

Bharat gets its Biggest Port



Massive Vadhvan Port worth ₹76 thousand crore being Constructed in Maharashtra



100 Days of Modi 3.0
Paving the Path to Viksit Bharat

PURE POLITICS

Modi Meets Biden, Discusses Strategic Partnership

PM Narendra Modi met US President Joe Biden Saturday. The leaders reviewed their "comprehensive global strategic partnership", which encompasses over 50 bilateral dialogue mechanisms. PM Modi is in the US for the Quad summit.

Atishi Takes Oath as Delhi CM, will Hold 13 Portfolios

Inside Story

Deep Dive P 4, 5

- How to Secure High-Value Art after a High-Profile Theft
- Man's Old Bloodthirsty Ways & New Battlefields
- Why Hotels are Gearing Up for Senior Citizens
- This Martini is Shaken by AI

Sunday Chatter P 6

- If a 20-Something Finfluencer Makes You Feel Like a Loser, Chill
- Oh, For the Very, Very Wealthy in a Poor Country
- Why Do Rich Kids Keep Banging Luxury Cars?

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- Long-Form Videos are On a Roll

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- Clarified Ghee? Please, It has a Long History of Adulteration

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- Arsenal Go to Man City's Fortress for the Ultimate Clash
- Is Ohtani Baseball's G.O.A.T.?

NEW LOAN TO MAKE MORE ROOM

Oyo to Get Keys to G6 After \$525m Deal with Blackstone

Acquisition of Motel 6 co by year-end in all-cash transaction will strengthen its footprint abroad

Our Bureau
New Delhi: Oyo Hotels & Homes parent Oravel Stays on Saturday said it has agreed to acquire US' G6 Hospitality, which owns Motel 6 and Studio 6 brands, from Blackstone Real Estate for \$525 million (about ₹4,383 crore) in an all-cash transaction.

Private equity firm Blackstone and Oyo said the deal for the lodging franchisor is expected to close before the end of the year, and would include offshoot brand Studio 6. Gurgaon-based Oravel will finance the deal by raising fresh debt, said people familiar with the matter. The G6 deal marks the SoftBank-backed hospitality company's latest bid to double down on overseas markets. Oyo Hotels & Homes did not comment on details of the transaction or plans to finance it. "This acquisition is a significant milestone for a startup like us, to strengthen our international presence," said Gautam Swaroop, chief executive of Oyo International, highlighting Motel 6's brand recognition, financial profile and network in the US. "It will continue to operate as a separate entity."

Oyo entered the US market in 2019 and currently operates about 320 hotels across 35 states. In 2023, it added nearly 100 hotels, with plans to add about 250 more in 2024, according to a joint statement from Oyo and Blackstone. The Motel 6 franchise network generates \$1.7 billion in gross room revenue, providing G6 with a strong fee base and cash flow. Julie Arrowsmith, chief executive of G6 Hospitality, said, "Oyo's innovative approach to hospitality will allow us to enhance our offerings and value, while maintaining the iconic Motel 6 brand."

Several New Properties Abroad >> 7

Oyo Welcome Mat

Company	Country	Year of acquisition	Key Businesses & Geographies
G6 Hospitality	US	2024	HOTELS 18,000
Checkmyguest	France	2024	HOME RENTALS 85,000
Direct Booker	Croatia	2022	
Bornholmske Feriehuse	Denmark	2022	
Leisure Group	Netherlands	2019	
Hooters Casino Hotel	US	2019	

Source: Traxcn



Motel 6 franchise network generates \$1.7 billion in gross room revenue

Oyo recently raised ₹1,457 crore from a group of top family offices in India

COUNTRIES India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Europe
Source: Oyo investor presentation

DOMESTIC, OVERSEAS INVESTORS PITCH IN

SpiceJet Raises ₹3,000 Crore

Cash-strapped SpiceJet has got a lifeline with a ₹3,000-crore share sale to 87 Indian and overseas institutional investors, including Tata MF, Authum and Goldman Sachs. >> 3

'NO REASON TO BE APPREHENSIVE'

Trai Assures Telcos on New Regime

Regulator says govt won't be able to unilaterally change rules, licence fee can't be removed

Kiran Rathee

New Delhi: The telecom regulator has sought to allay fears of operators over the proposed mechanism that could replace the current contractual agreement between the carriers and the government, with chairman AK Lahoti saying the state cannot unilaterally change rules and regulations, and that enough safeguards have been proposed to protect the interests of telcos. Speaking exclusively to ET, Lahoti further ruled out abolition or reduction in licence fee, which is 8% of adjusted gross revenue (AGR) - to be called authorisation fee in future - that telcos pay the government, marking an about turn after the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) itself had proposed a cut. "I don't think there is any reason for operators to be apprehensive about the authorisation regime," said Lahoti in his first comments on his recommendation. These now need to be considered by the telecom department for adoption. He was speaking on the sidelines of ETTelecom's 5G Industries Innovation Summit. Lahoti said the apprehension stems from operators' assumption that the government could make unilateral changes in rules. "We have put important safeguards in recommendations."

Open Consultation >> 7

Eased Transition



AK LAHOTI, chairman, Trai

EXPLORING A FRIENDLY TAKEOVER

Qualcomm Plans to Acquire Intel

Qualcomm Inc has approached Intel Corp to discuss a potential acquisition of the struggling chipmaker, raising the prospect of one of the biggest-ever M&A deals. >> 7

Proposed authorisation mechanism to replace licensing regime
A lean authorisation structure to be supported with a set of rules under the Telecommunications Act
Trai proposes enough safeguards to avoid any unilateral changes in rules by govt
Any changes in rules, barring security, should happen after consulting Trai
Licence fee to be called authorisation fee but it would remain the same



Eye in the Sky
Hundreds of drones are prepared for a celebratory show, as well as the upcoming 75th anniversary of communist China, beside Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong on Saturday. AP

Now, 'Enabler' Startups Ride on Qcomm Boom

A fresh wave of 'enabler' startups is transforming the booming quick commerce ecosystem, sparked by rapid growth of hyperlocal startups. Apoorva Mittal reports. >> 3

Earnings Revival Hopes Lift Indian IT Cos' Valuations

Valuations of IT firms have risen nearly 20% in the past three months, with TCS, Infosys and HCLTech stock giving returns of 13%, 26% and 22%, respectively, amid business revival hopes. Beena Parmar reports. >> 3

WITH BIG-BUDGET MOVIES BOMBING...

More Films Shelved as Bollywood Stops Shooting for Stars

Fading star power, high fee make films unviable; changing audience tastes also a reason: Producers

Rajesh N Naidu

Mumbai: The Hindi film industry has seen 30-40 big-budget films getting shelved in the past year and a half, a sharp rise from the pre-pandemic average of 10-15 annually, according to trade analysts, causing fresh concerns in Bollywood despite some recent relief brought by the success of a few mid-size releases. Big-budget films like *Rakshas* and *Bajju Bawra* (Ranveer Singh), *Ganpat 2*, *Rambo and Hero No.1* (Tiger Shroff), *Hera Pheri 3* (Akshay Kumar) and *Mr. Lele* (Varun Dhawan) are among the projects featuring prominent stars that have been shelved, industry watchers said. Such films account for 30-40% of all projects announced during the period when the Hindi movie industry has seen several releases that have failed to make an impact at the box office. Producers and trade analysts told ET that three key factors have

Covid Rewrites B'wood Script

How the cost of film-making has changed post-pandemic

Actors' remuneration increased to 50-60% of budget, from 40-50% pre-Covid
Fee of mid-range actors has jumped three times
A-list actors demand three vanity vans - one each for workout, food and their entourage
Technicians' fee jumped two times as they shift from web series to movies

Content is King >> 7

MCA ALLOWS ONE-YEAR EXTENSION

Nod for Virtual AGMs till 2025

The MCA has allowed companies to hold annual general meetings (AGMs) and extraordinary general meetings virtually for one more year - till September 2025. >> 3

India Inc's Class Act: Biggies Set To Go To School

Catch 'em Young

Cos putting enhanced focus on evaluating students on their industry-readiness
New-age specialisations like AI/ML, data science, analytics, sustainability, green business, supply chain management to be in high demand

Tier 1 institutes remain top talent hunting grounds
Some looking to tap more talent from Tier 2 colleges than last year

May boost campus hiring as they value the agility of young talent in an evolving biz environment

Rica Bhattacharyya & Lijee Philip

Mumbai: Traditional Indian conglomerates that are foraging into new business areas, incubating digital-first businesses or lining up aggressive growth plans would likely boost hiring from college campuses at a time when companies across sectors remain cautious on headcount addition as they focus on driving cost management and efficiency. The likes of Adani, Reliance, L&T, Vedanta and RPG are strengthening their campus hiring plan for the upcoming placement season with some of them likely to roll out more offers to management and engineering students for the class of 2025 compared to the last placement season. This comes at a time when the talent demand at campuses was muted - in FY24 - in several sectors including technology and services as an uncertain macroeconomic environment globally forced tightening of recruitments to conserve cash. Cements-to-ports conglomerate Adani Group, which has lined up an aggressive growth strategy, plans to increase intake of fresh graduates by around 20%, said sources close to the company, who did not want to be identified. "In line with its business growth trajectory, it aims to hire approximately 1,300 fresh graduates, primarily from core engineering streams and top institutions such as the old Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other prestigious engineering colleges," said a person in the know.

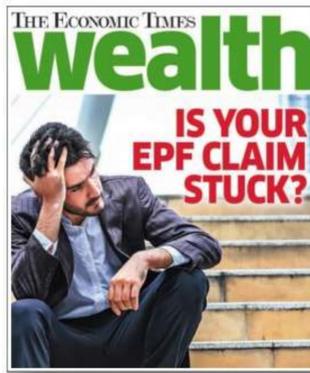
'Out-of-box Thinking Crucial' >> 7

TEAMING UP WITH INDIA INC, GOVT AGENCIES

IITs Overhauling AI Curriculum

India's top tech institutes are aggressively reshaping their AI curriculum, reports Neil Ghai. The IITs are also seeing significant industry and government collaborations. >> 3

ET WEALTH ON MONDAY



No Open Book, Fine Print Restrains Students Headed Overseas

Indians seen aiming for New Zealand, alternatives in Europe barring UK, as favoured higher education hubs tighten student visa rules/caps

Prachi Verma
New Delhi: With Canada tightening study visa rules, and Australia and the UK considering similar curbs, a dip in Indian students is expected in these countries' intake for spring 2025, said experts. Those looking to study abroad are expected to head for alternative higher education destinations such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Ireland, New Zealand and Malta in greater numbers, according to higher education and study abroad consultants.

However, the increased intake in these countries is likely to fall short of compensating the anticipated decline in Canada, Australia and the UK, they said. About 730,000 Indians are studying in Canada, Australia and the UK, according to Vaibhav Gupta, chief marketing officer of iSchool-Connect, an online study abroad platform. He expects approximately 125,000 fewer Indian students to travel to these three top countries.

"This will either be filled by the US or European destinations such as France, Italy, Germany or East European countries," said Gupta. Canada slashed study visa approvals by 35% for 2024 and announced an additional 10% cut in 2025.

Change in Trend >> 7

What's Going On?

Norms at some of Indian students' favourite destinations

CANADA Additional 10% cut in study visa approvals in 2025
Previously slashed study visa approvals by 35% for 2024
Cap includes master's and doctoral students for 2025 and beyond who were previously exempted

AUSTRALIA Cap on international student enrolment at 270,000 for 2025

UK Increased financial savings that international applicants must show to secure a student visa
Dependents no longer allowed with those on student visa, except for research PG programmes

WHY RESTRICTIONS? International student numbers growing
Migration on the rise
Pressure on realty, infra, jobs market
Other global factors: Ukraine war, recession

PM TO INTERACT WITH INDIAN DIASPORA TODAY

Modi, Biden Discuss Strategic Partnership

Quad Summit focuses on stabilising Indo-Pacific region; US Congress forms Quad Caucus

Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury

New Delhi: On his first visit to the United States in his third term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held extensive conversations with outgoing US President Joe Biden and attended the Quad Summit, with a focus on strengthening defence, technology, commerce, and Indo-Pacific partnership.

Modi and Biden held extensive discussions to assess their "comprehensive global strategic partnership," which includes more than 50 bilateral engagement mechanisms.

The meetings and Quad Summit took place in Biden's hometown, Wilmington, Delaware.



Mira Rapp-Hooper, White House National Security Council Senior Director for East Asia and Oceania, remarked ahead of the Summit that the United States regards India as a leader within the Quad and appreciates New Delhi's position in the four-nation grouping.

On Friday, a bipartisan group of American politicians announced the formation of the Quad Caucus in the US Congress. The Quad Caucus was announced by Congressman Ami Bera, Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Indo-Pacific Subcommittee, Congressman Rob Wittman, and Senators Tammy Duckworth and Pete Ricketts, both of whom serve on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Quad's constructive agenda centred on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, delivering public goods, and prioritising peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The reference to Ukraine in the Joint Statement sparked intense talks between India and the remaining three members in the run-up to the Summit. India has maintained a consistent posture of engagement and diplomacy, including Russia's participation in peace talks to settle the Ukraine conflict.

The Summit agenda covered health security, climate change, critical and emerging technology, HADR, connectivity, maritime security, and counter-terrorism.

On Sunday, the PM will have an interaction with the Indian diaspora. This is being organised by the community in Long Island, New York. He will also meet CEOs on Sunday and will engage with several tech CEOs during his three-day visit. On Monday the PM will address the Summit of the Future.

IN MANIPUR

4,800 of 6,000 Weapons Looted Yet to be Recovered

Bikash Singh

Guwahati: Over 4800 looted weapons in ethnic strife torn Manipur are yet to be recovered.

Manipur has witnessed repeated arms loot from armouries since May 3 last year. Over 6000 weapons were looted. The arms loot was more in valley districts.

Security Advisor to the Chief Minister of Manipur, Kuldip Singh in Imphal on Friday while talking to the media persons said around 6000 weapons were looted, around 2681 were recovered out of which only 1200 are looted weapons. So, 1400 weapons were not looted.

Singh reiterated the government's commitment to ensuring the safety of all citizens in Manipur and called for community support in maintaining peace and stability.

The investigation into drone bombing incidents has been forwarded to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for further scrutiny. He informed that Manipur will have SOP on drone use.

Manipur witnessed hi tech attacks by drone bombs and rocket propelled bombs. Following the attack by drone bombs and rocket propelled bombs, the security forces have deployed an anti-drone system to repel the rogue drones. At least 226 people have been killed, 1,500 injured and 60,000 displaced since violence broke out between the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi communities on May 3 last year.



The arms loot was more in valley districts of Manipur

PK Mishra Calls for Expanding Insurance Coverage Across Diverse Sectors

Our political bureau

New Delhi: Expressing concern over rising frequency and intensity of disasters globally, including in India, Prime Minister's principal secretary P K Mishra has advocated for a strategic vision to expand insurance coverage across diverse sectors and entities. He said ensuring that insurance is not only available but also accessible to the most vulnerable is a key challenge.

Mishra was speaking at a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) workshop on 'Why Disaster Risk Insurance Matters — Key Concepts and Benefits' on Friday.

According to an official statement issued on Saturday, Mishra deliberated about the government's likely role in supporting expansion of insurance coverage.

He also posed several questions such as, "Should the government act as a catalyst, facilitating the growth of the insurance market, or should it take a more direct role such as purchasing insurance for certain sectors? How should the government create public-private partnerships that improve the outreach of insurance services and products?"

He added that these questions directly relate to the fiscal sustainability of insurance-related interventions.

CHAUTALAS: Kings, Kingmakers And Now Battle for Survival



Jatin Takkar

New Delhi: From kings to kingmakers in last assembly results, the Devi Lal clan—the Chautalas—is attempting to retain its dominance in state politics while battling the most difficult election campaign this time around.

The clan has produced six of Haryana's eleven CM, including Devi Lal himself twice and his son Om Prakash Chautala four times.

However, the family had been out of power since 2000 and only achieved success in 2019, when Devi Lal's great grandson, Dushyant Chautala, became Haryana's Deputy Chief Minister after his party, JJP, allied with the BJP.

Devi Lal formed the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and ruled in Haryana on multiple occasions.

In 2019, one of his grandsons, Ajay Chautala, and his son, Dushyant Chautala, left the party to form their own outfit, JJP.

The JJP and INLD failed to gain a

single seat in the recent Lok Sabha elections. The INLD won 1.84 percent of the vote after contesting seven seats, while the JJP won 0.87 percent after contesting all 10.

To resurrect their fortunes, both parties have this time allied with political groupings with a dalit base: INLD has partnered with BSP, and JJP has joined forces with ASP. Many political commentators perceive the election as a bipolar struggle between the Congress and the BJP, with both Haryana-based parties focussing on outscoring one other.

On two assembly seats Rania and Dabwali INLD and JJP have fielded candidates of Devi Lal against each other. In Rania INLD has fielded Arjun Chautala great grandson of Devi Lal and against him former Prime Minister's son Ranjeet Chautala is contesting supported by JJP.

Similarly in Dabwali JJP has fielded Dushyant's brother Digvijay Chautala and against him INLD has fielded Aditya Chautala grandson of Devi Lal.

ing," it said.

The summit is taking place at a moment of hope and despair. Hope because countries like India have come into their own. Their ability to make their voice heard is today more than ever before. Despair because a crisis of global leadership has led to the breakdown of East-West relations. The clouds of war are hanging low, with the world teetering at the



brink. These tensions are casting their long shadow on the summit. Traditional powers have failed in their responsibility to maintain international peace and security, the sine qua non for global development and stability. India and many others are asking whether the future of the world can be left to their hands, and the answer is no. The future cannot be one of war, of climate disaster and of

Poll Songs in J&K Transcend All Barriers

From Faiz to Bollywood to Pak numbers, online & offline campaign a musical medley

Hakeem Irfan Rashid

Srinagar: Election songs have been pouring into campaign rallies and social media platforms of political parties in Kashmir during the ongoing assembly election, and the music being played transcends social, geographical and political barriers.

