lucknow to chair the session. While care was taken to ensure that the deliberations were kept

Maurya  
may have  
his personal  
reasons to  
have Yogi out  
of the way. But  
Shah sees him  
as the biggest  
challenge in the  
race to succeed  
Modi, whenever  
that may  
happen.

secret, the message that came out of the meeting was that all was not well within the party. Insiders confessed that a sharp divide between anti-Yogi and pro-Yogi factions was quite visible.

Maurya's supporters spread the word that he would soon replace Yogi, who would be shunted to Delhi. But then came the anti-climax. A decision was taken at the highest level to defer any drastic step until the conclusion of the forthcoming byelections to ten assembly seats in the state. Since the BJP held only three of those seats—the Samajwadi Party had five and the BJP's allies two—the bypolls might really not be that consequential. Yet, Yogi's continuance may be linked with the results. Another poor show after the Lok Sabha debacle could be used by the anti-Yogi lobby to ease him out.

The opposition INDIA bloc won 43 Lok Sabha seats in UP by playing the backward and dalit card, so the BJP cannot afford to lag behind. And if the change of guard in Lucknow does not happen now, it may be too late. Surely, the saffron party would not want to risk easing Yogi out close to 2027 when Uttar Pradesh votes again.

Maurya may have his personal reasons to have Yogi out of the way. But Shah sees him as the biggest challenge in the race to succeed Modi, whenever that may happen. After all, Yogi is no less ambitious; in addition to being a hindutva icon, the mantle of being the chief minister of India's most populous state gives him an added advantage in the succession race.

**Sharat Pradhan** is an independent journalist and author of *Yogi Adityanath: Religion, Politics and Power—The Untold Story*.



**MISSION IMPOSSIBLE**  
Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya

PAWAN KUMAR

# Politically correct

Made by political compulsions, Nirmala Sitharaman's budget is meant for political outcomes

BY PRATUL SHARMA

**A LOT HAS CHANGED** in a few months, and it was clearly evident in the Modi 3.0 government's first budget.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented an interim budget on February 1 against the backdrop of the confidence that the BJP-led government would return to power with a larger majority, and her speech dwelled on the achievements of the BJP's decade-long rule.

On July 23, Sitharaman's speech presenting the full budget was just 30 minutes longer than the previous one, and conveyed a succinct message reflecting the new political landscape.

With an apparent hint of course correction, the focus shifted to job creation, putting more money in the pockets of the middle class, and giving the rural economy a boost, signalling that the government was sensitive to their distress. According to a survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, unemployment rate in India rose sharply to 9.2 per cent in June 2024 from 7 per cent in May. The budget's job pitch may provide relief to the youth and the middle class.

The political intent of the budget outweighed the big-ticket reforms the government had promised before the 2024 polls. But what marks the

continuity from the interim budget is the promised fiscal consolidation—with the targeted fiscal deficit going down to 4.9 per cent of the GDP from the 5.1 per cent set in February—and the infrastructure push. Also, the finance minister did not quote any poet, just like the interim budget, and kept her speech short.

What stood out was the prominence of new realities. The government paid the political MSP (minimum support price) to its two most important allies—Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party—as the finance minister announced budgetary allocations and a promise to get more from financial institutions. Together these parties provide the support of 28 MPs in the Lok Sabha and they seem to have exacted a cost as they wanted more than just plum cabinet berths.

Naidu with his 16 MPs is crucial for the NDA government's survival and he has reasons to feel satisfied now that his dream capital, Amaravati, on the banks of the Krishna, will see the light of the day with Sitharaman promising ₹15,000 crore and more funds later, apart from a commitment on the Polavaram irrigation project, which aims to irrigate 4.36 lakh acres



## KEEPING THEM CLOSE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar

and generate 960 MW power. "It is an emotional issue for Andhra Pradesh as we were working without a capital in the last five years," said TDP leader and Civil Aviation Minister K. Ram Mohan Naidu. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said we will take care of you. People see what has been promised before polls have been delivered."

With Naidu, the BJP may look at a stable partnership ahead, but with Nitish, it has a chequered past. In an apparent poll pitch, Sitharaman announced ₹26,000 crore worth of road projects while promising more hospitals, airports, and sports complexes apart from developing an industrial node and religious sites in Gaya and a 2,400MW power project at a cost of ₹21,400 crore. She also announced financial support of ₹11,500 crore for flood control measures in the state. For the politicised state,



PTI

however, the announcements may not mean much. "These are routine announcements. What's so special about these? We want special status. Nitish Kumar has discarded the special status demand," said RJD leader Manoj Jha.

The allies in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh might have got enough, but the poll-bound Maharashtra and Haryana failed to find any mention in the budget, kicking up a political storm. Former Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan said the budget was only about Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. "And that is why Maharashtra has suffered. There is nothing new for Maharashtra. All that we got was continuation of existing schemes like funding for highways and metro," said the Congress leader.

Sitharaman, however, said in the Rajya Sabha a day after the budget that all states were not necessarily mentioned in the budget. "PM Modi

has already approved VadHAVAN port in Maharashtra at a cost of ₹76,000 crore," she said.

The BJP might have raised a saleable poll pitch for the assembly elections, but the government would have to deliver on its other biggest focus of this budget—jobs and agriculture—to get any traction in Haryana and Maharashtra. In fact, the subtle change in the

***What marks the continuity from the interim budget is the promised fiscal consolidation and the infrastructure push.***

government's theme comes with visible emphasis on the middle class, an opinionated section of society that had largely supported the party and hailed Modi. This aspirational class had felt the pinch of inflation and unemployment, and wanted more in the pockets to spend and to save.

The budget made mobile phones and gold cheaper, two things the middle class spend a lot of money on. Wooing them makes political sense, considering their growing size. The government claims to have added 25 crore to the category in the past 10 years. The BJP clearly suffered from the strong undercurrent during the polls generated by a lack of employment opportunities. The series of question paper leaks has only exacerbated the situation. And, as the polls results indicated, people needed more than just guarantees.

The finance minister spent a significant part of her budget speech on job creation. She labelled it as the prime minister's package of five schemes and initiatives. The package aims to facilitate employment, skilling, and other opportunities for 4.1 crore youth over a five-year period with a central outlay of ₹2 lakh crore.

An innovative scheme announced was of internship opportunities in 500 top companies to one crore youth in five years. The interns will get an allowance of ₹5,000 per month, along with a one-time assistance of ₹6,000. The Congress pointed out that the scheme was lifted from its manifesto.

"They should have seen full budget," senior BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad retorted. "It is a budget for the country's progress."

It was also a budget where the chorus to restructure the income tax slabs had been the loudest. The government gave in to the demand, announcing some tax relief for the salaried as the middle class that have been impacted by the price rise. The finance minister proposed

to increase the standard deduction for salaried employees from ₹50,000 to ₹75,000. Also, the deduction on family pension for pensioners is proposed to be enhanced from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000 under the new tax regime. This will provide relief to about four crore salaried individuals and pensioners. The tax slabs were also revised to give benefits to middle-income employees.

The big challenge staring at the government in the next five years is going to be from farmers. As several organisations have been preparing for another round of agitation demanding legal guarantee on minimum support price for crops, Sitharaman could not have ignored it. In fact, she started her budget speech mentioning farmers and agriculture.

The forgotten dream of “doubling farmers’ income by 2022” has now been replaced with realistic increasing productivity and resilience in agriculture. “A provision of ₹1.52 lakh crore has been made for the agriculture and allied sectors with an aim to enhance productivity and resilience through missions for oil seeds and clusters for vegetable production,” she said.

Senior farmer leader Vijay Jawandhia, however, slammed the budget as the one which is fooling farmers. “The message for farmers is to quit farming and villages, move to cities and work on infrastructure projects on low pay and get the free ration given by the government and remain satisfied. This is new colonialism. This is a budget which is making ‘Bharat’ a slave of the new Super India,” he said.

The budget, being the first policy document of the government, has signalled that it was ready to listen to people while maintaining fiscal prudence. It was also the new government’s first big test. We will know the results in the Haryana and Maharashtra assembly polls.

**With Dnyanesh Jathar**

# Balancing tact

While remaining true to the Modi government’s long-term vision, the budget tries to address the immediate challenges

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

**₹11,11,111 CRORE.** Earmarked for infrastructure projects, this assumedly auspicious number in this year’s budget does have a nice ring to it. Another expected figure, however, was surprisingly missing—the \$4 trillion mark that India’s GDP is set to cross this year.

What is not surprising was the absence of the usual hyperbole. Walking the tightrope between political expediency and long-term ‘Amrit Kaal’ goals, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had bigger shrimps (considering their regular appearance in her budget speeches) to fry.

## TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

While the political need of keeping the two main coalition partners, from Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, well-fed and happy was taken care of with an unabashed, almost embarrassing, largesse, a bigger issue remained—an economic boom that is not creating enough jobs and seemed to be benefitting only those at the top of the pyramid.

Sitharaman’s remedy? A two-pronged approach of pushing for skilling, education loans and job creation while doubling down on domestic manufacturing and wooing investment. The jobs push has a central outlay of ₹2 lakh crore over a period of five years and it would benefit 4.1 crore youth. It includes not just schemes for skilling the young and providing education loans, but an ‘employment linked incentive,’ which

will pay ₹15,000 to new employees. The aim is to coax entrepreneurs and corporates to offer jobs, and also get more private sector professionals registered in the Employees Provident Fund Office (EPFO), by taking care of a portion of their contribution to the EPFO for a period.

“The budget’s commitment to boosting education, employment and skill building... are steps in the right direction,” said Raghav Gupta, MD (India and Asia Pacific) of Coursera. “The provision for gaining industry experience through internships with 500 top companies can address the rapidly growing skills gap and social inequities, ensuring students’ transition smoothly into high-demand job roles.”

The success of these initiatives, however, will depend on how well they will bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace demands. “If implemented effectively, it could profoundly transform our educational landscape,” said Monica Soni, professor, JKLU Institute of Management in Jaipur.

The job push will work only if there are enough entrepreneurs offering jobs. This is where MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) get some attention. Facilitating easier loans for MSMEs and establishing e-commerce hubs in MSME clusters form the crux of Sitharaman’s several initiatives for the sector.

Tarun Chugh, CEO of Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance, said the focus on developing skills and generating



SANJAY AHLAWAT

employment laid the groundwork for a robust and sustainable economic growth.

That exactly was the intention. “We want more investment to come into this country,” Sitharaman said after the budget presentation on her measures to woo foreign direct investment (FDI), which included slashing of corporate tax for foreign companies. She knows well that big numbers in jobs are possible only with big-ticket investments, and who better to do that than multinational giants coming on the wing of ‘China plus one’ and a prayer for ease of doing business.

#### STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Of course, Sitharaman also knows that while big ticket foreign investment gives the country bragging rights, it is not the basket you put all your eggs in. This is where the many other announcements, be it the emphasis on energy transition, funding for innovation and research, multiplying capital expenditure for private space startups and, most importantly, the reduction of basic customs duty on a plethora of items come in. This reduction of duty on anything from solar panels to critical

*Domestic industry has been holding off on investing in new capacity. This is despite a consistent pampering of the formal economy biggies with massive government spending in infra and logistics.*

minerals like lithium, precious metals like gold and silver and many raw materials and components for electronics manufacturing, petrochemicals and telecom sectors are specifically meant to give a fillip to their local manufacturing base.

Take, for instance, the cut in the customs duty on gold, silver and platinum. As revenue secretary Sanjay Malhotra clarified, the decision was taken considering India’s growing importance as a business and processing hub for precious stones and metals. “We

have 50 lakh Indians employed in this sector,” he said.

The ‘Make in India’ push is clear from the rejigging of tariffs and policies—telecom equipment duty goes up to 15 per cent in an effort to entice local manufacturing, while the period of export of goods imported for repairs has been extended from six months to one year in aviation and shipping in hopes of attracting international business in maintenance, repair and overhauling.

#### NIRMALA’S NIGHTMARE

While the government’s best intention is reaping a GDP windfall from a combination of skilling and job incentives plus businesses investing more money and employing more people, there is a recurring worst-case-scenario in it. FDI fell 43 per cent last year, the lowest in 17 years, with many foreign investors preferring Indian bourses to doing business here.

Domestic industry, meanwhile, has been holding off on investing in new capacity. This is despite a consistent pampering of the formal economy biggies with massive government spending in infra and logistics. While this has helped shareholders of India Inc fatten their wallets, a reciprocal pumping of money into new plants and new businesses has not happened yet.

One of the marked features of the Modi regime’s economic policy has been its relentless push for manufacturing. What kicked off as ‘Make in India’ back in 2015 hit take-off velocity with the ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ package later and the production-linked incentives (PLI). But, with the exception of an Apple here or a Micron there, a rush by global biggies to set up plants in India is yet to be seen.

“India considers itself as a big market, but we should consider that as a per capita market and we are small,” said Rahul Ahluwalia, co-founder of the Delhi-based think tank Foun-

dation for Economic Development. “For a global company, we may be just 5 or 6 per cent of their total market. That is not enough for them to set up their manufacturing base here, unless we transform our local ecosystem and make it competitive with what they get in Vietnam or China. Raising protective tariff walls and inviting manufacturers is not going to do it.”

Then there are concerns about the growing inequality. While the growth has been good, it has been top-heavy. Kaushik Basu, former chief economist at World Bank, said India’s recovery after the Covid pandemic was a classic case of K-shaped recovery. Sitharaman might be hoping to fix this with skilling and employment incentives, but she completely ignored it in the opportunity provided by the income tax restructuring.

#### ACE UP HER SLEEVE

Sitharaman’s seventh budget remains true to the long-term vision of the Modi government that local manufacturing is the way forward. While it was a blinkers-on race to notch up numbers till now, this budget has tweaked it a bit by embracing education, job generation and social sector guarantees.

To her credit, Sitharaman has stuck to her vision of spending big and dreaming bigger, even while pulling off a miracle of sorts by targeting a sharp reduction in fiscal deficit, from 5.5 per cent to 4.9 per cent. “Keeping the fiscal deficit target at a better-than-expected 4.9 per cent of the GDP while retaining the focus on capital expenditure is no mean achievement,” said Sanjiv Puri, president of the Confederation of Indian Industry and chairman of ITC Limited.

The robust tax collections and the record dividend from the Reserve Bank of India this year sure helped, while the additional revenue Sitharaman intends to mop up does stand her in good stead. ●

# From denial to grudging admission

Fixing the job crisis is a gigantic task, and the government must apply itself diligently to it

BY P. CHIDAMBARAM



**A FEW WEEKS AGO**, the Reserve Bank of India published an article on the economy. The authors claimed that eight crore jobs had been created in India in the last few years and “there is no jobs crisis in India”.

It was an astounding statement, especially from a cautious, conservative and politically neutral institution like the RBI. The claim was lapped up by the BJP’s leaders, including the prime minister who mentioned it in one of his speeches.

The finance minister was silent. The chief economic adviser looked away. The NITI Aayog, that often sprang up to make bizarre claims, did not make any comment. No one asked the RBI questions such as how the claim was made, what kind of jobs were created, where were the jobs and who were the beneficiaries.

The RBI’s claim and the government’s tacit endorsement ran contrary to the evidence around us:

- ◆ The Uttar Pradesh Police department conducted an examination to recruit 60,244 positions in the state police, mostly constables. More than 48,00,000 persons, including 16,00,000 women, wrote the examination. (The examination was cancelled after a few days).
  - ◆ Air India wanted to fill 2,216 vacancies of ‘handyman,’ a job that involved diverse repair and maintenance duties. Some 25,000 persons thronged the Mumbai airport for a walk-in interview, and police had to step in to maintain order.
  - ◆ A private company in Gujarat sought to fill five positions; more than 1,000 persons applied.
  - ◆ Madhya Pradesh advertised 15 low-skilled government jobs. It attracted 11,000 applicants, many of whom were postgraduates, engineers, MBAs and even one who was preparing to write an examination for the post of a judge.
- The jobs crisis is best illustrated by the examinations conducted every year by the Staff Selection Commissions at the Centre and in many states. In Uttar Pradesh, an examination conducted for 7,500 posts (mostly clerical), received 24,74,030 applications.
- Unemployment is, and has been for many years, a serious problem in



# How to protect foot in people with diabetes

Living with diabetes comes with its own set of challenges, one of them being the increased risk of foot injuries. Due to poor circulation and nerve damage that can accompany diabetes, even minor cuts or blisters on the feet can develop into serious infections if not properly cared for.

People with diabetes need to be extra vigilant about any changes in their feet, as they may have reduced sensation and not notice injuries right away. This delayed detection can lead to complications that require medical intervention.

It's crucial for individuals with diabetes to prioritize foot health by inspecting their feet daily for any signs of infection or injury. Promptly addressing any issues and seeking professional help when needed can prevent more serious problems down the line.

By understanding the specific risks associated with foot injuries in diabetes, individuals can take proactive steps to protect their feet and overall well-being.

## Tips for protecting your feet:

Proper hygiene, regular check-ups, and wearing the right footwear are key to safeguarding your feet if you have diabetes.

Start by inspecting your feet daily for any redness, swelling, sores, or cuts. Don't forget to look at the bottom of your feet too - a magnifying glass can be handy!

Wash your feet daily with lukewarm water and a mild soap. Ensure they are completely dry afterwards, especially between the toes. Hydrate dry skin with moisturizer but avoid applying it between the toes.

Trimming toenails straight across after washing is crucial in preventing ingrown nails. Opt for well-fitting shoes with cushioning and ample toe room to prevent rubbing that can lead to blisters or calluses.

Regular foot check-ups by a healthcare professional are essential for early detection of any potential issues that may arise due to diabetes-related complications. Stay proactive about your foot care routine!

## The importance of managing blood sugar levels

Managing your blood sugar levels is

essential for overall health, including the well-being of your feet. Fluctuating blood sugar levels can lead to nerve damage and poor circulation in your feet, increasing the risk of injuries and infections.

Consistently monitoring and controlling your blood sugar through a balanced diet, regular exercise, and medication as prescribed by your healthcare provider is key. Stable blood sugar levels not only benefit your energy levels and mood but also play a crucial role in preventing complications like diabetic neuropathy.

Remember that every choice you make regarding food, activity level, and stress management influences your blood glucose levels. By staying proactive in managing your diabetes, you're taking significant steps towards protecting not only your feet but also your overall health.

## Exercises and stretches to improve circulation in the feet

To improve circulation in your feet, incorporating exercises and stretches into your daily routine can be highly beneficial. Simple activities like ankle circles, toe curls, and heel lifts can help get the blood flowing.

Try rolling a tennis ball under your foot to massage the muscles and stimulate circulation. Yoga poses that focus on stretching the calves and ankles, like downward-facing dog or seated forward fold, can also promote better blood flow.

Taking short walks throughout the day or using a stationary bike are great ways to keep your feet moving and increase circulation. Elevating your legs above heart level when resting can reduce swelling and encourage proper blood flow back to the heart.

Don't forget about calf stretches! Standing facing a wall with one foot behind you while bending the front knee can stretch out tight calf muscles - improving overall circulation in the lower legs.

## Taking care of wounds or injuries on the feet

Dealing with wounds or injuries on your feet when you have diabetes requires extra attention and care. Even minor cuts or blisters can lead to serious complications if not properly managed. It's important to clean the wound using mild soap and lukewarm water, patting it



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dry gently without rubbing.

Avoid using harsh chemicals or antiseptics that can irritate the skin further. Cover the wound with a sterile bandage to protect it from dirt and bacteria, but make sure not to wrap it too tightly as this can affect circulation. If you notice any signs of infection such as redness, swelling, warmth, or discharge, seek medical attention promptly.

Monitoring the healing process closely is essential—keep an eye out for any changes in colour, size, or pain level of the wound. Remember to follow your doctor's instructions for proper wound care and never hesitate to contact them if you have any concerns about your foot injury.

Remember that prevention is key when it comes to diabetic foot care. Stay vigilant, prioritize self-care, and consult with healthcare professionals for guidance on how to best protect your feet and enhance your well-being. Your feet carry you through life; it's time to give them the attention they deserve.





Ananya Panday with Vaibhav Maloo, managing director, Enso Group

## Business of Life

# Answers to 101 Tough Questions provides game-changing insights into a diverse range of topics

Among the myriad of books available in the market, online and offline, on self-help, guidance, global topics, and the like, there are a few that stand apart for more than one reason. When we got our hands on the recently launched book by Vaibhav Maloo, the Managing Director of the massive Indian conglomerate Enso Group, we were immediately intrigued by its unique approach.

Generally, readers and book lovers choose books that can help them solve their current life problems, give them some respite from their everyday challenges, and provide them with enough motivation to keep moving on their paths. However, Vaibhav Maloo's book *Business of Life: Answers to 101 Tough Questions* provides all this.

*Business of Life: Answers to 101 Tough Questions* indeed provide insights into what it claims – Answers to 101 Tough Questions, getting readers into a deep well of thoughts that can truly change their mindset and perspectives for the better. The book is structured as 101 concise Q&A's and offers game-changing insights into how to make the world a better place. It also covers various topics, from business ethics and global politics to personal development and social empowerment.

In *Business of Life: Answers to 101 Tough Questions*, Vaibhav Maloo, a distinguished business leader and Managing Director of Enso Group, tackles some of the most pressing and complex questions, combining them with curiosity and expertise. The book's

premise is that the most crucial skill for any entrepreneur is curiosity. He highlights that though communication, management, and creativity are essential, the desire to learn and know truly distinguishes leaders. This curiosity drives the explorations of various topics he delves into the book as an author, which allows him to offer thought-provoking answers, inspiring readers to take positive action in both business and life.

One of the most standout features of the book is the practical advice Maloo gives entrepreneurs. He combines his extensive professional experience with personal anecdotes to provide actionable insights. He discusses essential topics in his book, delving deep into the value of credibility, navigating office politics, strategies for going global, and more. The invaluable insights and answers he provides make one feel more compelled to read the book, which feels grounded in real-world experience, guiding business leaders at any stage of their careers. The wide array of subjects that he explores in the book includes the role of government in business, the dynamics of office politics, and the importance of linking regional identity to product identity.

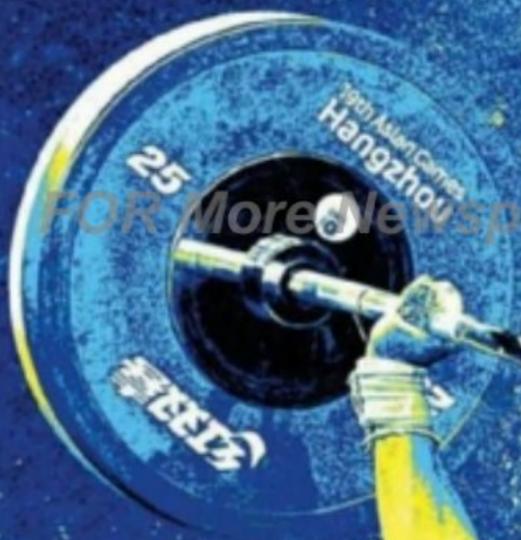
Besides this, the book gives great insight on global issues like the Gini coefficient, the rise of celebrity culture and the interplay between India, the US and China. This comprehensive coverage of diverse topics will leave you feeling well-informed and equipped to navigate modern life's complexities.

Reading *Business of Life: Answers to 101 Tough Questions* will not seem just like a guide or a collection of answers. It will also motivate you to take the right action in your journeys, encouraging you to reflect on your values, decisions, and impact on society, making the book profoundly engaging and thought-provoking.

*Business of Life: Answers to 101 Tough Questions* is a must-read for anyone seeking to navigate the complexities of modern life with insight and curiosity. Its engaging format and wide range of topics will make you return to it again and again for more wisdom and encouragement.



PARIS 2024 COVER STORY

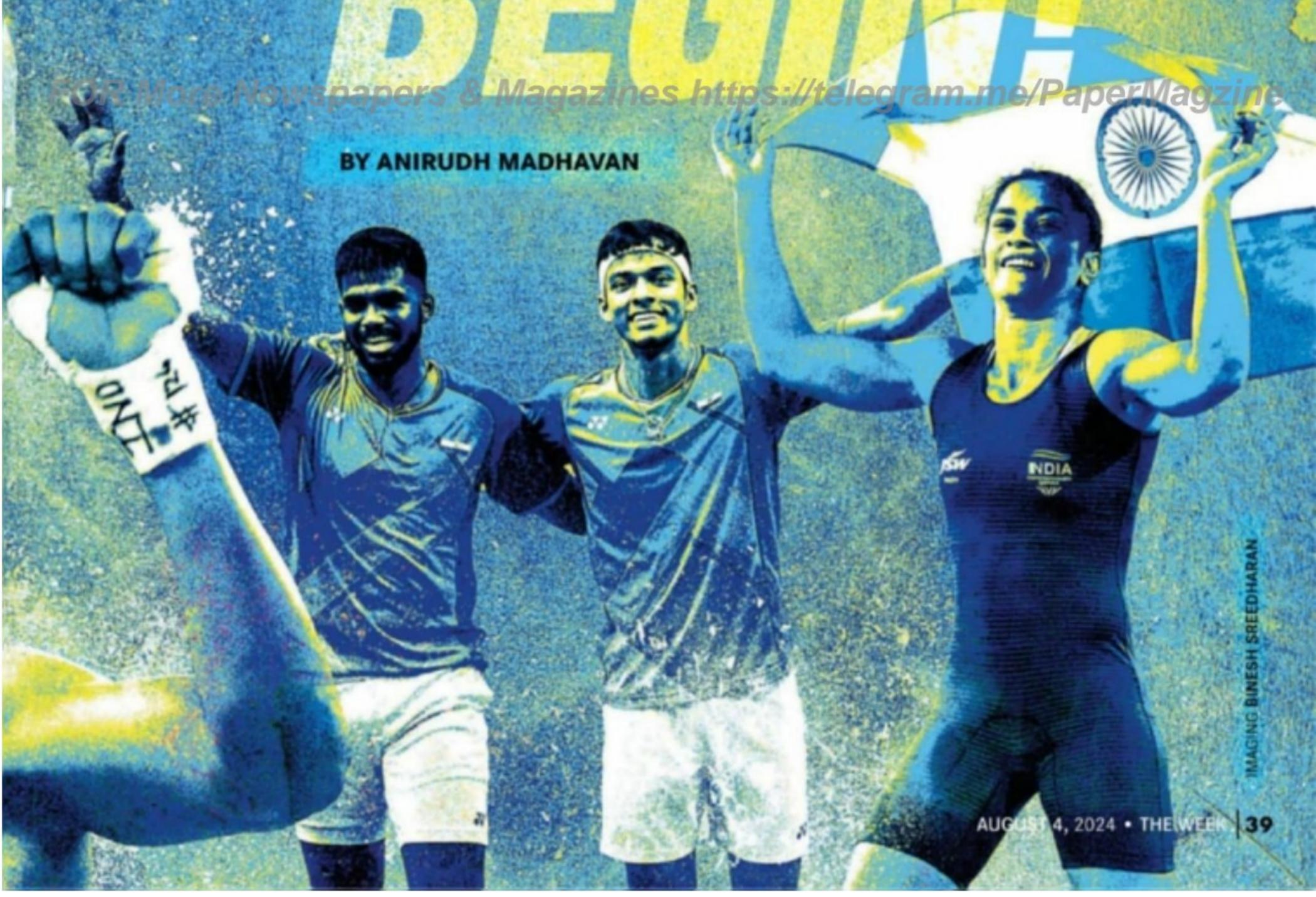


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# LET THE GAINS BEGIN!

