



# Gaming Education

**HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS ARE MISSING OUT ON WHAT COULD BE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THEIR LEARNING JOURNEYS — PLAY**

**Dr ADITYA DESHBANDHU**

**W**hat can video games as media and interactive experiences offer tomorrow's learning environments?

The introduction of play, games and aspects of video games in learning environments as a practice is gaining momentum and becoming prevalent globally. As teachers and researchers alike try to understand how the use of playful approaches in education can benefit the learning journeys of students from preschool environments to the higher education sector, it is important for us to acknowledge that the boundary between learning and play — once considered

**DESIGNING A COURSE THAT DRAWS ON GAMES AND PLAY ALSO MEANS THAT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ARE LESS HIERARCHICAL, THERE IS MORE ROOM FOR DEBATE, DISCUSSION AND PRE-CLASS PREPARATION**

sacrosanct, is now blurry.

Existing research has highlighted how aspects like joy, creativity, the development of goal-setting abilities and working towards achieving set goals are common to both learning and engaging with games. Similarly, psychologists examining learning environments that have adopted playful approaches have observed many positive effects among students irrespective of methods, content and contextual settings. Recent research in education has also highlighted how play is a crucial part of not just preschool and early years of schooling but throughout one's educational journey.

**THERE IS ALMOST NO MENTION OF THE NEED TO ENGAGE WITH GAME-BASED LEARNING, PEDAGOGIC APPROACHES DETERMINED BY PLAY, OR EVEN THE GAME DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY IN THE NEW EDUCATION POLICY**

In my research, I have found that incorporating play in the classroom and informal learning environments allows students to develop better communication abilities and initiative, and work better in large-group settings. The use of playful activities and games in classes has also been found to lead to a reduction of the fear of failure, fostering environments that could lead to students not just consuming knowledge but co-creating it with their learning facilitators.

However, the current disposition in India's higher education sector remains unconvinced of the benefits of games and game-based learning for the na-

tion's students. Though a few of our eminent centres of learning offer technical and development skills or even a full-fledged degree in game development/design, they choose to ignore the fact that video games is the largest media industry in the world in terms of revenue. There was almost no mention of the need to engage with game-based learning, pedagogic approaches determined by play, or even the game development industry in the New Education Policy of 2020.

Policymakers and the government are yet to engage with the Indian gaming industry's call to create necessary standards for game development, e-sports degrees and infrastructure for vocational and skill-based training. In the interim, Indian students miss out on what could be an integral part of their learning journeys — play. These are avenues for experiences that could spark curiosity and further critical and reflective learning, aspects deemed essential in workplaces geared for increasing degrees of automation in the next decade.

## Playful Twist

However, this article reflects on more than what our students are missing out on by not finding room for games, game-based learning and playful approaches in curricula. Drawing a bit from my teaching journey, it showcases specific examples where the use of games in classroom environments has enhanced the learning experience at the university level. I teach video games-based courses at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Over the last three years, as I have developed the courses, taught/delivered them, graded various assignments and engaged with students, I have observed a few key things:

### Levelling the classroom field

Higher education classrooms are generally extremely diverse, be it internationally where students and teachers from a range of countries often feature in the room to Indian settings where the cohorts are diverse in terms of class, region, language, religion and background. In such diverse settings, I have observed that video games or playful activities are not just great at breaking the ice and getting the conversation flowing, but they also allow students to communicate with ease.

In settings where language proficiency is a concern, I have witnessed games, through play and interactivity, bridge the gap between shyness and any awkwardness one might feel in one's grasp of a specific language. Secondly, the incorporation of games into course-



work offers students a shared set of experiences to bond over as well as a shared set of understandings to draw on when engaging with complex theories and ideas. For the teacher/facilitator, games can reduce the burden of integrating all the members of a classroom because the inherent interactivity games provide often means that students are searching through them for meaning, purpose and progression.

If the integration of game-based learning initiatives improves in-class environments, it is essential to ask if the use of games could be developed to align with students' desire to succeed in the Indian higher education setup.

### Collaboration and creative thinking

Most games are designed as problem-solving environments and engaging with the right game in courses will encourage students to solve the problems the field poses in creative ways. It is necessary to reiterate that the use of games in curricula reduces the fear of failure among students which, in turn, allows them to experiment and explore beyond the scope of course outlines and prescribed learning materials. Looking beyond prescribed sources of learning is a great sign of initiative and often leads to very interesting explorations by students.

I have had some very unconventional and thought-provoking assignments

submitted to me where I have used games or play-based learning. Students have also been keener to work in teams, brainstorm ideas, and, at times, go over and beyond the deliverable learning outcomes that are designed for the course. Designing a course that draws on games and play also means that learning environments are less hierarchical, there is more room for debate, discussion and pre-class preparation. I have never had trouble with attendance and student participation in a course where I have used pedagogies of play.

If the above benefits hold, then it is important to ask if games and play-based learning could encourage students to view their degrees as more than the requisite paperwork that allows them to look for jobs.