From different versions of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's nazm 'Hum Dekhenge' and Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's song "Sheron ka sher hai humara leader"

NO MESSAGING, JUST APPEALING



Rather than sending any ideological message or values of party, poll songs are a way to dazzle the electorate with specific info

to Bollywood song "Zindagi har kadam ek nai jung hai" and "Tu tera astr hai tahi tera shastra hai" from Kannada film KGF2, political campaigns online and offline are a musical medley.

Rather than sending any ideological message or reflecting the values of the party or an individual, election songs are a way to dazzle the electorate with specific information in the hope that it will translate into votes on

election day, a contesting candidate told ET on condition of anonymity.

"It is also a way to bring fun into politics and campaigns as people in Kashmir like to have spectacle of sorts on all occasions," said Muhammad Ashraf Bhat, 75, a shopkeeper in Srinagar who has attended election and political rallies since the 1960s.

The catchy song "Tum aise rehkar ko vote dena, watan ko jo mahtab kar de", from across the border in Pakistan, is being used by political parties to attract the attention of young voters.

NAIDU-JAGAN BATTLE OVER TIRUPATI PRASAD

Laddoo With Ingredient For Political Fighting

The Centre has waded into the controversy in Andhra and sought a detailed report

Nidhi Sharma

New Delhi: The sweet, dry fruit-laden gram flour laddoo, offered to Sri Venkateswara at Tirupati, is now at the heart of a burning political controversy. Andhra Pradesh chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu accused his predecessor and bete-noire Jagan Mohan Reddy of using animal fat-adulterated ghee in these cardamom flavoured laddoos.

The controversy, which has strong religious overtones since Reddy is a devout Christian, has brought the tender process followed by Reddy's erstwhile government and non-existent adulteration checks at Tirupati in sharp focus. ET deconstructs the politics behind the religious controversy.

THE LADDOO QUALITY

In the run-up to the Andhra Pradesh assembly election earlier this year, the quality of Tirupati laddoos was raked up by Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP). It may have appeared to be a trivial issue at the time, with complaints such as the shelf life of laddoo declining to seven days from 21 days and the taste deteriorating. But as soon as Naidu took over as chief minister in June, he disbanded the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanam (TTD) board and constituted a committee to streamline the procurement process of ghee, the key ingredient of the laddoo.

The committee sent samples of ghee to Anand-bent National Dairy Development Board's (NDDB) Centre for Analysis and Learning in Livestock and Food (CALF). The report, shared with the media by the government, has raised questions about the presence of animal fat (beef tallow and lard) in the ghee. As Naidu charged the previous government with not running requisite adulteration tests, Reddy retaliated saying 18 samples had been rejected on his watch in five years.

RAISING QUESTIONS

When Reddy took over as chief minister in 2019, he changed the process of procurement to "reverse tendering" — in sync with the Centre's policy. Under this system, the successful bidders are given a chance to bid again and even the highest bidder can participate (after consent of the lowest two bidders — termed L1 and L2. Under Reddy, the TTD shifted to the e-tendering system and several vendors were allowed to supply ghee. The Karnataka Cooperative Milk Producers Federation (KMF), which supplies Nandini ghee, got the contract in January 2021 during

DECONSTRUCTING TIRUPATI LADDOO POLITICS

Sri Venkateswara Swami temple is in Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh

This temple is managed by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD), which is under Andhra govt

Over the last few years, there have been complaints about quality of laddoos

The current controversy has been stirred by Naidu's statement that ghee used had animal fat

Former CM Jagan Reddy has accused Naidu of misusing "religious beliefs for politics"

Naidu has raised the point that if ghee was being procured at such low rates, it should have been tested for adulterants

How Ghee is procured by TTD

15,000 kgs of ghee per day is required to prepare laddoos

When Jagan Mohan Reddy assumed power in May 2019, he introduced

reverse tendering in sync with central government rules

TTD was in the process of upgradation of laboratory, which was initiated in 2023



Modi In US: Sharing Lessons, Shaping Future the India Way

At UN Summit of the Future, India is expected to ask for a hard stop to past models of governance and bring real issues of livelihood, equity, environment to centre stage



PANKAJ SARAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will once again be on the big stage on Monday when he attends the United Nations Summit of the Future in New York.

The idea of the summit emerged in 2021 in recognition of the fact, in the words of the UN Secretary General, that "we cannot continue to tackle 21st century challenges and opportunities with the 20th century foundational ideas and processes of the UN". The summit is an opportunity for international leaders to decide how to deliver a better today and safeguard the opportunities of tomorrow. The UN Secretary General has called it a "trust

building exercise".

The chief outcome document of the summit will be a Pact for the Future that is supposed to guide humanity as it moves towards the endpoint of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and beyond. The five chosen pillars of focus are sustainable development and financing for development, international peace and security, science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation, youth and future generations, and transforming global governance. The pact will be annexed with a Declaration on Future Generations and a Global Digital Compact.

India has high stakes in the summit and its outcomes, but even more in the future of the world. The world has an equally high stake in how India transforms. In its statement at the preparatory meeting for the summit in 2023, India did not mince words when it said that "the United Nations story is mixed". "The future must not repeat the failures of the past. Let us envisage a tomorrow that is inclusive and forward looking

ing," it said. The summit is taking place at a moment of hope and despair. Hope because countries like India have come into their own. Their ability to make their voice heard is today more than ever before. Despair because a crisis of global leadership has led to the breakdown of East-West relations. The clouds of war are hanging low, with the world teetering at the

political and economic exclusion. India can be expected to ask for a hard stop to past models of global governance. It will speak up against the Cold War mentality that has done more harm than good. It will seek to bring the real issues of livelihood, equity, environment and empowerment to the centre stage. It will offer an alternative vision of how nations should co-exist, respect diversity and create the conditions necessary to unleash the potential of the vast majority of humankind. There are many lessons India can share with the world, not least of which is its decades-long success in the peaceful and democratic transformation of 1.4 billion people. India can be expected to assert that the future belongs to the world, and not just to the victors of the Second World War.

On the way to the UN Summit, the Prime Minister attended the Quad Summit in Delaware. Two of its constituents at this summit, the host United States and Japan, was represented by outgoing leaders facing serious

PATH TO MODERNISATION

The outcomes of UN, Quad and other international meetings are essential to accelerating India's path to modernisation

domestic political challenges. It happened as two of its members, the US and Australia, have opened significant channels of communication with China since the last summit in May 2023. The Americans have had a series of cabinet-level visits to China while Australia has exchanged visits at prime ministerial level. The far bigger story is the shifting sands in India-China relations. Within a month of the Quad Summit, Prime Minister Modi will be sharing a

table with President Xi Jinping. Despite all the noise, China on its part remains integrated with western economies.

As each of its constituents pursues its own approaches to China, the Quad offers a platform to its members to play the long game in the Indo-Pacific region. The speed of expansion of areas of cooperation since the first summit in 2021 has been remarkable, ranging from maritime domain awareness to supply chain resilience to health security to scholarships. The measures being put in place today will have their effect only down the line, but it is better late than never. India has been right on Covid-19, Ukraine, green transition, digital transformation and global reform. There is still a long way to go but shaping the outcomes of such meetings is essential to accelerating India's path to modernisation.

The writer is former Deputy National Security Advisor

VIVAD SE VISHWAS 2.0

CBDT Notifies Date for Direct Tax Dispute Resolution

Our Bureau

New Delhi: The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) Saturday notified the rules and forms for the taxpayers to avail Vivad se Vishwas 2.0 scheme paving the way for settling disputes pending as on July 22.

It has reduced the number of forms and streamlined the process for settlement into a four-step process, unlike the previous scheme.

As per the notification, a taxpayer needs to first file an application and submit an undertaking to withdraw the dispute. Fifteen days after the filing of application, the tax officer concerned will certify the amount payable for settlement.

After the issuance of a tax certificate, the taxpayer will have to make the payment within 15 days and withdraw the dispute from the appellate forum, and notify the tax officer. After that, the tax officer will issue a certificate of settlement.

"While broadly the process is similar to earlier schemes, a notable relief is that payment rates are determined based on the date of application," said Karishma R Phatarphekar, Partner, Deloitte India.

"Applications submitted on or before 31 December 2024 can settle at regular rates, while those filed on or after 1 January 2025 will be subject to enhanced rates, provided payments are made within the specified timeframes," Phatarphekar added.

On Friday, the board had appointed October 1, 2024 as the date on which the Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas Scheme, 2024 shall come into force.

Banks Told to Set Up Efficient Monitoring Mechanism to Handle Pending Cases in DRTs

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Banks will put in place effective monitoring and oversight mechanisms for efficient management of cases pending in debt recovery tribunals (DRTs), the finance ministry said in a statement. They will also have a clearly defined policy for small and high-value cases pending in DRTs, for optimising the recovery, it said.

The Department of Financial Services, under the finance ministry, on Saturday chaired a conference with chairpersons of debt recovery appellate tribunals and presiding officers of DRTs.

The finance ministry said the whole gamut of issues concerning the functioning of DRTs and in order to make the recovery procedure more efficient was discussed.

"All stakeholders to work collectively to reduce pendency and take effective measures for optimisation of recovery which would help in ploughing back the capital stuck in pending cases to the economy for productive use," the finance ministry said, adding that in the meeting some of the best practices followed in DRTs were also discussed which can be adopted across debt recovery tribunals for better outcome.

"While formulating settlement policy, banks to take into account the transaction costs in mind while pursuing pending recovery cases," it said, adding that DRT Regulations 2024, which have a number of improved features compared to the earlier regulations of 2015, are to be adopted by all DRTs with an objective to make the recovery process more effective and less time consuming.

US, EUROPE LIKELY TO BOOST TECH SPENDING

Hopes of Earnings Revival Lift Indian Tech Firms' Valuations

Sector sees 20% jump in valuations in past 3 mths; experts say outperformance largely driving valuation re-rating

Beena Parmar

Bengaluru: Valuations of Indian IT companies have swelled nearly 20% in the past three months, with the top three firms Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys and HCLTech giving returns of 13%, 26% and 22%, respectively.

If returns for the past 12 months are considered, the three firms saw their stock prices rise by 19%, 28% and 36%, respectively. Even the fourth-largest software services firm, Wipro, a laggard in terms of earnings compared to the other three, saw shares rise about 10% in the past three months, and 25% over the past 12 months till Friday.

In comparison, the sectoral BSE IT index climbed over 29% in the 12-month period while the Nifty IT index soared over 27%.

Analysts say despite subdued revenue growth across the \$250-billion Indian IT industry, valuations are getting a lift from an anticipated revival in demand in key clientele regions—the US and Europe. Expected business revival, deal wins and fo-



cus on margin improvement in the past 2-3 quarters has further pushed up the momentum.

The first leg of the sector's outperformance is largely driving valuation re-rating, says Kumar Rakesh, associate director at BNP Paribas. "As discretionary demand starts recovering in the coming quarters, we expect earnings upgrades to also follow. This could drive the second leg of the sector's outperformance," Kumar said. He added that the price/earnings-to-growth (PEG) ratio for many companies under BNP's cover-

age has improved in recent months, trading between 2.0-2.5x. This is slightly above the last 5-year average, suggesting IT stocks are expensive currently.

"As we see earnings upgrades in the coming quarters, we expect the PEG ratio to normalise below 2x," said Kumar. The PEG ratio is a valuation metric for determining the relative trade-off between the price of a stock, the earnings generated per share (EPS), and the company's expected growth. As growth—the denominator—expands, the ratio sta-

bilises back to normal.

Saurabh Gupta, president of research & advisory services at HFS Research said the PEG ratio for the Indian IT sector rose in recent years due to strong post-pandemic growth but began to moderate in 2023.

"Clients are becoming cautious about discretionary IT spending given macro-economic challenges, which have dampened earnings growth for IT companies. Indian IT firms have been shifting focus from traditional services to high-margin digital services like cloud, AI and cybersecurity that have helped stabilise PEG ratios for companies that execute this transition well," he said.

The outsourcing industry has been struggling with low single-digit revenue growth for the past few quarters. Rising wage inflation and talent shortages could further adversely impact companies' margins. This reduces near-term earnings growth, and puts pressure on PEG ratios unless these firms can offset it through AI-driven productivity or other efficiency measures, Gupta said.

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COS EXPECT LOAN PENETRATION TO HIT 75-84%

India's Small Towns Turn Boomtowns for Auto Financing

Changing Times

Finance Penetration (%)		3- and 5-year tenure for Mahindra XUV700 AX7 petrol (₹)	
Auto loans (through banks and NBFC)	79.1	Retail price	21.19 lakh
Leasing	1.5	Loan amount	16.95 lakh
Subscription	0.1	Down payment	4.23 lakh
Cash	19.3	Interest rate	9.15%
		Tenure (months)	36 / 60
		EMI	₹54,025 / ₹35,313

Source: Jato Dynamics

Industry execs say youth's growing aspiration for car ownership drives rise

Lijee Philip

Mumbai: Growing aspiration for car ownership is fuelling a surge in auto loans in India, extending beyond the metros to smaller cities. Consumers are also opting for longer-tenure loans to afford higher car prices, say executives.

Top carmakers such as Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Mahindra, Tata Motors, Honda, and Toyota expect finance penetration to rise to 75-84% in 2024 from 64-75% in the pre-pandemic period, according to data collated by Jato Dynamics.

About 79.1% of car purchases in India are financed through bank loans or non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), underscoring the car's enduring role as a symbol of social progress in the world's most populous nation.

The preference for financing is more pronounced in tier II and III cities, where 75% opt for loans, indicating that the aspirational drive for car ownership is no longer limited to metros, said a senior official at a South India-based NBFC.

While traditional financing dominates, alternative models such as leasing, and subscription are struggling to gain traction in the Indian market.

Leasing penetration stands at a mere 1.5% and subscription at 0.1% of the market. The tepid demand is attributed to regulatory hurdles, complex logistics around insurance and maintenance, and a cultural preference for outright ownership, say experts.

"We don't get any GST benefits in leasing. Therefore, we are reluctant to offer it to the consumer," said a senior official at a Mumbai-based bank, a leading auto financier, highlighting the factors behind the loan demand.

With the calendar second half expected to outperform the first half for vehicle financiers, "we expect Mahindra Finance to report 1.9% RoA (Return on Assets) for FY25," Axis Capital said in a recent report.

GETTING FUTURE-READY

Top Tech Institutes Push for Overhaul of AI Curriculum

Team up with India Inc, govt agencies to create 'safe and scalable' AI solutions

Neel Ghai

New Delhi: On a sunny afternoon at IIT Hyderabad (IIT-H), driverless shuttles glide across the campus, silently showcasing India's strides in AI innovation. Funded by the Department of Science and Technology, TIHAN—Technology Innovation Hub on Autonomous Innovation—is part of a homegrown initiative launched in 2020 by students and faculty across AI, Electrical Engineering, Civil Engineering, and Computer Science departments.

"We wanted to bring AI to life for our students," says Ganesh Ghalme, head of the Department of Artificial Intelligence at IIT-H.

Much like in Hyderabad, India's top tech institutes are aggressively reshaping their AI curriculum. At IIT Madras (IIT-M) the newly introduced B.Tech and M.Tech programs in Data Science and AI reflect this shift.

"Our AI curriculum has less than 50% overlap with a traditional Computer Science curriculum, we built it to meet the industry's future demand," says B Ravindran, head of the Department of Data Science and AI, at IIT-M.

He believes that curriculum design and development should be a collaborative effort with industry and expert inputs but led by the academia. "If the industry drives curriculum design, it becomes short-sighted. We need to train students with strong fundamentals and then allow them to build on top of it," said Ravindran.

At IIT Delhi (IIT-D), Parag Singla, head of the Yardi School of Artificial Intelligence, talks about their "AI-X" model. "AI, today, goes beyond traditional disciplines like computer science, electrical engi-

SpiceJet Raises ₹3,000 cr from Domestic, Overseas Investors

Tata MF, Goldman Sachs among investors who subscribed to airline's QIP issue

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Cash-strapped airline SpiceJet has got a lifeline with a ₹3,000 crore share sale to Indian and overseas institutional investors, said the airline.

The company said 87 investors, including Tata Mutual Fund, Discovery Global, Sanjay Dagi's Autumn Investment and Goldman Sachs, bet on the revival of SpiceJet, with the demand being higher than the amount the airline had planned to raise.

"SpiceJet, due to its inherent nature, has a very low-cost base. It was due to unforeseen circumstances like grounding of Boeing 737 Max planes and Covid-19 that the airline became cash-strapped. With this funding, we are now back in a position to pay off our vendors who have supported us," said a senior executive of the airline, who did not wish to be identified.

The cost of capital will also come down significantly with the upcoming festive season driving demand we will be in a better position by the end of the year."

The shares will be issued at ₹61.60 apiece, lower than the closing price of ₹66.16 on Friday, when the scrip ended the session with a decline of 3.25% on the BSE.

SpiceJet promoter Ajay Singh's shareholding in the company will reduce to 34.96% from 47.8% stake he currently holds. He will remain the largest shareholder.

"The airline business is booming in India. Traffic growth is phenomenal. A sizable infusion at this stage in the airline can not only revive it but also help it to increase its market share," a person whose fund has invested in the equity financing said on condition of anonymity.

"SpiceJet needs new aircraft and upgradation of existing fleet which will not only increase its revenue but also reduce its cost. Both of these are possible now with the fundraising."

The carrier was in desperate need of funding to salvage operations as it had defaulted on payment to vendors, including aircraft lessors, some of whom had filed petitions in courts to declare the airline bankrupt. It has been unable to get new planes while rival airlines have cornered market share.

At the end of August, the airline had a little over 2% share of India's domestic aviation market. It has pending repayments of ₹601.5 crore, including statutory dues such as provident fund and tax deducted on source while another ₹750 crore is payable to lessors.

The airline had told investors while pitching for equity funding that despite shrinking in 2023-24, it had more than 50% of seat capacity at eight airports and a monopoly on 40 routes. Due to the shortage of spares, SpiceJet has around 36 grounded planes including a few Q400 planes, which it had bought from Export Development Canada in March 2014.