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BY ANIRUDH MADHAVAN



IMAGING BINESH SREEDHARAN

From trying to prove that Indian dominance in an athletics event was not a fluke to vying for a third individual Olympic medal, the Indian contingent at the Paris Olympics is full of varied arcs

T

he first batter to score a century in the Ranji Trophy, S.M. Hadi, had played tennis for India at the 1924 Olympics. So did a criminal lawyer from Cambridge and a medical doctor from London. None of them,

or the 10 others they accompanied to Paris, won a medal.

Exactly a century later, as India sends 117 athletes to the Games, once again in Paris, there is at least one solace. None of them has a PIL to file or a patient with a tummy ache to care for. They are all in. And they are all hungry. Some because this will be their last dance at the Olympics, some because it will be their first.

For Neeraj Chopra, another medal in Paris would prove that, yes, an Indian can dominate world athletics and that the throw in Tokyo was not a 'pinch me' moment. That the high his gold gave Indian athletics was not fleeting, and that there are now others stepping up their game.

Ask the 4x400m men's relay team. In the past year, the team of Muhammed Anas, Amoj Jacob, Muhammed Ajmal Variyathodi and Rajesh Ramesh have won gold at the Asian Games—the first Indian team to do so since





## LOCKED AND LOADED

Manu Bhaker would look to lay the ghost of Tokyo to rest in Paris



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the days of Milkha Singh—and have broken the Asian record by clocking in at 2:59.05 in the heats at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest in August 2023. In an incredible feat, they finished fifth in the final.

“From an Indian perspective, we need to go past measuring success with medals,” said Manisha Malhotra, former tennis player and head of sports excellence and scouting at JSW Sports. “I do believe we are in a very good place heading into Paris.

The Indian contingent is a lot younger, and many of our athletes have spent a lot of time competing and training abroad. Some have also won multiple World Championship medals and that is cause for all of us to be hopeful.”

Perhaps athletics might not get India many medals, perhaps only Chopra would get to the podium, and even that is not guaranteed. The real measure of progress, however, would be to see how many Indian athletes make it to the final of their events. In that, the nation might see some bright spots.

But if medals are the barometer, then India has to cross seven, the tally in Tokyo. And for that, the shooters would have to be on target. Three years ago, the group of world beaters returned empty handed from Japan in what was a morale-crushing outing.

Manu Bhaker took it particularly hard. The talented shooter from Haryana had been excellent leading up to the Olympics, but her



weapon malfunctioned in the qualification round of the 10m air pistol, and that set the tone for the rest of the Games.

“It was just bad luck,” said Sift Kaur Samra, the world record holder in 50m Rifle Three Positions. “I was not part of that team, but I know that they gave it their 100 per cent. I think if you do not keep expectations, then you just go with the flow and enjoy [shooting].”

Bhaker is back at the Games in Paris, and has reunited with coach Jaspal Rana after a falling out in 2021. She seems to have put behind what happened in Tokyo, and will have three chances to medal in Paris—women’s 10m air pistol, women’s 25m pistol, and 10m air pistol mixed team.

“In what may sound like a mix of optimism and confidence, I will say that India could surpass the seven medals from Tokyo,” said Rushdee Warley, CEO of Inspire Institute of Sport, one of the country’s top coaching and training centres. “Of course, this is sport, and everything needs to go perfectly right on the day, along with a little luck. But if things stay true to form, I feel India could see its highest ever tally at an Olympic Games.”

What could work for India is simple maths. The nation has sent its largest-ever shooting contingent to the Games this time. If Tokyo saw 15 Indian shooters, Paris will see 21. More athletes, more chances.

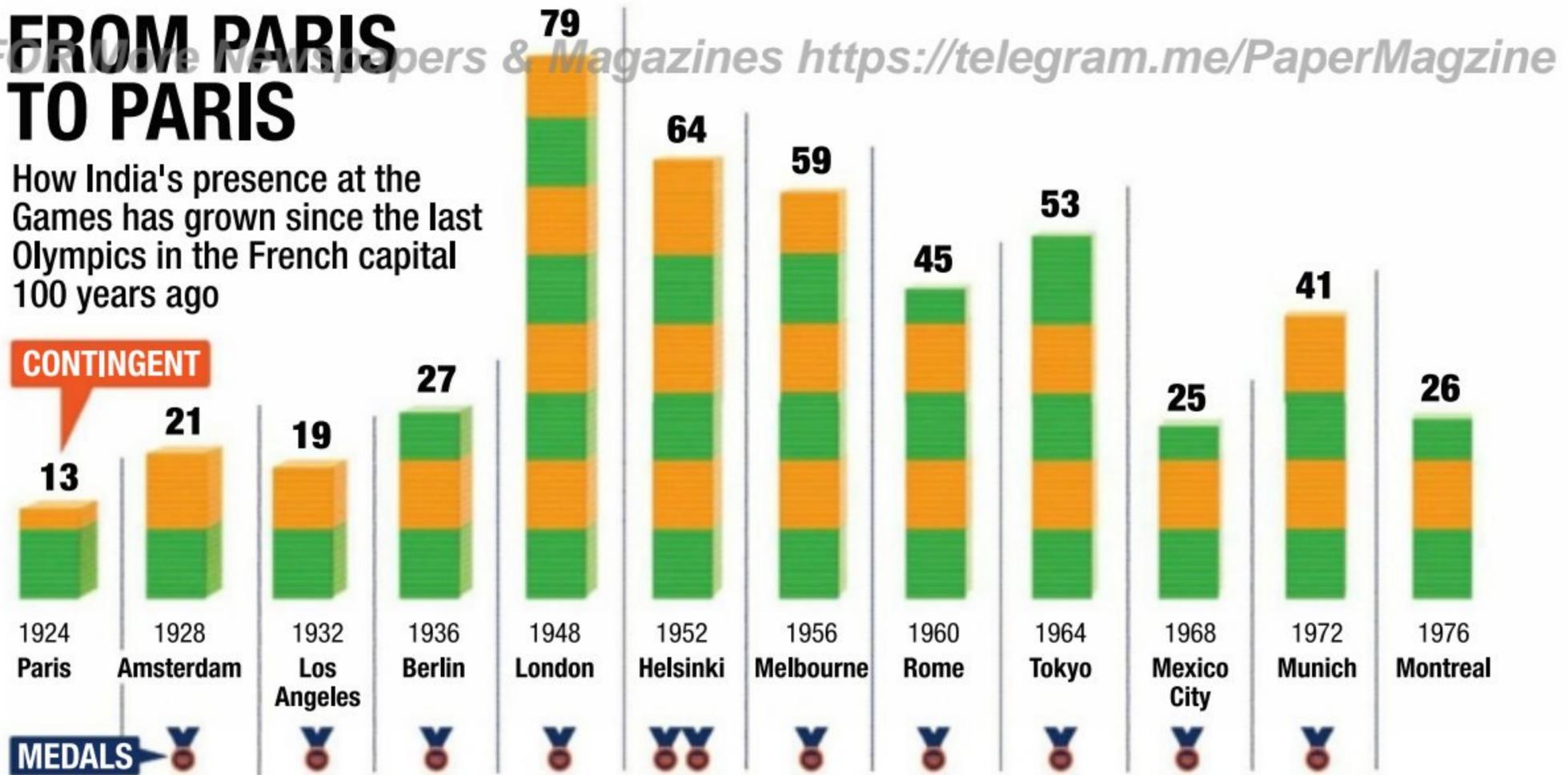
“To be frank, shooting is a difficult sport; it has very fine margins and anyone can win or lose on a certain day,” said Malhotra. “We’re going in with a very strong and very different contingent and I have big hopes for shooting. I believe we should be able to win five medals, but I think three would be more realistic and would be a good performance. These are young kids, not many big names or big personalities, and I believe that is going to be the big story in Paris.”

It could be the big story, but heading into the Games, there are stories galore in the Indian camp. Like PV. Sindhu’s quest to become arguably the greatest individual Olympian from India. She already has a silver and a bronze, and if she can add another medal here, she becomes the only Indian in an individual sport to collect three—a couple of men from India’s golden generation of hockey have four.

Sindhu’s form leading up to the Games might not inspire any medal talk; she has

## FROM PARIS TO PARIS

How India's presence at the Games has grown since the last Olympics in the French capital 100 years ago



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made only one final in tournaments this year. Plus, she turns 30 next year.

However, this is an athlete known to step up. “She has always been a big tournament player,” said H.S. Prannoy, Sindhu’s squad mate. “No matter what happens in the entire year of Super Series events, when it comes to the big events, she is able to deliver. I’m hoping she gets into that mood once again.”

In what might surprise many, this is Prannoy’s first time at the Olympics. The veteran had a stellar 2023, winning bronze at the World Championships and the Asian Games, but frequent bouts of ill health scuppered his progress. He was down with chikungunya just weeks before the Games, but as soon as he recovered, he was back on the court. His focus now is on increasing his speed to keep up with the young legs on the circuit. For Prannoy at Paris, it is better late than never.

Fellow Malayali P.R. Sreejesh knows that feeling. He had it last time; it was his third Olympics. At Tokyo 2020, India won an Olympic medal (bronze) for the first time in 41 years. Sreejesh was instrumental in that campaign.

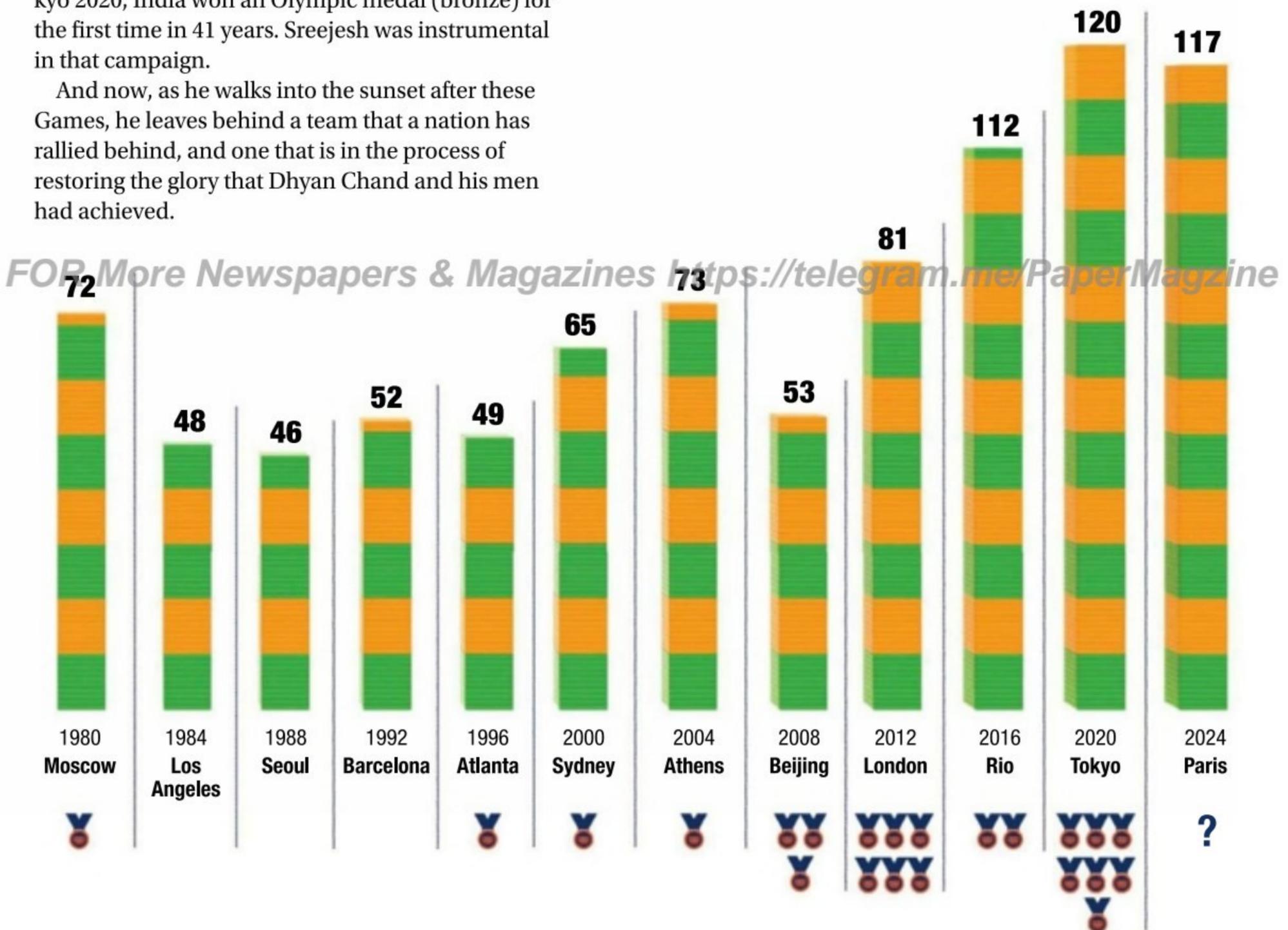
And now, as he walks into the sunset after these Games, he leaves behind a team that a nation has rallied behind, and one that is in the process of restoring the glory that Dhyan Chand and his men had achieved.

When THE WEEK spoke to hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh last August, he said the dream was to get automatic qualification into the Olympics by winning gold at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. They ticked off that box, but a bigger one awaits.

“Coming into a tournament, you have got an ideal goal and a realistic goal,” coach Craig Fulton told THE WEEK ahead of last year’s Asian Games. “The ideal goal is always to win. The challenge is: what is the realistic goal? How were you performing consistently in the last six months and what are you doing currently?”

In the past six months, India has not had a great run. They have had more losses than wins, including the 0-5 defeat in the series in Australia. Plus, India is in a tough pool with Australia, Belgium, Argentina and New Zealand.

Given that little separates the top teams in hockey at the moment, and anyone can beat





PARIS 2024



COVER STORY



**UP FOR GRABS FOR LOVLINA BORGOHAIN IS THE CHANCE TO CREATE HISTORY BY BECOMING INDIA'S FIRST DOUBLE MEDALLIST IN BOXING. P.V. SINDHU (RIGHT) IS ON A QUEST TO BECOME THE ONLY INDIAN WITH THREE INDIVIDUAL OLYMPIC MEDALS.**

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anyone, getting a good start will be crucial.

“The whole nation has a lot of hopes from the hockey team,” said Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey, himself a stalwart of the game. “The way the team has been playing under coach Craig Fulton after the 2023 World Cup (where India got knocked out early) has been good. Sreejesh and Manpreet are playing their fourth Olympics and Harmanpreet is captain. We have a lot of hope. The team will have to focus on short corners and defence.”

Defence, though, is not Aman Sehrawat’s preferred strategy. The 21-year-old likes to be on the attack, which complements his high speed.

Coming out of the turmoil that India’s wrestling scene has been in recently—what with the allegations against former Wrestling Federation of India

chief Brijbhushan Singh and the wrestlers’ protest at Jantar Mantar—Sehrawat became the only male grappler from India to qualify for the Paris Olympics. Apart from 2016, when Sakshi Malik won bronze, the men have delivered medals for India in every Olympics since 2008.

Sehrawat’s path in the 57kg category went through his idol and Tokyo silver-medallist Ravi Dahiya, whom he beat in the race for the quota. Sehrawat is, along with Antim Panghal in the women’s 53kg category, the only Indian wrestlers with a seeding at these Olympics. This means they would avoid tougher draws till later in the tournament.

The big question, however, is whether the mess within the federation would end up costing India on the mat. “To some degree, I do believe the timing of the events off the mat, and to have no federation in place and nobody calling the shots, have affected performance,” said Malhotra. “That being said, we should have been able to manage and grow the sport. Everyone was so quick to sideline the progression and there were so many political systems at play that we have not done what is best for the sport.”

In essence, it would seem that whatever medal India does win in wrestling, would most likely be in spite of the system rather than because of it.

Another sport where the women will hog more of the limelight is boxing. Two-time world champion Nikhat Zareen (50kg) and Tokyo bronze-medallist Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) are in the fray, with the former competing in her first Olympics.

Borgohain will have the experience of having done it before as she steps into the ring in Paris. That she won gold at the Women's World Boxing Championships last year in Delhi and later silver at the Asian Games in Hangzhou has boosted her reputation heading into these Games. It also validated her switch to 75kg from the 69kg category, which the International Boxing Association dropped from the Paris Games.

The competition, however, is strong with names like China's former world champion Li Qian, whom she has had no luck against recently, and the refugee team's Cindy Ngamba, who beat Borgohain in the Czech Grand Prix this June.

But up for grabs for the Assamese boxer is the chance to create history by becoming India's first double medallist in the sport. The country so far has three medals in boxing—one each to Vijender Singh, Mary Kom and Borgohain.

But the fact that an athlete winning two medals becomes historic in India also points to where the nation stands at the moment. While crossing the medal tally from Tokyo will and should be celebrated,

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PARIS 2024



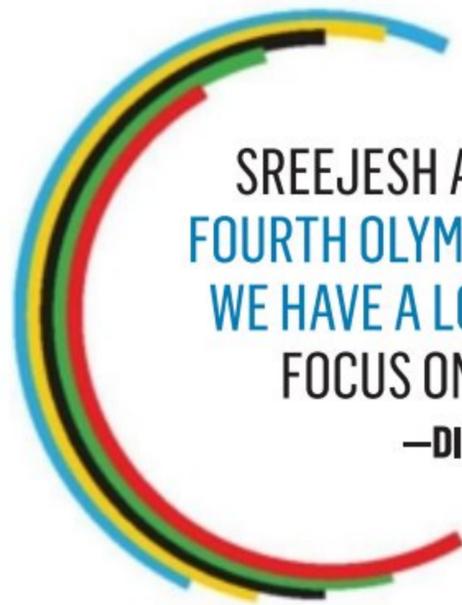
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GETTY IMAGES



**MAKING  
THEIR OWN  
LEGACY**

Captain  
Harmanpreet  
(middle) with  
his teammates  
during a match  
this June



**SREEJESH AND MANPREET ARE PLAYING THEIR  
FOURTH OLYMPICS AND HARMANPREET IS CAPTAIN.  
WE HAVE A LOT OF HOPE. THE TEAM WILL HAVE TO  
FOCUS ON SHORT CORNERS AND DEFENCE.**

**—DILIP TIRKEY, HOCKEY INDIA PRESIDENT**

it is worthwhile to remember that India at the Olympics is still a work in progress.

For in India, there has been a romanticisation of the struggles athletes overcome. Ideally, they should not be facing struggles that are not sport-related, in terms of money or opportunity. “I could not agree more,” said IIS’s Warley. “Yes, Indian sport is rife with stories of athletes coming from difficult backgrounds and making it big, and while we might not be able to affect the genesis, it is down to the system to identify, harness and support these athletes once they have been taken into the fold. A robust public-private-partnership model goes a very long way in making sure we do not lose talented athletes to lapses that stem from limitations.

“At the IIS, the effort is constant to ensure that we are giving our athletes the best chance to succeed. Many of our Olympics-bound athletes have been training across the world in the build-up to the Games. There are other private organisations, too, doing their bit, and the results are there for all to see. However, we will need a dozen more IISs if we are to bridge this gap.”

In 1924, Dorabji Tata had personally paid for most of the Indian contingent’s expenses and, a few years after, helped set up the Indian Olympic Association.

The field is much larger now. “Corporate investment is key because of two reasons,” said Sanjay Adesara, chief business officer, Adani Sport-

sline. “For starters, the athletes need a support system because sport is expensive and second, associations of this nature and magnanimity always helps the growth of the brand. Therefore, it is a win-win in that sense.”

The emergence of corporate help does not mean that the government has done nothing, as Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya explains in an interview (page 48).

Hockey, for instance, has been associated with the Odisha government for a few years now. “With Hockey India going sponsor-less, the Odisha government felt the need to get into that role so that the emotional connect [of hockey] with Odisha and India can be restored,” said Ranjit Parida, joint secretary, sports and youth services department, Odisha. “So that story actually began from the concerted effort of the Odisha government to support hockey.”

The progress, though, is still a jog, not a run. “We are still nowhere when it comes to track and field, cycling, rowing and swimming, which [offer] the highest [number of] medals. There is a big space for improvement and, for us to be able to factor in the growth in medals, it has to be a very strong system, which we do not have at the moment. We are currently investing in individual athletes, and that will not give you a sustainable long-term model.”

Perhaps that is the benchmark; being known for dominance in a sport rather than being known for an athlete who dominates the sport. Dhyhan Chand’s men would agree. ●

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I N T E R V I E W

**MANSUKH MANDAVIYA**  
UNION SPORTS MINISTER

# TARGETING TOP 10 FINISH AT 2036 OLYMPICS

BY R. PRASANAN, ANIRUDH MADHAVAN AND  
ANIRUDHA KARINDALAM

**Q/ What are your expectations from the Paris Games?**

**A/** My own expectations, like those of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are that each person in the 117-athlete contingent will produce the best efforts in keeping with their talent and the amount of hard work in preparing for the world's biggest celebration of sport. I am confident that India will return with its best performance in an Olympic Games.

**Q/ How satisfied are you with the Indian contingent's preparations?**

**A/** Since being handed the responsibility of the ministry, I have spent a lot of time visiting the National Centres of Excellence to interact with athletes and coaches. I am confident that each of our athletes is well prepared.

In the current Olympic cycle, the government has spent ₹470 crore for the 16 disciplines in which athletes have qualified for Paris. From funding their training and competition, in India and abroad, to helping them with the best coaching and support staff, the government has done everything.

**Q/ What specific measures has the government taken to help the contingent give a good fight, and to tone up India's position on the global sports map?**

**A/** First, the government has always worked keeping the athlete on the centre-stage. Be it in sanctioning 890-plus international exposure [trips] or funding athletes to be stationed overseas for long spells, be it flying them to secure the best sports medicine and sports science support or be it in helping them work with reputed foreign



coaches, the government has undertaken a number of steps to empower them to showcase their best efforts in Paris. In all this, we have worked closely with the National Sports Federations and the Indian Olympic Association. This time, our 117 athletes are supported by 140 coaches and support staff, with a 13-member medical team as well.

**Q/ The other part of the question...**

**A/** A large percentage of our population does not play recreational sport, let alone competitive sport. The government is making efforts to get more people to play sport by spreading physical literacy to the entire range of our population to improve the overall health of our people and reduce lifestyle diseases. This will create a wider pool of talent to draw from so that India marks its presence more tellingly on the global sports landscape.

**Q/ The last time Paris hosted the Olympics, India, then under the British, had sent 13 athletes. Now there are 117. But the most medals that India has won in a single edition is seven. Why do you think India is moving at such a slow pace?**

**A/** We must not view Olympic sport only through the prism of medals to gauge growth and evolution. We should look at the number of World Championship medals Indians win nowadays. We should look at how Indian athletes reflect the fearlessness of 'New India' and are able to express themselves on the global stage.

Take athletics, for example. There is a reason the government has spent nearly ₹100 crore on track and field athletes in the present Olympic cycle. If we look through the prism of the number of Indians making it to the finals in World Championships, we will find evolution. We will work to close the gap between reaching finals and making it to the podium.

Having said that, the government will work with all stakeholders to ensure a faster rate of growth. Some of the steps that have already been taken include the identification of disciplines in which the number of medals is large and where Indian athletes can be competitive. We are investing in cycling and are confident that breakthrough performances will not take long in coming.

**Q/ Do you think the Wrestling Federation of India controversy could have hampered the preparations of the grapplers?**

**A/** The resilience of Indian wrestling is such that it has a strong representation in the Paris Games. And I can say with confidence that all wrestlers who will compete in Paris will go there with the best preparation behind them.

**Q/ The Target Olympic Podium Scheme, a flagship programme of the sports ministry, completes a decade this year. How do you evaluate its success and are there plans to increase investment?**

**A/** Envisaged by Modi ji, the Target Olympic Podium Scheme has plugged many gaps that existed in the system when it came to supporting elite athletes in their quest to win medals for the country. To my mind, it has been very successful in attaining its core objectives by addressing proposals from our athletes with alacrity. I can tell you that there has been no cap on the amount of spends through TOPS. The Mission Olympic Cell evaluates each proposal, and the ministry acts on its recommendations.

**Q/ What other plans are in the pipeline to improve sporting infrastructure?**

**A/** While sports is a state subject in the Constitution, the Central government has never hesitated in funding sports infrastructure projects across the country. The Central government supplements their (states and Union territories) efforts through the Khelo India Scheme's utilisation, and creation and upgradation of sports infrastructure vertical. I am happy to share that the Khelo India Scheme has funded more than 300 sports infrastructure projects to the tune of ₹3,000 crore.

Aware that coaching standards at all levels need improvement, the ministry is working towards improving coach education in our country. We have encouraged the NSFs to make sure that



their coaches are abreast of the latest knowledge systems through the respective international federation's coaching programmes. I am personally invested in this aspect of sport in our country as I believe it is the key to us emerging a stronger sporting nation.

**Q/ What do you think of more and more corporates getting into the sports ecosystem? How is the government leveraging this investment?**

**A/** The increased interest is welcome, indeed, but we must remember that Indian sport has been supported by corporate India over many years. I am particularly pleased that public sector undertakings like NTPC and REC (Rural Electrification Corporation) India have taken the lead in supporting disciplines like archery, boxing, badminton and athletics. Coal India has funded the establishment of hostels for the trainees in Bengaluru, Sonipat and Gwalior. There has been effort to structure the CSR support in specific sports like weightlifting and even middle- and long-distance running.