### Learning beyond curriculum

One of the opportunities of using games in coursework is the ability to bring perspectives of game-makers and designers into the classroom. One such rare opportunity that we were offered this year was to welcome the makers of the virtual reality experience *Assassins Creed Nexus VR* as part of a session that allowed students to engage with people from the industry. The session, delivered by Lisa Ridley, Senior AI programmer, at Ubisoft's Reflections Studio in Newcastle, UK, went into great detail explaining how the iconic franchise *Assassins Creed* was reimagined as a virtual reality experience while also highlighting the challenges in making such an ambitious project playable on a device like Meta Quest 2 and 3.

There was a lot more to be learnt from the Ubisoft team as students could pick up on aspects of marketing and promotion of games as well as approaches to the development and execution of social media campaigns to promote upcoming games.

However, at the end of the session, what caught me by surprise was not just the opportunity to learn from one of the largest game-makers in the world, but rather the sheer number of questions students wanted to ask. The interaction lasted for over an hour and spanned a wide variety of questions — most beyond the boundaries of the reading materials from the courses I had taught but within the domain of the larger discipline. The discussions and deliberations were both deep and nuanced as I watched how students adapted and bridged what was discussed in the classroom with what was presented by the experts.

If such interactions and commitments to learning are possible then we must ask our current education sector: If world-

leading organisations and game-makers are willing to view their games as not just sites of play but as opportunities for teaching and learning, why are we holding back from creating the right openings and connections from such associations? Also, what more can educational institutions expect of their students beyond a self-driven desire to learn and an in-depth engagement with the materials of the course?

## Theory and Ideas

Games and game-based content if imagined and complemented with theory and ideas in the right way can be used to

**POLICYMAKERS AND GOVT ARE YET TO ENGAGE WITH GAMING INDUSTRY'S CALL TO CREATE NECESSARY STANDARDS FOR GAME DEVELOPMENT, E-SPORTS DEGREES AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR VOCATIONAL SKILL-BASED TRAINING**

teach much more than resource allocation and strategy building in business schools (as is the norm currently). In the process, it might instil in students a desire to carve their own journeys of learning.

In my decade-long time in higher education, I have relied on games to convey a wide variety of ideas — from games like *Beecarbonize* to help students visualise the extent of the climate crisis on our hands to more complex games like *Detroit Become Human* to get them to critically think of workers' rights in the gig economy. As we begin to think about what education and insti-

**IF GAME-MAKERS ARE WILLING TO VIEW THEIR GAMES AS NOT JUST SITES OF PLAY BUT AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING, WHY ARE WE HOLDING BACK FROM CREATING THE RIGHT OPENINGS?**

tutions of higher learning mean and offer in the era of Generative AI, one of the key distinctions lies in the experience we offer. If it is a meaningful and value-driven experience, then few things push the boundary to the maximum the way games and play-based activities do.

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## Lessons Unlearned

The recent assembly election results in Jharkhand have highlighted significant challenges for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite deploying its top leadership and resources, the NDA suffered a major setback, with the Hemant Soren-led alliance decisively retaining power. This defeat reveals deep structural and strategic flaws within the NDA, offering important lessons for future battles. One of the most glaring missteps was the government’s decision to arrest Chief Minister Hemant Soren. Rather than weakening his political standing, this move galvanised tribal communities and created a wave of sympathy for Mr Soren. The tribal belt, historically critical to the BJP’s electoral success, overwhelmingly turned to the INDIA bloc, leaving the BJP with just one victory in the 28 tribal-reserved constituencies. This stark shift underscores the importance of understanding regional political dynamics and the risks of aggressive tactics that can backfire.

The BJP’s inability to retain its traditional general-category voters further amplified its defeat. Historically loyal to the party, this segment showed a clear drift towards the JMM and Congress, reflecting dissatisfaction with the BJP’s focus on tribal outreach at the cost of addressing broader developmental concerns. This shift signals the need for a more inclusive strategy that balances regional priorities with the aspirations of diverse voter groups. The NDA’s failure to address local concerns effectively also played a crucial role. The BJP’s campaign focused heavily on national issues, such as alleged infiltration from Bangladesh, but lacked credible local voices to anchor the narrative. This disconnect alienated voters, particularly in tribal areas, where such issues resonated less than tangible welfare initiatives. The JMM’s targeted welfare schemes, including direct financial support for women and housing programmes, demonstrated a clear understanding of voter priorities, further consolidating their support base.

The role of alliances also warrants scrutiny. The BJP’s ally, the All Jharkhand Students’ Union (AJSU), was expected to mobilise the influential Kudmi vote. However, the emergence of Jairam Mahato as a third force splintered this crucial vote bank, resulting in significant losses for the NDA in at least 16 constituencies. This miscalculation highlights the need for better coordination and a more nuanced approach to alliance politics. Moreover, internal dissent and ineffective ground operations compounded the BJP’s woes. Reports of party observers remaining disconnected from grassroots realities and accusations of sabotage within its ranks point to organisational weaknesses that require urgent redress.