Virtual meetings have proved to be time-efficient, cost-effective and accessible for stakeholders

Virtual meetings have proved to be time-efficient, cost-effective and accessible for stakeholders, especially the smaller ones, said Prakash Mithal, advocate at Kings & Alliance LLP.

"It's high time that the VC (venture capital) option is formally introduced instead of merely extending the Covid-era circular, recognising it as a permanent alternative in today's corporate governance landscape," Mithal said.

The ministry had first allowed companies to undertake such crucial meetings through the electronic mode in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It has since extended the relief periodically.

Venture Fund MGF-Kavachh Closes First Deal with ₹400cr

Shantanu Nandan Sharma

New Delhi: A venture fund set up by former defence secretary Ajay Kumar has raised ₹400 crore and closed its first deal, with three more deals approaching finalisation.

In a first for a former defence secretary of India, Kumar turned an entrepreneur by launching MGF-Kavachh, an alternative investment fund approved by the Securities and Exchange Board of India, in January, following the completion of his mandatory cooling-off period after retirement.

"We have so far raised ₹400 crore with a visibility of reaching ₹500 crore soon. Our plan is to invest in 30 startups in sectors like defence, space and deep tech," Kumar told ET in a phone interview from Washington DC, where he is currently on a work trip.

The 61-year-old former Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer said the fund has closed its first deal, but declined to disclose further details ahead of a formal announcement expected later this week. At least three more deals are in the pipeline, he said.

Delhi-headquartered MGF-Kavachh, backed by contributions from 32 limited partners, primarily high-net-worth individuals and family offices, is focused on bolstering India's growing defence sector, as more and more startups have begun production of cutting-edge weapons, ranging from drones to drone-dropped bombs.

Asked about the size of the proposed deals in targeted startups, Kumar said, "I prefer not to mention an average investment size as it can be misleading. For early-stage companies, we plan to invest around ₹3-4 crore, while for more mature companies with higher valuations, we may invest as much as ₹30-40 crore."

Retired IAS officer-turned-entrepreneur says his fund will invest in defence, space and deep tech startups

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Rapid Growth of Qcomm Fuels Wave of 'Enabler' Tech Startups

Many early-stage venture capital funds actively evaluating investment opportunities in burgeoning ecosystem

Apoorva Mittal

Mumbai: A fresh wave of 'enabler' startups is transforming India's booming quick commerce (Qcomm) ecosystem, sparked by rapid growth of hyperlocal startups, coupled with the entry of new startups, established e-commerce firms, and new-age brands racing to shorten delivery times.

Several early-stage venture firms are actively evaluating investment opportunities in this burgeoning space, ET has learnt.

"There are obviously some overlaps with e-commerce, and hence, some existing enabling technologies can assist quick commerce; however, quick commerce sometimes requires its own enablers," said Kunal

Bahl, cofounder of Titan Capital and Ace Vector Group, which runs Snapdeal and Unicommerce.

Bahl added that Titan Capital has invested in Blitz, a startup building a third-party dark store network to support quick commerce for brands. Other areas it has evaluated startups include products that allow order management across multiple quick commerce platforms.

Another startup, Gurugram-based

Zippee, which recently closed a funding round, enables two-hour and same-day deliveries for more than 140 new-age and established brands such as Frido, Ultrahuman and Haldiram's. The company gives access to dark stores to fulfil orders in a dozen cities including New Delhi, Chennai, Ludhiana and Pune.

Other emerging platforms are also starting to offer their services to quick com-

merce startups, which experts say could be challenging. Bahl said such companies building for quick commerce firms such as Blinkit and Zepto may face challenges due to their tech-native nature, adding that "the opportunity lies in creating products for brands now managing orders across various distribution channels."

A senior executive at one of the largest quick commerce platforms, said while new entrants are offering a range of services such as Software as a Service (SaaS) products, logistics, and real estate solutions, the limited addressable market of 8-9 major compa-

ny may pose a challenge going forward.

Nitin Sharma, partner at early-stage fund Antler, offered a balanced view on the emergence of such ventures. "There are two contrasting angles to explore in this space," he notes. "On one hand, the growth of quick commerce may soon require its own 'enabler' ecosystem of startups. These startups will help large platforms scale further across inventory management, dark store operations, and last-mile logistics."

However, Sharma also acknowledged potential challenges. "How quick commerce will evolve in non-metro and tier I markets remains unclear. Additionally, local kiranas and general trade stores must adapt to retain their more profitable customers."

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VARANI SAHU



ISTOCK

neering and maths, encompassing almost every field of study. We call it the AI+X model, something new at least on this scale," he explains.

Reflecting the surge in student interest, IIT Kharagpur opened a new engineering department in 2024, the first in nearly 30 years. "Students are signing up for B.Tech in AI faster than for electrical and electronic engineering, and only behind computer science," says Niloy Ganguly, head of the AI Department at IIT Kharagpur (IIT-K).

IIT Guwahati (IIT-G) was an early mover, launching its full-fledged B.Tech program in Data Science and AI in 2021.

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Shishir Prasad

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend. I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed. I parried; but my hands were loath and cold. Let us sleep now..."

— "Strange Meeting" by Wilfred Owen

In 1845, the German philosopher, political theorist and economist Karl Marx wrote about his theory of historical materialism in *Theses on Feuerbach*. It states that the direction of history is determined by material forces and that the ultimate result will be a communist utopia. With the proletariat (workers) emerging as victors, and that it would be the "end of history".

Exactly 144 years later, two events happened. In the summer of 1989, the American magazine *The National Interest* published an essay, "The End of History?". Its author, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, said that the ideological battles between East and West were over. Western liberal democracy had triumphed. At that time, anti-communist protests were breaking out across the former Soviet Union. Fukuyama had put his neck on the line with that essay.

Humans didn't get to be at the top of the species ladder by reason or love. We got here through incessant bloodlust and an insatiable desire for battle and war. Evolution, you see, is red in the tooth and claw

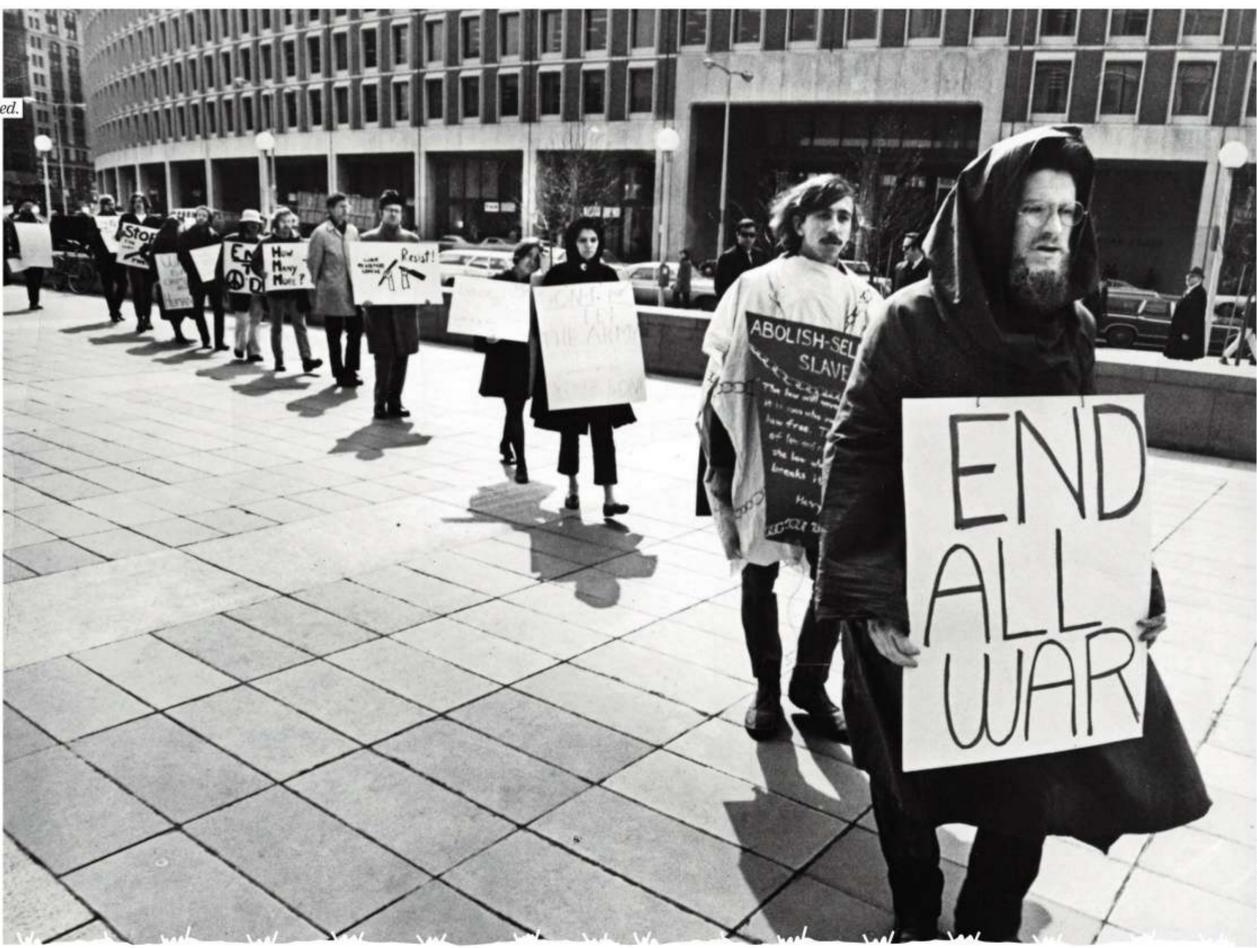
He was remarkably prescient. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was torn down, marking the end of the Cold War. It was exactly the opposite of what Marx had theorised. Capitalism won, not communism. It should have been the end of all disagreements. It should have been the beginning of an era of peace, brotherhood, sisterhood and chill vibes.

It has been anything but that. The US invaded Iraq in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. By 1991, the US had won. It took just another 11 years and then September 11, 2001 happened. The world simply went back to its bloodthirsty ways. The US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, setting off a chain reaction that gave birth to al-Qaeda first and later ISIS. In the process, most of the Middle East became a kill-zone.

Today, we have the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza, the Capitol Hill violence in the US, an almost-anarchic Bangladesh, not to forget India's not-so-friendly relationship with Pakistan and China. What happened to that love and peace? Why did we choose to return to our bloodthirsty ways?

"I, too, thought we had made enormous progress upon the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was much talk in the United States at the time of a 'peace dividend'. Presumably we wouldn't need to spend so much money on national defence. We could use that money to build roads, bridges, hospitals, highways and perhaps even cure cancer," says John Kiriakou, a former CIA officer, and associate fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, DC, in an email interaction with ET. "That dream was pushed aside temporarily, we thought, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. But one thing led to another, 9/11 took place and the US went on an invasion spree around the world. The rest is history," says Kiriakou, who was responsible for the capture of Abu Zubaydah, then believed to be the third-ranking official in al-Qaeda, in Pakistan in 2002. In 2007, Kiriakou blew the whistle on the CIA's torture programme.

EVOLUTION IS RED
Humans didn't get to be at the top of the species ladder by reason or love. We got here through incessant bloodlust and an insatiable desire for battle and war. Evolution, you see, is red in the tooth and claw. Peter Turchin, a political scientist and



steam power. Did all this flowering of arts, culture, music, philosophy and technology reduce war? Only till 1914, when World War I began. At the battle of Somme, in 1916, in a space of five months, more than a million young soldiers were killed. By the time the war ended, 40 million people had died. It didn't take very long for the Europeans to thirst for blood again. In 1939, World War II started. It ended in 1945. It killed more than 60 million people. Historians estimate that more than 3% of the global population of that time were killed during the war. All that great European philosophy wasn't of much use, was it? So much for Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative. Banish the thought of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism. Just throw into the dustbin Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning. No matter what the Europeans professed in the classrooms, they were always hungry for flesh outside of it. Nothing changed, even outside of Western

"The major reason for widespread violence is inequality, injustice. Even in educated societies, economic, social and racial disparities create tension, leading to growing frustration and anger. Violence becomes a form of expression for survival," says Mairaj Patel, psychologist

Europe. About 9 million people died during Stalin's rule. Mao Tse-tung had many wonderful ideas, including the Great Leap Forward. It is just that such ideas resulted in more than 40 million deaths.

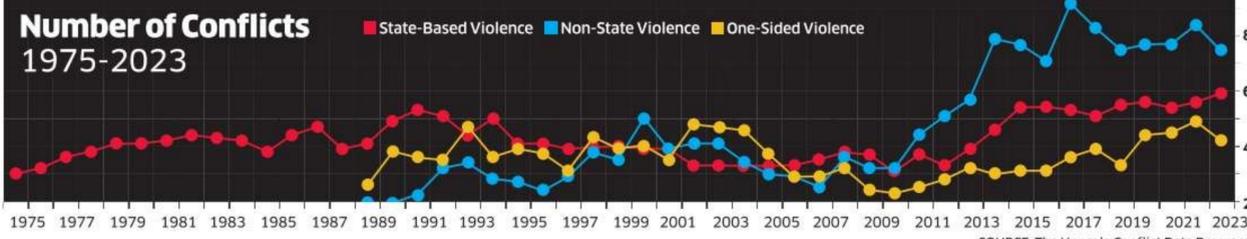
DARKNESS OF HUMAN SPIRIT
It is a puzzling thought. All those lessons of reasoning, of self-restraint, they all come to naught when push comes to shove. "We only made technological progress. Intellectual progress has been backwards. Earlier war resources were difficult to gather, now it is easy. Earlier it was mandatory to go to the battlefield to fight a war. Now wars can be fought from thousands of kilometres away. Earlier scores of lives used to be lost in a war which are reducing with each step of our technological advancement," says Major (ret) Amit Bansal. He is a leading expert in geostrategy and international affairs and is associated with think tanks like the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Technological advances like long-range missiles, rifles and now drones mean you don't have to look at your adversary before you stick the knife in. You just press a button and "boom". The farther away you are, the less the emotional cost of a "killing decision".

"This is in spite of people all over the world being more educated. You would think education would help. It hasn't. 'The major reason for widespread violence is inequality, injustice. Even in educated societies, economic, social and racial disparities create tension, leading to growing frustration and anger. Violence becomes a form of expression for survival,' says Mairaj Patel, psychologist and psychologist therapist. The essay, 'The End of History?', became a book where Fukuyama outlined the conditions for a liberal democratic state: 'A liberal democratic state requires three things. First, it is democratic. Secondly, the state possesses sufficient strength and authority to enforce its laws and administer services. Thirdly, its leaders are not above the law.' Perhaps this trinity is impossible to achieve.

As World War I ended, the greatest poet of the 20th century, TS Eliot, wrote *The Waste Land*, disturbed by the war. Its invocation is essential. "What is the city over the mountains Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air Falling towers Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London Unreal ... These fragments I have shored against my ruins Why then I'll fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe. Datta. Dayadhvam. Dmyata. Shantih shantih shantih" shishir.prasad@timesofindia.com

BATTLE FATIGUE

Prophecies of peace and philosophies of global welfare wither outside pulpits and classrooms as mankind keeps returning to its old bloodthirsty ways and new battlefields



We thought as recently as the 1970s that we could have guns AND butter. But that wasn't true. It was guns OR butter. And we chose the guns" JOHN KIRIAKOU, former CIA officer

cliodynamics theorist (history through scientific study), in his book *Ultrasociety*, says, "The evidence is overwhelming that daily life in the shadow of imminent violence was the rule rather than an exception for people in tribal societies. The main and the most terrifying threat came from outside their society. It came from strangers." Then we evolved, independently and differently, in different parts of the world, but extermination of the "other" has remained a constant refrain. About 5,000 years ago, people in Britain were building the famous Stonehenge. Within a few centuries, these people were wiped out by a set of people called the Yamnaya. Writing in *New Scientist*, Colin Barras says,

"Between 5000 and 4000 years ago, the Yamnaya and their descendants colonised swathes of Europe, leaving a genetic legacy that persists to this day. Their arrival coincided with profound social and cultural changes. Burial practices shifted dramatically, a warrior class appeared, and there seems to have been a sharp upsurge in lethal violence." "I've become increasingly convinced there must have been a kind of genocide," says Kristian Kristiansen at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden in the same article.

UTOPIA HAS BLOOD ON ITS HAND
This desire for killing never subsided, be it among the Aztecs, the Aztecs and Incas, Columbus and the Native Indians, Native Indians themselves, Vikings and the Europeans and, of course, the French and the English. Yet, there has been this desire for an idyllic world free of strife that has always remained like a "concealed carry"

In 1939, World War II started. It ended in 1945. It killed more than 60 million people. Historians estimate that more than 3% of the global population of that time were killed during the war. All that great European philosophy wasn't of much use, was it?

within the treacherous human heart. Like Hannibal Lecter listening to Bach's Goldberg variations before he samples his guest's liver with a glass of Chianti. Two things happened in the most violent of all places: Europe. First came Renaissance and Enlightenment (1300-1600 CE) to which we can trace back all modern use of reason and creativity. And then came the Industrial Revolution (1700-1900 CE) which launched the modern technological basis of progress. Think

Martini, Shaken by AI

Garima Verma

What makes a great cocktail? 007 would say it is in the shake. It is in the kick, some would argue. Precision in each pour and consistency are the way to go for most. What if all these are possible just by touching a screen in your living room? What if all the secrets of a dirty martini, a classic Negroni, a stately old fashioned, or a colourful cosmopolitan are at your fingertips rather than in the dexterous hands of a mixologist in a bar?

For the new cocktail is brought to you by AI. Barsys, a New York-headquartered home automation company, has launched its AI-powered cocktail machine in India after debuting it at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas in January this year. Called Barsys 360 and costing ₹55,700, this halo-like automated bartending machine can mix over 1,000 cocktails, some within 15 seconds and all of them customisable to the last ml. It can even personalise the drinking experience by recommending new cocktails based on previous preferences and selections.