**Q/ What do you make of India's bid for the 2036 Olympic Games? Is it a realistic target?**

**A/** Of course, it is a realistic target. A lot of work is being done behind the scenes and the IOA leadership is constantly in touch with the International Olympic Committee's Future Host Commission that assesses every bid. The government will extend all support to the IOA to ensure that all requirements as per the bid documents and processes are met in time.

**Q/ If India gets the 2036 bid, what should be the target for the country in terms of medals at the Olympics?**

**A/** It is way too early to speak of medal predictions.

However, we are hoping that India will have made the strides to be in the top 10 on the medal tally by doing well in a number of disciplines.

**Q/ India is pushing for the inclusion of yoga in the 2036 Olympics. What are the challenges ahead in promoting it as a global sport?**

**A/** The ancient Indian discipline is now emerging as a competitive sport run by a world body. You will be aware of Modi ji's efforts to get yoga global recognition by having the United Nations declare June 21 as International Yoga Day. I am confident that such efforts will popularise yoga as a globally competitive sport. We have seen yoga being introduced as a medal discipline in the Khelo India Games and the National Games as well. The addition of yoga in the Asian Games sets a positive precedent for its potential future inclusion in the Olympic Games.

**Q/ India ranked at the top of the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of dope offenders for 2022. What are the measures being taken to educate athletes and coaches about the dangers of doping?**

**A/** First and foremost, it must be considered that the number of Adverse Analytical Findings was a result of the National Anti-Doping Agency's sustained testing programme across the country and at all levels. The number of tests and the targeted testing have produced these results, serving as a deterrent to other athletes. I am sure that NADA will continue its good work in the war against doping. The one truth is that dopers will be caught, sooner or later.

Besides an effective testing programme, NADA has been conducting numerous workshops and education programmes during various competitions. It has made available an app for athletes to ensure that any medication they are prescribed does not contain banned substances. India has also established a nutrition supplement testing centre in the National Forensic University in Gandhinagar to certify that batches of these supplements are free of banned substances.

Yet, despite such sustained efforts, some athletes seek shortcuts. We are making athletes at all levels aware of the dangers of doping, especially to their own health and the image of the country. ●

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THE GOVERNMENT WILL EXTEND ALL SUPPORT TO THE IOA TO ENSURE THAT ALL REQUIREMENTS AS PER THE [2036 OLYMPICS] BID DOCUMENTS AND PROCESSES ARE MET IN TIME.

**P.T. USHA****PRESIDENT, INDIAN OLYMPIC ASSOCIATION*****We will help athletes overcome pressure***

BY JOMICAN JOSE/PARIS

**Q/ How many medals do you expect at the Paris Olympics?**

**A/** Expectations are always high. I am confident that our team will perform well in Paris. In Tokyo, we made a historic leap in medal count. We finished with seven—one gold, two silver and four bronze. If you ask me for a name, I will definitely say Neeraj. He is our prime hope. We are hopeful in athletics, boxing, shooting, badminton and weightlifting. I will not say an exact number. I do not want to pressure our athletes. Let them fight for medals in good spirit. Let us hope they will make us proud.

**Q/ The Olympics is a big stage. As you have said, athletes face a lot of pressure out there. How will the IOA help them overcome it?**

**A/** We have made every arrangement to help our athletes overcome pressure. We have a special team that includes a mental conditioning coach and sleep therapists to tackle the issue.

**Q/ Exactly 40 years ago, you missed out on an Olympic medal by a whisker. And now you attend the Games as the president of a national governing body. What difference do you feel?**

**A/** Both situations are unique. Both give me immense satisfaction. ●

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# Return of the king

Neeraj Chopra faces a tough battle in the men's javelin event, but his consistency is cause for optimism

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

As usual, there is much excitement around a reigning Olympic and world track and field champion ahead of an Olympics. Unusually, that champion is Indian. No longer is the Indian Olympic experience restricted to cheering on the brave underdog, for, in Neeraj Chopra, India finally has the big dog.

Following the euphoria of Tokyo 2020, Chopra was ubiquitous. It is quite possible that more Indians have seen him in advertisements than those who have seen him competing. Thankfully, Chopra the athlete did not get lost in his celebrity.

Starting with the Paavo Nurmi Games in June 2022, he competed in 17 events and won 11. He was second in the other six. He consistently hit 85m and improved his personal best twice. After becoming the first Indian to win a silver at the World Athletics Championships, in 2022, he told media that he would win gold the next time. After winning that gold in 2023, he said many athletes had won the same medal many times and that he would push himself to do the same.

Going into Paris 2024, there had been concerns about an adductor niggle that had troubled Chopra, but his German coach Klaus Bartonietz allayed fears by confirming that there was no issue and that Chopra was in high-intensity training.

When asked how he keeps himself motivated after all that he has achieved, Chopra, who was THE WEEK's Man of the Year in 2022, simply said: "I like it. Training for hours daily is a challenge."

However, there have been times when his best has not been enough. Since the gold-winning 87.58m in Tokyo 2020, he finished second with his personal

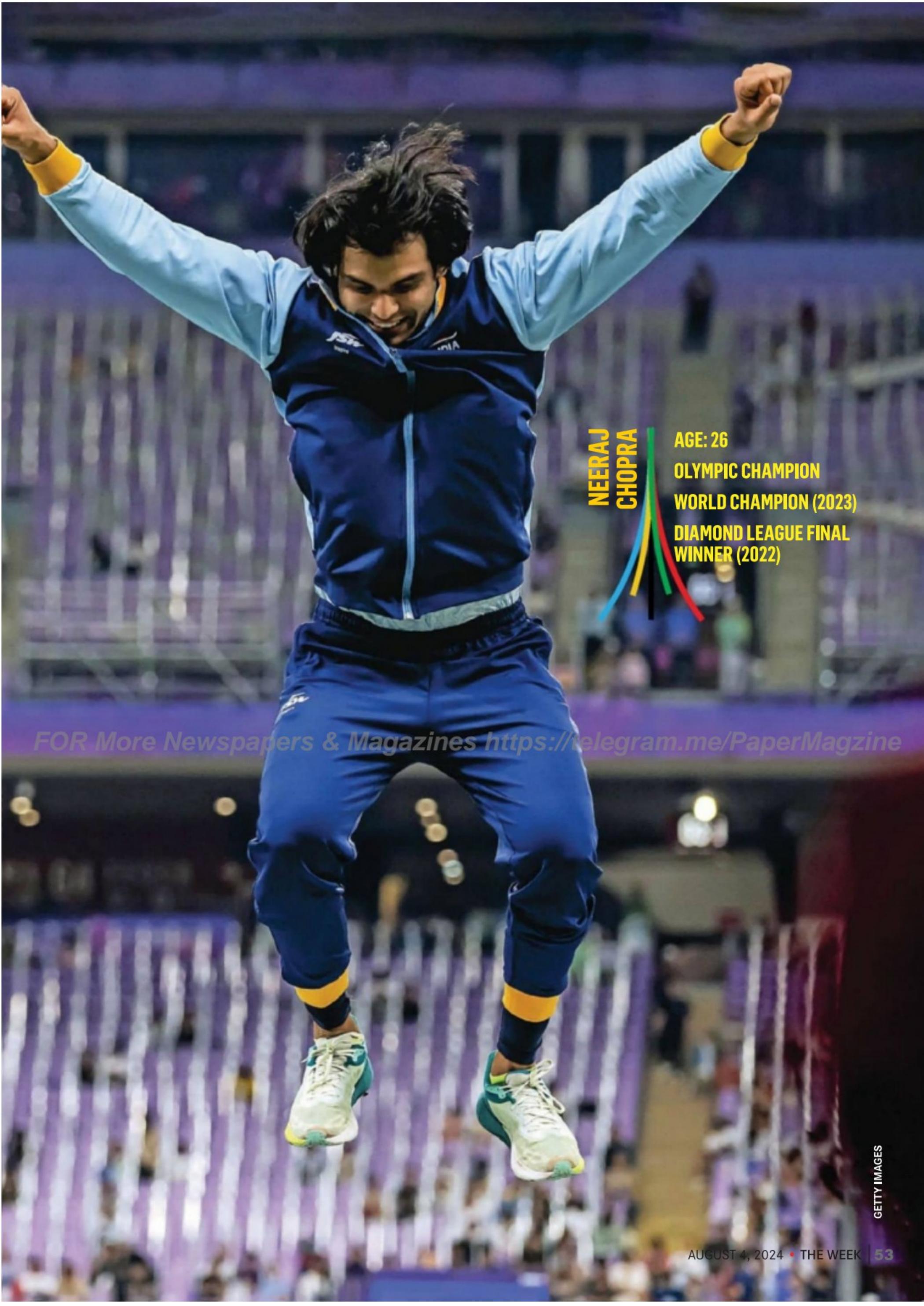
best of 89.94m in 2022—Grenada's Anderson Peters piped him to the gold with 90.31m. In the 2022 World Athletics Championships, too, it was Peters who won gold (90.54m against Chopra's 88.13m). Finland's Oliver Helander, too, beat Chopra's 89.30 with 89.83m in 2022. In May 2024, the Czech Republic's Jakub Vadlejch beat Chopra's season best of 88.36m to the gold with 88.38m.

Vadlejch, who is the current world No. 1 (Chopra is second), won the silver in Tokyo. He could be Chopra's main challenger in Paris. His personal best is 90.88m and season best is 88.65m. World No. 3, Julian Weber of Germany, has a best of 88.37m this season. Peters, rank five, has a massive personal best of 93.07m, but his season best is 86.62. There are others in the fray who have hit 90m, like 22<sup>nd</sup> rank German Max Dehning (90.20m this year) and Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, who won silver at the 2023 World Championships. He has a best of 90.18m, but his season best is 84.21m.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S JAKUB VADLEJCH, WHO IS THE CURRENT WORLD NUMBER ONE (CHOPRA IS SECOND), WON THE SILVER IN TOKYO. HE COULD BE CHOPRA'S MAIN CHALLENGER IN PARIS.

Chopra is supremely unperturbed about not breaching the 90m-mark. He has said that it will happen when it has to. "If I take the pressure, I may not be able to do the 88m-89m throws I do," he said, adding that he focuses on giving his 100 per cent during a competition. Chopra, 26, has shown since Tokyo 2020 that regularly hitting high 80s may be more important to winning events than breaching 90.

At Paris 2024, Chopra will be joined by Kishore Jena, the world No. 7. And, while the Indians have a tough field to contend with, Chopra's incredible consistency should once again see him through. ●



**NEERAJ  
CHOPRA**

**AGE: 26  
OLYMPIC CHAMPION  
WORLD CHAMPION (2023)  
DIAMOND LEAGUE FINAL  
WINNER (2022)**

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PARIS 2024



COVER STORY



# Double the hope

The time is ripe for Satwik and Chirag to claim their first Olympic medal

BY BECHU S.

**CHIRAG SHETTY, 27 (L)**  
**SATWIKSAIRAJ RANKIREDDY, 23**

**WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP BRONZE (2022)**  
**ONLY INDIAN PAIR TO BE WORLD NO. 1**

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PTI

India's best shot at a medal? Neeraj Chopra, hands down, for most. What about second-best?

There is a pair, who triumphed at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, and has not dropped out of the top-three in the world rankings this year. They were No. 1 twice (currently rank 3), made it to four finals and managed two titles.

Men's badminton doubles pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, 23, and Chirag Shetty, 27, are the reigning Asian Games gold medallists—the first Indian pair to do so. With the Thailand Open and the French Open Super 750 trophies under their belt, the young pair has an impressive 23-6 win-loss record in 2024. If everything goes as planned (touchwood!), they could very well be the first Indian male shuttlers on the Olympic podium.

Saina Nehwal, the first Indian badminton medallist, said Satwik and Chirag, or Sat-Chi as they are called, stand a 95 per cent chance of winning a medal in Paris. The Indian pair may even claim gold, she said. "The only thing [to see] is how they fare against the top pair," she told the *Hindustan Times*. "But, there is no need for much tension about them."

Sat-Chi's feats in recent times do substantiate Nehwal's confidence. Their bronze at the 2022 World Championships was India's first medal in the competition. It came on the heels of the Commonwealth gold. The duo also played a crucial role in India's successful Thomas Cup campaign in 2022.

The next year was also an illustrious one as they went on to win the Swiss Open, the World Super 1000, the Korean Open and the Asian championships.

Satwik and Chirag will be hell-bent on not yielding an inch in Paris, after a narrow elimination in the group stage in Tokyo—there was a three-way tie, settled by head-to-head record.

This time, Satwik and Chirag are one of the four seeded teams. They cannot complain about their group fixtures, having drawn the world No. 7 pair of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Ardianto (Indonesia), along with a 31-ranked German pair and 43-ranked French pair. Alfian and Ardianto have not got the better of them since 2018. And, the German and French pair have never defeated them.

But, things could get tricky from the quarterfinals onwards as a random draw decides the fixtures. The duo may have to take on the other seeded teams, Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang of China (1), Kim Astrup and Anders Skaarup Rasmussen of Denmark (2) and Kang Ming-hyuk and Seo Seung-jae of South Korea (4). While the Danish pair have a 6-2 record against them, the Indians had won the only meeting in 2024. The Chinese pair not only enjoys a 5-1 record, but also beat them in May.

However, under coach Mathias Boe, Satwik and Chirag have come a long way. Also their French Open title this year was won at the La Chapelle Arena—the venue for Olympic badminton.

With age, experience and form on their side, it is time for them to deliver a killer smash. Fingers crossed. ●



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PARIS 2024 COVER STORY



# Faith of the fearless

**Nikhat Zareen wants better than bronze, but being unseeded in the 50kg category could make her path tricky**

BY BECHU S.

**A**s per the Indian orthodoxy, disrespect for elders is a transgression of the highest order. The extent of the backlash for this grave offence grows in proportion to the reputation of the senior. Having questioned the supremacy of India's single most celebrated boxer ever, Nikhat Zareen knew it was going to be tough. However, like many successful sportswomen in India, she was armed with the experience of battling patriarchy. Zareen was ready.

Her ask was a fair trial ahead of Tokyo 2020. It was too precious an opportunity. She could not afford to be coy just because six-time world champion Mary Kom was in her division. She got the opportunity, but lost to Kom in the trial. The legend also refused a handshake after the bout. Zareen left the arena in tears. The online trolls pounced. But, the name-calling did not last long.

The Telangana boxer's in-ring performances since 2021 silenced critics. In 2022, she beat Tokyo silver medallist, Turkey's Buse Naz Cakiroglu, soon to be the 50kg category world champion. Zareen



ZAREEN'S PREFERENCE TO FIGHT AT MID-RANGE (ABOUT AN ARM'S LENGTH AWAY) MAY MAKE LIFE DIFFICULT AGAINST TOP BOXERS WHO ARE MASTER CLINCHERS (CLINCH IS WHEN BOXERS LOOK LIKE THEY ARE HUGGING).



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herself became world champion in the 52kg and dedicated it to Kom. "No victory is complete without your idol's blessings," she said. Kom said she was proud of Zareen's performances. Zareen also won the 2022 Commonwealth gold in the 50kg category. And won her second World Championships, at New Delhi, in 2023, in the 50kg category. This made her the only Indian female boxer other than Kom to win more than one World Championships. But, she only got bronze at the Hangzhou Asiad later in the year.

After a vacation, she resumed training and bounced back in style. Ahead of Zareen's Olympic debut, there are no concerns about form as she won silver at the Strandja Memorial in Bulgaria in February and followed it up with gold in the Elorda Cup in Kazakhstan in May. The 28-year-old is confident of a podium finish in Paris and says the colour of the medal matters to her as she wants to better what Kom and Lovlina Borgohain did—bronze at London and Tokyo, respectively. But, her path could be tricky as she is an unseeded contestant—a result of the strategic switch to the 50kg category which had been made with Paris 2024 in mind.

Zareen's preference to fight at mid-range (about an arm's length away) may make life difficult against top boxers who are master clinchers (clinch is when boxers look like they are hugging). This is how Thailand's Raksat Chuthamat got the better of her at Hangzhou, but Zareen believes the advantage of her style—being able to adapt fast—makes it effective. Zareen, who trained in Turkey under the Target Olympic Podium Scheme, aims to be an all-rounder who can go anywhere the fight leads. She wants to ensure that if the likes of Chuthamat or Vietnam's Nguyen Thi Tamin strike and miss, she gets the time and distance to counter-punch.

Outside the ring, Zareen is uncomplicated. She has revealed her father encouraged sports in the hope of his not-so-bright daughter landing a sports quota job. She has spoken about comforting her mother, who was worried by her bruised and bloodied face, that suitors would queue up once she made it big. Clearly, an open personality, but, in the ring, she never lets her guard down. 📌

NIKHAT  
ZAREEN

AGE: 28

WORLD CHAMPION (2022, 2023)

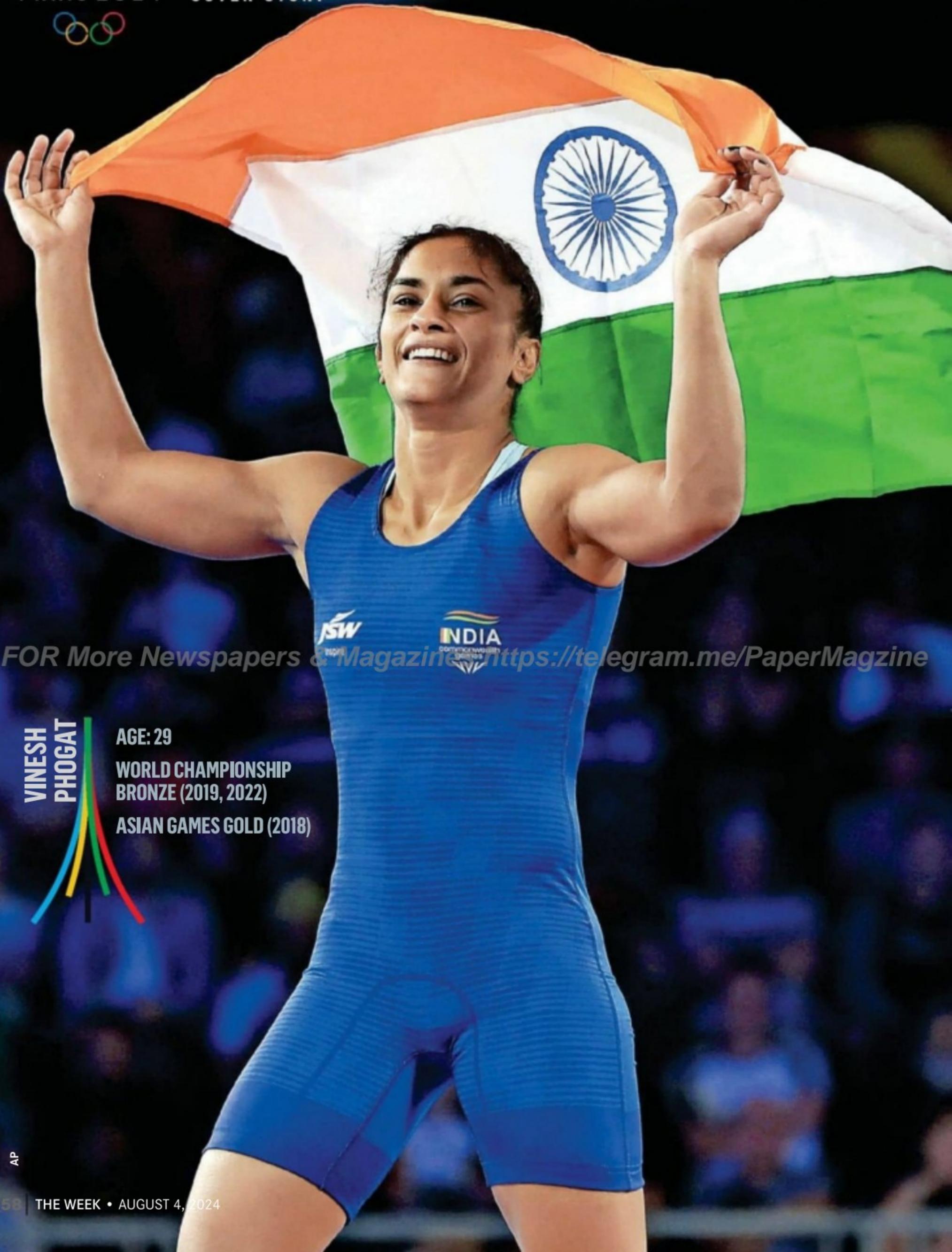
ASIAN GAMES BRONZE (2023)

PTI



PARIS 2024

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**VINESH  
PHOGAT**

AGE: 29

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP  
BRONZE (2019, 2022)

ASIAN GAMES GOLD (2018)

AP

# Street fighter

Vinesh Phogat's path to Paris has been a rollercoaster ride; a medal there would be the fairytale ending

BY ANIRUDH MADHAVAN

**O**n her road to Paris, Vinesh Phogat had an unlikely sparring partner—the Delhi Police. There she was, a two-time World Championship medallist protesting on the road, skin touching asphalt, as she took on the might of former Wrestling Federation of India president Brijbhushan Sharan Singh. “They did such *badtameezi* (ill-mannered acts) that they tore our clothes,” she told ESPN. “They knew we were wrestlers and attacked us in covert ways. They twisted our legs so that we would get injured. One officer twisted Sangeeta’s [her cousin and wrestler] knee and I had to intervene and say she needs to wrestle, stop doing that. They would scratch us with their nails in a manner that it wouldn’t be seen. They pulled our hair in the guise of pulling us.”

Phogat was taking a stand for a handful of female wrestlers who had accused Singh of sexual assault. The case is still in court and, as fate would have it, the trial against Sin-

THE PAST TWO YEARS HAVE BEEN TOUGH FOR PHOGAT. NOT ONLY DID SHE HAVE TO FACE BARBS ABOUT USING “POLITICS TO SAVE A DROWNING CAREER”, BUT ALSO HAD TO TAKE CARE OF HER WONKY KNEE, WHICH REQUIRED SURGERY.

gh begins on July 26, the day the Olympics begin in Paris.

This is Phogat’s third bite at the cherry—having lost out in 2016 and 2021—and a win here would make it the sweetest. For this time, it is about more than just proving that she deserves a chair at the champions’ table. It is personal, it is political, it is everything in between.

The past two years have been tough for the three-time Commonwealth gold medallist. Not only did she have to face death threats and barbs about using “politics to save a drowning career”, but also had to take care of her wonky knee, which required surgery.

When she did return to the mat, it was not in her natural weight category of 53kg; that spot went to the talented Antim Panghal, one of the bright spots in an otherwise bleak phase of Indian wrestling.

No, Phogat had dropped down to 50kg, in which she won a quota for the Paris Olympics. Her options to head to Paris were—take on Antim for the 53kg spot (if the WFI conducted trials, which it did not), go up to 57kg and face physically stronger wrestlers, or drop down to 50kg, a category she had last wrestled in consistently in 2018. She went with the mad option of losing about 10kg to make the 50kg category and breezed through the competition at the Asian qualifiers to book the ticket to Paris.

However, unlike Antim in the 53kg category, Phogat is not seeded in her own group, which means she will go into the tournament blind. She could not rack up the points needed for seeding as she was out of competition or was still adjusting to the weight class when she did compete in those ranking tournaments. The system works in a way that the seeded athletes avoid each other till the later rounds. Phogat, though, could end up facing the No. 1 seed Yui Susaki, who is the reigning Olympic and world champion, in the first round and get knocked out.

And that is when the critics will show up once again with their “told-you-so”s. But, as a woman who has been fighting the police, politicians and the system, Phogat would take her chances on the mat. After all, the mat is home. 🏠



PARIS 2024



COVER STORY

# Weight of a nation

Mirabai's injury woes have made things difficult for her, but India's only lifter in Paris should not be underestimated

BY BECHU S.

If another word can give 'legend' a run for its money in the realm of overused terms in sports, it would be 'redemption.' So common is the use of the word that fans may be left to wonder whether any professional athlete has ever managed a career sans a redemption arc.

But, Saikhom Mirabai Chanu's is a redemption story in its truest sense. After her humble beginnings in a Manipur village, where she was noted for lifting firewood bundles too heavy for her brother, she made it big to represent India at Rio 2016. The 21-year-old failed to register a valid lift in the clean and jerk.

But, within a year, she became only the second Indian weightlifter, after Karnam Malleswari, to win gold at the World Weightlifting Championships. And when the Games reached Tokyo, Mirabai was on the podium on the opening day with a silver medal in the 49kg category.

The journey till Tokyo fits the 'redemption' bill, but there would be more in store. She suffered a wrist injury in training, and battled pain to win silver at the 2022 World Championships in Colombia. Then, at the Hangzhou Asian Games in 2023, she fell and injured her thigh when her hip gave out during a clean and jerk lift. She had been in pain since her final lift in snatch, but kept pushing in the clean and jerk to try and secure a medal. The on-stage collapse was during her third try. A limping Mirabai was helped out of the arena.

She was out of action for six months. These were crucial days. In rehabilitation, she was not only missing training but qualification events as well. This led to genuine fears regarding her qualification for Paris

SAIKHOM MIRABAI CHANU

AGE: 29

OLYMPIC SILVER  
WORLD CHAMPION (2017)

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP  
SILVER (2022)





IT IS PREDICTED THAT SHE WILL HAVE TO TARGET A TOTAL LIFT OF 200KG-PLUS TO CLAIM A SECOND OLYMPIC MEDAL. HER PERSONAL BEST OF 205KG AND THE THEN CLEAN AND JERK WORLD RECORD OF 119KG CAME AT THE 2021 ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS.

2024. She returned to competition in April, at the World Cup in Thailand. It was the final qualifier for the Olympics and a compulsory event for weightlifters to be eligible for Paris. Mirabai managed a twelfth-placed finish to seal her Olympic berth. She will be the only Indian weightlifter in Paris.

Mirabai has said that she was targeting a 90kg snatch (her best is 88kg) and a better clean and jerk lift in Paris. She was not lifting more than 80 kg during training. In her own words, she was 100 per cent recovered but 80-85 per cent fit in training. "I can't set a target," she said. "I will do what it takes and give my best to win a medal, but I can't predict the colour."

She has been choosy about her participation in competitions. The World Cup was her only competition after the injury. "I was apprehensive about another injury," she said. "I didn't want to spoil my Paris chances."

Le Ferte-Milon, France, was her acclimatise-base. National coach Vijay Sharma and conditioning coach Dr Aaron Horschig are part of the team.

It is predicted that she will have to target a total lift of 200kg-plus to claim a second Olympic medal. Her personal best of 205kg and the then clean and jerk world record of 119kg came at the 2021 Asian Championships in Tashkent. True, there is no clear picture of her recent form. But, there is nothing to suggest that Mirabai's determination would not get her back on the podium.