Barsys' story started in India almost a decade ago. "It was in 2014 that the idea came to us," says Arush Tewari, head of Barsys India. "The liquor industry, despite its size, seemed to be

Cocktail machines, powered by artificial intelligence, are creating a stir in the market. Can they replace the human bartender?

having the least technological disruption." Tewari and his brother Akshet, who is the founder and CEO of Barsys, decided to elevate the mixology game with a machine that would craft hundreds of cocktails. It helped that both of them have a background in engineering.

After attracting investors at a show in New York and incorporating the company in Delaware, the Tewaris launched a sleek version of their original machine for around \$1,000 in the US in 2016. Called Barsys 2.0, its latest version comes for ₹1,80,000 in India. Then came the Barsys Coaster, which can be operated via an app that will guide the user through precise measurements for a drink. The Barsys 360 is the latest and can hold six different ingredients for cocktails.

TEQUILA MEETS TECH

Automated cocktail-making machines and robots are creating a buzz in the global alcohol-beverage sector—and India is joining in the fun. The global cocktail maker market, valued at \$428 million in 2023, could touch \$1,030 million by 2030, according to Verified Market Reports.

It is not just Barsys. An eponymous cocktail maker from Bartesian, a company founded by a former bartender called Ryan Close, and the bev by Black+Decker are also creating a stir in the market. Unlike Barsys, these two require cocktail capsules. The Bartesian Cocktail Maker, costing \$350 in the US, can make over 60 cocktails and works with four types of liquors at a time. While you can choose the strength of your cocktail, its LCD screen will flash the type of glassware to use. A packet of eight pods would cost \$20. The Bartesian's smaller version, Duet, is priced at \$260, while its latest iteration, The Premier, which was showcased at the 2024 CES, is expected to be available soon.

The bev by Black+Decker, which can make over 40 cocktails, costs \$300. The company, known for its power tools and home appliances, has also unveiled a cordless version, priced at \$400. "The cordless machine allows users to enjoy cocktails and mocktails at any location," says a Black+Decker official.

BAR BENDER

Will the bar machine replace the bartender? Will the AI get more cheers than the human?

Sahil Sangari, a 37-year-old businessman in Delhi, has been using the Barsys 360 for over a month now, and is a convert. "Everyone

is fascinated with it. We have moved from straight drinks to fancy cocktails," says Sangari, whose family of six uses the machine every 10 days.

Rick's, the lounge at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Delhi, may tread the nostalgic *Casablanca* path in its name, but its manager, Anushka Bagchi, avers that they are not averse to technology adding another dimension to the bar experience. After all, an automatic wine dispenser from Enomatic at its wine bar, Captain's Cellar, has been the talk of the town for quite some time. "You go to the bar for the drinks and the people, especially the way bartenders personalise your drinks and

What if all the secrets of a dirty martini, a classic Negroni, a stately old fashioned, or a colourful cosmopolitan are at your fingertips rather than in the dexterous hands of a mixologist in a bar?

engage with you. That is something that will never change. However, these machines can be cool assistants to bartenders," says Bagchi. "They can never take over completely as you still need the human presence to tell the stories behind the drinks, like at Rick's."

Chef Om Nayak, founder of The Pasta Bowl Company, is looking forward to sleeker versions of these machines that can act as personal bartenders at every table at his Italian restaurant in Gurgaon. "Just imagine the conversations the people would have while experimenting with their drinks. Rather than the screen restricting interaction, it will help start one," he says. Till then he might get a cocktail machine to expand his drinks menu.

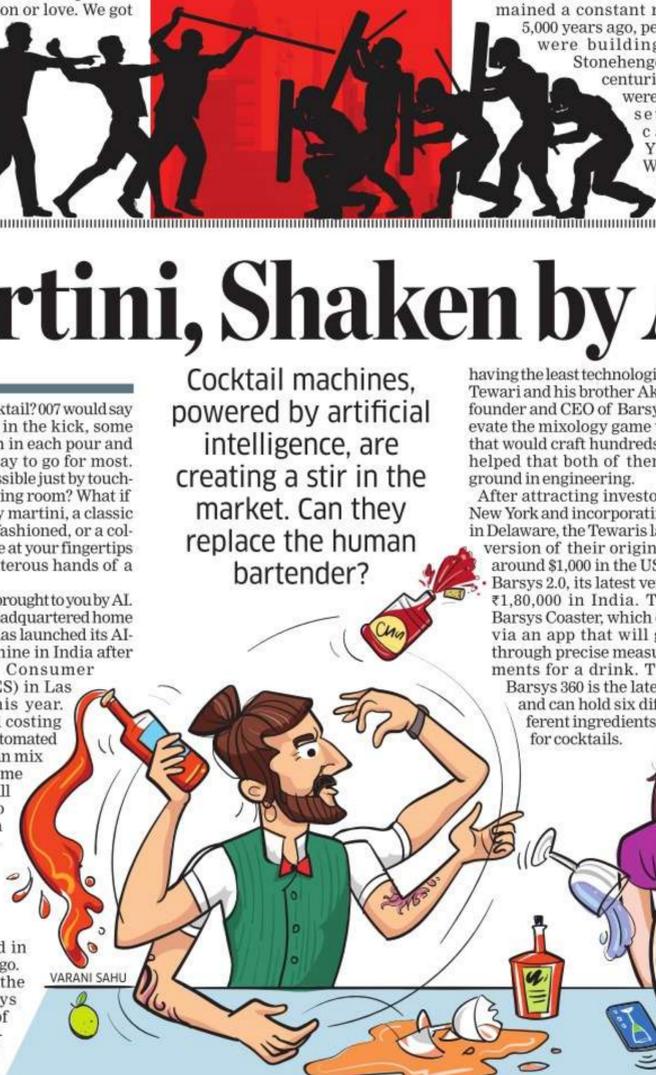
AD Singh, MD of the Olive Group of Restaurants, which includes the Monkey

Bar, demurs about machine bartenders replacing humans. "I am sure AI could make cocktails very well and follow the recipe consistently. However, in India, we need jobs. And bartending is a skilled job. I would rather see AI support people rather than take away their jobs," says Singh, adding that "the personal touch, the human interaction, can never be replaced".

Atilla Iskifoglu, a British-Turkish mixologist who has won the European Flair Championship multiple times, says, "All bars are a stage and we are the performers. But there cannot be a theatre without a vast knowledge of cocktails, providing a package of great drink, great entertainment and great service." Iskifoglu is in India to hold masterclasses in mixology and bar takeovers in collaboration with The House of Suntory. He had also curated cocktails for the recent Ambani wedding. "It is all about the heart. AI could be smarter than us, but it doesn't have a heart. It can never provide the energy, the vibe and the show like we do. It can make a cocktail very quickly, but can it add love?" asks Iskifoglu.

However, AI may not relent. Recently, ADAM, a humanoid robot developed by RichTech Robotics of Nevada, served 500 beverages in its first week of operation at the stadium of Texas Rangers' Major League Baseball. Earlier this year, South Korea's Doosan Robotics introduced its Mixmaster Moodie, a robot that can make and serve drinks depending on your mood. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, XOXO Beverages has made its cocktail machine more accessible via a rental service. Barsys' Tewari says they have been thinking along similar lines so that more people can experience their machine bartender. "But currently our aim is to meet the growing demand and launch the machine in more cities in India," he says.

Garima Verma is a Delhi-based journalist who writes on travel, food and sports



That Painting's a Steal

A spate of recent incidents, especially the reported theft of a Raza painting, is making India's art fraternity relook at how it protects high-value art



Glynda Alves

There is something about the art thief. For one, art thieves in movies are portrayed as being suave and sophisticated as opposed to your sneaky and slithery garden-variety thief.

These are people who, one is made to believe, enjoy the finer things in life and, yes, can engage in a conversation with a liberal sprinkling of phrases like how a painting talks to the performative sensibility of the sublime and evokes the oblique objectives of precarious assemblages.

Romanticisation of criminality—and gibberish—aside, art has aesthetic, emotional and monetary value, and where there is value there is greed.

Little surprise then that India's art community was shaken up when SH Raza's 1992 painting *Nature*, valued at around ₹2.5 crore, reportedly went missing from Astaguru's warehouse in Mumbai. The auction house has filed a police complaint, according to a report in the *Times of India* on September 11.

The painting was put up by its owner Indra Veer for auctioning in 2020, and was last seen in March 2022.

The case has put the spotlight on the safety of high-value art, even as the market for Indian art soars. According to the 2024 Hurun India Art List, sales by the top 50 artists reached a record-breaking ₹301 crore, a 19% increase from 2023. Demand is high, with 92% of featured artists seeing a rise in sales value.

Artist Paresh Maity says, "When any work of art, which has the power to bring joy and delight to countless individuals, is stolen, it generates a shockwave of disbelief throughout the community."

Naturally, galleries are relooking at their

Raza is one of India's foremost artists and his works are highly prized. His *Gestation*, which sold for ₹51.75 cr in 2023, is one of the most expensive Indian art works to be auctioned

safety protocols. Minal Vazirani, cofounder of the auction house Saffronart, says, "Something like this shakes you up. Maybe we need to look a little more closely at processes, procedures and physical locations. We have to relook at things and become better."

Sunaina Anand, founder of Art Alive Gallery in Delhi, seconds it and adds that they are now more conscious of security.

The three biggest threats to the safety of art

During exhibitions, it is mandatory for our core team to be in the vicinity of art works to safeguard them from any kind of damage. With technology, it is possible to do remote management of security

SUNAINA ANAND, founder, Art Alive Gallery

in storage or exhibition are theft and vandalism, often involving sophisticated planning and execution; environmental damage, that can be due to improper storage; and human error like mishandling of works.

Of late, art has been frequently targeted, especially in Europe. In 2022, 38 environmental protests were held in museums. Tomato soup was hurled at Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and mashed potatoes were thrown at Monet's *Haystacks*. Not even the *Mona Lisa* was spared—she got a taste of pumpkin soup at the Louvre. Thankfully, all these paintings were safe behind glass.

Security guards, CCTV, access control, alarm systems, environmental controls and insurance are non-negotiable to secure high-value art works, says Jennifer Harvey, group CEO of the logistics company Crown Worldwide

Group, which stores and transports art and whose clients include high-net worth art collectors, galleries and exhibitors.

Radha Iyer, assistant general manager of relocations, world mobility and fine art at Crown, who handles its India operations, says art needs to be centrally monitored.

"This team is responsible for addressing any issues, ensuring that nothing falls through the cracks," says Iyer.

Rasika Kajaria, founder of the art gallery Exhibit 320 in Delhi, says they have multiple cameras that are continuously manned, capturing every angle, especially the entrance and exit in storage areas; security staff and climate-controlled storage units.

It isn't just thievery that the fraternity needs to protect art from. Indian summers and monsoons are not friends of art. Fungus and moisture are big offenders.

Says Harvey: "It is mandatory in our company to update the daily record of humidity level. We have CCTV cameras and 24x7 security. Our vault is air conditioned, temperature-controlled and has a Novec fire-suppression system installed. The vault can also resist fire for many hours."

Goenka, who has a substantial collection of art, says, "For the Mumbai weather, we have deployed dehumidifiers. Art is not something you can just buy and forget about. You need to put in some discipline to maintain art works, particularly the mixed media works."

Art is like any other valuable asset and is vulnerable to theft. But as they are unique individual creations, the loss is more than just monetary

HARSH GOENKA, chairperson, RPG Enterprises

PROTECTING ART

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Insurance, insurance, insurance. A must-have for anyone who deals with high-value art is insurance. "Insurance, insurance, insurance—I cannot stress on it enough," says Kajaria, who has been using Sonnen Insurance Broking Services in Delhi to insure art pieces.

Vazirani says Saffronart works with insurers in India as well as globally.

Srabasti Dhali, national manager-private client group & personal property at Tata AIG General Insurance, says art houses must insure pieces on-site, in storage and in transit.

"Insurance for art works is generally on all-risk basis, protecting against loss due to theft, fire, floods and handling accidents. Such assurance is vital for maintaining a reputable standing in the art market, as a single mishap can jeopardise an auction house's reputation and viability," says Dhali.

That is partly why stocktaking is important. "It is a more complex process than just saying we do stocktaking every six weeks," says Vazirani. "You don't want to get into a situation where you are wrapping and unwrapping big works on a continuous basis. It really is about making sure you have got procedures in place for the physical stocktaking of the works. It is critical."

Liability typically begins when an art work leaves the owner (artist or seller) and continues until it is sold or returned.

In case of theft, liability depends on the contract between the art owner and the storage facility or auction house.

"Generally, the facility may be liable if negligence can be proven. However, insurance does play a crucial role in mitigating losses. All high-value art has to be insured to cover such risks," says Iyer.

Recently, a child accidentally broke a rare, 3,500-year-old jug at the Hecht Museum in Israel. The jug had been displayed without a case.

Maity says while some events are unfortunate, it should not make artists nervous about showcasing their work in public.

"I prioritise offering my work to known and important people because I trust that they will handle and display the pieces with the utmost care and professionalism," he

Insurance for art works is generally on an all-risk basis, protecting against theft, fire, floods, and handling accidents. This coverage is critical, as it not only safeguards against financial losses but also builds trust with art owners and buyers

SRABASTI DHALI, national manager-private client group & personal property, Tata AIG General Insurance

says, adding that he meticulously numbers his works, so that he can track each piece and maintain a comprehensive record.

Goenka says that as far as possible, he tries to display art at his homes and office spaces. Otherwise, it is kept in storage.

"In the past, whenever we had public exhibitions, we handled the art logistics ourselves," says Goenka. "In case of loans for exhibitions, the art works are fully insured by the loanee, and we assess their protocols before we lend them."

Anand says they ensure strict security during public exhibition of works. "It is mandatory for a core team to be in the vicinity of art works to safeguard them from any kind of damage. And with technology, it is possible to do remote management of security. We always consult specialised security management companies."

That said, there are still blind spots. Kajaria says that in India, especially at art fairs, extensive security is not provided by organisers, and they have to trust the "educated audience". If the work is fragile, they encase it in glass.

BRUSH WITH CRIME

The theft of the Raza painting was discovered close to an auction the work was to feature in. British auction house Christie's, too, was hacked at the most inopportune time, right before the New York Auction Week.

(Christie's, Sotheby's and Astaguru declined to comment for the story.)

Establishing a contingency plan before any significant event is key. "If you experience a disruption, acting swiftly to notify authorities and affected parties, while immediately securing any remaining as-

sets, is essential, says Kajaria. The silver lining, says Vazirani, is that the art fraternity in India is interconnected. Reselling a stolen art work, like the Raza, is not easy. "If you resell a work, particularly in a public auction, it is not something that would just go by unnoticed."

Clearly not all art thieves get their way.

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Lijee Philip

PS Ganapathy and his wife Jemmy, both in their 80s, take a two-and-a-half hour trip from Kodagu to a hotel in Mysuru every three months. "We are pampered there. Even our diet preferences, like turmeric milk at sundown, are known to the staff," says Ganapathy, who has retired from Tata Coffee. For the couple, familiarity breeds comfort. They stay for 10-15 days at a stretch at the hotel. "We get personalised service and even assistance with unpacking," says Jemmy.

Footloose and fancy-free were epithets that once celebrated the young. Now, as senior citizens wear those adjectives with aplomb, travelling where their savings and fascination take them, hotels are getting ready for a silver wave of clientele.

"The retired community has a great propensity to travel as they are now free of professional obligations," says Monisha Dewan, VP, sales & distribution, South Asia, Marriott International. "They have substantial spending power and are increasingly looking to enjoy their golden years through travel and leisure."

Marriott offers a 15% discount for guests aged 62 and above. Hilton gives a 7% cut in rates for those above 65 years. Meanwhile, domestic chains like Royal Orchid offer discounts on long stays, wellness packages and curated local experiences for senior citizens.

The hospitality industry is also bringing in amenities to make the older clients comfortable. Some hotel chains are redesigning rooms to make them more accessible for senior citizens, with features such as roll-in showers where wheelchairs can be moved in, lower beds, ramp access, grab bars in bathrooms, anti-skid flooring, wider doors and seating in shower areas. They are also moving restaurants and facilities to the

Silver Service

Why the hospitality industry is gearing up to cater to senior citizens

Hotels are creating senior-friendly environments that prioritise comfort, safety and health. From adaptive designs to tailored services, the hospitality sector is poised to cater to the needs of an ageing population

NANDIVARDHAN JAIN, Founder & CEO, Noesis

ground floor for easy access, and putting ramps for wheelchair users.

Global population is ageing. And the hospitality industry knows its future is intertwined with this growing demographic. The United Nations' report "World Population Ageing 2019" estimates that by 2050, there will be 1.5 billion people aged 65 and above, including 225 million Indians.

According to NITI Aayog, India is projected to have 319 million people who are 60 and above by 2050; this means one in five Indians will be a senior citizen. Catering to them is a business opportunity and a social responsibility.

Hotels in India are also looking outwards to tap the growing market of senior travellers from across the world who want to explore new destinations or escape the cold winters to the warm cities of India. The international senior tourism market is estimated to grow at 4% annually, according to McKinsey & Co, and hotels that welcome them by incorporating senior-friendly amenities will be able to seize the opportunity.

Internationally, there are successful age-friendly hospitality initiatives,

such as Marriott offering accessible accommodation

ON THE MOVE

The hospitality industry says it is seeing an uptick in senior travellers in domestic tourism. "From 10% in 2019, the share of senior bookings has grown to 18% in 2023, driven by leisure and medical tourism," says Chander Baljee, chairman and MD, Royal Orchid and Regenta Hotels, which of-

fers senior-friendly accommodation with special rates in many properties.

The travel agency Thomas Cook has seen a 15% rise in domestic travel by senior citizens since 2019.

Health and wellness tourism, in particular, is becoming popular among seniors who seek destinations that offer relaxation and healthcare.

Zubin Saxena, senior vice-president and regional head, South Asia, Hilton, says there is a significant increase in domestic travel by senior citizens. "It is driven by more leisure time post-retirement and the desire to explore new destinations, besides religious travel. This trend will grow as more travellers in the senior citizen age group embrace travel for leisure and wellness."

Hotels are tapping this market by designing accessible and comfortable spaces. Many Hilton properties offer early-bird specials at their restaurants,

Grey Matters

348 mn: Projected population of India's elderly by 2050

20%: Projected share of the elderly in India's population by 2050, up from 10.1% in 2021

Note: Elderly means 60 years and above

Source: NITI Aayog

Stepping In

Senior-friendly services can help hotels

Capture a portion of the \$0.5-1 billion senior recreation market.

Increase average occupancy rates by attracting long-stay senior guests

Tap into the international senior tourism market, estimated to grow at 4% annually

Source: Noesis, McKinsey



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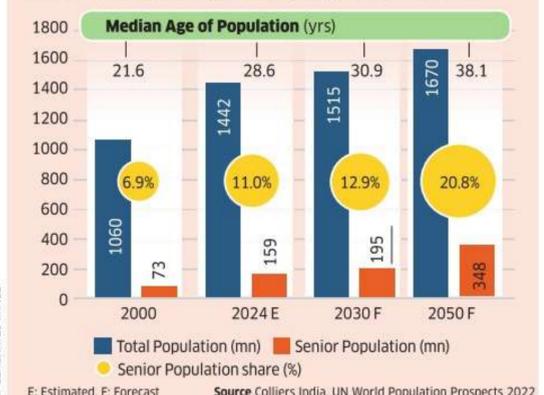
catering to senior guests who prefer to dine early. The menus are often tailored to suit their dietary needs. Some Hilton properties partner with local medical providers for on-call services.

T Bhaskar, a 70-year-old businessman from Bengaluru and frequent traveller, says, "We want brand familiarity. We don't mind exploring unknown food." He says he likes the attention a familiar hotel showers on him, which is often the biggest acknowledgement for senior travellers.

While India has about 18% of the world's senior population, its elder care market size is only one-hundredth of the world, according to Noesis, a hotel investment advisory and consulting firm. Its research also says that the market size of recreation for senior citizens is estimated to be \$0.5-1 billion.

According to Nandivardhan Jain, founder of Noesis, "Hotels are creat-

India's Growing, Greying Population



The retired community has a great propensity to travel as they are now free of professional obligations

MONISHA DEWAN, VP, Sales & Distribution, South Asia, Marriott International

ing senior-friendly environments that prioritise comfort, safety and health. From adaptive designs to tailored services, the Indian hospitality sector is poised to cater to the unique needs of an ageing population."

Health and wellness are key areas where hotels can make a difference. They can offer on-site medical facilities or partner with local healthcare providers such as wellness centres and hospital networks to provide essential care and cater to health- and recovery-focused stays. Wellness programmes, including spa services tailored for old-

er adults, can be an attraction. Nikhil Kapur, founder of Atmantan Wellness Centre near Pune, says they have seen a rise in travellers in the 60-70 years age group. "They go for long-stay packages. They are mostly in good health with some niggling issues. We have a team that is trained to look after seniors and all dietary protocols are followed," he says.

According to Jain of Noesis, since hotels are getting ready for senior citizens, rooms are getting equipped with voice-activated assistants and easy control systems for lighting, temperature and entertainment. Leisure and recreation are also curated to suit the physical capabilities of elderly travellers, which include low-impact activities like an evening stroll. Since dining and nutrition play a critical role, many hotels are laying out customised meal plans as well.

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TOLL IN FRIDAY'S AIRSTRIKE IN BEIRUT SUBURB RISES TO 37; 13 WOMEN, 6 CHILDREN AMONG THOSE KILLED IN STRIKE ON GAZA SCHOOL

Israeli Raids in Lebanon, Gaza Kill Over 50

Beirut | Jerusalem | Gaza: At least 37 people were killed in an Israeli airstrike on a Beirut suburb on Friday, including three children and seven women, the Lebanese health ministry said on Saturday.



(From left) Rescuers at the site of an Israeli strike in Beirut's southern suburbs; Gazans mourn over bodies of their kin killed in Zaytoun AFP



Hours after the Beirut attack, Palestinians said an Israeli strike in southern Gaza City killed at least 22 people in a school sheltering displaced people on Saturday.

The government media office said 13 children and six women at the Al-Zaytoun School 'C' were among the dead. Tel Aviv claimed that it hit a Hamas command centre embedded in the compound that previously served as a school. Israel has repeatedly accused Hamas of using civilian facilities for military purposes, which the Palestinian armed outfit has regularly denied.

Lebanese militant group Hezbollah said overnight that 16 of its members, including senior leader Ibrahim Aqil and top commander Ahmed Wahbi, were among those killed in the Beirut strike — the deadliest in a year of its conflict with Israel. The Israeli army said on X that the strike hit an underground gathering of Aqil and senior commanders of Hezbollah's elite Radwan forces, and had "almost completely dismantled" Hezbollah's military chain of command.

Heavy cross-border strikes continued Saturday with Israeli warpl-

ans carrying some of its heaviest bombardment in 11 months of fighting across Lebanon's south and Hezbollah claiming rocket attacks on military targets in Israel's north.

Friday's strike sharply escalated the conflict between Israel and the Iran-backed group, and inflicted another blow on Hezbollah after two days of attacks this week in which pagers and walkie-talkies used by its members exploded. The total toll in those attacks has risen to 39 and over 3,000 have been injured.

The attacks on communications devices were widely believed to have been carried out by Israel, which has neither confirmed nor denied

its involvement. Hezbollah-aligned transport minister Ali Hamieh told reporters at the scene of Friday's strike that at least 23 people were still missing. "The Israeli enemy is taking the region to war," he said.

'NEW PHASE' OF WAR

In a brief statement on Friday evening, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel's goals were clear and its actions spoke for themselves. Defence minister Yoav Gallant, who said this week Israel was launching a new phase of war on the northern border, posted on X, "The sequence of ac-

tions in the new phase will continue until our goal is achieved: the safe return of the residents of the north to their homes."

The UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Jeanine Hennis-Plaschaert, said on Friday the strike in a densely populated area of Beirut's southern suburbs was part of "an extremely dangerous cycle of violence with devastating consequences. This must stop now."

DEAD CARRIED ON DONKEY CARTS

Reuters footage of the strike in Gaza showed blasted walls, wrecked and burnt furniture, and holes in the ceiling of one room as people

tried to salvage what they could of belongings. Some of the dead were wrapped in blankets and carried away on donkey carts, as ambulances transferred other bodies.

"The women and their children were sitting in the playground of the school, the kids were playing, and suddenly two rockets hit them," said one witness.

Meanwhile, in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, the health ministry said four health workers were killed by an Israeli strike that hit ministry warehouses. Ambulance crews could not reach the dead or treat the wounded, it added. Reuters

Lankans Vote for a Prez to Steer Nation post 2022 Collapse



People queued outside a polling centre on the outskirts of Colombo AP

Cash-strapped Sri Lanka voted for its next president Saturday in an effective referendum on an unpopular IMF austerity plan enacted after the nation's unprecedented financial crisis. Turnout was nearly 70% an hour before polling stations shut at 10:30 GMT, an election commission official said, citing provisional figures.

The record for voter turnout in a Sri Lankan presidential election was set in 2019 with 83.72%. President Ranil Wickremesinghe is fighting an uphill battle for a fresh mandate to continue belt-tightening measures that stabilised the economy and ended months of food, fuel and medicine shortages.

His two years in office restored calm to the streets after civil unrest spurred by the downturn in 2022 saw thousands storm the compound of his predecessor, who promptly fled the country. "I've taken this country out of bankruptcy," Wickremesinghe, 75, said after casting his ballot. "I will now deliver Sri Lanka a developed economy, developed social system and developed political system."

But Wickremesinghe's tax hikes and other measures, imposed un-

der the terms of a \$2.9-billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout, have left millions struggling to make ends meet.

"The country has been through a lot," lawyer and musician Soundarar David Rodrigo told AFP after casting her vote in Colombo.

"So I just don't want to see another upheaval coming soon."

Wickremesinghe is tipped to lose to one of two formidable challengers. One is Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the leader of a once-marginal Marxist party tarnished by its violent past. The party led two failed uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s that left more than 80,000 people dead, and it won less than 4% of the vote in the previous parliamentary elections.

But Sri Lanka's crisis has proven an opportunity for the 55-year-old Dissanayake, who has seen a surge of support based on his pledge to change the island's "corrupt" political culture.

Fellow opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, 57, the son of a former president assassinated in 1993 during the country's decades-long civil war, is also expected to make a strong showing. AFP

Iran Unveils New Arsenal as Tensions Rise

Iran unveiled a new ballistic missile and an upgraded one-way attack drone at a military parade on Saturday, state media said, amid soaring regional tensions and allegations of arming Russia. The solid-fuel Jihad missile was designed and manufactured by the aerospace arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and has an operational range of 1,000 km, state news agency IRNA said. The Shahed-136B drone is an upgraded version of the Shahed-136, with new features and an operational range of more than 4,000 km, it added. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called on Islamic countries to "completely cut off relations" with Israel. AFP

Turkey Calls on West to Take 'Deterrent Steps'

Ankara: Attacks on Lebanon this week showed that the Israeli government planned to spread the war to the region, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Saturday, calling on Western countries to take "deterrent steps" against Tel Aviv's actions. Erdogan told a press conference that Israel's war in Gaza will top the agenda of his speech at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday. "In order for our region not to be dragged into a great disaster, the pressure on Israel must be increased even more," Erdogan told a press conference in Istanbul. He was commenting on attacks in Lebanon this week that killed 39 people. Reuters

Content is King

From Page 1

"Today, stars cannot guarantee you a good opening at the box office. The industry must accept this," said Tanuj Garg, managing partner at Ellipsis Entertainment, a production house. "Actors and directors before the pandemic worked on hefty fees. This was impractical and unsustainable." This is a wake-up call and the Hindi film industry is thinking about what is viable and what is not, he said.

"It is quite clear that high concept films are working at the box office and not big stars. So, a film's content has to work," said Garg of Ellipsis Entertainment.

After the pandemic, streaming platforms increased their investments in buying films and creating original content. They invested in actors who did not belong to the A-list category, paying them close to three times the fees they previously charged, said trade analysts.

This became a benchmark in the industry. But these actors could not provide a reasonably good opening to their films at the box office. After the list of films failing to make a mark got long and their focus turned to profitability, streaming platforms reduced their average spending on acquiring a film. According to the Ficci-EY Media and Entertainment industry 2024 report, the number of films released directly on these platforms reduced to 57 in 2023 from 105 in 2022. This impacted the revenue of producers. The total revenues from selling digital rights of films fell to ₹3,500 crore in 2023 from the peak of ₹4,000 crore in 2021, shows data from the Ficci-EY report.

"Today, more than 50% of the cost of a film goes into remuneration of stars," film distributor and trade analyst Shaaminder Malik said. "Take, for instance, the recent Hindi film *Khel Khel Mein*. The budget of the film is ₹150 crore. The film is shot almost completely indoors," he said. "Why does such a high budget? It is clear that a large part of the film's budget has gone into remuneration of stars and their entourage. Despite this, the film has collected less than ₹40 crore at the box office."

According to industry insiders, the financial dynamics within the Hindi film industry have reached a point where scriptwriters earn less than what is spent on a star's entourage. After covering these substantial costs, producers are hesitant to allocate further funds for film promotion and advertising, leading to a lack of audience awareness about new releases and their launch dates, which can severely impact a film's success.

On an average, the cost of promotion, marketing and advertising associated with a mid-sized or big-budget film is estimated in the range of ₹8-15 crore. Malik said: "The stupendous success of *Street Dances 2* lies not only in its franchise value but also in its tight budget and strong and sustained marketing and promotion."

Girish Johar, a producer and industry expert said: "A sense of pragmatism has prevailed among makers today. The whole focus has shifted to relooking at both costs and streams of revenue thoroughly."

Chipmaker Qualcomm Weighs Friendly Takeover of Intel

Qualcomm Inc has approached Intel Corp to discuss a potential acquisition of the struggling chipmaker, a person with knowledge of the matter said, raising the prospect of one of the biggest-ever M&A deals.

California-based Qualcomm proposed a friendly takeover for Intel in recent days, according to the person, who asked not to be identified discussing confidential information.

The approach is for all of the chipmaker, though Qualcomm hasn't ruled out buying or selling parts of Intel in a combination. It's uncertain if the initial move will lead to an agreement and any deal is likely to come under close antitrust scrutiny. Qualcomm has been speaking with US regulators and believes an all-American combination could allay any concerns, the person said.



Under CEO Pat Gelsinger, Intel is working on a plan to reshape the company AP

Qualcomm is looking at Intel at a time when its smaller rival is in the midst of the most difficult period in its 56-year history.

Under chief executive officer Pat Gelsinger, Intel is working on a plan to reshape the company and revive its flagging share pri-

ce. He still believes the turnaround plan could be sufficient to remain an independent company, the person said. Intel's shares have fallen about 37% over the past 12 months, giving it a market value of about \$93 billion.

Qualcomm's stock has risen more than 50% over the same period for a market capitalisation of about \$188 billion. At such values, any deal between Qualcomm and all of Intel would rank among the largest on record, *Bloomberg*-compiled data show.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Qualcomm's interest on Friday, driving Intel's shares up by more than 3%. Representatives for Qualcomm and Intel declined to comment.

Intel is headed toward its third consecutive year of shrinking sales, estimated to make \$52 billion in revenue in 2024. *Bloomberg*

'Out-of-box Thinking Crucial'

From Page 1

"Adani (Group) prefers fresh graduates over readily deployable talents with short-term experience because it is more efficient to train them in their respective domains," one of the sources said.

Engineering major L&T will hire about 3,800 entry level talent from the 2025 batch. "In 2024, we inducted over 3,800 candidates, including engineering graduates & postgraduates, CAs, MBAs, diploma engineers, and other graduates. As on date, based on the business projections, we are looking at similar numbers for 2025," said C Jayakumar, chief human resources officer (CHRO), L&T.

Vedanta CHRO Madhu Srivastava said: "The campus talent pool is fundamental to Vedanta's very core. We believe in hiring young talent at the entry level and providing them with exceptional growth and learning opportuni-

es. Our target numbers will be the same for the upcoming placement season."

The diversified conglomerate will continue to focus on Tier 1 institutes including IIMs, IITs, XLRI, NITs, BITS and others. Focus will also be on inducting students from new-age specialisations like AI/ML, data science, analytics, sustainability, and supply chain management.

RPG Group will have similar hiring numbers as last year. "This year we are doing a judicious mix of talent spotting-visiting tier 2 campuses in addition to the premier institutes (including top IIMs) that we hire from," said S Venkatesh, group president-HR at RPG Enterprises.

Reliance Industries, which saw an overall headcount reduction in FY24, is said to be looking to increase its campus intake by 15% from the class of 2025 to cater to new business growth, according to sources close to the company.

The country's largest company by market value reduced its workforce by 42,000, or nearly 11%, in FY24. Its employee strength was

347,362 in FY24, according to its latest annual report. Last year, RIL's online wholesale format JioMart aligned its operations with Metro Cash and Carry, which it acquired. With the addition of Metro's permanent workforce of 3,500 employees, there was an overlap of roles, both in the backend and online sales operations.

FMCG major Dabur India plans to maintain its fresher hiring intake at last year's levels, said Executive Director-HR Biplob Bakshi. "The objective is to build a solid pipeline for future leadership roles. The young talent brings energy and enthusiasm to the workplace with fresh ideas and new perspectives. Their agility, multitasking skills, and out-of-the-box thinking are crucial in addressing current business challenges in our dynamic and constantly evolving environment," he said.

HR heads and top company officials said there will be an enhanced focus on evaluating students on their industry readiness, especially in the light of rapid technological disruptions across industries.

Open Consultation

From Page 1

"Whenever the government wants to make changes to the rules, other than security conditions, it should always seek recommendation from Trai," the chairman said.

The regulator always follows an open consultation process and gives its independent suggestions after factoring in views of all the stakeholders.

Lahoti highlighted that even in the current licensing regime, the government can make changes in the terms and conditions. "To be fair, when the changes resolve operators' problems, they welcome them, but when the changes become more

stringent, the telcos oppose it. I don't think it makes any difference with the new mechanism," he said.

Over 800 pages, Trai has suggested the Centre grant service authorisation under Section 3(1) of the Telecommunications Act, 2023, instead of entering into an agreement. It also said the rules for service authorisation should be prescribed separately under the Act.

ET had reported about India's top telecom operators' unhappiness over the proposal, fearing that such a move would ring in regulatory uncertainty and undermine investor confidence. A top telco executive had won-

dered how a company would have any clarity on what the rules would be.

"An agreement now is binding, and telcos can challenge if the government unilaterally changes something, but that won't be possible in the new (proposed) framework."

Industry executives added that when operators get a licence, all terms and conditions are specified, which allows them to plan their future roadmap. So even if the government wishes to change certain terms and conditions, it cannot do so unilaterally, and a notice must be given to the telcos first.

While the regulator has recommended replacing the licensing regime, it has not proposed any reduction in the 8% licensee fee paid by telcos, further damping the mood among

telcos. "The fee would remain...we have recommended a significant reduction in the entry fee, bank guarantees etc. The licensee fee would remain; it would be called authorisation fee. It has to be there when you provide the public service," Lahoti said.

The regulator has recommended the authorisation mechanism following the notification of the Telecommunications Act, which envisaged the regime structure to be an authorisation, supported with a set of rules. "Trai's recommendations are in line with the intent of the Act," he said.

The new mechanism, Lahoti said, makes the whole process much simpler, with a lot of authorisations integrated. It looks to retain the advantage of sy-

nergy, for more efficient and innovative service delivery.

"The positive sides are more and there is no need to be apprehensive," he added.

On Wednesday, the telecom regulator proposed a complete overhaul of the licensing regime, suggesting a unified authorisation to offer all kinds of telecom services, from mobile and internet to international calls, with three broad categories of service — main, auxiliary and captive.

Trai has also suggested a single authorisation for satellite telecommunication, merging the VSAT and Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS) licences. Reduction in entry fee for taking various authorisations and no fee for renewals have also been mooted.