It is said that the darkest hour is just before dawn. Mirabai has worked hard through the darkness. How can dawn be far away? ●

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# Endless ambition

**T**he clock showed just over five seconds left when Germany's Lukas Windfeder drag-flicked a penalty corner towards the Indian goal. It was the bronze medal match at Tokyo 2020 and India was leading 5-4 towards the end of a thrilling encounter. The German had already scored seven goals in Tokyo, including one earlier in the match. But, at the crucial moment, he could not get past goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh, 'The Wall of Indian Hockey'. India had its first Olympic hockey medal since 1980.

Sreejesh, 36, will be back in India's goal at Paris 2024, for one last time. A veteran of 328 caps across 18 years, he will be the first Indian goalkeeper to participate in four Olympics. It is evident that he wants more than a bronze to show for it. While announcing that he would retire after Paris, he said that he wanted to help in changing the colour of the medal this time. The expectations are high. But, the task also feels difficult this time. India, ranked 7<sup>th</sup>, are in the same group as Tokyo gold medallists Belgium (rank 3) and silver medallists Australia (4). The other teams in the group are Argentina (6), New Zealand (10) and Ireland (11).

India won against Argentina in May, but suffered a white-

**P.R. Sreejesh goes into his last tournament for India with the aim of upgrading the bronze won in Tokyo**

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

wash in a five-game series in Australia in April. But, Sreejesh is not worried about the results Down Under. "It was an experimental tournament for us," he told THE WEEK. "I believe we succeeded in that irrespective of the results. We learnt where we need to improve and are working on that for the Olympics." He added that the coach wanted to test the youngsters, too.

And, what does the senior statesman of the team think about his younger teammates?

"We have a good strength of

players here," he said. "They are competitive. Each one is pushing really hard to get in the team. That healthy competition is helping us grow as a team."

He also believes that he is leaving the goalkeeper role in safe hands. "Krishan Pathak (Sreejesh's 27-year-old deputy) is one of the most talented goalkeepers in the world," said Sreejesh. "I have been watching him since 2016, when I joined the junior team to mentor them. I have seen him progressing as a wonderful goalkeeper. He already has good experience and I believe that he can be a vital part for this team for long."

For now though, the focus will be on the veteran. His younger teammates may prefer it that way as they prepare for a potentially life-changing tournament. And, Sreejesh has repeatedly shown that he is well-adjusted to having all eyes on him. Hockey India president and former national team captain Dilip Tirkey is confident about Sreejesh's match-winning ability. "He is very experienced and we all saw his performance at the last Olympics," Tirkey told THE WEEK. "I am sure that he will do well at his fourth Olympics and help the team."

Sreejesh, as seasoned goalkeepers tend to do, is just focused on the basics. He said his personal aim for the Olympics was to "reduce mistakes and make more saves so that the team survives till the last match". ●

P.R. SREEJESH

AGE: 36

GOALKEEPER OF THE YEAR (2021, 2022)

WORLD GAMES ATHLETE OF THE YEAR (2021)

SREEJESH, AS SEASONED GOALKEEPERS TEND TO DO, IS JUST FOCUSED ON THE BASICS. HE SAID HIS PERSONAL AIM FOR THE OLYMPICS WAS TO "REDUCE MISTAKES AND MAKE MORE SAVES SO THAT THE TEAM SURVIVES TILL THE LAST MATCH".

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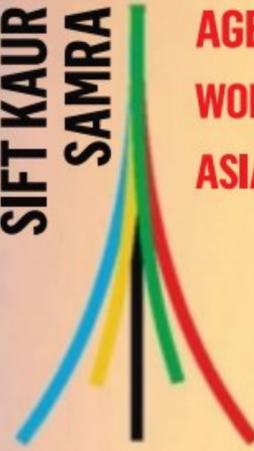
PARIS 2024



COVER STORY

SIFT KAUR  
SAMRA

AGE: 22  
WORLD RECORD HOLDER  
ASIAN GAMES GOLD (2023)



GETTY IMAGES

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# Taking aim

Sift Kaur Samra has a world record to her name; now she has a chance to wipe clean the memories of India's dismal shooting performance at Tokyo 2020

BY ANIRUDH MADHAVAN

**Y**ou need a steady hand to handle a rifle. Or a scalpel. Sift Kaur Samra has done both. Not only did she clear the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, which is in itself an achievement, but she also broke the world record in 50m Rifle Three Positions at the 2023 Asian Games.

"When I planned for NEET, I had a thought that I'm going to leave shooting and this would be my last national [games]," she told THE WEEK. "And at that national, because I was not under any pressure and I was just so relaxed, I broke the national record. And I was like, okay, this is the way I should play the match. No tension, no pressure, nothing. You know how to shoot. You know how to perform. It is just that how you control your thoughts. I really am thankful to medical for helping me understand my shooting."

This clarity of thought is a hallmark of Sift's game. The 22-year-old from Punjab started shooting when she was 16; she had seen her father's friend, a shooter, on television, and her father had then taken her to the range.

Six years later, she's at her first Olympics, and that too in what they call the hardest event in shooting. "Changing into three positions (kneeling, prone and standing) and carrying a lot of stuff with you is really difficult. And more than that, we have to face a lot of challenges," she

said. "If there is wind, you have to shoot. You cannot wait."

All this makes the world record all the more impressive. In fact, when asked if she would rather have a world record or a major medal, she chose the former. "When I broke the world record, P.V. Sindhu texted me. She said, 'Enjoy this, *roz roz world record nahi toot-tey* (world records aren't broken every day)," she said. "That was a really beautiful line."

Sift would look to emulate Sindhu, who won a medal in her debut Olympics in Rio 2016. And her calmness would be an advantage. Sift looks at the Olympics as just another tournament, and she will just stick to her guns. "I have to do the same thing that I do in my training and I do in my competition," she said.

That she does not have the baggage of the Tokyo failure—the Indian shooting contingent had gone in with high hopes to the previous Olympics, but was off target—could help her keep a clear head during tense situations.

In a recent episode of *The Great Indian Kapil Show*, Sift was a plant in the audience who was picked out to join former Olympians Mary Kom, Saina Nehwal and Sania Mirza on the couch. She showed off her skills in front of the studio audience and was given advice by the veterans.

If she keeps her momentum—she won bronze at the ISSF Munich World Cup last month—Sift could not only erase the blemishes of Tokyo 2020, but also enter the league of the ladies she shared that stage with. ●



PARIS 2024

COVER STORY



# Lakshya's zen energy

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While being fully aware of his ability and his weakness, Lakshya Sen is not thinking too far ahead

BY BECHU S.

**L**akshya Sen is somebody who can do well in big matches; he's got that champion mindset, H.S. Prannoy told THE WEEK about his fellow Paris-bound badminton star.

Had Prannoy spoken a few months back, it may have seemed like hollow, kind words to motivate a youngster. To say Sen was struggling would be an understatement. The shuttler from Uttarakhand's Almora suffered seven round-one exits

between September and January. He split with a coach and further slipped in the rankings, leaving his Olympic debut dream in jeopardy.

But, the 22-year-old rose from the ashes to reach the semifinals of both the French Open and the All England Open to seal his berth at Paris 2024. That is Lakshya Sen for you. Prannoy would agree...

"I was struggling," Sen told THE WEEK. "By November, there was a change in my approach with a focus

on building myself rather than just playing tournaments. I got those few weeks of good training, in Bengaluru, in November and December to build myself up. It was the key to changing results."

But, he did not do well immediately. The bad run continued with the Malaysia Open and the India Open in January. "But, slowly, my fitness improved," he said. "It fell into place during the European Tour. By March, I found the rhythm and

AP



LAKSHYA  
SEN

AGE: 22

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP BRONZE (2021)

ALL ENGLAND OPEN RUNNER-UP (2022)

the French Open and the All England gave me a lot of confidence. It has been a great journey since then.”

During his bad run, his former coach, Vimal Kumar, returned to his side in December. Sen is grateful for Kumar’s contributions in keeping him hungry. “Even when I faced those first-round exits, he kept motivating me,” he said. “He would analyse my bad matches, but remained certain that I was going to make it to the Games.”

At Paris, Sen, world No. 18, has been drawn in Group L with familiar foe Indonesian Jonatan Christie (rank 3), Guatemala’s Kevin Cordon (Tokyo semifinalist) and Belgium’s Julien Carraggi. Sen, the 2022 Commonwealth champion, is targeting to top the group and trained in Marseille with the aim of getting adjusted to French conditions and to get a good sleep cycle. “It is in the same time zone as Paris, which is only three hours away,” he said. “So, I can practise at the timings when my matches would happen.”

Sen’s defensive game is solid. Yet, he lacks a killer instinct towards the end in close games, critics have said. This was why Dane Anders Antonsen got him 24-22, 21-18 in the Indonesia Open quarterfinal clash in June, they said. Sen accepts that he has to be more aggressive towards the end of games. “No doubt, you have to be on your toes to create chances and go all out in rallies,” he said. He is working on it.

India’s Olympic badminton medals have been clinched by women, Saina Nehwal in 2012 (bronze) and P.V. Sindhu in 2016 (silver) and 2020 (bronze). While fully aware of his ability, Sen is not thinking too far ahead. “I am focused on the preparation,” he said. “I am gonna take it one match at a time, thinking about nothing other than the game in hand.”



PARIS 2024 COVER STORY



# The chase *is on*

Avinash Sable has planned his season perfectly to peak just in time for the Olympics

BY BECHU S.

**I**t is okay to lose a battle if you win the war. This is the philosophy that Avinash Sable seems to have embraced ahead of Paris 2024. Only, the Indian Army athlete chose to skip some battles altogether.

The Commonwealth Games silver medallist, who often starts the season early, has competed in just three 3,000m steeplechase events this year. At the Portland Track Festival in the US, he clocked 8:21.85 before managing 8:31.75 at the National Inter-State Championships in Panchkula, Haryana.

Then, at the Paris Diamond League Sable clocked 8:09.91 to smash the Indian 3,000m steeplechase record for an outlandish tenth time. The new personal best, his first sub-8:10s-finish, saw him crossing the line sixth, in a race that saw five of the top six set new personal bests.

His timing in Panchkula at the end of June and in Paris at the start of July seem like chalk and cheese. A staggering 20-second plus difference. One reason could be that the competition was lower in India—the athlete who finished second was 15 seconds behind him. But, there is more to it than that. His thin schedule this year shows that he wanted to peak at the Diamond League, just ahead of the Olympics. And peak, he did. Plus, with the experience of having competed against the likely-finalists at Paris 2024, he learnt what he was up against and had time for

analysis and modifications.

Sable's new strategy seemingly evolved from earlier disappointments. The Asian Games gold medallist was in good shape ahead of the 2022 World Athletics Championships, but he finished eleventh. Similarly, he did not progress from the heats in the 2023 World Championships. "Every year, I used to start my season early. But... I was not being able to compete," the 29-year-old has said. "I only ran a few 5,000m and 10,000m races (at the start of the 2024 season). I was not running for timing, but taking it as practice for the Olympics."

Switching his base to the US's Colorado Springs also proved right as he trained with the likes of multiple Olympic medallist Paul Chelimo. Alongside him in the altitude training at the Springs was Parul Chaudhary, who will represent India in the women's 5,000m and 3,000m steeplechase.

Sable and Chaudhary, accompanied by coach Scott Simons, also trained in St. Mortiz, Switzerland. Located at an altitude of 1,856m in the Alps, it is a haven for altitude training of long-distance runners. It is a perfect final stop for Sable before his run for glory in Paris.

After showing immense promise, Sable has somehow failed to establish himself on the global stage. Contracting Covid-19 twice ahead of the Tokyo Olympics did not help. But, he has silenced all doubters by breaking the Kenyan monopoly over the Commonwealth Games with his silver in 2022.

Sable knows his body. He has known it right from the days of running 6km daily to reach school in Maharashtra's Beed. He had to depend on his fitness to survive while he manned the border at Siachen Glacier. So, when he says he is in the form of his life, there is no need to doubt it. The battles he avoided could well mean the difference in Paris.

"It will be a technical race and I am ready for that," he said. "Let us see what happens." ●



**AVINASH  
SABLE**

AGE: 29

COMMONWEALTH SILVER (2022)

ASIAN GAMES GOLD (2023)

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# Par for the course

Aditi Ashok has a realistic chance of medalling at Paris 2024, but a good start will be crucial

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

*August 2021. "Are you watching golf? This cute Bengaluru girl... She needs some birdies. With eagles, she could even win gold."*

*"Bloody hell, somebody get her the damn birds. So, are they like good luck charms?"*

*Judgmental silence.*

*Google search: birdies eagles golf.*

**E**ven as I frantically read up on golf-related terms, the search term "golf rules" was at its peak in Google's trends for India. The reason was Aditi Ashok. The unheralded golfer, who was ranked 178th in the world before Tokyo 2020, got off to a flying start at the Kasumigaseki Country Club's East Course. The par—the number of strokes a proficient

golfer would need to complete the course—was 71. Aditi finished the 18-hole course in 67 strokes in the first round—the same as the world number one Nelly Korda of the US.

In the second round, Aditi improved, finishing in 66, but Korda pulled ahead with a masterful 62. Aditi was joint second with two others. In the third round, things got more exciting as Korda stumbled and Aditi closed the gap, and went clear at second. On the fourth and final day, Aditi was unable to get under-par scores in the first four holes, allowing Rio 2016 silver medallist Lydia Ko of New Zealand to climb to the second place. Aditi recovered and got her birdies (one stroke under par; eagle is two strokes under

par)—to stay in contention. But, narrowly missed birdies in the last two holes—the ball caressing the edge of the 17th hole—cost her a medal. (Korda won gold and Japan's Mone Inami beat Ko in a silver-bronze play-off.)

Three years on, Aditi is a much-changed golfer. Her driving distances have visibly improved. This helps her get closer to the hole off the tee. She had the best year of her career in 2023, winning two events, finishing second in another two, third in one and in the top 10 in four more. She ended the year ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> and reached her best ranking of 39 in early 2024.

However, she has had a less spectacular 2024, not finishing in the top 10 in 15 events. As a result, she has slipped to the 60<sup>th</sup> rank. She is also yet to win a golf major. At the Hangzhou Asian Games in 2023, while she won a historic silver for India, she missed a great chance to win gold (losing a seven-stroke lead).

At Paris 2024, despite not being one of the favourites on paper, she is still a contender for the podium. One of the reasons is her strong short game. According to a report in ESPN, she is the seventh best putter in the world in 2024. Also, the Olympic field is generally weaker than professional events because of the restrictions on the number of golfers from a country. And, Aditi, 26, has shown that, on her day, she can hold her own against the best in the world. For instance, she finished above Korda, who is still the world No. 1, at a 2023 event.

So, at her best, Aditi is very much on a par with the rest of the field at Paris 2024. At Tokyo 2020, her strong start put her in medal contention. In Paris, too, it will be crucial to score under par, right from the off. ●

ADITI HAD THE BEST YEAR OF HER CAREER IN 2023, WINNING TWO EVENTS, FINISHING SECOND IN ANOTHER TWO, THIRD IN ONE AND IN THE TOP 10 IN FOUR MORE.

ADITI  
ASHOK



AGE: 26

5 LADIES EUROPEAN TOUR WINS

4<sup>TH</sup> AT THE TOKYO OLYMPICS



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PARIS 2024

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AP

# I N T E R V I E W

## THOMAS BACH

PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

# NOT LETTING OUR GUARD DOWN

BY MARC VENTOUILLAC

**T**he International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach is taking a calm approach to the Paris Games. But he does not intend to lower his guard in the face of security issues and geopolitical tensions.

Bach, a former Olympic fencing gold medallist, would have liked to have taken a dip in the Seine with Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo and Tony Estanguet, president of the organising committee. But one meeting follows another for the German, who met French President Emmanuel Macron after his visit to France's National Institute of Sport, Expertise and Performance (INSEP). Bach was also present at the opening of the athletes' village. Excerpts from an interview:

**Q/ Finally, here we are.**

**A/** The real 'finally' will be on July 26. We can't wait for the opening ceremony. After that, it is time for sport. We're coming to the end of this long journey and we can finally reap the rewards. The results are becoming tangible, we can see the success of the Olympic flame.... It's a great time, but as an athlete, I know that it's not the training that counts, it's the championship. In that sense, we are working well together with the organising committees for the Olympic Games to finally create this success for which we have all the ingredients.

**Q/ These are the first post-Covid Games...**

**A/** It is extremely important. I've just been around our offices here in Paris. What all our colleagues are saying is that there are no more masks, but

above all, that we are not only together, but that we feel together and that we can be happy to be together. It's a completely different atmosphere, and that's very important for the atmosphere of these Games.

**Q/ Do you have any concerns?**

**A/** The preparation is excellent, there's nothing to fear, there are no worries. If I had any concerns, it would be if I felt or saw that we were letting our guard down because of this excellent preparation. But the OCOG (Organising Committee for the Olympic Games) is continuing to work with the same attitude as before. They are very vigilant, they are not unaware of the challenges. Everything is put on the table, we discuss, we decide and then we manage to resolve the problems or challenges that arise. And that's the key to success. I'm confident that

things will go on like this, and that's why I'm not worried.

**Q/ Any problems with the political situation in France?**

**A/** No. Everyone wants the Olympics to be a great success for France and for the Olympic movement.

**Q/ Are you more worried after the attack on Donald Trump?**

**A/** No. It's an American situation, so I'm not worried. We have full confidence in the French authorities, who keep us regularly informed of their work. I'm sure that the French authorities are cooperating very, very closely with many international intelligence services, and, of course, with the American services.

**Q/ How many Russian and Belarusian athletes will be at the Paris Games?**

**A/** Fourteen athletes with Russian passports and sixteen with Belarusian passports have accepted the invitation. What we have seen is a different attitude between Belarus and Russia. The Belarusian National Olympic Committee has been constructive. Two days ago, they took a formal decision to ensure their presence and to support their athletes so that they can make their Olympic dream a reality. The situation in Russia is different. There are several sporting and government authorities who have taken a different attitude.

**Q/ Are you aware of any tensions between the Israeli and Palestinian athletes?**

**A/** No, because what we've been seeing for 30 years now gives us a lot of confidence. These two national Olympic committees have lived in peaceful coexistence. That's not to say that there weren't problems and discussions, but they always respected each other's existence. They have taken note of our efforts and accepted them. ●

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I N T E R V I E W

RAFAEL NADAL

# Alcaraz and I are going for a medal

BY VICTOR LENGRONNE

**R**afael Nadal looks back on a paradoxical Roland Garros, where he rediscovered his excellent sensations despite losing his opener at the French Open. Still unsure of how far his career will go, the 38-year-old Spaniard is preparing with great enthusiasm for the Olympics, where he will play singles and partner the sensational Carlos Alcaraz in doubles. Excerpts from an interview:

**Q/ Have you seriously thought about stopping your career?**

**A/** Yes, of course. Many times. I had recurring problems, I couldn't train, I wasn't enjoying myself. When I'm not enjoying myself, when I'm too physically limited, it loses all meaning in everyday life. Absolutely everything. And even more so when you're almost 38, have a family and after the career I've had. But I've always had people on my side who have helped me, whether it's my family or my team. And I've always been able to stay stable in my head.

**Q/ Where do you stand on your potential farewell?**

**A/** I've never taken a decision in haste, and that won't be the case this time either. The way I've felt over the last few weeks means I want to explore a bit more, to see what can happen. I feel like I'm back to enjoying myself and having fun. I want to give myself a chance to see if my physique stays at this level or if it's just a passing moment and things start to go wrong again. I'm giving myself time to see how I feel after the Olympics, and then we'll see what happens and what decisions I make. But always with great serenity, with

the satisfaction of having always done my best. And when I have to make a decision, in the end, I'll take it without any problem. I've always said that I think this will be my last year, but I can't say for sure, because at the end of the day, you never know what's going to happen in the future.

**Q/ How did you react when Carlos Alcaraz won the French Open? He's the first Spaniard to succeed you.**

**A/** I'm delighted for him and his family. He's an incredible player and a good person. For me, he was the great favourite. I felt that if Carlos played at his level, without necessarily being incredibly good, he would be hard to beat. He's the one with the greatest ability to play





I'M TRAINING TO BE READY FOR SINGLES. I WANT TO PLAY AT A HIGH LEVEL IN SINGLES AND I KNOW THAT IF I CAN DO THAT, I'LL BE ABLE TO PLAY AT A GOOD LEVEL IN DOUBLES.

in different ways. And on clay, that makes all the difference: he can play aggressively, defend, reverse the rally in different ways. The other players are incredible, but on clay, they have fewer options than he does.

**Q/ How did you end up partnering him in doubles at the Olympics?**

**A/** I don't know, that's a difficult question to answer, because we didn't really know if I was going to play in the Olympics, or how I was going to get there. Then David Ferrer (Spain's coach) said to me: "If you're feeling well, Carlos would like to play doubles with you. Would you be up for it?"

Of course, I was delighted! I couldn't have a better partner than him.

**Q/ Will you be preparing specifically for doubles?**

**A/** No, I'm training to be ready for singles. I want to play at a high level in singles and I know that if I can do that, I'll be able to play at a good level in doubles. That's what I've always done: when I've played well in singles, I've played well in doubles. It's true that I haven't played doubles for a long time, and the ideal thing would have been to play a tournament beforehand, but that wasn't possible. If Carlos is available and I'm physically fit, I think it would be interesting to train together the week before the Olympics. The Olympics are a team affair. Doubles are almost as important as singles. It's an opportunity to try and win a medal. That's the ultimate goal. ●

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REUTERS



# NEAR MISSES

17 times India came agonisingly close to Olympic medals

## DINKARRAO SHINDE

ANTWERP 1920

**MEN'S 60KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING**

The Maharashtra wrestler got a bye in round one. Won the next bout. Finished fourth in a field of 10 after losing the bronze medal bout



## KESHAV MANGAVE

HELSINKI 1952

**MEN'S 62KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING**

The Maharashtra wrestler got a bye/walkover in the first two rounds, lost to Iran's silver medallist, beat a Canadian and lost to the US's bronze medallist. Stood fourth in a field of 21

## FOOTBALL TEAM

MELBOURNE 1956

**MEN'S FOOTBALL**

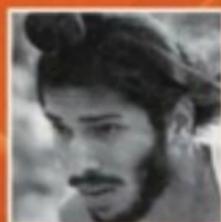
Bye in round one; beat Australia 4-2; lost 4-1 to Yugoslavia and lost the bronze medal match 3-0 to Bulgaria to finish fourth in the 11-team tournament

## MILKHA SINGH

ROME 1960

**MEN'S 400M**

Singh, with a time of 45.6 seconds, finished 0.10 seconds behind the South African bronze medallist. 'The Flying Sikh' stood fourth among 54 athletes



## PREM NATH

MUNICH 1972

**MEN'S 57KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING**

The Delhi wrestler won four bouts. Lost to the US's silver medallist and Japan's gold medallist. Hungary's bronze medallist won the medal based on fewer negative points than Nath, who stood fourth in a field of 28



## SUDESH KUMAR

MUNICH 1972

**MEN'S 52KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING**

Won four bouts. Lost to Japan's gold medallist and the Soviet silver medallist. Stood fourth in a field of 24



## P.T. USHA

LOS ANGELES 1984

**WOMEN'S 400M HURDLES**

Usha, with a time of 55.42 seconds, finished 0.01 seconds behind Romania's bronze medallist. 'The Payyoli Express' stood fourth among 26 athletes

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## KUNJARANI DEVI

ATHENS 2004

WOMEN'S 48KG WEIGHTLIFTING

The Manipur weightlifter lifted a total of 190kg, 10kg behind the Thai bronze medallist, to finish fourth in a field of 15



## DIPA KARMAKAR

RIO 2016

WOMEN'S VAULT GYMNASTICS

Tripura gymnast got to the final and landed the Produnova vault, but missed bronze by 0.150 points



## JOYDEEP KARMAKAR

LONDON 2012

MEN'S 50M RIFLE PRONE

The West Bengal shooter scored 699.1. The Slovenian bronze medallist finished on 701. Karmakar was fourth in a field of 50



## ADITI ASHOK

TOKYO 2020

WOMEN'S GOLF

The Karnataka golfer performed phenomenally and held her spot in the top three till the final round, when she slipped to fourth in a field of 60

## RAJINDER SINGH

LOS ANGELES 1984

MEN'S 74KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING

The Haryana wrestler won three bouts, before losing to the German silver medallist. Lost to Yugoslavia's bronze medallist to finish fourth among 22 wrestlers



## ABHINAV BINDRA

RIO 2016

MEN'S 10M AIR RIFLE

The Beijing 2008 gold medallist finished fourth in a field of 50



## HOCKEY TEAM

TOKYO 2020

WOMEN'S HOCKEY

Recovered from early defeats with back to back wins. Upset against Australia in the quarters. But, two narrow defeats saw them finish fourth



## LEANDER PAES & MAHESH BHUPATI

ATHENS 2004

MEN'S DOUBLES TENNIS

Won three matches in straight sets, including against Roddick's US team and Federer's Swiss team. Lost to the German silver medallists. Lost the bronze match 7-6, 4-6, 16-14 to the Croatian pair



## SANIA MIRZA & ROHAN BOPANNA

RIO 2016

MIXED DOUBLES TENNIS

Lost semifinal to silver medallists Venus Williams and Rajeev Ram. Lost bronze medal match 6-1, 7-5 to the Czech team



## DEEPAK PUNIA

TOKYO 2020

MEN'S 86KG FREESTYLE WRESTLING

The Haryana wrestler won two bouts before losing to the US's gold medallist in the semi final. Lost the bronze medal match to finish joint fifth in a field of 16

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I N T E R V I E W

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LEON MARCHAND  
FRENCH SWIMMER

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# NO LIMIT TO WHAT I CAN DO

BY CÉLINE NONY

**F**rench swimmer Leon Marchand, five-time world champion, will dive into the pool at the Paris La Défense Arena on July 28 for the 400-metre medley that has been promised to him ever since he retained his world title last summer in Fukuoka, while smashing legend Michael Phelps's last world record—Marchand's record was 4.02.50 compared with Phelps's 4.03.84 (in 2008). A feat that has already given him a new status, ahead of this quest for an incredible Olympic challenge that could see him become the first Frenchman to win four individual gold medals in a single edition of the Games (the 22-year-old is competing in the 400m freestyle, 200m butterfly, 200m breaststroke and 200m freestyle). Excerpts from an interview:

**Q/ In two years, you have won five world titles and beaten Phelps' world record. How has that changed your life?**

**A/** I don't feel any different, I've just evolved. I'm a better version of myself, in the sense that I have more confidence in myself. When I make choices in my everyday life, I regret them a lot less than I used to. And that's thanks to swimming. It doesn't necessarily come from titles, but they validate what I do every day. This development has been a long road since I was a kid.