Several New Properties Abroad

From Page 1

In India, Oyo primarily offers hotel aggregation services, while in Europe, it focuses on the home rental business, after having acquired Amsterdam-based Leisure Group in 2019. It also operates a premium hotel brand, Sunday, launched in May 2023 through a joint venture

with SoftBank Group. Last month, the company announced plans to launch 25 new properties under this brand by March 2025.

About 95% of Oyo's storefronts are in its core growth markets of India, Europe, Malaysia and Indonesia. In these markets, it manages 18,000 hotels and 85,000 home rentals. ET reported in June, citing an investor presentation.

Besides, the company also entered China in 2018 but has virtually withdrawn from that market over the past few years.

On August 14, ET reported that Oyo recorded a net profit of ₹229 crore in 2023-24, as compared to a loss of ₹1,286 crore in the previous financial year. However, its operational revenue saw a 1.4% decline to ₹5,389 crore, from ₹5,464 crore during this period.

The travel technology firm recently raised ₹1,457 crore from a group of top family offices in India. The round was led by an entity floated by founder and chief executive Ritesh Agarwal, which infused ₹300 crore. The rest of the capital was

from the family office of Mankind Pharma promoters Ramesh and Rajeev Juneja, ASK Financial Holdings and venture firm J&A Partners. The funding was at a valuation of about \$2.5 billion, as against its peak value of \$9 billion. Before this round, SoftBank and Agarwal together held nearly 80% in the firm.

Oyo withdrew its IPO application for a second time this year. ET first reported on February 14 about Oyo's plans to opt out of its IPO and raise funds privately.

Change in Trend

From Page 1

"The drastic 35% cut by Canada could result in around 80,500 Indian students being denied study permits in 2024 alone, marking a steep drop in admissions," said Adarsh Khandelwal, co-founder of Collegify. Next year, another 23,000 aspirants are likely to be affected, experts said.

The Canadian government also decided to link postgraduation work permits to the labour market, a positive step according to Piyush Kumar, regional director-South Asia and Mauritius at IDP Education. "Students will be more careful while selecting the course as a re-

sult," he said. "In the last 48 hours, Leverage Edu has already seen a lot of existing Canada applications diverted...Tonality goes a long way," said Akshay Chaturvedi, founder and chief executive of Leverage Edu.

The UK government recently announced an increase in minimum financial savings that international applicants must show to secure a student visa. This came on top of the stringent condition in place since January, under which overseas students can no longer bring dependents on their UK student visa, except for research postgraduate programmes. About 40% of Indian students are accompanied by dependents in the UK, experts said.

"A drop of 15-20% in postgraduate applications from India is fore-

cast," said Khandelwal of Collegify, adding that the increase in minimum monthly maintenance fund is expected to put additional financial strain on students from India. "This may lead to a 5-7% fall in applications, particularly from students with limited means," he said.

Australia recently put a cap on the number of new international students coming in at 270,000 a year from 2025, as well as introduced stricter visa requirements and eligibility criteria.

"The recent reduction in intake caps for study permits in key destinations like Canada, Australia and the UK is creating a more selective environment for Indian students," said Saurabh Arora, founder and CEO of University Living. According to University Living,

between 2021 and 2023, Spain saw a more than 28% increase in international student intake while Germany saw a nearly 13% increase and, outside of Europe, both New Zealand and Dubai saw about 10% increase. "Some Group of Eight institutions (in Australia) may experience an impact. We advise students to apply early and accept on time for their preferred universities," said Kumar of IDP.

Meanwhile, many foreign institutions are unhappy with the limits imposed by their respective governments. For instance, Michael Wesley, deputy vice-chancellor for global, culture and engagement at the University of Melbourne told ET that Australia's decision to cap international student enrolments was a terrible idea.

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Letter No. 908/PUR/34/TURBINE/2024-25, Date: 21 September, 2024
E-TENDER NOTICE FOR SUPPLY, INSTALLATION & COMMISSIONING OF TWO NEW 03.00 MW TURBINES WITH CIVIL FOUNDATION WORK BY REMOVING EXISTING TWO NOS. TURBINE OUT OF THREE NOS. 750 KW OR 1500 KW OR 2000 KW TURBINES (BELLISSI / GERMEN / ITALIAN MAKE TURBINE) INSTALLED IN SUGAR MILL BAZPUR (U.S. NAGAR) AND SUPPLY, INSTALLATION & COMMISSIONING WITH CIVIL FOUNDATION WORK OF ONE NEW 03.00 MW TURBINE IN EACH SUGAR MILL KICCHA / NADEHI (U.S. NAGAR) IN THE YEAR 2025-26.

On line E-tenders are invited from Original Manufacturers / Authorized dealers (as per details given in tender documents) for SUPPLY, INSTALLATION & COMMISSIONING OF TWO NEW 03.00 MW TURBINES WITH CIVIL FOUNDATION WORK BY REMOVING EXISTING TWO NOS. TURBINE OUT OF THREE NOS. 750 KW OR 1500 KW OR 2000 KW TURBINES (BELLISSI / GERMEN / ITALIAN MAKE TURBINE) INSTALLED IN SUGAR MILL BAZPUR (U.S. NAGAR) AND SUPPLY, INSTALLATION & COMMISSIONING WITH CIVIL FOUNDATION WORK OF ONE NEW 03.00 MW TURBINE IN EACH SUGAR MILL KICCHA / NADEHI (U.S. NAGAR) IN THE YEAR 2025-26. Tender will be uploaded up to 06.00 PM on 08.10.2024 and Technical Bid will be opened on 08.10.2024 at 10:30 AM. The EMD for the E bid is Rs. 40,00,000.00 (Rs. Forty Lacs only).

The details for submission of the E-Bids is available on the E-tender portals & Uttarakhand Sugars Website :- www.uktenders.gov.in & www.uttarakhandsugars.com from 23.09.2024 at 06:00 PM. The bidders will have to deposit E-tender fees (Non Refundable) of Rs. 11,800/- (GST Inclusive) & E-Tender Fees & Earnest Money in the form of Demand Draft/ RTGS / NEFT in favor of Uttarakhand Sahakari Chini Mills Sangh Limited, Payable at Dehradun. Tenders without E-Tender Fees & Earnest Money will not be accepted. The bank details are available inside the e-tender document.

The Federation reserves the right to cancel any or all e-bids/annual e-bidding process, without assigning any reason to & decision of Federation will be final & binding. इस निविदा के सम्बन्ध में सभी घोषणा, स्पष्टीकरण, शुद्धि, परिशिष्ट, समय वृद्धि आदि को केवल www.uktenders.gov.in & www.uttarakhandsugars.com पर ही दिया जावेगा। निविदादाना अचरन जाकाररी के लिए निविदा रूपा से इन वेबसाइटों को पढ़ते हैं।

MANAGING DIRECTOR

India's gaming fandom went berserk when their favourite video game streamer, Ajendra Variya, who goes by the YouTube handle 'Total Gaming', revealed his face last year. Variya's video was watched 36 million times.

Meanwhile, educators like Vikas Divyakriti, Vijendar Masijeji and Alakh Pandey are going beyond the classrooms to become cultural icons. In fact, videos related to the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) preparation have reaped more than 6.5 billion views in the 12 months ending July 2024.

Similarly, comedy creators such as Kenny Sebastian, Raunaq Rajani, Kumar Varun and Varun Thakur are building brands, selling out live shows and even merchandise.

In the era of mindless scrolling on social media and attention spans of less than eight seconds, long-form content is continuing to thrive, monetise and garner fan loyalties.

While short-form content has a loyal fanbase who needs its bite-sized convenience, long-form remains a powerful tool for brands seeking in-depth engagement and value. This is evidenced from notable Indian creators who have refused to succumb to the concept of quick virality.

Ajay Nagar aka CarryMinati, Ajubhai, Ashish Chanchalani, Bhuvan Bam are the flagbearers of this sector, but there are an estimated 300-500 creators in all who have received the Gold Play button, given to channels with more than one million subscribers on YouTube.

THE STORY SO FAR

YouTube CEO Neal Mohan recently told ET that the creator economy in India has generated ₹16,000 crore worth of economic activity and 7,50,000 jobs so far. "I've watched the progress of YouTube in India over the years. When I first started at YouTube nearly a decade ago, we had 11 creators who had more than a million subscribers; today, that number is more than 11,000," said Mohan.

"Whether it is a mobile phone or a television stream, it is the only platform where viewers, especially Gen Z, feel like their time is well spent."

— Shekhar Khosla, V-P, Google India

"YouTube is the most watched streaming service on TVs here. And our views on connected TVs in India have quadrupled in the past three years," he added.

Shekhar Khosla, vice-president, marketing at Google India, had said YouTube is the only platform that lets viewers engage deeply with the content they love. "Whether it is a mobile phone or a television stream, it is the only platform where viewers, especially Gen Z, feel like their time is well spent."

QUALITY AUDIENCE

Creating long-form content requires time, energy and effort. It also needs investment in high-end filming equipment, long editing and voiceover hours, and an army of people to assemble the final piece.

The effort-to-return ratio may appear to be low. But, as creators suggest, content consumption by a quality audience is the key to their monetisation. "The visibility is on Instagram, [but] the impact is on

YouTube," says Drishiti Sharma (429,000 subscribers), who creates self-help, wellness and motivational content. "Instagram is mostly to discover newer audiences. YouTube works on SEO, gives you brand deals, options for membership, Supers, AdSense and even facilitates creators, making them part of a community," she adds.

"Also, the thing about YouTube is that I can plan my content for the next three to four months because its algorithm is not volatile compared to other platforms." What this means is, videos posted two or three years ago, or even going back a decade, will still be discoverable. "You can tweak the SEO, the hashtags in the description and change the thumbnail, and make your older videos rank No.1 again," Sharma explains.

The Long Shot

Long-form video content is thriving in a world where bite-sized reels are gaining marketers' attention. **Mannat Dora and Himanshi Lohchab** explore how educators, podcasters, gamers, comedians and gadget experts are making it big

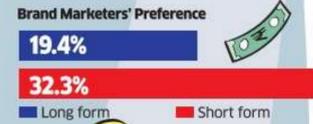


Influencer marketing spends to grow at 45% CAGR to \$3.5 billion by 2028

Total content creators in India: 2.5-3.5 million
 YouTubers: 300,000
 110,000-170,000 are able to monetise

Earnings per content

Category	Instagram	YouTube
Nano (1K-10K)	₹500-₹5K	₹1K-₹7K
Micro (10K-100K)	₹3K-₹1L	₹5K-₹2L
Macro (100K-1M)	₹50K-₹5L	₹75L-₹5L
Mega/Celeb (1M+)	₹2L+	₹3L+



SOURCE: DECODING INFLUENCE: THE 2024 INFLUENCER MARKETING REPORT BY KOFLUENCE

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BRAND FOCUS

Globally, three million channels are part of YouTube's Partner Program, which has paid out over \$70 billion to



creators, artistes and media companies over the past three years, Mohan wrote in a letter this February.

In India, the number of YouTube channels making an annual income of at least ₹1,00,000 has risen over 10% in 2023. Adding avenues like membership fees, merchandise sales and fan funding has helped creators to monetise even further beyond ads.

"Creators receive a fee for each ad viewed, and at the end of the month, they get paid for the total ad revenue generated by all their videos," said Ritesh Ujjwal, co-founder, Kofluence. "While YouTube shares about 55% of its ad revenue with creators, the actual amount shared depends on the brand and the creator's reach." This could be anywhere between ₹20,000 and ₹2,00,000 per month through YouTube ads based on their audience size and engagement levels.

"The longer format is difficult to make, and so, there are fewer players in the market and it is hard to copy," says Ganeshprasad Sridharan, co-founder and presenter at the YouTube channel ThinkSchool, a publisher of knowledge content.

He explains that niche areas such as fitness, education, finance, business, geopolitics, economy and fintech are suited for long form, while travel and fashion are the prerogatives for short-form content.

"YouTube brand deals are insane and there is very less competition because of trust, reach and recall value that these videos derive. Only 5% content talks about the brand," Sridharan said.

Business management software company Odoo, edtech firm GrowthSchool, Sharan Hegde's One Percent Club, etc, have all been sponsoring ThinkSchool's videos for over a year.

"Odoo says that with every single YouTube integration, they are getting one paid customer for their business managing software, which entails ₹5-10 lakh spending. Online learning company Skillshare got a 120% return with us. Scaler School of Business has admitted students in courses worth ₹15 lakh by just sponsoring three videos. In fact, we are also co-creating a new channel with Zerodha called 'ThinkSchool Hindi'," he shares.

LOOKING AHEAD

So, where do we go from here? Several trends are shaping the format's future. Brands are increasingly focusing on geo-targeting, which fosters local connections. Micro-influencers enable them to target niche audiences. Affiliate marketing allows creators to monetise content through product endorsements and commissions.

"Live shopping, which blends real-time interaction with long-form content, adds another dimension by creating engaging, dynamic experiences for viewers. Lastly, contextual advertising aligns promotional messages with relevant long-form content, optimising ad relevance and effectiveness," says Ujjwal.

Mansi Gupta, chief business officer of influencer marketing agency OprahFX, believes that AI will bring a huge upside to content creation. "Creators are extensively using AI for thumbnails and editing. I think Virtual Reality has also picked up and it will only grow in the future," she concludes.

The era of digital competition



RAJAN NAVANI

The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games has been a moment of great pride for India, with our athletes winning a record 29 medals. This achievement highlights India's potential to nurture world-class talent in multiple areas of sport, including the fast growing world of esports. With the International Olympic Committee (IOC) planning the Esports Olympics in 2025, India has a golden opportunity to become a dominant force in this arena.

Conquering the video gaming and esports space, however, requires more than exceptional gamers. It demands robust infrastructure, a cultural shift and a commitment to nurturing talent. The government's recognition of the sector has certainly set us in the right direction. Beyond the glory, esports has significant potential to contribute to employment growth and the economy.

REDEFINING VIDEO GAMING AND ITS CHAMPIONS: A CULTURAL SHIFT

The journey to becoming an esports champion is no walk in the park. Mastering a game at globally competitive levels demands immense dedication. Esports athletes hone their lightning-fast reflexes, strategic brilliance and unwavering mental fortitude through countless hours of practice. Today, India is a sleeping giant, a nation brimming with the raw materials

As a nation brimming with raw talent, India can become a dominant force in the esports arena



GAME ON

We need a holistic approach, one that fosters not just physical prowess but strategic thinking, mental acuity and teamwork

needed to forge esports champions. This isn't just about a few talented individuals; it's about a cultural shift that can propel India to the forefront of the global esports scene.

Remember kabaddi? A regional sport confined to dusty fields, transformed into a national phenomenon in a single generation? Professional leagues, televised matches and celebrity endorsements catapulted

kabaddi into the limelight. Esports can replicate this meteoric rise, but with an even greater impact.

DIGITAL GURUKULS: THE POWER OF SKILLING AND INFRASTRUCTURAL SUPPORT

The traditional image of an athlete training ground involves barbells and treadmills. But the esports arena is a different beast altogether. Imagine high-tech training centres that rival athletic academies, equipped with cutting-edge VR rigs, high-performance internet connections and sophisticated analytics software. These digital gurukuls will be the breeding grounds for our future champions.

Partnering with established industry players and experts in creating such facilities will be crucial. The infrastructure is just the foundation. We need a holistic approach, one that fosters not just physical prowess but strategic thinking, mental acuity and the unwavering teamwork that leads to sporting glory.

Our nation today has the opportunity to not just be consumers of esports, but also become global leaders in its development. Imagine a game where gamers strategise battles between mythical warriors using cutting-edge AI, or a fast-paced shooter set in the vibrant chaos of a bustling Indian bazaar. The possibilities are endless, and the potential economic impact for Indian developers is significant.

India is well poised not only to just participate in the esports revolution, but also to lead it. By harnessing the passion of its gamers, fostering a supportive ecosystem, and leveraging its cultural heritage, India can add esports to its roster of sporting glories. After all, the future lies not just in physical strength, but in the lightning-fast reflexes and strategic minds honed in the digital realm. Let's embrace this new frontier and write India's name at the top of the esports leaderboard.

The author is the CEO and founder of JetSynthesis. Views expressed are personal

Bits & Bytes



META BEATS LAWSUIT OVER APPLE PRIVACY

Meta Platforms won the dismissal of a lawsuit claiming it defrauded shareholders by concealing how changes to Apple's privacy settings would make Facebook and Instagram less desirable for advertisers.

In a decision, US District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers also rejected claims that Meta concealed former COO Sheryl Sandberg's use of company resources on personal matters, including her wedding and her book Lean In.

The Oakland, California-based judge also turned aside claims that Meta knew its transition to Reels, which copied TikTok's short-form video format, would hurt revenue because it offered fewer ads per hour than older formats.

TECH FIRMS BLAST EU DECISIONS ON AI

A group of companies including Meta and Spotify blasted the

European Union for its "fragmented and inconsistent" decision-making on data privacy and artificial intelligence (AI). The firms along with several researchers and industry bodies signed an open letter claiming that Europe was already becoming less competitive and risked falling further behind in the age of AI.

The letter takes issue with recent decisions under the 2018 general data protection regulation (GDPR).

MICROSOFT-BLACKROCK TEAM TO RAISE \$100 BN FOR AI DATA CENTERS

Microsoft and investment powerhouse BlackRock said they have teamed up to raise as much as \$100 billion for data

"We are committed to ensuring AI helps advance innovation and drives growth across every sector of the economy."

— Satya Nadella, chairman and CEO, Microsoft.

centers and infrastructure to power artificial intelligence.

The alliance includes Global Infrastructure Partners and the advanced technology investment firm MGX, created in Abu Dhabi this year, according to a joint release.

"We are committed to ensuring AI helps advance innovation and drives growth across every sector of the economy," said Satya Nadella, chairman and CEO, Microsoft.



GOOGLE URGES TRIBUNAL TO THROW OUT \$9.3-BN UK LAWSUIT

Google parent Alphabet has asked a London tribunal to throw out a mass lawsuit that accuses the tech giant of abusing its dominance in the online search market.