**Q/ What do you mean by that?**

**A/** I've always been very shy and reserved. But I've taken my destiny into my own hands. I know myself better and better, my abilities, my faults. I'm able to choose what I want to do, without following the herd. I'm more focused on myself and I think I'm much more mature. I've become very independent since I started living on my own. Three years ago, I'd come home, put my feet under the table, the pasta and chicken were ready; now it's different. All my life, everything I do all day, is to be better the next day in the water. Obviously, that requires sacrifice. But the titles serve as a reward, they help you get back in the water at 6am on Monday morning. When you don't have results, it's harder to do all that.

**Q/ The downside is your new status, isn't it?**

**A/** When I'm in the US, I'm still a normal student who goes to classes and the swimming pool.

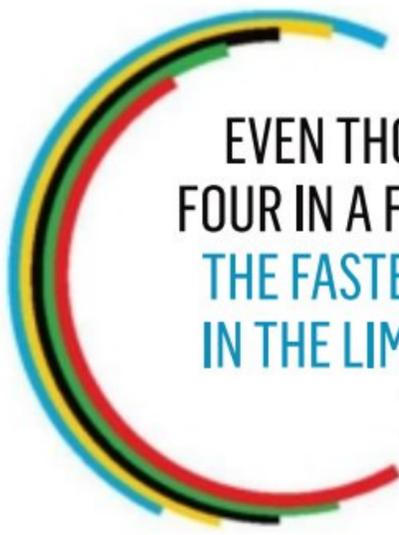
They don't recognise me, I'm just one of many world champions. And it suits me to remain incognito. Even though I love being on lane four in a final [the one reserved for the fastest time], I don't like being in the limelight, having to express myself in public. But I'm making it my own more and more.

**Q/ Over the past two years, we've noticed that your family and friends have become quite involved in your career. How do you get organised?**

**A/** We form a small group with my mother, who looks after me, my father, who looks after the media, and Carole (Bluzat, a family friend), who is a lawyer and manages my image and contracts with sponsors. There's also Bob (Bowman, his American coach), who is a major player. So there are five of us, which is quite small, but it's enough to protect me. In absolute terms, I'd like to see everyone and please everyone. Seeing people smile is great! It makes me really happy, but I could get carried away. Those closest to me know how to call me to order, tell me to reduce the time I spend with the press, to go and recuperate. Together, we draw up a career plan. It came about quite naturally after the World Championships in Budapest (2022). Basically, my job is limited to what I do in the water they take care of everything else.

**Q/ Conversely, your parents have chosen to withdraw completely from the media. Why is that?**

**A/** They've never really liked being in front of the cameras to talk about me. They never wanted us to share personal things, and neither did I for that matter. We try to keep it professional. I receive hundreds of requests a day, and they're the ones who



EVEN THOUGH I LOVE BEING ON LANE FOUR IN A FINAL [THE ONE RESERVED FOR THE FASTEST TIME], I DON'T LIKE BEING IN THE LIMELIGHT, HAVING TO EXPRESS MYSELF IN PUBLIC.



#### FOLLOWING THE CHAMPION

Marchand (left) with American swimmer and decorated Olympian Michael Phelps after he broke Phelps' 400m individual medley record

Michael Phelps is the most decorated athlete at the summer Olympics—he has **28 medals**, including **23 gold**—and has more podium finishes than most countries. He was at his dominant best at **Beijing 2008**, where he won a mind-boggling eight gold medals.

sort them out, which is a huge relief for me. All these decisions are taken together. We realised after Budapest just how big things were. Before, I was a national-level swimmer, but Budapest changed everything. I was no longer just an Olympic finalist, but a double world champion. We didn't want to put up with it any more. We had to take things in hand to make my job easier. I really respect the fact that my parents can help me so much, but I don't want it to be their full-time job. They each have their own jobs and their own lives.

**Q/ Isn't it difficult to keep your head on your shoulders?**

**A/** I think it's a question of upbringing. My parents have been like that all their lives, they brought me up to be myself no matter what. I call them every week and we always talk about the same things. Nothing has changed. I always ask for Oscar's [his younger brother]

maths grades, which makes me feel a bit like I'm still in Toulouse. I know exactly what they do every day. That said, my parents taught me that swimming was only a small part of my life, the fun part. Obviously, the fun part has become more professional, but I still have a great time in the water. If it wasn't a passion, I wouldn't get up at 5am to dive into the cold water. My schooling also helps me keep my feet on the ground.

**Q/ What subjects would interest you?**

**A/** The first thing I notice is the extent to which people listen to great sportsmen and women, respecting their voice and their experience. Phelps spent four years of his life when, mentally, it was very difficult. I'm also thinking of the gymnast Simone Biles, who is also very vocal on the subject. Who else can we listen to but them? I very much want to play this kind of role one day with the general public, and with young athletes, too. ●



# *The spectacular disg-race!*

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## My memories of watching the Ben Johnson-Carl Lewis showdown at the 1988 Seoul Olympics

BY AYAZ MEMON

**T**he Carl Lewis versus Ben Johnson showdown in the 100m final at the Seoul 1988 Olympics remains the high point of my career covering sport. Given how events unravelled, before, during and after the race, I have not seen anything more dramatic or spectacular.

Since the modern Olympics began in 1896, the Games remain the biggest sporting event in the world. The Seoul edition carried even more significance, coming as it did after a series of major boycotts that had marred the Olympic movement.

In 1976, more than 20 African countries stayed away from the Montreal Games, protesting the International Olympic Committee's refusal to take action against New Zealand, which had allowed their rugby team to tour South Africa during apartheid.

In 1980, America and most of the Western Bloc, numbering 65 countries, boycotted the Moscow Games protesting the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. This invited retaliation from the Eastern Bloc led by the USSR, adding up to more than 15 countries, which refused to

participate in the Los Angeles Games in 1984.

The future of the Olympics was getting alarmingly wobbly. A reboot had become imperative for the Games to survive.

The IOC, through painstaking lobbying and astute diplomacy, worked towards getting all the countries in the world to participate in the 1988 Games. Even so, seven, including Cuba and North Korea, did not come to Seoul. However, 159 countries did.

A whopping 8,391 athletes participated. For the first time, professional tennis players were permitted to participate. The crème de la crème of sportspersons, including the likes of Edwin Moses, Daley Thompson, Seb Coe, Steve Ovett, Sergey Bubka, Florence Griffith-Joyner, Greg Louganis, Steffi Graf, Chris Evert, Vijay Amritraj and P.T. Usha, were vying for glory. A total of 739 medals were at stake, but no event was more discussed or debated than the 100m sprint featuring Carl Lewis and Ben Johnson.

Their rivalry over the preceding three years had become increasingly intense, bitter but also enthralling, capturing the imagination of the world.



REUTERS

BY THE 80M MARK, WHERE WE WERE SEATED, LEWIS (SECOND FROM RIGHT IN PIC) WAS TRAILING SOME DISTANCE BEHIND, DRAINED OF STRENGTH, HIS TONGUE HANGING OUT, STARING UNBELIEVABLY AT JOHNSON.

just among fans and the media, but also the thousands of athletes in the Games village.

The 100m final was designated the 'Race of the Century'. Conventionally, this race is scheduled in the evening. This time, it was run on the morning of September 24 to suit television audiences, primarily in the US.

We reached the main stadium a couple of hours in advance. The atmosphere was electrifying, the excitement of those in attendance made it a scene of high-decibel cacophony. This turned into hushed whispers as the runners came into view near the starting line, then turned into pin-drop silence when they settled into their starting blocks. Johnson and Lewis exchanged a last glance at each other as they waited for the starter's gun to go off.

When the gun went pop, the runners were off their blocks like lightning. Within a few seconds, Johnson, muscles bulging, had surged ahead, followed closely by Lewis. Would the American be able to outstrip his nemesis? Could Johnson hold on to his lead?

Till the halfway mark, Lewis looked to be in the race. However, by the 80m mark, where we were seated, Lewis was trailing some distance behind, visibly drained of strength, his tongue hanging out as a symbol of helplessness, staring unbelievably at Johnson who powered on, raising his hand to signal triumph as he breasted the tape, the clock watch stopping at an incredible 9.79s. He had bettered the 9.83s world record he had set the previous year. Lewis clocked 9.92s, which won him the silver but seemed pedestrian in

comparison.

The stadium broke into bedlam. The media precincts became the hub of frenetic activity as reporters, writers, photographers and broadcasters flailed over each other to be the first with their dispatches.

My day had started at 5am, to go to the race. It ended around midnight, after the last story had been filed. It had been a daunting, tiring day, but also hugely fulfilling. As I put my head on the pillow to sleep, I told myself how fortunate I was to be at the Olympics. Could there be a bigger story than seeing the Race of the Century!

Around 5am, I was woken up by furious knocking on the door of my room in the media village. "Ben Johnson has tested positive for drugs," said a journalist whose name and nationality I cannot recall now. "He is on his way to the airport to be flown back to Canada."

By this time, word of Johnson being nabbed by a lab assistant for taking the banned substance stanozolol was no longer exclusive information. As word spread, pandemonium broke out in the media village with reporters making a beeline for either the airport or to catch Johnson, or the media centre to chronicle this remarkable twist in the tale; of how Johnson, who had the world at his feet in the morning, had the ground cut from under him by evening, sent to his doom by an ordinary but alert lab assistant.

The race of the century had become, as the title of writer Richard Moore's tour de force account of the Johnson-Lewis rivalry describes, *The Dirtiest Race in History*. ●

Lewis, who had won four gold medals at Los Angeles (100m, 200m, long jump and 4x100m relay) to emulate Jesse Owens, was widely regarded as the greatest athlete of the time, if not all time. But Johnson, a Canadian of Jamaican origin, had begun to dent Lewis's seemingly invincible status.

To see Johnson rise to dizzying heights over such a brief period of time was disorienting and soul-destroying for Lewis. Beaten first in 1985 by Johnson, Lewis—as indeed the whole world—thought this was an aberration. But leading into the Seoul Games, Johnson had beaten the American in marquee races a spate of times.

The 100m sprint, which identifies 'the fastest man on earth', is the blue riband event of the Olympics. It was also Lewis's favourite distance.

At Seoul, his clash for supremacy with Johnson created frenzy not

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**TIME TO TRAIN**

Swami Nateshananda  
Saraswati with young basketball  
players at Perks Public School  
in Coimbatore

# THE MONK WHO SLAM-DUNKS

Swami Nateshananda Saraswati aka N. Amarnath is a former basketball player who participated in the 1980 Moscow Olympics

BY NIRMAL JOVIAL

For Swami Nateshananda Saraswati, 70, shooting a basketball remains a meditative practice. In his *purvashrama*—the life before becoming a *sanyasi* of Advaita philosophy—he was N. Amarnath, a basketball star who represented India in the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics and led the Indian team in the 1982 Asian Games. In his prime, scoring field goals brought him immense joy. Today, his ultimate goal is *moksha* or liberation and oneness with Brahman, the supreme cosmic power in Advaita.

Being at the '*kuticaka*' (first) stage of *sanyasa*, Saraswati lives alone in a flat in Coimbatore. The colour saffron dominates the decor, including the bedsheets. THE WEEK visited him on the eve of his trip to Rishikesh Dayananda Ashram ahead of Guru Purnima. "*Kuticaka sanyasis* live in one place, just abiding in the knowledge," said the Olympian, who embraced the *sanyasi* life a year after his wife's death in 2018.

Saraswati believes that destiny has always taken him on routes he had never expected or foreseen. "There are many talented players who played for India. But how many could become captain," he asked. "Destiny had that for me even though my parents named me after the legendary cricket captain Lala Amarnath, hoping I, too, would be an Indian skipper one day."

Born to a Brahmin family in 1954, Saraswati used to be an all-round cricketer during his school days in Periyakulam, a small town in Tamil Nadu's Theni district. "I was a decent off-spinner and a one-down batsman," he recalled. However, at the age of 16, he fell in love with basketball. His first coach was town postmaster Padmanabhan, who used to train the youth in his locality in his spare time. He started playing for the sports club and was also part of his college team. Soon, the 5'9" player got jobs under the sports quota, first at Madura Coats, then at the Integral Coach Factory in Chennai and finally at the State Bank of India. Saraswati had great admiration for the ICF team, but back then getting a job in India's top bank was like a dream come true. "Because of the declaration of Emergency, I had to wait for two years, from 1975 to 1977, to join the bank," he said. The working hours at the bank gave

NIRMAL JOVIAL

## SPORTS & FAITH

AN OLYMPIAN'S JOURNEY

him ample time to practise daily, and his game improved by leaps and bounds. Little did he know then that destiny had been preparing him and a bunch of others to be India's first Olympic basketball squad.

In the 1979 Asian Basketball Confederation (ABC) Championship, India came fifth. China was at the top, followed by Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. The tournament finished in the second week of December and almost two weeks later Afghanistan was invaded by Soviet forces.

The Summer Olympics of 1980 was scheduled to be held in Moscow, and the American bloc started a movement towards either boycotting the games altogether or moving them out of the Soviet Union to pressure the Soviets to pull out of Afghanistan. The Soviets did not give heed to the deadline declared by the Jimmy Carter administration and this, in turn, pushed US allies to pull their Olympic teams from the Moscow games. Saraswati got selected to the Indian national team for the first time in early 1980 when this boycott movement had been gaining momentum in other parts of the world. "I was selected to the Indian team for a Gulf tour of 10 matches," he said. "Even then, nobody knew India would go to the Olympics."

China, the ABC champion, was supposed to play in the Olympics. But China boycotted the Olympics, and so did Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. "So, India got the invitation," said Saraswati. "It was up to the government to decide whether to send us to Moscow. P.N. Sankaran, then secretary general of the Basketball Federation of India, did an exemplary job of persuading the government. He convinced the authorities that the Olympic team could be selected from the inter-zone championship and could be trained for a month before being sent to Moscow."



Legendary Services coach Captain M. Rajan, while picking the squad for Moscow, considered only merit and discipline. That helped Saraswati earn a place in the team, despite being one of the shortest players. The team had its pre-Olympics practice season at the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports, Patiala.

"I was then working in a branch where many exporters [were clients]. The exporters and the bank staff gifted me a thick brown leather overcoat to beat the cold weather in Russia," recalled Saraswati. "When we landed in Russia, it was 18°C. The days were too long and nights were short. For the first time, we were going beyond the Gulf and Asia to play. There was real excitement."

The Indian team was not comparable with the other teams. "But we went there with the attitude that we must do our best, play a good game and also learn," said Saraswati. "Back then, we did not have TVs. So, we did not even know how the other teams would play. Embassies used to arrange some screenings. That way, we saw videos of American players playing. That's it."

The Games Village in itself was a wonder for the Indian team. "We were surprised to find a machine that had juice coming out on the press

of a button," recalled Saraswati. "It was almost 45 years ago. We had seen only water taps until then, not juice vending machines." India was placed in Group A along with host Soviet Union, who were the favourites to win gold. "And, our opening match itself was against the host in a 60,000-capacity indoor stadium," said Saraswati, adding that they were not too fussed about it as India had nothing to lose. India finished last in the 12-team event. "We had hoped to give a good challenge to Senegal,"

**We were surprised to find a machine that had juice coming out on the press of a button.... We had seen only water taps until then, not juice vending machines.**

**—Swami Nateshananda Saraswati,**  
who participated in the 1980 Moscow Olympics



### ALL EYES ON THE BALL

(Far left) Saraswati aka N. Amarnath (jersey no 12) taking a shot against Australia at the Moscow Olympics in 1980; Saraswati (inset) worked at the SBI for 37 years; (below) with wife Malathi on the banks of the Ganga



captain of the Indian team. “I came to know about it when I went to write a bank-related exam in Delhi. I bought a newspaper and saw the news that I was made captain,” he said. Under his leadership, India had some memorable performances at the Asian Games, although the team only secured the eighth position in the tournament. Against the powerful Philippines, India delivered a tight fight, losing by only eight points (108-100).

In 1983, Saraswati had a knee injury, but did not undergo surgery. Since then, his performance declined as jumping became painful. He was dropped from the national team and he turned to coaching for a while. Soon, he ended his basketball career to focus on banking.

During this phase, he met Malathi, who also worked at the bank. “It was a love marriage,” said Saraswati. In the early 1990s, the couple developed an interest in spiritual learning, which was further influenced by their transfer from Chennai to Coimbatore. “It was like my guru was waiting for me in Coimbatore,” he said. “On the day we arrived, a neighbour invited me to Bhagavad Gita sessions in his flat. He told me that *brahm-achari* Dheera Chaithanya, a disciple of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, [who had founded various centres for teaching Vedanta around the world and is said to be Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s spiritual guru], was coming to give lessons. Later when

my guru took *sanyasa*, he took the name Swami Sudheerananda. There are 700 *shlokas* in Bhagavad Gita, and from 1995 to 2004, we studied Gita under him.” Saraswati said that job transfers usually happened every three years. But his transfer order came only after he had completed learning the 700 *shlokas*.

The couple had a great devotion to their guru. In the early 2000s, Malathi received a *mantra deeksha* from Swami Sudheerananda—a secret *mantra* to chant with faith and devotion. Almost 15 years later, despite his failing health and being confined to a wheelchair, Sudheerananda travelled to Rishikesh to initiate his Olympian disciple to *sanyasa* on July 16, 2019.

Saraswati retired from SBI in 2014 after 37 years of service across 16 branches. Malathi and he initially wished to settle in Srirangam, a neighbourhood in the city of Tiruchirappalli. However, he believes that destiny brought him back to Coimbatore, where he bought a flat to be close to his guru.

Post retirement though, basketball made a comeback in Saraswati’s life. Close to his flat is the Perks Public School where K. Murugesan, currently coach for the Tamil Nadu women’s junior basketball team, trains grassroots-level talents. The Olympian is a regular visitor to the court. Now, except for the times when he is in Rishikesh or on spiritual journeys, he visits the court to meet young players. He, however, says that post Olympics, India’s sports system failed to utilise the experience gained by the only Olympian basketball players. But he has no complaints, only acceptance of life as it is.

“Basketball, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sutras are three things I learned in this life,” he said, adding that he continues to be a student of Vedanta and is living in the light of the knowledge that “everything is one with the supreme Brahman.” ●

recalled Saraswati. But Senegal, too, beat India 81-59 in a match for minor placing.

After the Olympics, Saraswati found a place on the Indian team that went to the ABC Championship held in Kolkata in 1981 and an international tournament in South Korea in 1982. Before the Asian Games in New Delhi in 1982, he was made the



## Our tennis rockstar

One can count on Leander Paes, the Padma Bhushan tennis superstar, to charm the pants, tees, shorts and caps off anyone in his orbit. He did just that during his terrific acceptance speech, when he (along with another tennis legend, Vijay Amritraj) was inducted into the prestigious International Tennis Hall of Fame at Newport, Rhode Island. They are the first Asian men to be thus honoured. Deservedly so. Leander, at 51, is a diehard Kolkata boy, born to remarkable parents, who, he candidly shared in that amazing speech, conceived the wonder-kind in Munich, where they found themselves locked inside the India Pavilion at the ill-fated Olympics, when Palestinian terrorists murdered 11 Israeli athletes. Leander's father, Dr Vece Paes, was a member of India's hockey contingent. His mother, Jennifer, a top-notch basketball player, was with her husband.

Leander urged the tennis greats assembled at the induction ceremony, "To do the math." In the audience, his parents were seen beaming away. Leander has consistently heaped generous praise on his father, saying, "My dad is my hero, best friend, guiding light, North Star". It's lovely to know that grandpa Paes has assumed the same mentor role in Leander's 18-year-old daughter Aiyana's tennis career. She has picked tennis over modelling/acting. Her mother is the gorgeous Rhea Pillai, who was with Leander for several years, before both moved on. Leander, himself, flirted with films briefly when he acted in a socio-political thriller which was a commercial disaster, *Rajdhani Express* (2013). No matter, Leander had a blast shooting it since Bollywood was on his bucket list. So was theatre and a Broadway debut! Let's wait for this announcement. Leander is not known to give up easily!

Leander's tennis bio is awe-inspiring. He started playing at age five, was a good footballer, but at his dad's urging, switched to tennis and joined the tennis academy in Chennai. What followed is known to fans.

With 45 weeks a year on tennis tours, the former Davis Cup team captain is finally making time for what he enjoys the most—family, friends and golf. We last met at the Tolly X'mas lunch in Kolkata.

The fabulously organised annual tradition is the

most significant event on the social calendar in the City Of Joy. Everyone who is anyone is seen enjoying the lavish buffet on the sprawling lawns. And while we were busy greeting old friends, there was Leander, walking up with a big smile, accompanied by a beautiful lady. We met warmly, exchanged a few pleasantries and that was that. We were meeting after a break of a few years during which a great deal had transpired in his adventure-filled life. I turned around to watch the good-looking, fashionably clad duo as they did the rounds, clicked selfies with fans and spread good cheer. Wow! I thought to myself, they look so much in love. Maybe she's the one!

Leander's natural charm is irresistible and infectious. Women

adore him! And so do kids and senior citizens. His heart-warming acceptance speech at Newport was a genuine reflection of all that he stands for. His humility and grace were not made for media constructs. If only more of our sports stars had this quality!

The personal lives of sports legends interest fans as much as their spectacular records. That's how it should be. These amazing men and women are not regular folks leading ordinary, humdrum, mundane lives. Everything about them is exaggerated, and that's what makes them heroes. Our fantasies would be horribly incomplete without the extra pinch of spice in the feast.



Leander Paes after getting inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame



## MAN WITH THE BILLION STORIES

**Vikas Swarup's latest  
novel is satire at its  
best, with a touch of the  
screwball**

**BY ANJULY MATHAI**

*FOR More Newspapers & Magazines <https://telegram.me/PaperMagazine>*

A

fter her life turns several hairpin bends, Devi—the protagonist of diplomat-turned-writer Vikas Swarup's latest book, *The Girl With The Seven Lives*—lands up in a beauty salon in Mumbai. The technician is described in much detail. "I found myself gaining focus and confidence as I washed and dried her feet, cut and shaped her nails, used a pumice stone to exfoliate the rough patches on the soles of her feet, and massaged her calves with a rose-scented lotion, losing myself in the rhythm of the strokes and the soothing music playing in the background," says Devi.

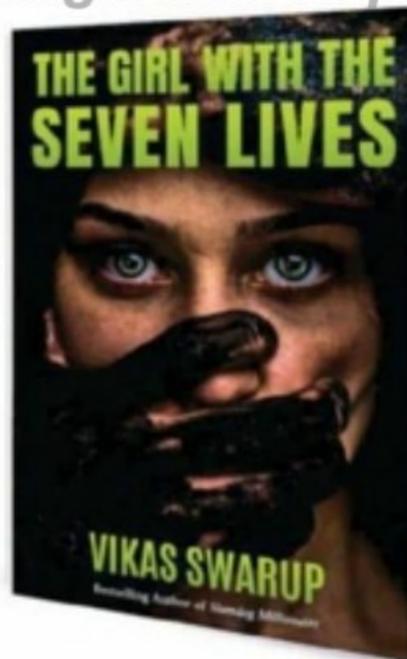
There is perhaps some irony in the former spokesperson of the external affairs ministry and former High Commissioner of India to Canada writing about how to "tweeze, wax, thread, tint and apply makeup with finesse and artistry". Swarup laughs when I point it out to him during a Zoom chat. "I have never set foot inside a beauty salon, so I had to do a lot of research," he says. "I read many articles and watched YouTube videos to understand how exactly these manicures and pedicures are done..."

And therein lies Swarup's wizardry as a storyteller—making fiction fun. Even as he deals with heavyweight topics, his writing bears just a touch of the outlandish so that you know you are in a made-up world. Living inside Swarup's imagination is a little like playing a high-octane video game. There is the slightly off-kilter feeling of not knowing where you are headed or how many detours you will be made to take. All you can be sure of? One heck of a ride.

From serving as a muse to a millionaire banker in Delhi to living in an observation home for girls to volunteering at a *dera* run by a fake godman, to working as a nurse in



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**THE GIRL WITH THE SEVEN LIVES**

By Vikas Swarup

Published by **Simon & Schuster India**

Price ₹499; pages 401

Pune to becoming a beautician in Mumbai, Devi's seven lives move along at a rollicking pace and are tied together by a gunman who holds her captive and forces her to recount her past. Bizarre? Maybe. But boring? Not even close.

"What I love most about fiction is that it allows you to go wherever you want to go," says Swarup. "So, if tomorrow I want to write a novel set in Ecuador without ever having set foot in Ecuador, I could do that, with the help of Google Maps, and by learning about Ecuadorian history, politics, culture and society."

Currently, however, he is not in Ecuador. He is very much at home enjoying retired life with his artist-wife Aparna and preparing to enter the publicity circuit for his fourth novel, which comes after a break of 10 years. "When you are in a regular job, you



**Swarup says his younger son Varun, who studied music at the McGill University in Montreal, has inherited his and his wife's creative gene, while his older son, Aditya, who invests in startups, has a more logical bend of mind.**

**FAMILY MAN**

Swarup with wife Aparna and sons Aditya and Varun

together piecemeal. This, of course, does not mean he is not trying to make a point. There are pithy shots of wisdom. In *Six Suspects*, for example, when a rich girl falls in love with a poor boy, the boy quips, "I don't know whether to thank God or Bollywood for this remarkable turnaround." Or take this one from *Q&A*: "The one conclusion I have reached is that whiskey is a great leveler. You might be a hotshot advertising executive or a lowly foundry worker, but if you cannot hold your drink, you are just a drunkard." Then there is the tagline of *The Accidental Apprentice*. "In life, you never get what you deserve: you get what you negotiate." The best thing about Swarup? He can see the satire in life's greatest solemnities.

In his latest book, it feels like one is flipping through a newspaper, as Swarup takes a dig at every evil in Indian society, from honey-trapping and sexual abuse to poverty and educational fraud. He has set his stories in India precisely because of this. "I have always wanted to write something closely connected with my country," he says. "That's why all four of my novels are rooted deeply in the Indian milieu."

It is the country's sheer diversity that attracts him, the fact that there are "a billion Indians in India, each of them having a billion stories, and you can choose any story that you want".