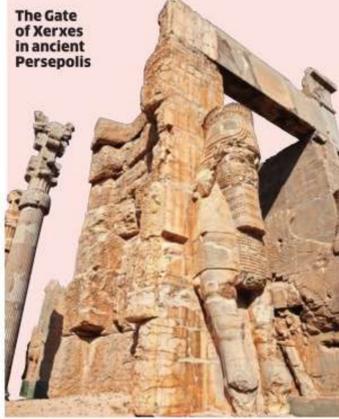
The lawsuit — valued at up to 7 billion pounds (\$9.3 billion) — is the latest case focusing on the business practices of Google.

It is also one of several multibillion-pound cases to have been filed at Britain's Competition Appeal Tribunal in recent years, including a similar case against Google for allegedly abusing its dominance in the online advertising market.

Consumer rights campaigner and the lawsuit's class representative Nikki Stopford argues Google's dominance allows it to increase businesses' costs for search advertising services which are then passed on to consumers.

— Agencies

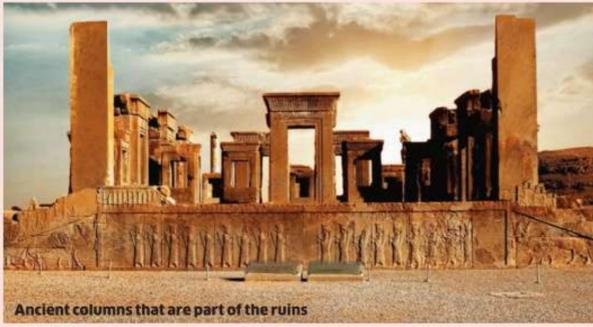




The Gate of Xerxes in ancient Persepolis

The Stone Eaters That Threaten Iran's Ancient Persepolis

Conservationists at Persepolis, Iran's most iconic ancient site, are waging a delicate battle against an unlikely adversary: Tiny but persistent lichens eroding millennia-old monuments. The fight, which began years ago, is aimed at stopping the threat to the integrity of the site's structures and its intricate carvings from lichens, organisms that grow on surfaces like stone and can slowly break them down over time. Built in the 6th century BC by Darius I, Persepolis has withstood destruction, looting, earthquakes, fires and harsh weather. "It's an open-air museum reflecting 25 centuries



Ancient columns that are part of the ruins

of Middle Eastern life," said Alireza Asgari Chaverdi, director of the site, located about 50 km from the city of Shiraz. "It is the foundation of Iran's history, culture and socio-cultural life."

GRAVE CONCERN

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, Persepolis features colossal sculptures and intricate stone reliefs of ancient Persian kings, nobles and deities. But these have suffered over the years from lichen, a combination of an algae and a fungus. "This is the most serious problem, especially for carvings on stones," said Shahram Rahbar, a conservationist at the site. "If we do nothing, these organisms could reduce these relics to dust within 50

to 100 years," he said. Red lichen marks are now etched into many of the ancient relics at Persepolis.

TAKING ACTION

The spread of lichens, which dissolve minerals and penetrate stone surfaces by more than 1.5 centimetres, is driven by industrialisation, acid rain and the harsh desert climate, said lichenologist Mohammad Sohrabi. "We cover the lichens with a material and, after a week, repeat the process until they weaken enough to be removed with suction devices," said Rahbar. "Many of Persepolis's intricate motifs have already been lost due to lichen activity," Sohrabi said.

— AFP

A Fresh Look at Van Gogh's Last Years and His 'Final Flourishing'

The New York Times

Two vivid portraits — the poet and the lover — hang together at an exhibition, as they once did over Vincent van Gogh's bed.

It was there, roughly two years before the artist killed himself in 1890, that he had dreamed of creating a 'Studio of the South', an artist commune that would produce avant-garde art bathed in the golden light of southern France. "I know that it will do certain people good to find poetic subjects —

THE STARRY SKY — THE VINE BRANCHES — THE FURROWS — the poet's garden," he wrote to his brother, Theo. It was a prolific period for the Dutch artist, during which — despite emotional turmoil and mental breakdowns — he produced some of his most iconic works.

It's also the focus of an ongoing exhibition in London's National Gallery, which looks at his two final years, highlighting how he displayed his works and arranged them to create an environment of images in conversation.

THE LOVER, THE POET

In 'The Lover (Portrait of Lieutenant Milliet)' and 'The Poet (Portrait of Eugene Boch)', both from 1888, he casts acquaintances in archetypal roles. Milliet, a local soldier lothario, is shown from the shoulders up, wearing a pristine black uniform. The lover's soft eyes look dreamily into the distance, while in the upper-right corner, like an enigmatic hieroglyph, floats a crescent moon curved around a single star.

"The poet, too, appears against a stellar background. Van Gogh described Boch, a fellow painter, as "an artist friend who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings". Boch's upper body, clad in a brown coat, is plain and flattened, but his face is detailed and expressive. The contours of his cropped blond hair glow like a halo against the stars.

Similarly, in 'The Bedroom' (1889), he offers a vertiginous perspective of his bed in a cramped corner

In 'The Lover' (top) and 'The Poet' (above), both 1888, Van Gogh casts acquaintances in archetypal roles

with his own paintings hung on the surrounding blue walls. One of them might be 'Self-Portrait' (1889), a three-quarter view of the artist, wearing a blue smock and with a palette in hand, that hangs nearby; another could be a portrait of Marie Ginoux whom he painted five times.

Van Gogh can seem overly familiar, but — as in 'Poets and Lovers' — there is always something new to see and perhaps, moreover, to feel.

The New York Times

THE PRACTICE



Argentine director Martin Rejtman has accumulated a body of deceptively profound comedies over the past four decades, the likes of which are hard to find elsewhere. Often spiralling out of absurd premises, they are low-key but whip-smart dramas about the tragicomedy of everyday human relations, which sneak up on you with their sharp analysis of life under modern-dawny capitalism. His latest, *The Practice*, follows in this vein.

The central premise almost sounds like a sketch or a gag: Gustavo (Esteban Bigliardi), a yoga teacher in Chile, has separated from his wife and has lost custody of his home and his studio. As he tries to find a new apartment and continue his practice on the go, a series of comical complications piles up. He tears his meniscus; a new student (with possible substance-abuse issues) seems to be stealing from his class; another student, who accuses Gustavo of inappropriate behaviour, is injured during an earthquake and loses her memory. Multiple other plot and character threads emerge and intertwine, each satirising further with rich detail.

PILGRIMS



Two friends, Paulius (Giedrius Kiela) and Indre (Gabija Bargailaitė), meet on a summer afternoon and somberly, with few words exchanged, embark on a strange expedition. They drive to several spots around their provincial Lithuanian hometown, and Paulius narrates pieces of a gruesome story that unfolded at each location, sometimes re-enacting scenes. It takes a while for all the details to add up, but when they do, the full picture lands like a punch to the gut.

Why are they doing this exercise? It's never stated explicitly in Laurynas Bareisa's stark, matter-of-fact film, which simmers with unspoken — perhaps unspeakable — feelings. We go along with the protagonists, hoping for an explanation, a sudden twist or a revelation, but all there is to find are the hard facts of an irrevocable loss.

It's a world tour for couch potatoes — five international films featuring stories that span continents and genres

Cinematic Passport

THE VISITOR

There's a picture-perfect prettiness to Martin Bouloq's *The Visitor*. The movie is set in small-town Bolivia, amid mountains dotted with colourful homes and winding streets, and each frame has a breathtaking sense of symmetry and precision to it. Yet, this provokes a sense of uneasiness, too, as if it is concealing the messiness of reality. Indeed, *The Visitor* is about what lies underneath seemingly perfect facades.

Humberto (Enrique Aráoz), the protagonist, has just been released from prison and is trying to get back on his feet and reconnect with his daughter. She is in the custody of Humberto's wealthy in-laws who are pastors at a church. They are, by all appearances, pious and beneficent, but there is an undercurrent of violence to their condescending niceties. As a quiet power struggle ensues, Bouloq sculpts a rich drama of class, race and religion from his modest, melancholic premise.



The Visitor

SILVER HAZE

Each frame of Sacha Polak's film pulsates with rage, grief and pain, and yet makes room for remarkable tenderness. The story traces Franky (Vicky Knight), a nurse in her 20s, who lives in a dysfunctional home in working-class London with her siblings and mother. Years ago, a fire left Franky with burns all over her body and killed her older brother. Her parents split over the incident, while its mysterious circumstances continue to

torment Franky. *Silver Haze* traces a volatile love story in the midst of Franky's tumultuous daily life: When she meets the suicidal Florence at her hospital, the two are drawn together like magnets, each of them yearning to be loved and held. At its centre is a raw performance by Knight, whose real-life experiences of being scarred in a fire as a child forms the narrative.



The Hypnosis

THE HYPNOSIS

Herbert Nordrum, from the acclaimed 2022 film *The Worst Person in the World*, stars in this strange Swedish satire that milks the performativity of startup culture to excellent cringe-comedy effect. Andre (Nordrum) and Vera (Asta Kamma August) are preparing to attend Shake Up, a three-day coaching retreat for startup founders. Their idea is an app that helps, vaguely, with women's health, and their pitch hinges on a personal appeal made by Vera (though clearly scripted and directed by Andre) to the pains of growing up female.

Right before the pitch, Vera tries hypnotherapy to help her quit smoking, and emerges changed, though not in the ways she expected. No longer meek or eager to please, she's uninhibited and unpredictable. Her behaviour initially proves an asset at Shake Up, but when she starts to cross all manner of social boundaries, chaos ensues, especially for the buttoned-up Andre, whose desperation to be liked generates its own squirm-inducing humour. What starts as a somewhat straightforward tale about self-actualisation becomes something uncomfortably, gloriously weirder, committed more to the bit than to any moralistic message.



Silver Haze

WEEKEND POSER



PIC: GETTY IMAGES

In the Future, Can My Phone Let Me Smell What's on the Other End of a Call?

Imagine this: You pick up your phone for a video call with a friend. Not only can you see their face and hear their voice, but you can also smell the cookies they just baked. It sounds like something out of a science fiction movie, but could it actually happen?

WHAT PHONES DO NOW

When you talk to someone on your phone, you can hear the

sound through built-in speakers, which convert digital signals into physical vibrations using a diaphragm. Your ears sense those vibrations as sound waves.

Your phone also has a screen that displays images and videos. The screen uses tiny dots known as pixels that consist of three primary colours: Red, green and blue, but by mixing these three in different ways,

your phone can show you everything from beautiful beach scenes to cute puppies.

Scientists are developing digital scent technology that uses a small number of cartridges, each containing a specific scent, but which can be mixed to create different smells

HOW ABOUT SMELL?

Smells are created by tiny particles called molecules that float through the air and reach your nose. Your nose then sends signals to your brain, which identifies the smell.

So, could your phone send these small molecules to you? Scientists are working on it. Think about how your phone screen works. It doesn't have every colour in the world

stored inside it. Instead, it uses just three colours to create millions of different hues and shades.

Now imagine something similar for smells. Scientists are developing digital scent technology that uses a small number of different cartridges, each containing a specific scent, but which can be mixed to create different smells.

— AP

Could Tirupati's Problems Help Clarify the History of Ghee Adulteration?

FOOD FABLES



VIKRAM DOCTOR

In November 1886, *The Times of India* reported a case at the Fort Police Court, of Poonamchand Dueera charged with selling adulterated ghee. He was an odd defendant. When his advocate Mr Hurryshunker asked if good ghee ever contained animal fat, Dueera responded that ghee was an animal fat since it came from milk.

He had to repeat the question before Dueera clarified that good ghee never came from dead animals.

Hurryshunker suggested that the ghee he was selling was meant for lamps, not human consumption. Dueera said "I have never seen it used in lamps."

When his advocate asked how long ghee stayed good, presumably hoping to establish it as perishable, Dueera said he had seen good two-year-old ghee in Afghanistan. When asked if he knew about degrees of purity in clarified butter (ghee), Dueera's response was almost philosophical: "I should say a thing was clarified when it is clarified." (He lost his case and was fined ₹50.)

Tirupati's ghee drama reminds us that all too often, very little is clarified with ghee. There is a long history of adulterating it, both with fats rendered from dead animals and with vegetable fats, which can be



PIC: GETTY IMAGES

natural like kokum butter or manufactured like *vanaspati*. The fact that *vanaspati*, made from vegetable oils solidified through the hydrogenation process, successfully sold itself as 'vegetable ghee' is another source of confusion, since ghee is considered vegetarian,

though, as Dueera noted, it is technically an animal fat. It is easy to get bogged down in the social, religious and medical claims for ghee, so perhaps it's best to focus on its physical properties. In Harold McGee's magisterial *On Food and Cooking*, he explains that butter (which can be made from fresh cream or cultured yoghurt, another complication) is first heated to 90°C to evaporate water and then to 120°C "to brown the milk solids, which flavours the ghee and generates antioxidant compounds that delay to onset of rancidity". As Dueera admitted, properly made ghee stays good for a long time.

Removing its water makes it solid, or semi-solid, and this is the factor, along with great taste and keeping qualities, that make it so useful for sweets like *laddos*. Liquid oils make softer products, but ghee holds together till the moment a piece is

crumbled off and then melts in your mouth. This is why it is adulterated with other fats that are also solid at room temperature: Rendered animal fats like tallow (from beef) or lard (from pork) or vegetable fats like kokum butter, stearin (from palm oil) or *vanaspati*.

The basic problem, however, as writers like Harish Damodaran point out, is not enough butter. The White Revolution increased milk supply but also increased demand for milk products. It makes more economic sense for dairy companies to supply butter, or products using butter fat, like ice cream, directly to consumers, rather than a bulk shipment of ghee, at lower negotiated rates, to a customer like Tirupati. As supplies fall short, there will always be the risk of them being made up from dubious sources.

During the Raj, this often included rendered animal fats, which the

British ate themselves, so were slow to see it as a problem. In 1887, *ToI* reported a debate in the Bombay Town Council where it was noted that the law only protected against adulteration that made ghee unhealthy, not against it being mixed with other edible fats. The law was finally changed, but this ambiguity lingered, which helped *vanaspati*. In 1927, a brand named Veejem advertised that it was better than ghee, because the latter was easily adulterated with animal fats.

Vanaspati ultimately fell out of favour because of problems caused by hydrogenation, but is back now with a new interesterification process and with added vegan appeal. Perhaps Tirupati could consider providing cheaper and clearly identified '*ahimsak laddos*' made with *vanaspati*, along with real ghee *laddos* for those who can afford them.



Vantika Helps India Draw with US; Men Split Points With Uzbekistan

International Master Vantika Agrawal delivered the goods when it was badly needed, defeating Grandmaster Irina Krush to force a 2-2 draw against the US while the Indian men stayed in sole lead after splitting points with Uzbekistan in the ninth round of the 45th Chess Olympiad. The Indian think-tank rested an out-of-form Grandmaster D Harika but it did not change the fortunes on the top board as R Vaishali went down to Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova. On the second board, Divya Deshmukh settled for the peace result in an uneventful game with black against Carissa Yip. On the fourth board, Tania Sachdev had almost everything going in her favour but could not find the knock-out blow when the opportunity came to share the point with Alice Lee. It was left to Vantika to equalise the score and the young girl played with a lot of heart and commitment to beat her higher-rated opponent. For the record, Krush blundered in mutual time pressure and Vantika was remorseless in her attack. The draw took India to 15 points, and they will now probably need two victories in the last two rounds to keep the gold medal chances alive. **PTI**

TOP STANDINGS AFTER 9 ROUNDS

OPEN CATEGORY	
#	COUNTRY
1.	India
2.	USA, Uzbekistan, China
5.	Slovenia, Ukraine, Serbia, Hungary, Armenia
14	
WOMEN CATEGORY	
1.	Kazakhstan
2.	India
3.	China, Armenia, Poland, Germany, Ukraine, Georgia, Vietnam, US, Spain
14	

Homeless Football World Cup Kicks Off in Seoul

The 2024 Homeless World Cup kicked off in the South Korean capital of Seoul on Saturday, marking the first time the event has ever been held in Asia. Held each year since 2003, the event bills itself as helping participants change their lives for the better through football, while also challenging society's perceptions of those experiencing homelessness. This year's edition features 52 teams from 38 countries worldwide, according to local organisers, and got under way Saturday on the main pitch at Seoul's Hanyang University. This is the tournament's first outing since FIFA signed an agreement in August to partner with the Homeless World Cup Foundation in organising it. "FIFA is excited to contribute, because we share the view of the Homeless World Cup Foundation that football is a force for good," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said via Instagram last month. Under the agreement, FIFA is providing medals and trophies, and broadcasting the event on its streaming platform FIFA+. **AFP**

ISL Jamshedpur Come From Behind to Beat Mumbai

Spaniard Javi Hernandez struck a brace as Jamshedpur FC eked out a hard-fought 3-2 win over Mumbai City FC after falling a goal behind to secure their first home victory of the Indian Super League (ISL) 2024-25 season on Saturday. Hernandez scored in the 44th and 50th minutes while Jordan Murray (36th minute) got the other goal for the home side at the JRD Tata Sports Complex. In the process, Hernandez became the third player in the ISL to score for five different clubs. Nikolaos Karelis (18th) and Yoell van Nieff (77th) found the target for Mumbai City. **PTI**

Three Chepaukmunks

Pant, Gill and Ashwin shine on Day 3 to help India take dominant position in the first Test against Bangladesh



Anand Vasu REGARDLESS

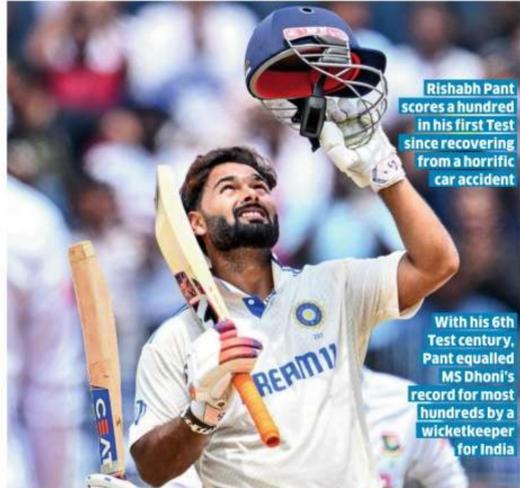
India played model Test cricket on the third day of the first Test and put Bangladesh in the shade. First there was the calm batting of Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill, respectful of the bowlers and the conditions and then came Ravichandran Ashwin, showing off his skill to ensure that India moved the game forward. There was an air of inevitability over the hundreds Pant and Gill scored. For Pant, it was obviously a significant ton — his sixth — in the context of his life and the challenges he has faced over the last two years. It was an innings he was going to remember for a long time to come. Gill, while complementing Pant, understood that his role was slightly different. Gill needed to get some serious runs under his belt and the calm and collected manner in which he went about the task was pleasing on the eye.