That is why he never runs out of ideas. And that is why each of his previous novels has been adapted into movies or OTT series. And if this one were to be made into a movie, who would he want to play Devi? "I can't think of anyone better than Alia Bhatt," he says. "Not the glamorous Alia, but the deep Alia of *Udta Punjab*." Going one step further, if they were to make a movie on him, who would he want to play him? "I think I'd like to play myself," he says with a laugh. "I could dye my hair and de-age myself using AI." ●

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treasure your weekends. Now every day is like that," he says with a smile. "Sometimes you don't even know if today is a Saturday or a Monday." He is also experiencing the empty nest syndrome, with both his sons having left home and being busy with their careers. He says his younger son Varun, who studied music at the McGill University in Montreal, has inherited his and his wife's creative gene, while his older son Aditya, who invests in startups, has a more logical bend of mind.

Behind him on the computer screen, I can see a huge book shelf that dominates the room. He says his love for books developed because he had nothing else to do in his childhood. He grew up in Allahabad in the late 1960s, when there was no internet, cable television or Play Station. Books were easily available

as his grandfather had a 10,000-book library. Swarup initially binged on thrillers and mystery novels by Agatha Christie, Alistair MacLean and Irving Wallace, but soon progressed to classics by Ernest Hemingway and Franz Kafka, among others.

Currently, he is reading Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Nearer*, on artificial intelligence. Which is fitting since OpenAI has used all three of his previous books to train its models. Perhaps what is most appealing about his books—from *Q&A*, which was adapted into the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, to *The Girl With The Seven Lives*—is the light touch with which he handles heavy topics like corruption and bribery. There is a jauntiness to his writing, and an ease with which the story flows, as though he birthed it whole, instead of fitting it

# Brown is in

## Taking Indian beats to international heights

BY NIRMAL JOVIAL

*"Ty mama died, I was there, my nephew died, he was there*

*He in my house more than I be there, more than Bey there"*

**IN 2018, WHEN** music's power couple, The Carters (Jay-Z and Beyoncé), released the song 'FRIENDS' as part of their joint album *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*, it served as a massive shout-out to their friends who had been there for them through thick and thin. Tyran 'Ty Ty' Smith had a special place in the song.

Ty Ty has known Jay-Z since the age of 14 and played a crucial role in the billionaire rapper's life and career. Ty-Ty, who co-founded the entertainment firm Roc Nation in 2008 with Jay-Z, has also been instrumental in cultivating many of today's top artists, like DJ Khaled, J Balvin, J. Cole, Rihanna, and Shakira. Now, he is scouting talent among brown communities worldwide, and taking them to international fame.

To achieve this, he has initiated a new genre of music and a label, Desi Trill, along with Shabz Naqvi, an Indo-British artist and repertoire (A&R) executive at Roc Nation and a member of the hip-hop collective So Solid Crew. The duo promises that all songs released under Desi Trill will combine elements of hip-hop, R&B (rhythm and blues), and South Asian music from different regions.

Naqvi was born and raised in the culturally diverse backdrop of south

London. His parents were born in Uttar Pradesh and moved to London in the 1960s. His musical journey began at 16 when he discovered his passion for producing music on his elder brother's equipment. This love for music production eventually led him to join forces with childhood friends to create So Solid Crew.

The initial idea behind Desi Trill came to him about five years ago. "Back then, I realised that my nephews and nieces growing up in the UK had no real representation," he told THE WEEK. "I approached Ty Ty, saying, 'Ty, I need your guidance, man. I want to do something in the music business to bring light to the Indian diaspora globally and their love of music and hip-hop.' Instantly, Ty Ty responded, 'No, I'm not going to guide you. I want to do this with you.' And that was the birth of Desi Trill."

Ty Ty said: "I have known Shabz for over 20 years. It is not like we met a couple of years ago and decided to do this; we have been very close friends for a long time. I have been around his family and friends from India. When he came to me with his idea, the first thing I thought was, 'Man, that makes sense.'"

Ty Ty told THE WEEK that his thought process revolved around Naqvi's daughter, Noah, whom he considers his niece. "Like, who's Noah's Taylor Swift? Who's Noah's Beyoncé? Who's her Rihanna? I was like, how is it possible that I do not know



of a big South Asian artist that can walk in a room anywhere in America, anywhere in the world, and everyone knows who that is?"

And, an antithesis to these questions in the minds of both Ty Ty and Naqvi emerged in the form of the slogan "Brown's Everywhere". "We are going to go hard, and we are going to break this thing and we are going to break it globally," said Ty Ty. "You know, that is why our slogan is Brown is Everywhere." He said the one demand he had was that the artists being signed under the label "have to sing in their mother tongue, they have to be true to who they are".

"I told Shabz that whoever we sign as an artist has to sing the way I hear you speak with your friends and family," he said. "There aren't any rules with music. I said, 'There is a lot of gatekeepers that are not going to understand what is happening, but the fans, once you get to them, they are going to be the ones that dictate what is happening.'"

The result was evident in May, when Desi Trill released its EP



#### DEAL MAKERS

(From left) Ty Ty Smith, DJ Lyan, Shabz Naqvi

“

**There is a lot of gatekeepers that are not going to understand what is happening, but the fans, once you get to them, they are going to dictate what is happening.**

—Ty Ty Smith, co-founder, Roc Nation and Desi Trill

(extended play), *Brown is Everywhere*—every track had a musicality that resembled a conversation. The EP featured Yung Sammy, Subhi, Natania, Shalmali Kholgade, Naisha and DJ Lyan, Juss Nandhra, Khushi K. and Mumzy Stranger.

Naqvi, who grew up in a household that loved Indian musical legends from Muhammad Rafi to

A.R. Rahman, noticed that Indian music is rich in melodies. He said he has always taken creative inspiration for melodies from Indian rhythmic sounds and has brought them to hip-hop. Naqvi adds that the Desi Trill team also aims to use its expertise in augmenting the process of a consolidated hip-hop culture and a music industry in South Asia. Ty Ty said that, above all, the label’s efforts aim to inspire young people from even remote areas to be dreamers and to help them become world-renowned artists.

Both Jay-Z and Ty Ty grew up in Marcy Houses, the 28-acre public housing development in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood. Developed in 1949 by the New York City Housing Authority to house the city’s low-income residents, Marcy was in a dangerous state of disrepair when Jay-Z and Ty Ty were growing up there. “I grew up listening to R&B and a lot of different music, but when I first heard hip-hop as a kid, it just hit me,” said Ty Ty. “Jay-Z started rapping because we knew another

guy who was rapping and even had a music video on TV. We were amazed. Jay-Z kept rapping, and I was a huge fan. I believed in him. We followed through with our dreams; no one could tell us it was not going to happen.”

Ty Ty was road manager to Jay-Z, before he co-created Carter Faculty—a joint label deal with Def Jam Recordings, and later became senior vice president of A&R at The Island Def Jam Music Group. Though he said he had been the “worst road manager ever”, his passion and the belief he had in Jay-Z’s music is evident.

“All I ever wanted was for other people to hear what I was hearing when Jay would rhyme,” he said. “Because I would talk about it all, I mean, I would just be like, ‘You gotta hear his raps, you know?’ And we followed it through, and, you know, it was a lot of, it was a fight, right? People did not believe it and all that stuff, but we just kept going. So, you know, and I’m bringing that same energy here with Desi Trill.” ●



## The Shein is off

I have to admit I absolutely loved the Reliance wedding. Oops, I meant to say the Ambani wedding. The youngest son of the legendary Mukesh Ambani, Anant, married an heiress, Radhika Merchant, in the wedding of the century, thanks to its pomp and ceremony. We were treated to possibly minute by minute updates thanks to their multiple and very buzzy social media accounts.

I think the Freudian slip of calling it a 'Reliance wedding' was thanks to its very public nature. The entire world was invited to watch. If you did not know or care who the Ambanis were, you would certainly be interested in what Justin Bieber, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian and Katy Perry were up to. It is a great way to launch yourself as an international brand, Reliance or the Ambanis, whichever.

I also love the fact that we were educated in multitudinous Indian crafts. Right from the finest embroideries to the most exquisitely made jewels to a lehenga hand-painted by a celebrated artist. Coincidentally, Reliance Retail launched Swadesh, a craft-first clothing label less than a year ago, which promises to take the mickey out of Fabindia, Anokhi and other textile enterprises. The more the merrier, I say, making the consumer a certain queen.

But last month's announcement of Reliance Retail's tie-up with Shein is vexing. It makes one believe that come what may, fashion cannot escape its dependence on fast fashion. With this partnership, Chinese fast fashion behemoth Shein is looking to re-enter the Indian market after it was thrown out, along with TikTok, by the Modi government in 2020, thanks to China's transgressions on India's Himalayan borders.

The Indian fast fashion market (ethnic labels as well as European ones like Zara and H&M) is esti-

mated to be at \$10 billion currently, and expected to reach \$50 billion by 2031, according to a report by Redseer Strategy Consultants. Shein is the world's largest fashion ecommerce retailer with an estimated revenue of \$27 billion, according to Statista.

In this new partnership, Shein, which cannot be back in India independently, will be sold via Reliance's ecommerce apps as well as in Reliance's physical multi-brand stores. They will receive a licence fee for profit sharing from the India market. India's large demographic also helps Shein reduce

its dependence on the Chinese market for numbers. While Reliance can learn how to better its supply chain network, as Shein has the lowest-ever turnaround time for manufacturing (they take one week, whereas other fast fashion companies take one month). Shein is sold in 150 countries and has a social media following of 250 million.

Moreover, Shein is possibly the cheapest fast fashion manufacturer, with items costing as low as \$3. Its CEO is the 40-year-old Xu Yangtian who does not give interviews

and is completely shrouded in secrecy.

According to a report in *Financial Times*, Shein has kept its pricing minimal to make use of 'de minimis' rules, where low-priced items are exempted from customs duties while shipping to the EU, US and UK. The EU's allowance is €150, while the US has a \$800 ceiling. Shein has also faced allegations of unethical labour practices in its supply chain, which the company has denied. With their new announcement of listing in London's IPO, all of this will be open to more scrutiny.

Fast fashion in India is a new and post-mall culture beast. It is fast catching up with the rest of the world. Reliance Retail must find a way to keep its commitment to slower practices of artisanal crafts.



From Shein's 'family fits'

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## THE HUNT BEGINS

Everyone's favourite quiz show is returning. **Amitabh Bachchan** is once again hosting the 16th season of Kaun Banega Crorepati. He confirmed this by sharing a few photos from the sets of the show, adding that the shoot was so hectic, he did not get any breaks and had to "lunch in car". Bachchan first started hosting the show in 2000 and since then has hosted all its seasons except for the one in 2006, which was hosted by Shah Rukh Khan. KBC 16 will premiere on Sony TV on August 12.

## ENTER BEYONCE

Kamala Harris launched the first official day of her 2024 presidential run in style—with a mega fundraising haul of \$81 million. And the song that soundtracked the presidential hopeful's entry into the arena? **Beyoncé's** 2016 number 'Freedom'. The singer has reportedly given Harris permission to use the song throughout her campaign. Harris is probably hoping that the track will stop Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in his tracks.



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AFP

GETTY IMAGES

## A SWIFT RETREAT

**Eminem's** latest album, *The Death of Slim Shady (Coup de Grace)*, topped The Billboard 200, dethroning Taylor Swift, whose *The Tortured Poets Department* had reigned for 12 weeks straight. If it would have remained for one more week, Swift would have beaten Stevie Wonder's record of 13 weeks on top. *The Death of Slim Shady (Coup de Grace)* is the 12th studio album of the rapper, who had won an Oscar in 2003 for his song, 'Lose Yourself'.

## FATAL SEDUCTION

**Huma Qureshi** was adjudged the best actress at the Indian Telly Streaming Awards 2024 for her performance in *Monica, O My Darling*, about a seductive company secretary who has illicit affairs with many men. Qureshi has earlier compared her character with that of James Bond. With her charm and chutzpah, she might just be our answer to the famous British spy.

## FASHION FOR THOUGHT

Tech whiz **Elon Musk** has turned style guru. His latest move? An AI-made fashion show with Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden and Donald Trump among the models. PM Modi walked the ramp in a multicoloured coat with geometric motifs and dark sunglasses. The video immediately went viral, garnering close to 40 million views.



SHUTTERSTOCK



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COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



## Laugh Kamala, laugh

Ever since Kamala Harris—daughter to a scientist mother born in Tamil Nadu, and father from Jamaica—became the presumptive nominee for the US presidential elections, the internet has lit up with bite-sized memes and videos of her. Some of these are made by supporters of Donald Trump that seek to criticise her but really end up doing the opposite, solidifying her place, especially among female voters.

Take the memes about her so called ‘cackle’.

There’s a brilliant riposte by Kamala herself. In an interview with actor Drew Barrymore, Kamala credited her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, for her loud laugh.

For us, in India, the following description is completely relatable: “I have my mother’s laugh and I grew up around a bunch of women in particular who laughed from the belly. They laughed—they would sit

around the kitchen drinking their coffees, and telling big stories with big laughs,” Kamala told Barrymore. Replace the coffee with chai and that could be our masis (maternal aunts), our ammas (mothers), our aajis (grandmothers), laughing uproariously, and without apology.

Jaded cynics argue that Indians romanticising this moment are being naive and cliched. Kamala, they argue, has always chosen to give primacy to her identity as a black American over an Indian-American brown woman. And while at the level of politics, there is truth to that; Kamala’s mother has always been at the centre of all her stories. More than Kamala making dosas with Mindy Kaling, another star of the Indian diaspora, it is the backstory of Kamala’s mother that brings home her desi antecedents in a really powerful way.

Besides, as Zarna Garg, a fabulous stand-up co-

median with roots in Maharashtra and Gujarat, told me, “... Just the fact that someone called Kamala or Sujata can run for president changes the games.” It’s a different matter that very few Americans can even pronounce Kamala correctly—and maybe this campaign will finally teach them how to!

More seriously, America has wrestled with structural sexism. Their inability to have a female president for all of these decades—and now their regressions on abortion laws—makes the Kamala story all the more critical. All the more when you consider that she is running against someone who has been accused of not just misogyny, but also sexual assault. In fact, more than

a dozen women have publicly charged Trump with abuse or harassment. And his running mate J.D. Vance (married to an Indian American) has revealed his own bigotry, by mocking what he calls ‘childless cat ladies’.

The last time a woman in America took a shot at the White House, she was also punished for her loud laugh, her clothes, her bad hair days. There may have been many different reasons for

why Hillary Clinton lost, but among the causes was deep-seated discomfort with women who are opinionated, individualistic and do not conform to societal stereotypes.

And as Garg points out, the Kamala moment is even more significant than the Hillary moment because Kamala is entirely self-made with no political familial links. “Indian aunties rule,” Garg told me, only partially joking, “and Indian uncles, you please sit down....”

Even if you hold back the urge to impose India into the Kamala story, women everywhere should be pleased. And we should laugh as loudly as our mothers and grandmothers taught us to.



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AUGUST 4, 2024

# health

**Syam Kumar, 23,**  
fought life's  
adversities

with 16 surgeries.  
Now he is the

**WORLD'S  
YOUNGEST**

to skydive solo  
with a  
prosthetic leg

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COVER STORY 26



## FLYING SOLO

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Syam Kumar S.S., a 23-year-old from Thiruvananthapuram, is the youngest person in the world to skydive solo from an altitude of 13,000ft with a prosthetic leg, and also the youngest paragliding pilot with a prosthetic leg. But that is just one chapter of a life filled with struggles, spirit, surgeries and summits. His next goal? A jump from 42,000ft

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LAYOUT  
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Syam Krishnan, Ajeesh Kumar M.

COVER DESIGN  
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COVER PHOTO  
Sreelakshmi Sivasdas Menon

The Week Supplement: Printed at Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam, and published from Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi-682 036, by **Jacob Mathew**, on behalf of the Malayala Manorama Company Private Ltd., Kottayam-686 001. Editor: **Philip Mathew**. **Focus/In focus** features are marketing initiatives

# letters



## Useful AI

It is good to know that Indian companies are using artificial intelligence to develop faster and cheaper medicines to treat rare diseases ('AI-Pill', July 7). AI is the future, and it can definitely speed up drug discovery and development.

The efficiency that AI brings to the drug discovery process is extremely useful. It is worrying that many of the life-saving drugs are now becoming ineffective. We need to have more AI and robots to help with open heart surgeries and minimally invasive procedures.

**K.V. PRASAD,**  
ON EMAIL.

AI will help in analysing patient records and deciphering new therapies. AI helps in patient engagement. I have heard of an AI tool that can gauge fat around your heart, which will help you predict heart attacks and manage heart conditions. Even in cancer screenings AI can help produce better results.

**VANDANA SAXENA,**  
ON EMAIL.

I have grave reservations about the use of AI in health care. It is risky and the findings can be confusing. The AI system can be sometimes wrong and could lead to further problems. Health is a fundamental human right, and health care will always need humans. Robots can never have empathy and they can never compete with doctors and nurses. But, yes, the medical



professionals will continue to take help from AI.

**DIVAKARAN NAMBIAR,**  
ON EMAIL.

## All the same

I read with interest your Quicksan item on C-section babies needing two doses of measles vaccine (July 7). But I don't understand why we harp on babies born by C-section and those born vaginally. C-section is a common procedure these days



## Tattoos are not good

I don't understand the logic behind tattoos. I also don't understand why some people are crazy about it ('Quicksan', July 7). Tattoos are very harmful and can lead to allergic reactions and skin infections.

Tattoo providers need to be strictly monitored.

**VIPIN DEV,**  
*ON EMAIL.*

Tattoos can lead to serious health conditions and should be avoided. There are so many other ways to express ourselves. Why use tattoo and spoil our beautiful skin?

I blame celebs like Angelina Jolie and David Beckham for bringing in the tattoo culture. If not for them, such customs would not have been in vogue.

Tattoos can never be accepted as an art form.

**ANJANA UNNI,**  
*ON EMAIL.*

and there are many who consider it a better delivery method for the mother and baby. Once we grow up, it doesn't matter whether we were C-section babies or vaginally born babies.

**DEEPAK CHERIAN,**  
*ON EMAIL.*

## Engage brain

Lifestyle changes can lessen Alzheimer's disease ('Quick scan', July 7). Staying active matter and we should be so

even after the age of 60, 70 or 80. There is nothing like retirement. Some changes in lifestyle are required after a particular age. It is important to keep the brain engaged with challenging activities that could promote the growth of fresh neural cells. We should aim for at least eight hours of sleep every day. Staying socially connected and managing stress can support overall brain health.

**PRASAD KAPPU,**  
*ON EMAIL.*



## Don't starve

Personalised diets and adjusting to certain habits will help us reduce weight ('Twist of fat', July 7). We are all made differently, with distinct genetics. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Personalised diet focuses on a particular body's unique responses and is more fruitful. There is no need to starve to lose weight, as starvation will cause physical and emotional changes. It is not a sustainable method for weight loss.

**TIGIN THOMAS,**  
*ON EMAIL.*

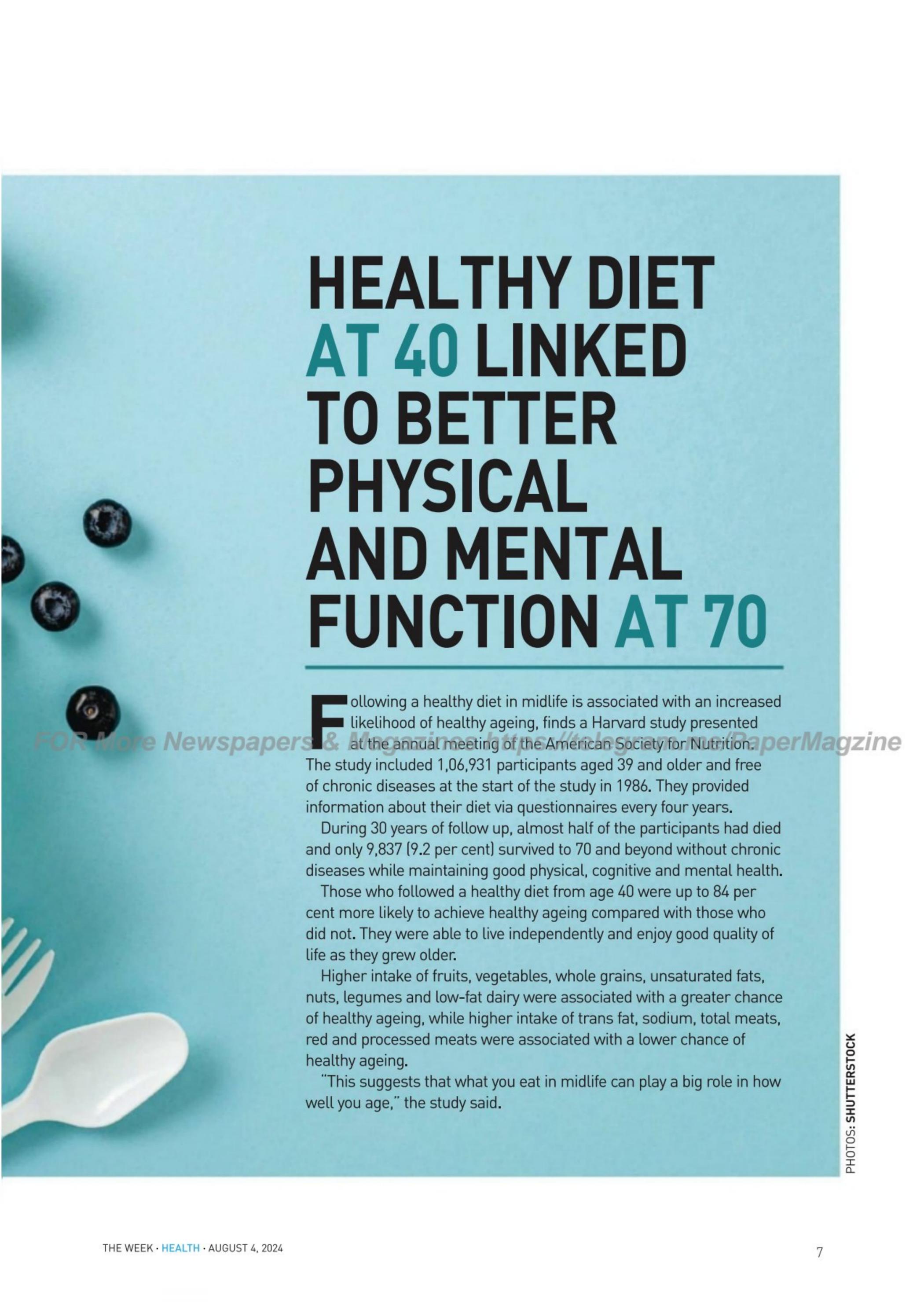
Only recently I came to know that 'volume eating' involves eating high volumes of low calorie food with high water content. The biggest takeaway here is that it limits processed food. We should have more of nutrient-dense food like green leafy vegetables, eggs and fish. Many young people today simply don't have such food.

All said, we should be careful on not exceeding our daily nutrient demands.

**TARUN KOTHARI,**  
*ON EMAIL.*



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The background is a solid teal color. On the left side, there are several blueberries scattered vertically. At the bottom left, the handle and bowl of a white ceramic spoon are visible. The main title is centered on the right side of the page.

# HEALTHY DIET AT 40 LINKED TO BETTER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL FUNCTION AT 70

**F**ollowing a healthy diet in midlife is associated with an increased likelihood of healthy ageing, finds a Harvard study presented at the annual meeting of the American Society for Nutrition.

The study included 1,06,931 participants aged 39 and older and free of chronic diseases at the start of the study in 1986. They provided information about their diet via questionnaires every four years.

During 30 years of follow up, almost half of the participants had died and only 9,837 (9.2 per cent) survived to 70 and beyond without chronic diseases while maintaining good physical, cognitive and mental health.

Those who followed a healthy diet from age 40 were up to 84 per cent more likely to achieve healthy ageing compared with those who did not. They were able to live independently and enjoy good quality of life as they grew older.

Higher intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, unsaturated fats, nuts, legumes and low-fat dairy were associated with a greater chance of healthy ageing, while higher intake of trans fat, sodium, total meats, red and processed meats were associated with a lower chance of healthy ageing.

“This suggests that what you eat in midlife can play a big role in how well you age,” the study said.

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## ALZHEIMER'S RISK HIGHER IF MOM HAD MEMORY PROBLEMS

**HAVING A PARENT** with Alzheimer's disease can increase your risk of developing the disease as well. But which parent contributes more to your risk?

According to a US study published in *JAMA Neurology*, people whose mother had a history of Alzheimer's disease had a greater risk for the disease compared with those who only had a paternal history of memory loss. The study included 4,413 healthy participants aged 65 to 85. They were asked if either of their parents had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and at what age the symptoms started. They then had PET scans to measure the amounts of amyloid protein plaques (a hallmark of Alzheimer's) in the brain.

"Amyloid-beta accumulation is

thought to be the earliest disease process of Alzheimer's disease that occurs at a preclinical (pre-symptomatic) stage," the study explained. There was higher buildup of amyloid protein plaques in people whose mother developed Alzheimer's symptoms at any age, along with those who had both parents with the disease. With fathers, the children had elevated amyloid levels only if the father had early-onset symptoms (occurring before age 65). But if the father developed symptoms late in life, there was no amyloid plaque buildup.

"Maternal inheritance of Alzheimer's disease may be an important factor in identifying asymptomatic individuals for ongoing and future prevention trials."



### Did you know?

People over 50 who experience chronic loneliness are 56 per cent more likely to suffer a stroke, compared with those who aren't lonely

eClinicalMedicine



## WALKING MAY HELP REDUCE LOWER BACK PAIN

---

**ABOUT 800 MILLION** people worldwide have lower back pain which is a leading cause of disability and reduced quality of life. About 70 per cent of those who recover will experience a recurrence within a year.

According to Australian researchers, walking could be a simple, yet effective remedy for lower back pain. For the study published in *The Lancet*, researchers randomly assigned 701 adults, average age 54 years, who had recently recovered from an episode of lower back pain to either an individualised walking programme and six physiotherapist-guided education sessions over six months, or to a control group.

During one to three years of follow up, those in the walking group had fewer occurrences of activity limiting pain compared with the control group and could go nearly twice as long without recurrence—208 days compared with 112 days. Participants in the walking group also had better quality of life and reduced need for health care support. They could also reduce the time they had to take off work by nearly half.

“Walking is a low-cost, widely accessible and simple exercise that almost anyone can engage in, regardless of geographic location, age or socioeconomic status,” the study said.



**Did you know?**

Women who experience depression during pregnancy or after birth have a 36 per cent higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease

European Heart Journal

## SOME ANTIDEPRESSANTS CAUSE MORE WEIGHT GAIN THAN OTHERS

PEOPLE WHO TAKE antidepressants are prone to weight gain. But do all antidepressants cause similar weight gain?

To find out, US researchers analysed the health records of 1,83,118 patients, aged 18 to 80, who were first-time users of antidepressants. The researchers tracked weight changes for 24 months after they started taking brand-name or generic versions of one of eight common antidepressants—sertraline, citalopram, escitalopram, fluoxetine, paroxetine, bupropion, duloxetine, or venlafaxine.

Bupropion users gained the least amount of weight. They were 15 per cent to 20 per cent less likely to gain a significant amount of weight compared with those taking the most common antidepressant, sertraline. Those taking escitalopram, paroxetine and duloxetine were most likely to experience weight gain.

Weight gain is a common side effect of antidepressants that causes people to stop taking their medication, leading to poor clinical outcomes. Bupropion had the highest adherence rate, at 41 per cent. “Patients and their clinicians could consider weight gain as one reason for choosing a medication that best fits their needs,” the study suggested.

The findings were published in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

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## RESISTANCE TRAINING KEEPS SENIORS MOBILE

**HEAVY WEIGHT** training around retirement could preserve vital leg strength years later, finds a study published in the journal *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*. People naturally lose skeletal muscle mass and function as they get older, which could lead to immobility and dependence. Losing leg muscle strength is considered a strong predictor of death in older people.

For the study, 369 recently retired and healthy and active seniors, average age 66 years (61 per cent women), were randomly assigned to either one year of lifting heavy weights thrice a week, or moderate intensity training with body weight or resistance bands thrice weekly, or a control group who maintained their usual level of physical activity.

Bone and muscle strength and body fat were measured at the start of the trial, and then again after one, two and four years. Leg strength was preserved at the same level in the heavy weights group, but fell in the other two groups, after four years. Body fat remained the same for both the exercise groups, but increased in the control group. However, leg extensor power (the ability to kick a pedal as hard and as fast as possible), handgrip strength and lean leg mass decreased in all three groups.

“In well-functioning older adults at retirement age, one year of heavy resistance training may induce long-lasting beneficial effects by preserving muscle function,” the study concluded.



## AVOID BRIGHT LIGHTS AT NIGHT TO KEEP DIABETES AWAY

**AVOIDING EXPOSURE TO** bright light between 12:30am and 6am may be a simple and cost-effective way to reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes.

To find out if light exposure at night predicted the risk of diabetes, Australian researchers used data from 84,790 people without type 2 diabetes who wore light-tracking devices on their wrist day and night for one week.

During about nine years of follow up, researchers found that participants who were exposed to light between 12:30am and 6am were much more likely to be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, regardless of how much light they were exposed to during the day.

The risk was dose-dependent: the more the exposure to bright light, the higher the risk, and the link remained even after accounting for lifestyle habits, sleep patterns, shift work, diet and mental health.

Exposure to bright light at night disrupts the body's circadian rhythm. “Changes in insulin secretion and glucose metabolism caused by disrupted circadian rhythms affect the body's ability to regulate blood sugar levels, which can ultimately lead to the development of type 2 diabetes,” the study explained. The findings were published in the journal *The Lancet Regional Health–Europe*.

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## 40% CANCERS, 50% CANCER DEATHS PREVENTABLE

**NEARLY HALF OF** all cancer deaths and four in 10 cancer cases in adults aged 30 years and older could be attributed to lifestyle choices, finds a US study published in the journal *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*.

The researchers analysed nationally representative data on cancer incidence and mortality and risk factors to estimate the number of cancer cases and deaths that can be attributable to potentially modifiable risk factors for 30 cancer types. The modifiable risk factors included smoking, excess weight, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, diet, ultraviolet radiation and seven carcinogenic infections.

Smoking was the leading risk factor, contributing to 30 per cent of all cancer deaths and nearly 20 per cent of all cancer cases (56.0 per cent of all potentially preventable cancers in men and 39.9 per cent in women) followed by excess body weight, alcohol consumption, UV radiation exposure and physical inactivity.

In 19 of 30 cancer types analysed, more than half the cases and deaths were due to potentially modifiable risk factors.

Lung cancer had the highest number of cases and deaths attributable to evaluated risk factors, followed by female breast cancer, skin melanoma and colorectal cancer for attributable cases, and colorectal, liver and

oesophageal cancer for attributable deaths.

All cervical cancer cases can be prevented by vaccinating against human papillomavirus (HPV).

“Effective vaccines are available for hepatitis B virus, which causes liver cancer and HPV, which can cause several cancer types, including cervical, other anogenital and oropharyngeal cancers,” said the study. “Vaccination at the recommended time can substantially reduce the risk of chronic infection, and consequently, cancers associated with these viruses.”

CONTRIBUTOR: SHYLA JOVITHA ABRAHAM

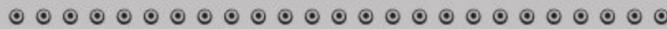
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# MEDTALK



BY NIRMAL JOVIAL



## Fitter 20s, healthier 40s

If you are not kind to yourself in your 20s, a series of cognitive troubles could affect you in your 40s. Researchers from UC San Francisco found that higher inflammation in young adulthood may lead to reduced cognitive function in midlife. High levels of inflammation are associated with obesity, physical inactivity, stress and smoking. While the link between higher inflammation in adults and dementia is already well-established, this is the first time a connection has been made between inflammation in early adulthood and lower cognitive abilities in one's 40s.

Study author Amber Bahorik, from the UCSF department of psychiatry and behavioural sciences and the Weill Institute for Neurosciences, explained, "Long-term studies indicate that brain changes linked to Alzheimer's disease and other dementias can evolve over decades. Our aim was to investigate whether health and lifestyle habits during early adulthood could impact cognitive abilities in midlife, potentially affecting the risk of dementia later in life."

The study tracked 2,364 adults enrolled in the CARDIA study, which investigates factors in young adulthood that contribute to cardiovascular disease decades later. Participants, aged 18 to 30 upon entry, underwent testing four times over an 18-year span to measure the inflammatory marker

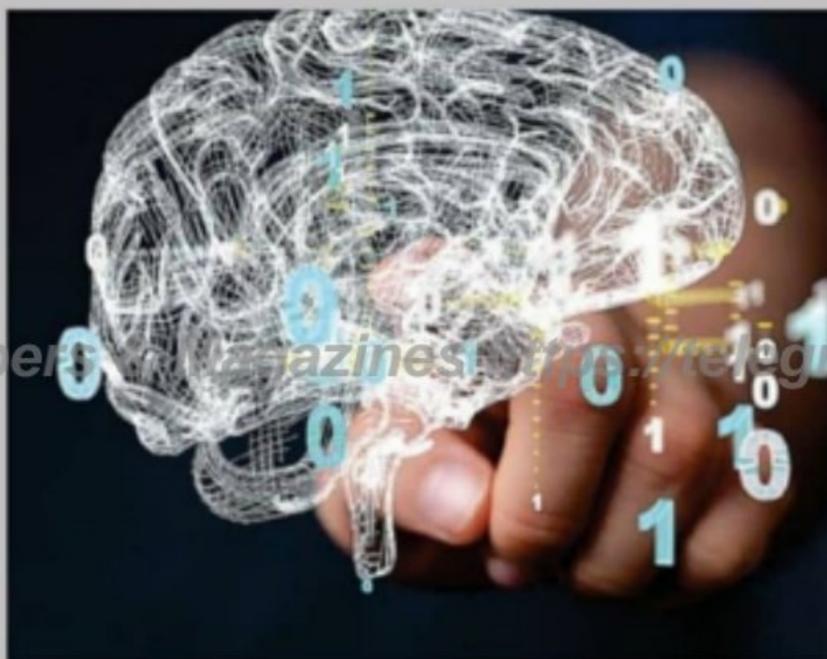
C-reactive protein (CRP). Cognitive tests were administered five years after the final CRP measurement, when most participants were in their forties and fifties.

About half the participants were female. Among the participants, some 45 per cent had lower stable inflammation, while 16 per cent had moderate or increasing inflammation; 39 per cent had higher levels.

Researchers discovered that among participants, only 10 per cent with low inflammation performed poorly on tests of processing speed and memory, whereas 21 per cent and 19 per cent of those with moderate or higher inflammation levels, respectively, struggled on these tests.

Even after adjusting for factors such as age, physical activity, and total cholesterol, disparities persisted in processing speed. The researchers also observed differences in executive functioning, encompassing working memory, problem-solving, and impulse control.

The researchers discovered both direct and indirect effects of inflammation on cognition. They emphasised that increasing physical activity and quitting smoking are effective ways to reduce inflammation. However, while these steps may sound straightforward, many find them hard to implement.



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# Cross-border care

## How a teenage Pakistani girl found hope and a new heart in India

By Lakshmi Subramanian

It began in 2009. Four-year-old Ayesha Rashan was gasping for air. Her panicked teachers called her mother, Sanober. She took her back home, hoping her daughter's condition would improve with rest. It did not. So, in the evening, Sanober rushed Ayesha to the doctor in her locality in Karachi. The doctor prescribed medication that eased Ayesha's breathlessness.

Sanober, a single mother, was relieved and convinced herself that the episode was just a temporary health issue and that her little girl would be fine soon. After finishing the medicine's course, Ayesha went back to school. But, before long, she was back in the sick room. Another visit to the doctor followed. Medication provided temporary relief. Ayesha was back in school. And, then, back in the sick room. The relentless cycle repeated.

Slowly, Sanober realised that those grim calls from the school were becoming more frequent. And, she noticed that Ayesha's breathlessness seemed to be

getting worse, despite multiple visits to the doctor. But she just did not know what to do to make things better for her daughter.

One day, when she was at the school in response to yet another call from the teachers, the school doctor suggested that she take Ayesha to a cardiologist. And, at long last, there was a proper diagnosis—cardiomyopathy (a disease of the heart muscle that makes it more difficult for the heart to pump blood to the rest of the body). However, according to Sanober, the cardiologist said there would be no treat-

ment available in Pakistan. He prescribed medication for six months, but also warned Sanober that the condition was life threatening.

Sure enough, breathlessness came back to haunt Ayesha again and she had to stop going to school. Tired, and mostly breathless, she would lie on her bed as her two elder sisters shared stories from school. Sanober was already shattered. Her struggles grew as she could not keep up with the medical expenses. She provided for her girls with her earning from a job in a private company.

But despite the challenges and the feeling of powerlessness, Sanober continued her fight. If treatment was not available in Pakistan, she would cross the seven seas to save Ayesha. She

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### DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

*Dr K.R. Balakrishnan (left) and Dr Suresh Rao of the Institute of Heart and Lung Transplant and Mechanical Circulatory Support in Chennai*



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scoured the internet for treatment options overseas and frequently visited the cardiologist seeking suggestions on a hospital in the west that could treat her daughter. The cardiologist and her relatives suggested hospitals in the US and the UK. But, they were not affordable. Sanober's search for a hospital lasted years and Ayesha's condition continued to deteriorate.

Finally, one of Sanober's relatives heard of a Pakistani patient who had got a heart transplant in India. It was done by Dr K.R. Balakrishnan, chairman of the Institute of Heart and Lung Transplant and Mechanical Circulatory Support in Chennai. After verifying what she could about Balakrishnan on the internet,

**AN ORGAN WILL ONLY BE ALLOTTED TO A FOREIGNER IF THERE ARE NO INDIANS ON THE WAITING LIST. AYESHA (IN PIC) HAD BEEN ON THE WAITING LIST SINCE 2019.**



Sanober got in touch. It had been 10 years since Ayesha first took ill. The 14-year-old was now fighting for her life, and failing.

Even after finding a doctor, the challenges continued. Getting a medical visa to India took more than six months. By the time Ayesha got to Balakrishnan in 2019, she was critically ill. "Her heart had almost stopped," said Balakrishnan, who is also the chief of heart transplant at MGM Health Care, Chennai.

Balakrishnan and his team performed CPR and put her on ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation)—a machine that provides heart and lung support. After a few days, another artificial heart pump—a ventricular assist device—was implanted. Sanober had been unable to afford the device and had told Balakrishnan about her predicament. The doctors pooled money to help her. Ayesha was a candidate for a heart transplant, but once the artificial pump was in place, Sanober went back to Pakistan.

Ayesha took ill again. The right side of the heart became sick and the pump got infected. Ayesha developed a leak in the aortic valve. Before they could return to India, the Covid-19 lockdown was imposed. They did not have access to equipment needed to monitor patients with artificial heart pumps and there was no treatment in Pakistan, said Sanober. And, there was literally no way out. As the weeks stretched to months, Sanober and Ayesha managed the condition solely by following the advice Balakrishnan was giving them from Chennai.

By the time the lockdown passed, Ayesha's treatment



options had got complicated. The doctor's decided that a heart transplant was her best bet. Getting a medical visa post-Covid was even more difficult than it was pre-Covid. Sanober's perseverance saw her through and, in June 2023, Ayesha returned to India with hopes of getting a new heart.

Sanober did not have the money for Ayesha's surgery and care. She travelled to India only on the word of Balakrishnan and his team of doctors that the money would not be an issue. "We had to take care of expenses," said Balakrishnan. "The Aishwaryam Trust (a non-profit organisation) came forward generously to help." Up next was the unnerving wait for a donor.

The transplant register was overflowing with requests from within India. The list of foreign nationals seeking organs is shared with the Union health ministry's National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation

**SANOBER (RIGHT IN PIC) DID NOT HAVE THE MONEY FOR HER DAUGHTER'S SURGERY. SHE TRAVELLED TO INDIA ONLY ON THE WORD OF BALAKRISHNAN AND HIS TEAM OF DOCTORS.**



(NOTTO). An organ will only be allotted to a foreigner if there are no Indians on the waiting list. Ayesha had been on NOTTO's waiting list since 2019. It was only in January 2024 that the heart of a 69-year-old donor from Delhi was allotted to her.

"Luckily, she got the organ," said Dr Suresh Rao, co-director at the Institute of Heart and Lung Transplant and Mechani-

cal Circulatory Support. "For international patients, usually it is difficult to get an organ. In Ayesha's case, there were no takers for a heart that was available in Delhi. We did a lot of logistics, including organising a chartered flight to bring it here on time."

On January 31, 2024, the heart was airlifted from Delhi to Chennai. Balakrishnan and his team performed the transplant. However, as the donor was much older, the heart was too big for Ayesha. So, her chest was kept open for almost 10 days. She had a slow recovery. "She had to recover completely and the doctors wanted to monitor her health on a regular basis," said Sanober. The mother and daughter stayed in Chennai and after five months in and out of the hospital, in June, Ayesha chose to go back to Pakistan. This time, she was not worrying about the future, but determined to pursue her dream of becoming a fashion designer.

Balakrishnan had spend his own money and also sourced funds for her recovery. When asked why this case was so close to his heart, he simply said: "She is so young; like my daughter. As a doctor, for me, every life matters."

"The hospitality we got and the care Ayesha got in Chennai has given me a new life," said Sanober. "My only request to Indian authorities is to give visas to patients who want to get treated in India. The political or bilateral relationship should never stand in the way."

In a world divided by borders and beliefs, Ayesha's heart now beats, somewhere in Karachi, with a resilient spirit.



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TETSUYA YAMADA

# USER-FRIENDLY DEVICES

## Embrace early detection methods and take charge of your heart's health

Over the past three to four years, we have witnessed a sudden spike in cardiac events, sometimes fatal. What is concerning is that the patients are getting younger. There has been a spate of healthy-looking people, in their 40s, succumbing to cardiac arrest. Accounting for about 27 per cent of deaths, heart disease has become a silent epidemic in India. Approximately six lakh individuals succumb to sudden cardiac death annually, a significant being under 50.

Atrial fibrillation (AFib), a common heart rhythm disorder, and hypertension contribute significantly to these statistics. AFib, characterised by irregular and rapid heartbeats, poses a heightened risk of complications such as stroke and heart failure. So, early detection and regular monitoring are paramount.

Despite efforts to raise awareness among the public and health care practitioners about hypertension, there remains a significant disparity in the number of people monitoring it. In a recent

study from the Indian Council of Medical Research, 30 per cent of Indians aged 18-54 have never had their blood pressure (BP) checked.

Undetected and untreated hypertension elevates AFib risk threefold, and AFib increases stroke risk fivefold. This underlines the importance of monitoring AFib, along with hypertension, and can only be done when one measures ECG along with BP.

Patients, who consistently and accurately monitor their blood pressure fluctuations, can provide comprehensive data to health care providers, leading to better treatment strategies. While we have digital BP monitors available to track BP at home, home ECG monitoring solutions are the newer entrants and add more value. Unlike traditional methods that necessitate time-consuming visits to health care facilities, home ECG monitoring empowers individuals to monitor their heart's health from the comfort of homes. There are advanced devices available now that enable patients to measure BP and electrocardiogram (ECG) readings

and even detect AFib—all in one go, from home. It is important to note that AFib is not detected with just one or two measurements. A home monitoring device is crucial for identifying patterns and providing comprehensive data to health care providers.

These devices are user-friendly and clear to read. They look like standard home blood pressure monitors, with two electrodes on the sides, and can be connected to a smartphone app. Users need to place their thumb and index fingers on these electrodes to take their ECG. They can use the arm cuff for measuring blood pressure. The app not only displays your blood pressure and ECG readings but also tracks them over time. This data can be sent to your doctor in PDF format, providing them better insights into your health status.

The transition from reactive to proactive health care plays a pivotal role in preventing dire consequences linked with undetected heart conditions.

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The writer is MD, OMRON  
Healthcare India.



# Bone voyage

**The remarkable journey of two innovators whose work is poised to revolutionise bone reconstructive surgery**

By Nirmal Jovial

In India, professions are often compartmentalised, with doctors and dentists primarily seen as healers. Defying this norm are Dr Adersh G.A., assistant professor at the department of surgery at PMS Dental College in Thiruvananthapuram, and Shivadhath R.P., a house surgeon at the same college. Their passion extends beyond traditional dentistry, to innovating and crafting novel medical solutions. Together, they have pioneered the world's first clinical 3D bone graft printer, OsseoCraft, which is poised to revolutionise bone reconstructive surgery globally.

“Bone reconstruction for cases of bone loss typically involves the use of material like titanium and certain plastics. But they just provided support for existing bone or tissue, rather than fostering bone regeneration,” says Adersh, who co-founded the startup Pionomed Biogenix with Shivadhath. “Unlike these conventional options, the material we employ possesses unique properties that stimulate bone

growth. It is osseo-conductive, which means it attracts bone formation. Consequently, when these particles are implanted in the body, bone forms around them, making this product unique.”

Moreover, this 3D-printed graft significantly reduces operative time compared to traditional methods like bone harvesting from other parts of the body. “For example, in cases of accidents or cancer surgeries resulting in bone loss, traditional approaches necessitate complex microvascular surgeries to transplant bone from elsewhere in the body,” says Adersh.

The duo utilises CT images of the patient to reconstruct the lost bone via 3D printing, directly implanting it into the patient's body. The 3D printing process resembles that of a robotics system. “As we feed the reconstruction material into the machine, it is melted by an extruder heating to 200 to 300 degrees Celsius, deposited layer by layer according to the design programmed



into the system,” says Adersh.

The reconstruction material contains hydroxyapatite molecules, a common component found in natural bone. “When implanted, the material attracts blood, facilitating the absorption of bone-forming factors. Subsequently, bone formation occurs around the implanted material,” he says.

Shivadhath highlights the cost-effectiveness of this printing technology compared to traditional titanium-based bone reconstruction materials. “A titanium graft can cost between ₹3,000 to ₹5,000 per graft, whereas we charge only ₹500 per graft,” he says. “Titanium, while strong, can sometimes weaken surrounding tissues due to its strength surpassing that of natural bone. Our material possesses strength comparable to natural bone,

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**BIG  
BREAK**

*Adersh G.A. (right) and Shivadhath R.P., who developed the world's first clinical 3D bone graft printer, OsseoCraft*

NIRMAL JOVIAL

resulting in faster healing and improved surgical outcomes.”

Each graft produced by Pionomed Biogenix is customised to meet the unique requirements of individual patients, eliminating the need for on-table manipulations.

The concept behind the 3D printing-based bone graft was born during a contemplative phase Adersh had when he was an intern. “As a surgeon, I frequently encountered cases necessitating bone grafting or harvesting from alternative sites in the body. This process often extended surgeries by an additional five to six hours, and introduced complications such as donor site morbidity. Reflecting on these challenges, I sought a solution that could effectively substitute natural bone without resorting to metals or plastics. This journey led me to

conceptualise a mechanism for producing grafts composed of a material engineered to emulate the properties and functionality of natural bone tissue,” he says.

Adersh’s father is a pioneering dental mechanic in Kerala known for crafting artificial teeth. “My father introduced me to dentistry,” he says. “Growing up in a family that owned a dental lab, I was exposed to various dental procedures from a young age, sparking my interest in the field.” Shivadhath says “fate” brought him to dentistry; he has a longstanding fascination with engineering as well. “In my second year [as undergraduate], I delved into research, eventually securing the first BDS student idea grant from the Kerala Startup Mission in 2022 for a gypsum recycling plant,” he says. “My innovation significantly reduced

the cost of gypsum recycling. As I continued with my research, I crossed paths with Adersh, and our collaboration began.”

The award-winning duo’s 3D printer is now in use at PMS for reconstruction surgeries in the head and neck region. Additionally, the team has initiated discussions with several hospital chains and has forged partnerships with institutions like Apollo Hospitals, Hyderabad. Priced at ₹10.5 lakh, their printer offers a cost-effective solution compared to similar models abroad, which often integrate stem cell technology with 3D printing.

“We are aiming to provide an Internet of Things-based printer to hospitals, enabling remote planning and file creation, streamlining their workflow,” says Adersh. “For hospitals unable to invest in the printer, we offer the option to print grafts at PMS and deliver them.”

The entire journey, from conception to regulatory approval, spanned five years for this 3D printer featuring bioactive materials. The project received support from PMS’s engineering team and various other startups. Under Pionomed Biogenix, the duo is spearheading 12 innovative medical technology projects, including robotic exoskeletons, wheelchair-accessible dental chairs, and dental gypsum waste recycling plants. Additionally, they plan to venture into sustainable energy and establish a robotics centre, expanding their innovative endeavours. They are also chasing a world record—3D printing the largest artificial teeth using recycled plastics, leveraging their unique technology.



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# MAN UP!

**L**ow testosterone, or Testosterone Deficiency (TD), is experienced by two out of 100 men, and while it becomes increasingly common with age, ageing isn't the only reason. Its impact can be upsetting, leaving men feeling unhappy and unwell. The good news is that it's an entirely treatable problem. The difficulty can lie in identifying it.

While most people imagine low testosterone to be purely associated with libido and sex, there are actually a whole range

**Low testosterone is as much a taboo for men as menopause has been for women. It needn't be**

By Ceri Roberts

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of other symptoms that may indicate a testosterone problem, and it's often spouses and partners who are best placed to spot them.

## SYMPTOMS

Men with low testosterone levels may feel excessive tiredness, even after sleep. A lowering of testosterone can produce a range of physical and psychological symptoms in them. Many of these can be easily mistaken for other conditions, or simply the bad

temper of age. Knowing what to look out for can help you to get your partner the treatment they need. Dr David Edwards, general practitioner and specialist in men's and women's sexual health and contributor to TRTed, shares the key signs and symptoms to be aware of:

### 1 He's tired all the time

Whether it's nodding off on the couch every evening, spending more time at home just relaxing, not wanting to get out of

bed in the morning despite a full night's sleep, or putting off tasks or events that he would usually enjoy, he may have a testosterone imbalance.

### 2 He's more irritable or depressed than usual

Testosterone affects emotions and too little can lead to depression. Suppose your partner is snappish or moody for no apparent reason. In the case that he's not stressed or obviously ill, there are no family or other personal problems—there's a chance that it might be low testosterone pulling his emotions all over the place.

### 3 He's putting on weight

A lot of people gain weight as they age, but if your partner has developed a recent 'spare tyre' around his middle and he's not noticeably changed his diet or exercise routine, it can be an indication that his testosterone has fallen.

### 4 His sex drive has dropped off or he's having trouble maintaining an erection

This is the sign that most people know to look for when it comes to low testosterone, but it can be interpreted in other ways. If your partner isn't initiating intimacy as often as he once was, it's easy to imagine that he's losing interest in you. If he's failing to maintain an erection, he may laugh it off as too much beer. But if these things are occurring regularly and there are no other reasons—like injury, stress or illness—there could be hormonal issues at play.

### 5 He's not as strong as he once was

Testosterone directly impacts

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the building and maintaining of muscle. When testosterone levels fall, muscle mass falls, too, typically reverting to fat. And this can impact a man's strength, his ability to lift, carry, and even exercise.

## 6 He's finding it hard to concentrate

Testosterone has also been linked to cognitive function, meaning concentration becomes harder when it falls. And this can come into play at work as well as at home. If he's complaining about not finishing his projects on time, the boss breathing down his neck at work, or he doesn't seem to be

paying attention at home, testosterone could be playing a part.

## 7 He's lost his oomph and other symptoms

Although it's really not an appropriate term, there are a lot of reasons why low testosterone is often jokingly referred to as the 'male menopause'. In some cases, men can experience a range of similar symptoms, including night sweats, hot flushes, sensitive breasts and anaemia. Shrinking testicles can also occur. It's worth paying attention to how the man is sleeping, feeling, and whether he has any sensitivities.

## THE HEALTH EFFECTS

If a man has biochemically low levels of testosterone, he can experience a range of health issues. While some of them are minor, such as tiredness and a loss of energy, others can be more serious, such as depression, diminished bone and muscle strength, as well as low red blood cell count. In fact, research has shown that men with TD have a greater chance of dying younger than men with normal levels.

Testosterone levels and symptoms can improve with testosterone treatment gradually over many months. Interestingly, the first symptoms to improve are often the sexual symptoms such as erections, libido and early morning erections.

Men with type 2 diabetes are more likely to suffer from TD—40 per cent of type 2 diabetics (T2D) have low or borderline testosterone. Those with T2D must ask for a testosterone blood test to be carried out in annual blood tests.

Interestingly, other research has shown that men with TD and T2D can put their diabetes into remission with testosterone treatment. They see an improvement in their diabetic, cholesterol and fat blood levels. Furthermore, their weight goes down, blood pressure reduces and abdominal circumference improves year on year.

But it's not an overnight fix, so don't expect miracles straight-away.