"Initially when I used to practice, especially against spinners, I used to step down trying to rotate. It's the same here because it's hard for bowlers to settle on a wicket like this where the odd one is turning but not all the balls are turning," Gill said.

"It's something that I started practising when I was very young because I was always a tall guy. So, it was easier for me to use my feet and play along the ground. Playing in the air and hitting sixes actually came a bit later when I got a little bit more power in my body."

The 161-run partnership ensured that both batsmen moved to centuries without ever really playing a false shot. Pant's first mistake was his last one, when on 109 he failed to get fully to the pitch of a ball from Mehidy Hasan Miraz. The result was a return catch to the bowler as the ball came a touch slowly off the surface.

Gill capitalised fully, ending unbeaten on 119 as India declared on 287 for 4, setting Bangladesh a target of 515.



Rishabh Pant scores a hundred in his first Test since recovering from a horrific car accident

With his 6th Test century, Pant equalled MS Dhoni's record for most hundreds by a wicketkeeper for India

"I think the series that I had against England gave me a lot of confidence. I felt it was a long time coming for me, especially batting at that position (No. 3). And having got out the way I got out in the first innings (down the leg-side), I was obviously very disappointed," the 25-year-old Punjab batter said.

"But it further motivated me to be able to spend a lot of time on the crease and put extra value on my wicket. I think my best is yet to come."

If Bangladesh were rolled out in the first innings, they offered much more resistance in the second. To be fair to India's bowlers, the pitch had eased up. There was far less lateral movement for the quick bowlers and the bounce was largely true. Still, India were forced to really work for their wickets.

It wasn't until Bangladesh had 62 that India had their first breakthrough. A stunning

We got tested early on around the stumps more, and that was a big difference. Obviously, we're playing against India, who possess some quality bowling, a very confident side, especially playing at home. So, you're going to be challenged

DAVID HEMP
Bangladesh batting coach

catch from Yashasvi Jaiswal at gully gave Jasprit Bumrah his first scalp. Ashwin then got into his groove, settling into a nice rhythm and mixing things up ever so slightly to keep the batsmen guessing.

Shadman Islam was the first of Ashwin's wicket when he tried to work the ball to leg but could not keep it along the ground. Mominul Haq got a perfectly pitched peach from Ashwin that did just enough to beat the bat and hit the stumps. Mushfiqur Rahim became Ashwin's third victim when he drove uppishly towards mid-off.

Even though Bangladesh had managed to get some runs on the board, ending the day on 158 for 4, India will know that they got it just right.

From here on, even with a touch of rain predicted, all India need to do is the basics.

The pressure of the scoreboard, the natural variation of the red soil wicket and the sheer class of India's attack will combine to keep Bangladesh from breathing easy.

BRIEF SCORES
India 376 and 287/4 dec (Gill 119), Pant 109; Miraz 2/103) lead Bangladesh 149 and 158/4 (Shanto 51*, Islam 35, Hasan 33; Ashwin 3/63) by 357 runs.

Change is the Only Hope

AITA under fire, players demand reforms after Davis Cup controversy



Boria Majumdar

Indian tennis is facing an unprecedented crisis. A 0-4 loss to a modest Sweden in Davis Cup last week has exposed deep divisions within the sport. While the All India Tennis Association (AITA) accused that some players "refused to play for the country", the players have responded with their own accusations against the federation.

Sumit Nagal, one of the players who was accused by the AITA of neglecting national duty, said that he was injured before the Sweden tie and did not want to hamper the team's chances. In a statement, Nagal said, "Representing my country is a privilege and an honour I hold in the highest regard... However, after consulting my medical team it became clear that competing while carrying an injury could not only jeopardise my health but also adversely impact the team's chances..."

Mahesh Bhupathi, one of India's most successful doubles players, was displeased by the association's attempt to tarnish Nagal's reputation. "This is classic AITA," said Bhupathi. "Sumit Nagal had a medical issue. He did not play a tournament in China as well. And to see him being accused of

not wanting to play for India is plain unfair. And this has been going on for years. Unless things change, there is only one loser and that's Indian tennis." Somdev Devvarman, one of India's best singles players ever, expressed his disappointment, explaining that playing in the Davis Cup is highly stressful for Indian players. "If you ask players from other countries, they'll tell you they all look forward to the Davis Cup. It's the best week of the year—you spend time with teammates, play for your country, and have fun," Devvarman said. "In India, it's the exact opposite. The Davis Cup is the most stressful week because of all the politics. Afterward, it takes three weeks to recover from the mental strain."

Controversy inevitably dominates the headlines ahead of every Davis Cup tie. For the past 25 years or so, the situation has remained the same, with players regularly having issues with the AITA. "Someone or the other has forever been targeted by the AITA. Be it Sania [Mirza], Mahesh, Leander [Paes], myself and now Sumit. It should be the exact opposite. The federation and

the players should all be in sync for the sport to thrive," argued Devvarman. Sources say Nagal was on the verge of announcing retirement from the Davis Cup after the unfortunate exchange. Fed up with the federation's antics, he was ready to focus solely on his tour career and skip the Davis Cup. However, he changed his mind after talking with former players.

"I don't really know what is more depressing... the current state of tennis in our country or the fact that some of our knowledgeable experts are will-

ing to throw our only Top-100 singles tennis player (male or female) under the bus to deflect criticism!" said Imran Mirza, Sania's father and coach.

From team selection to blame game, the Sweden tie has become a classic example of mismanagement. "Players ranked that low shouldn't have been fielded. Why don't we have a plan? The players don't even know who will play and when?" concluded Somdev.

Mahesh was equally critical in his assessment. "If you were to take the example of the top three or four sports in the country—cricket, hockey, badminton and shooting—each of them has former players making key decisions and guiding the sport. As a result, these sports show consistent results year after year," he said.

"The AITA needs to use Rohan Bopanna and Sania Mirza. They run successful academies with ample facilities that could be used to develop players. Devvarman is the only suitable choice to lead a high-performance program in our country."

"See what China did in 15 years with a clear vision. They have two men and five women in the top 100, and an Olympic gold medalist. If the Chinese can do it, I am sure we have more talent in India. We need to put in place a structure and resources to harness that talent."

The AITA and Indian tennis have an opportunity coming in a month, with elections just around the corner. This is a chance to cleanse the system by appointing right people to key positions, fostering synergy between the players and the federation, and involving former players to drive positive change. The mindset has to change. Time is fast running out.

The F1 Season has Surprisingly Become a Free-for-All

After the first few races, it looked like Red Bull would run away with the titles once again. Not this year

Phillip Horton

Formula One has, to the surprise of many, an engrossing championship battle in 2024, with four teams having a strong year.

It appeared unlikely when reigning three-time champion Max Verstappen dominated four of the opening five races, continuing his dominance in 2023, when he won 19 of 22 races.

But Verstappen has not won a Grand Prix since Spain in June, a run of seven Grands Prix, and his and Red Bull's title prospects are under serious threat. "Last year we had a great car, which was the most dominant car ever, and we basically turned it into a monster, so we have to turn it around," Verstappen said after the Italian Grand Prix earlier this month, in which he finished sixth.

Red Bull's car, the RB20, has had balance problems, meaning there is often a disconnect between the front and rear of the car. That creates inconsistency and leads to other consequences, such as oversteer and worse tire degradation.

Verstappen has been direct about Red Bull's weaknesses for months, frustrated on occasion amid hints he felt some of the team were not tackling the problems with sufficient zeal.

"It's up to the team to come with lot of changes with the car because we basically went from a very dominant car to an undrivable car in the space of, what, six to eight months?" Verstappen said this month, adding



that the car is "bad everywhere," at all types of circuits and conditions.

It has been a problem for several months, even notable at some events in 2023, when Red Bull was coming to victories. The RB20's predicament has been exacerbated by new up-grades not delivering the performance gains expected.

Of greater concern is the on-track performance not replicating the data from the wind tunnel. It means Red Bull has to diagnose the problem before applying a remedy, and this all takes time.

"I think if you dig into it there were some of these issues early in the year,

It's up to the team to come with lot of changes with the car because we basically went from a very dominant car to an undrivable car in the space of, what, six to eight months?"

MAX VERSTAPPEN, Red Bull driver

even when we were winning races by 20 seconds," Christian Horner, the team principal, said. "I think that recent up-grades, whilst it put load on the car, it's disconnected the front and rear, and we can see that; our wind tunnel doesn't say that, but the track says that, so it's getting on top of that, because, obviously, when you have that it means you can't trust your tools."

Horner agreed with Verstappen that "both championships absolutely will be under pressure." He said the impending departure of design chief Adrian Newey, the architect of Red Bull's title-winning cars, was not the cause of the problems.

"I think we would have had all of these issues because the issues were already there, and one man's input could never be so dramatic so quickly," Horner said. Red Bull has held a performance advantage since Formula One introduced new technical regulations in 2022, but now the front-running teams

have converged and the development curve is flattening.

"It's like you're scraping around the bottom of the jar for the last bit of lap time, you've got the knife in there around all four corners and not much comes out," said Rob Marshall, the chief designer of McLaren, which he joined in January after leaving Red Bull.

While Red Bull, Ferrari and Mercedes have introduced some new components that have misfired, McLaren's upgrade packages have delivered the anticipated gains.

McLaren has consequently been able to fight for victories at most races, winning four times. It has a young team unaccustomed to operating at the front. Its drivers, Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri, have recorded maiden victories in 2024, but they have stumbled on occasion, and McLaren has been reluctant to favor one driver. Norris is the stronger option, 59 points behind Verstappen, while Piastri is 91 points behind. **The New York Times**

Is Ohtani Baseball's G.O.A.T.?

In the minds of many, MLB's Japanese superstar is already on the shortlist of the sport's all-time legends

David Brandt

If baseball fans are lucky, Shohei Ohtani's greatness in the batter's box and maybe even on the pitching mound could be on display for at least another decade.

But in the minds of many, the 30-year-old is already on the shortlist of the sport's all-time legends.

The Japanese superstar added to his absurd feats on Thursday, becoming the first player in Major League Baseball history to have 50 homers and 50 stolen bases in one season. He hit both marks in grand fashion, with his first three-homer game, his first six-hit game and a franchise and career-record 10 RBIs in Miami.

"There's definitely arguments that could be made that he's better than Babe Ruth," Mets outfielder Brandon Nimmo said Friday. "Everybody always talks about Babe Ruth and him being one of the greatest baseball players, if not the (greatest) of all-time."

"I think we're playing with the modern-day Babe Ruth here."

Ohtani is only in his eighth big-league season after playing five years in Japan, but it's fair to wonder if he's already cemented a plaque in Cooperstown. He's the overwhelming favourite to win his third Most Valuable Player award this season, according to BetMGM.

Ultimate Test

In a clash of last two seasons' table-toppers, Arsenal go to Man City's fortress. Can Arteta's defence keep Haaland in check?

Arsenal's Premier League title ambitions face the ultimate test on Sunday when a relentless Erling Haaland aims to fire Manchester City five points clear of the Gunners at the top of the table.

Mikel Arteta's men managed to stop City scoring twice last season, but still could not deny the English champions a record fourth consecutive Premier League title.

For the past two seasons Arsenal have finished second to Pep Guardiola's winning machine.

Many believe this is their season to end a 21-year wait to win the title since Arsene Wenger's "Invincibles" romped to glory without losing a game.

City remain their biggest obstacle, although the path could be cleared should the holders be hit by a points deduction for 115 alleged breaches of Premier League rules by the end of the campaign.

Haaland has struck a record nine times in the first four matches of the new Premier League campaign. The Norwegian's stunning form has ensured City are the only side in the English top-flight yet to drop points.

But Arsenal are on their tails again—just two points behind—after proving their title credentials in battling away wins at Aston Villa and Tottenham.

Arsenal's challenge is built on rock solid defensive foundations. Centre-back pairing William Saliba and Gabriel Magalhães are earning comparisons to legendary partnerships of the past, while goalkeeper David Raya has an extraordinary show-reel of saves from the past month alone.

In five matches in all competitions, Arsenal have conceded just once—a goal that arrived when down to 10 men against Brighton.

"We all want to achieve something. Winning this Premier League is not easy, but when you finish twice second, you want to win," said Saliba.

"We will give everything, even more than last season, because we don't want

to finish second, third or fourth. We want to win this league and we'll give everything."

When Arsenal shut out City in a 0-0 draw on the final day of March, there were muted celebrations from the visitors as they left the Etihad still on top of the table. But City did not drop another point in the final nine games of the season to snatch the title by two points.

"In Premier League history (City) has been the most consistent ever, not only in terms of results but in terms of dominance and consistent top performances," said Arteta on Friday.

"This is the challenge, we have to go there and prove that again we've made another step and we can compete."

If Arsenal are to emerge victorious on a ground where they have not won since 2015, their centre-back combination

will be to the fore. Haaland did not even manage a single shot on target in the two league meetings when up against Saliba and Gabriel last season. "I'm good, he's good. We both speak French and we play now in our third season together," added Saliba on how the pair have formed such a potent partnership.

"We know each other so well and it's a pleasure to play every game with him. We grow to gether because he's young and well, so it's really good to have him by my side."

In 65 Premier League games with that duo together at the back, Arsenal have kept 30 clean sheets and conceded just 51 goals. "William Saliba and Gabriel are on the threshold of joining elite company," wrote former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher in *The Telegraph*.

"Provided they stay together, we will eventually reference Saliba and Gabriel in the same breath as the two stand-out partnerships of my generation: Chelsea's John Terry and Ricardo Carvalho, and Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic."

Yet, to gain that level of recognition, Arsenal need to add silverware to their impressive starts.

For all of the impressive progress over the past three seasons, they do not have a single trophy to show for it. Ending City's near two-year unbeaten run on home soil would strike a telling early blow that this time the title race could end differently. **AFP**



Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta

Man City coach Pep Guardiola

WATCHOUT! Tonight

PREMIER LEAGUE Man City v Arsenal 9pm (Star Sports) LA LIGA Villarreal v Barcelona 10pm; Valencia v Atletico Madrid 12:30am (Sports18) BUNDESLIGA Bayer Leverkusen v Wolfsburg 7pm; Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund 9pm (Sony Ten) ISL Kerala Blasters v East Bengal 7:30pm (Sports18)

Doubles by Diaz and Jackson Help Liverpool And Chelsea Cruise to Identical 3-0 Wins

A quick-fire double from Luis Diaz set Liverpool on course for a comprehensive 3-0 home win against Bournemouth on Saturday as Tottenham eased the pressure on Ange Postecoglou by beating Brentford 3-1 on Saturday.

Nicolas Jackson (in pic) scored twice as Chelsea cruised to a 3-0 win at West Ham, while Aston Villa are level on points at the top after coming from behind to beat Wolves 3-1. Liverpool suffered the first setback of Arne Slot's early days in charge when Nottingham Forest shocked Anfield seven days ago. But the Reds responded in style to blow Bournemouth away before half-time. Luis Diaz was rested for an impressive 3-1 win at AC Milan to start Liverpool's Champions League campaign in midweek. Restored to the starting line-up, the Colombian struck twice inside two minutes. **AFP**

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Is Ohtani Baseball's G.O.A.T.?

In the minds of many, MLB's Japanese superstar is already on the shortlist of the sport's all-time legends

David Brandt

If baseball fans are lucky, Shohei Ohtani's greatness in the batter's box and maybe even on the pitching mound could be on display for at least another decade.

But in the minds of many, the 30-year-old is already on the shortlist of the sport's all-time legends.

The Japanese superstar added to his absurd feats on Thursday, becoming the first player in Major League Baseball history to have 50 homers and 50 stolen bases in one season. He hit both marks in grand fashion, with his first three-homer game, his first six-hit game and a franchise and career-record 10 RBIs in Miami.

"There's definitely arguments that could be made that he's better than Babe Ruth," Mets outfielder Brandon Nimmo said Friday. "Everybody always talks about Babe Ruth and him being one of the greatest baseball players, if not the (greatest) of all-time."

"I think we're playing with the modern-day Babe Ruth here."

Ohtani is only in his eighth big-league season after playing five years in Japan, but it's fair to wonder if he's already cemented a plaque in Cooperstown. He's the overwhelming favourite to win his third Most Valuable Player award this season, according to BetMGM.

the president of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. "People are excited about what they're seeing and that's very understandable."

It was about this time last season that Ohtani's career hit a major speed bump. The two-way star was having a phenomenal season for the Los Angeles Angels at the plate and on the mound when he suffered a torn ligament in his pitching elbow on Aug. 23. That led to the second major surgery on his pitching elbow.

But the free-spending Dodgers were undeterred by the injury in free agency, snagging Ohtani on a \$700 million, 10-year deal that was by far the richest in MLB history. It's safe to say he's been worth it so far.

Able to focus solely on hitting, Ohtani has produced arguably his best offensive season. He's batting .294 with 51 homers and 120 RBIs while stealing 51 bases and only getting caught four times.

Some like Angels manager Ron Washington and Red Sox pitcher Tanner Houck said they would reserve judgment on Ohtani's Cooperstown credentials until his career is over. But there's little doubt he's trending the correct way. "I like to see the full career," Houck said. **AP**



Shohei Ohtani is the first and only player in MLB history to have 50 homers and 50 stolen bases in one season