## How to talk to your partner about low testosterone

Unfortunately, one of the most common symptoms of low testosterone is irritability. And the last thing you probably want to do when you already feel like you're walking on eggshells is to broach a difficult personal conversation. But the best approach is to offer honesty and sympathy. As soon as your partner realises that there's a problem, he can start to do some-



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thing about it.

Start by making a plan.

- ⊙ Do some research to make sure that low testosterone could be the potential problem, and so that you can make a convincing argument. One that is factual rather than emotional.
- ⊙ Think about how you're going to open the conversation—ideally avoiding the "we need to talk" gambit—and what you're

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going to cover.

- ⦿ Choose a time when he's relaxed, not distracted, has some free time, and is most likely to engage.
- ⦿ Be open, honest, and sympathetic.
- ⦿ Give him a chance to speak—and listen to what he has to say. He may have other explanations for his symptoms.
- ⦿ Have a suggested action plan ready, so if he agrees and wants to seek treatment, you know what to do next.

## TREATMENT

"In the first instance, your GP should always be the first point of contact for anyone who thinks they may have low testosterone," says Dr Edwards. "While online services are available, to gain a true diagnosis, men need to have a medical history, physical examination, and blood work completed. Without this, misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis is common. Once a diagnosis has been made, your GP will be able to suggest the correct treatment or refer your partner to the relevant specialist."

With the right treatment, men can recover health and their sense of vitality. It's only when low testosterone is left untreated that wider problems develop.



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# ON A LIMB, AND A PRAYER

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**Syam Kumar S.S.** had his right leg amputated at age eight. At 23, he has had 16 surgeries already. But today, the world knows him as the youngest person to skydive solo with a prosthetic leg

By Nirmal Jovial

**F**ollowing his 16th surgery—a renal transplant—then 21-year-old Syam Kumar S.S., an amputee since age 8, confronted a fatal thought. “I told myself, ‘I have already suffered a lot in life. It is enough,’” he recalls. And then he had another thought—“What if I jump from a height?”

Jump he did, not to his death but to reach greater heights. Kumar, now 23, has two records to his name in the International Book of Records. A resident of Thiruvananthapuram’s Kulathummal village, he is the youngest person in the world to skydive solo from an altitude of 13,000ft with a prosthetic leg and the youngest paragliding pilot with a prosthetic leg.

THE WEEK first met Kumar at KIMSHEALTH Hospital in Thiruvananthapuram, where he had undergone a complicated kidney transplant two years ago. He had come in for a routine checkup wearing a fitted, full-sleeve T-shirt and convertible track pants that can be detached knee down, with the part of



**WIND BENEATH HIS WINGS**

*Syam Kumar with parents Sreekumar K. and Saralakumari S.S. at their home in Kulathummal village*

the pant below his amputated right leg detached. He wasn't wearing his prosthetic leg, prompting the hospital staff to offer him a wheelchair. “It is totally fine. I can walk. I can run kilometres on my lone leg,” he told the staff, before turning to this reporter with a wink. The puzzled staff, however, insisted on the wheelchair and Kumar accepted it with a smile.

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SREELAKSHMI SIVADAS MENON

Kumar wasn't making tall claims though. His life seemed like a roller-coaster ride that only went downhill, but he soared and how. His travails began since birth. "I was born with one leg glued to my buttocks," said the high-endurance athlete who was born to a manual labourer, Sreekumar K., and a former drawing teacher, Saralakumari S.S. "I had plenty of other issues at birth,



**I was born with one leg glued to my buttocks. I had plenty of other issues at birth, including a malformed renal system, a spinal tumour, and congenital scoliosis. I had my first surgery just 19 days after birth.**

*Syam Kumar S.S.*

including a malformed renal system, a spinal tumour, and congenital scoliosis (a sideways curvature of the spine owing to abnormal vertebral development before birth). I had my first surgery just 19 days after birth.”

Saralakumari, his mother, recalled that she could hold her baby boy only on the 17th day after birth, as he had to undergo numerous tests. “Soon after, he was taken into surgery because he had issues with passing urine,” she said. “Within two months, he had another surgery to remove a layer between his buttocks and leg, which is similar to the webbing on a duck’s feet.”

Kumar was soon diagnosed with duplex kidney, wherein two ureters drain urine from a single kidney to the bladder. Normally, it is one ureter per kidney. Kumar had this issue only in his right kidney. Those with this congenital condition are at a high risk of urinary infections. Urinary incontinence, which is leaking of urine because of poor bladder control, is another issue that comes with it.

Since Kumar had been facing issues releasing urine, doctors created an opening from the bladder to the outside of the body when he was just eight months old. “I would keep clothes at the opening,” recalled Saralakumari. “Every five minutes, they would get wet. There would be a load of clothes like that to wash every day. Then, imagine my boy’s situation.”

Despite his physical challenges, Kumar was an active child. “He would crawl all over,” said Saralakumari. “When he was one and a half years old, doctors attempted to straighten his leg. This was planned earlier, but because of renal infection, it got delayed. By the time the surgery for his leg was done, it was too late, and doctors could only partially straighten it.”



#### FLYING HIGH

*Kumar during one of his skydives in Thailand*

By the age of five, Kumar had been trained to perform a procedure called clean intermittent catheterisation (CIC), wherein the urine is drained via a catheter inserted into the urethra, past the sphincter and into the bladder. Once the urine is drained, the catheter is removed. CIC is vital for reducing bladder pressure and draining residual urine, thereby preserving kidney health.

However, in the schools he attended, the “smelly kid” went through great difficulties. “I was

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always taunted for my wet pants,” he said, recalling memories of being the lonely kid sitting in a corner of the classroom. “That period was incredibly depressing. I had no friends. People found me disgusting because of my condition and wouldn’t sit near me. Even when I was in class five or six, I had to clean my own bench and the areas where I sat after everyone went home. I had to wait until class eight to have a friend. I was so happy, but that person also moved away after some time. It was heartbreaking.”



**My mother has asthma and had to carry me everywhere in our village, which is a hilly area with difficult terrain. But I could walk on one leg, and I decided to go for [the amputation].**

*Syam Kumar S.S.*

Saralakumari has been Kumar's biggest support system right from the beginning. His father struggled with alcoholism in the initial years—though he later overcame it—which added to Saralakumari's burden. "My mother took care of me in every possible way," said Kumar. "She supported me throughout the journey in ways I can't even imagine now. Despite her efforts, people criticised her, suggesting she should have aborted the pregnancy if she had known the difficulties that lay ahead."

Kumar, therefore, made the decision to become an amputee out of love and care for his mother. He was all of eight then. "My mother has asthma and had to carry me everywhere in our village, which is a hilly area with difficult terrain," he explained. "But I could walk on one leg, and I decided to go for it. People often questioned my mother, asking why she allowed the amputation at such a young age."

Kumar underwent surgeries at regular intervals during his school years to address health issues, including the removal of a tumour from his spine. He had a neurogenic bladder, which refers to urinary bladder problems because of a disease or an injury of the central nervous system or peripheral nerves involved in control of urination. And that led to end-stage kidney disease. By the time he reached class 10, his kidney function had reduced to less than 25 per cent. His bladder wasn't large enough to hold the urine produced by his kidney, and in 2016, he underwent bladder augmentation at a hospital in Bengaluru. He also had surgery to remove his undescended testis at that time.



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**Within three months after the transplant, I began working out and doing push-ups. I resolved that I had to jump solo. This thought kept me awake for six to seven days straight, fully aware of the risks and medications involved.**

*Syam Kumar S.S.*

His life then revolved around the “rooms” of his house, hospitals, operation theaters or school. But then Kumar decided to no longer be boxed in and pushed himself to try new activities, including clay modelling and swimming. It was, however, cycling that propelled his transformation. “One day, while I was sitting inside my home, I noticed a few children playing outside on the road,” he recalled. “They were skidding around with their bicycles, having a lot of fun. I decided to join them. With my artificial limb, I tried to skid just like them. The kids found it very amusing, but it motivated me to show them that I could do it, too.”

He developed a newfound interest in cycling. “Despite financial challenges and relying on my (disability) pension, I saved up for five months and eventually bought a small bicycle,” said Kumar. “I taught myself to ride and over time, I also learned to repair and upgrade it, including adding gears.”

Soon, Kumar started cycling uphill to places like Ponmudi and Gavi. Push-ups and other strengthening activities became part of his routine. During this phase, he also took up mountaineering. “In 2019, at the age of 18, I participated in the ‘Save Alappad’ campaign—a

protest against excessive beach mining by two public sector companies—and cycled for 230km within 12 hours,” he recalled. “For that long journey, I carried a catheter to urinate. I was bleeding; my urine tube was filled with blood. I also had scratches on my body. But even then, I chose to continue riding.”

Kumar’s kidneys were weak and failing. His creatinine levels were dangerously high, and he anticipated kidney failure at any moment. He enrolled in a psychology degree course at MG College in Thiruvananthapuram, but his worsening kidney issues put a stop to his studies. It did not, however, dent his zeal for a life of adventure. “As kidney failure seemed inevitable, I decided to embark on a journey (from Thiruvananthapuram with no destination in mind) said Kumar. “I wasn’t sure how long it would take, but I packed urine bags, catheters and saline water for bladder management over 30 days. Carrying around 20 bottles of 500ml saline and other essentials, I built a carrier for my bike and set off. Within the next six days, I covered over 1,000km despite my deteriorating health.”

But by the time he reached Kannur, Kumar began vomiting, he recalled. “As night fell, I grew very weak and eventually called the police when I started losing consciousness,” he said. “They tracked me down, found me in my room, and rushed me to the hospital. They had contacted my mother using the emergency contact information I had set on my phone’s screensaver.”

Soon, Kumar began undergoing dialysis treatment. To facilitate this, an AV fistula—a surgical connection between an artery and a vein—was created in his arm. With an AV fistula, blood flows directly from the

SREELAKSHMI SIVADAS MENON

**CERTIFIED ADVENTURER**

*Kumar with his International Book of Records certificates*

artery into the vein, increasing blood pressure and flow through the vein. This increased flow and pressure caused the vein to enlarge, resulting in one hand being noticeably broader and larger than the other.

Dialysis once again confined Kumar to indoor life. A kidney transplant remained the ultimate solution. He found a donor in his mother, and social groups initiated crowdfunding for the transplantation. But there were significant medical risks involved, and not one hospital that Kumar had approached had agreed to do the transplant. Finally, Dr Satish Balan, consultant nephrologist with KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram, came on board. Kumar, by then, had already undergone five surgeries related to his kidney problems.

“In Kumar's condition, we faced several challenges when he came for the transplant,” explained Balan. “The first issue was [that] he only had one limb. After the transplant, we had to ensure he could walk, which was crucial.” The second issue was related to his primary kidney problem, which stemmed from an abnormal bladder, added Balan. “The bladder's abnormal function caused increased pressure, leading to kidney damage,” he said. “To mitigate this, we needed to ensure the bladder could accommodate a new kidney without damaging it. One approach was bladder augmentation, where we used intestinal tissue to enlarge the bladder. This procedure makes the bladder non-functional, requiring manual urine removal daily. Kumar was already trained for this, which solved half of the problem, as such training is challenging without early initiation and habituation. After the transplant, this procedure would continue to prevent infections in the new bladder and kidney, presenting another hurdle we had



**Given his involvement in extreme sports and other activities, we opted for a steroid-free kidney transplant. Steroids can interfere with muscle growth and strength. A steroid-free transplant carries higher risks of rejection and post-transplant complications. Fortunately, Kumar didn't encounter any issues afterward.**

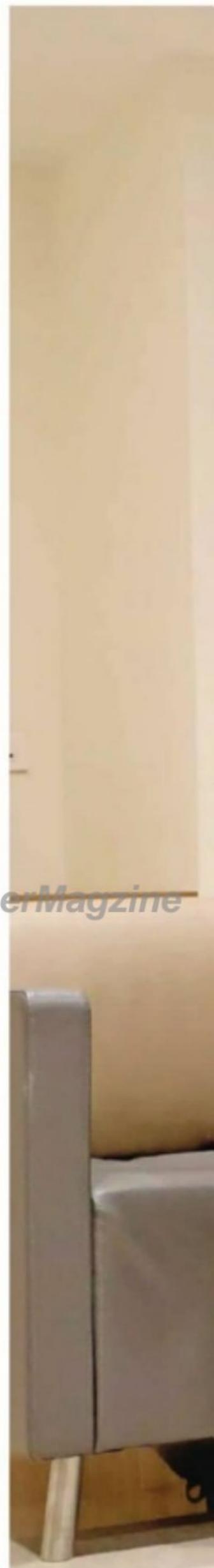
*Dr Satish Balan, consultant nephrologist, KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram (in pic, left)*

to overcome—ensuring the bladder functioned normally post transplant by regularly draining urine through a tube.”

Kumar being a high endurance athlete presented Balan with a third challenge. “Given his involvement in extreme sports and other activities, we opted for a steroid-free transplant,” said Balan. “Steroids can interfere with muscle growth and strength. A steroid-free transplant carries higher risks of rejection and post-transplant complications. However, without steroids, his muscle function and athletic capacity are likely to remain unchanged from before the transplant. Fortunately, Kumar didn't encounter any issues afterward, and we have continued with a steroid-free regimen, maintaining stable kidney function.”

Balan noted that Kumar has shown a positive attitude and has been diligent in following medical instructions and taking medications regularly. “He is also physically the fittest person I have seen, including

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NIRMAL JOVIAL

doctors and patients,” he said.

Kumar did not take it slow after the transplant though. Instead, he decided to skydive, that too solo. “Within three months after the transplant, I began working out and doing push-ups,” he recounted. “I resolved that I had to jump solo. This thought kept me awake for six to seven days straight, fully aware of the risks and medications involved.”

Kumar decided to allocate the remaining funds from his crowdfunding campaign, originally earmarked for his transplant and recovery, towards pursuing this high-risk jump. After thorough research, he realised that he needed a skydiving licence from the United States Parachute Association (USPA). “I spent around four months contacting them, sending hundreds of email,” he explained. “I detailed my journey, described my training regimen, and showcased my progress. However, their initial responses were disheartening as they cited concerns over taking the risk. Eventually, I managed to persuade one of their board members, who requested my complete medical history and certificates. Upon review, he advised that I first try skydiving at a designated drop zone before obtaining the licence.”

Of the many requests Kumar sent, only Skydive Thailand responded positively. Andy Pine, the chief instructor there, assured Kumar of their support, advising him to undergo wind tunnel training before arriving in Thailand. “So, I underwent wind tunnel training, which was quite expensive in Hyderabad,” recalled Kumar. “Hours of wind tunnel train-

ing were required to learn how to stabilise the body in the air. Mastering this balance is crucial, involving a deep understanding of aerodynamics where even the slightest finger movement affects stability. Solo skydiving can be daunting; panic can lead to disastrous consequences, from potential blackout due to G-forces (gravitational force equivalent) to the inability to deploy the parachute. The risks are substantial. Despite the health and medication risks, I decided to take the leap.”

Following the wind tunnel training, Kumar travelled to Thailand for his inaugural jump in November 2023. Prior to that, he had to clear a written exam for USPA licence. Additionally, he underwent canopy training and other necessary preparations. When the time came for his first jump, his instructor asked whether he preferred to jump solo or with him. And, Kumar insisted on jumping solo.

Kumar controlled his free fall with the prosthetic limb in the first two jumps safely. But during his third jump, he started experiencing a dangerous spin. “And, when I opened the parachute, it tangled with my leg. Luckily, it was my normal leg, and I managed to untangle the canopy and land safely within a gap of 12 seconds. The instructor then suggested I do more wind tunnel sessions.”

The Thai Police facilitated his wind tunnel training. Following this, Kumar successfully completed three more skydives. During these jumps, he encountered challenges such as unexpected winds, but his quick thinking enabled him to land safely.



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SREELAKSHMI SIVADAS MENON



**There are so many people who find any excuse not to do stuff and the thing is Kumar has got every excuse and yet it just doesn't seem to faze him; he tries and he pushes himself to his limit.**

*Andy Pine, chief instructor, Skydive Thailand*

However, after these experiences, skydiving instructors informed Kumar that he could no longer skydive with his prosthetic leg because of control issues, particularly as advanced jumps require precise airborne manoeuvres. They advised him to learn to jump without his prosthetic leg. "It is like imagining an airplane flying with one wing," he said.

Kumar returned to India owing to financial constraints. But his Thai instructor Pine is hoping for his return. "Regardless of whatever he achieved here, one of the things that I noticed is he is a person who has obviously encountered many, many obstacles in his life and never given up his tenacity, his attitude towards life," he said. "I mean there are so many people who find any excuse not to do stuff and the thing is Kumar has got every excuse and yet it just doesn't seem to faze him; he tries and he pushes himself to his limit. And if only more people would do that, the world would be a far better place.... We will see you when you get back because it is an honour."

Kumar, on his return to India, started working as a videogra-

pher. He also got a drone pilot licence. Later, he received an invitation to participate in paragliding at Bir Billing in Himachal Pradesh, the world's second-highest paragliding site at 5,000ft above sea level. There, he completed the basic paragliding course (P1 and P2) and became a certified paragliding pilot.

Kumar's prosthetic leg, which he had on him in Thailand, was damaged recently. Currently, he is using an older version that varies in height, as acquiring a new one would cost around ₹17 lakh. Despite that, Kumar remains steadfast in his ambition to obtain a skydiving licence. "I have completed only six jumps. I need 24 jumps to qualify for the basic licence [from USPA]," he said, hopeful of finding a sponsor to support his journey. "I will need to train my body and adjust my technique to jump without the prosthetic leg. This will require extensive effort and additional wind tunnel training. Nevertheless, I am pursuing my dream of freefalling from a height of 42,000ft."

Who needs wings when there's will!



# Spinal solution

## A new approach to treating Parkinson's Plus Syndrome, a first in India

By Prathima Nandakumar

Mary (name changed), a 65-year-old from Europe, arrived in Bengaluru in a wheelchair, grappling with the debilitating symptoms of Parkinson's Plus Syndrome (PPS). Having endured years of fruitless medical consultations across France, England and Africa, she found herself at Fortis Hospital Bannerghatta Road, where she was diagnosed and given relief through an innovative treatment.

PPS, a variant of Parkinson's disease, presents a unique set of challenges including early-onset dementia, hallucinations and balance issues, making traditional medication ineffective. Mary's case was particularly severe, marked by a loss of bladder control, speech impediment, and a near-complete loss of mobility. Traditional treatment avenues exhausted, the medical team swiftly formulated a novel approach—high cervical spinal cord stimulation.

“While Parkinson's often responds to medication like Levodopa and deep-brain stim-

ulation surgery, PPS presents a more complex scenario,” said Dr Guruprasad Hosurkar, additional director of neurology at the hospital. “Unlike PD, where brain degeneration is localised, PPS affects a broader range of brain functions. PPS patients develop balance issues and gait freezing early on. In PD, a patient may develop similar symptoms 10 to 15 years after the onset of the disease. If tremors are seen in PD patients, the atypical Parkinsonism patients experience difficulty in swallowing, speech and coordination, and clumsiness. They cannot do regular work like eating or standing.”

Conventional DBS surgery could have potentially exacerbated Mary's condition. The doctors went through literature and found that some centres had tried brain stem stimulation and lower spinal cord stimulation.

“We selected the higher cervical cord stimulation, where we put a lead over the surface of the spinal cord for stimulation,” said Hosurkar. “This would modulate the networks in the spinal cord

and improve her condition or restore some of the normal functions like speech, bladder control and movement. She improved and started sleeping through the night without disturbance. We put a lead covering 70 per cent of the spinal cord (from C3 to C8 vertebrae) and used an external battery to stimulate the spinal cord. After adjusting the parameters, we saw nearly 40 per cent improvement in her working abilities.”

Dr Raghuram G., additional director, neurosurgery, at the hospital said, “Our approach involved an initial trial surgery utilising an external pacemaker. This step was crucial as it allowed us to closely monitor the patient's response to the stimulation. Following this, we observed promising results, including improved mobility and reduced



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SHUTTERSTOCK

symptoms. Encouraged by these outcomes, we proceeded with the spinal cord stimulation surgery, which involved precise placement of electrodes along the spinal cord to modulate neural activity and alleviate symptoms. Spinal cord surgeries are different because they involve placement of an electrode on the spinal cord chosen for a particular condition. It is an epidural (space around the spinal nerves) electrode and is not put within the spinal cord. Unlike the deep brain stimulation electrode, which is placed within the brain.”

The procedure, done in a few centres in the US and China, was carried out in India for the first time. The internal battery lasts seven to eight years. The small devices that conduct electricity are placed near the spinal cord.

“The patient who had come in with the assistance of two people for treatment could walk a few steps independently after the treatment. The stiffness in the limbs reduced, speech became clear and she slept peacefully at night after many years. The new procedure has a window of 10 days before which you can remove the lead and the external battery if you don't see some predictive value of improvement. The cost of the lead is around ₹2 lakh and the battery would cost ₹15 lakh,” said Dr Hosurkar, adding that the patient was discharged after ten days.

A patient programmer app helps in the follow-up treatment as it sets parameters for stimulation in the device. If the response to the earlier limit of stimulation is lower, they can

increase it. Video consultations are held in follow-up sessions.

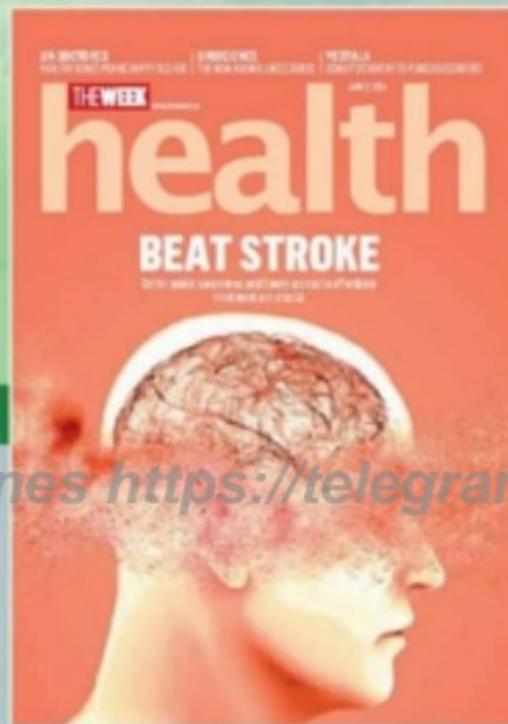
With the increase in life expectancy, there are more Parkinson's patients—one in every hundred aged 80-plus. And for every 10 cases of Parkinson's, two to three patients have PPS, said doctors.

The spinal cord stimulation can be used to treat Parkinson's, too, as the patient develops similar complications and the gait might not improve even after DBS. However, it is not advisable if the patient is above 70 and has co-morbidities.

“The achievement represents a significant milestone in the field of neurosurgery,” said Akshay Oleti, business head, Fortis Hospital Bengaluru, “and offers hope to individuals battling this challenging condition.”



# When you are touched by our stories, so are our writers

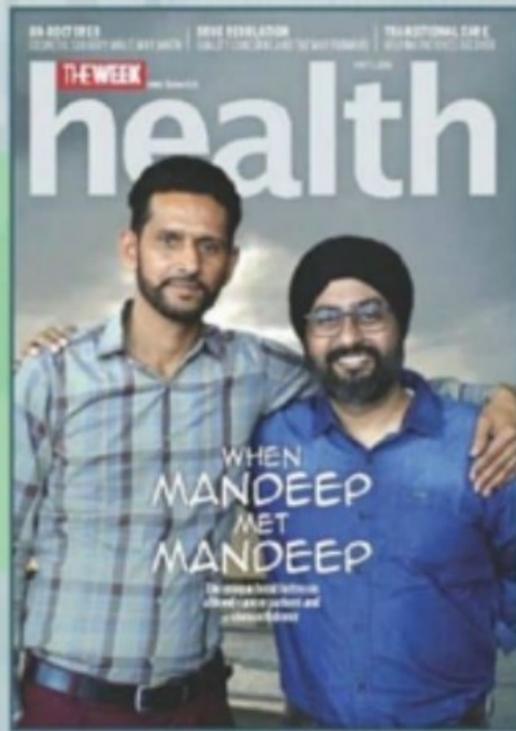


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**NIRMAL JOVIAL**

**W**hile working on the cover story on stroke care, I realised that inequality in access to health care is one of the most overlooked forms of inequality. Many lives, especially in rural areas, are lost to stroke simply because we lack a robust system capable of delivering the right care within the right time. This concern is amplified by the increasing number of young stroke patients. So much human potential is wasted owing to a condition whose ill-effects can be minimised if treated promptly!



*It was overwhelming to encapsulate the emotional journey of the two Mandeeps, unconnected by blood but connected by destiny. Cancer made its presence in the lives of both, although in different ways, and changed the course of their lives. How one Mandeep saved the other from the brink of death became my most loved story to work on. And, it gave me lessons in life I will carry with me forever.*



**POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL**

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**PUJA AWASTHI**



*The initial idea behind our cover story on air pollution was to examine if its impacts went beyond the lungs. That 'if' was not just a resounding but an astounding 'yes'. Though recorded evidence is not aplenty, correlations of air pollution's ill effects on the entire human body are too alarming to ignore. From our mental health to our skin, every bit of the body bears the brunt of the air we breathe, besides a reduction in the quality and years of life. Through its impact on fertility and the foetus, this is a generational worry. The time to tackle it was yesterday, for tomorrow might be too late.*



**By Dr S.N. Omkar**  
yogaomkar@yahoo.com



## STRETCHES GO A LONG WAY

The pelvic floor and groin muscles are essential for supporting the pelvic organs, maintaining continence, and facilitating movement. The groin muscles are responsible for the movement of the thigh towards the midline of the body and stabilisation. These muscles ensure proper pelvic function, stability, and mobility, and are crucial for preventing pelvic organ prolapse and incontinence.



MODEL: YUKTHA RAJGOPAL

### METHOD:

- ◉ Stand upright.
- ◉ Position a yoga wheel, approximately 40cm in diameter and 15cm in width, behind your back.
- ◉ Spread your feet about four feet apart with the yoga wheel centred between them.
- ◉ Turn both feet outward.
- ◉ Bend your knees and lower your hips.
- ◉ Gently sit on the yoga wheel.
- ◉ Press your feet into the ground, engaging the calf muscles and the back of your thighs.
- ◉ Hold the posture for around 60 seconds, breathing slowly and steadily.
- ◉ Slowly straighten your legs to rise back up.
- ◉ Repeat the posture three times.
- ◉ Stand upright and relax.

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