The BJP’s reliance on star power and high-profile campaigns, while ignoring the need for robust local strategies, proved to be a critical error. This loss has implications beyond Jharkhand. For the BJP and its allies, it serves as a wake-up call to recalibrate their strategies ahead of upcoming state and national elections. The focus must shift from polarising rhetoric and top-down campaigning to addressing local aspirations and building trust through consistent engagement. The NDA must introspect deeply and adapt its approach if it hopes to regain lost ground in this politically significant state.

## Tense Relations

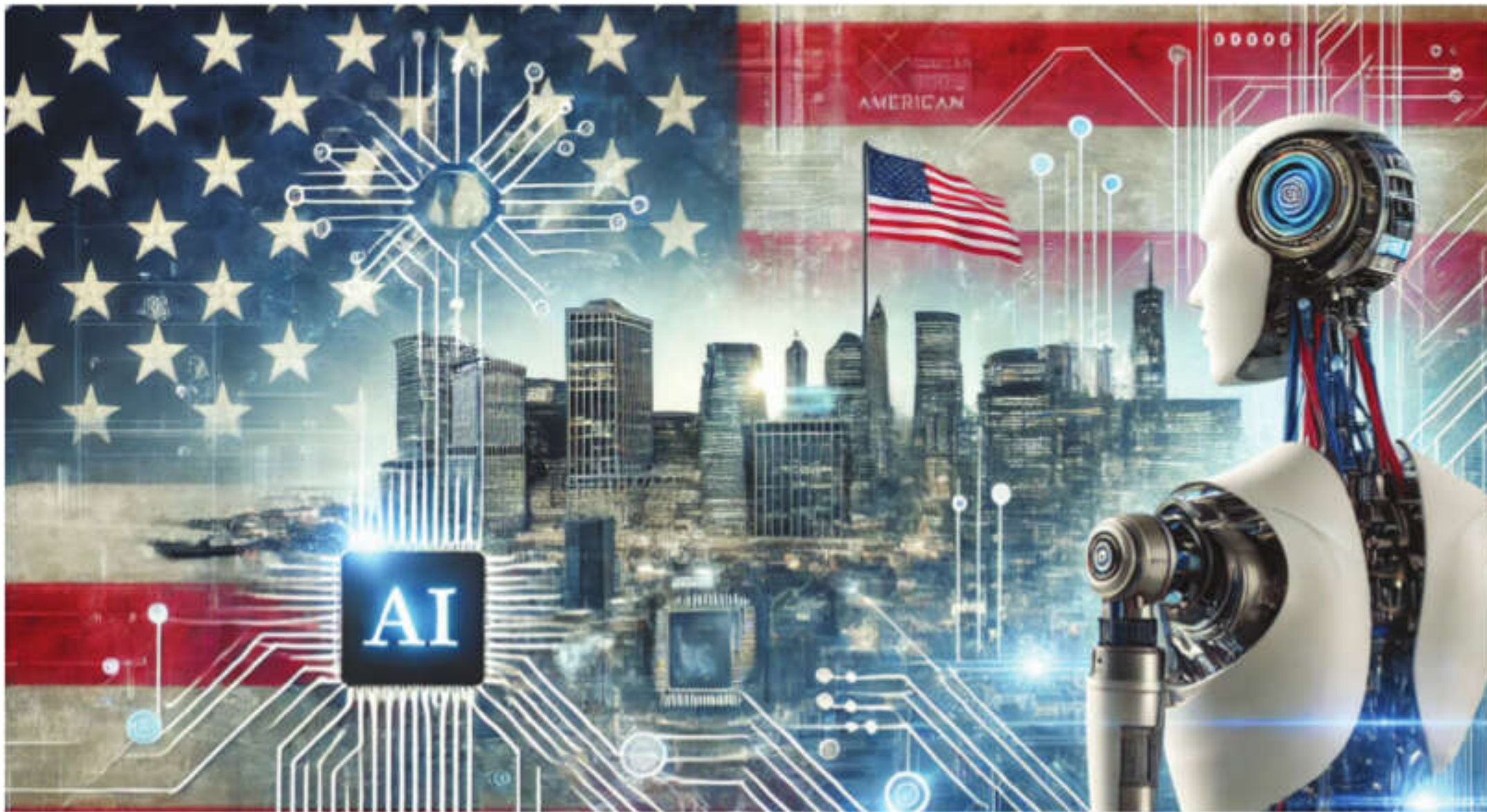
The arrest of a prominent Hindu monk in Bangladesh has sparked a diplomatic tussle with India, highlighting a recurring point of contention in the bilateral relationship: the condition of minorities in Bangladesh. This latest episode not only puts the spotlight on the treatment of minorities but also raises broader questions about governance, social harmony, and the delicate balance between justice and communal sensitivities. Bangladesh’s Hindu minority, comprising around 8 per cent of the population, has historically been a barometer of the country’s commitment to pluralism. The arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a vocal advocate for minority rights, and the ensuing violence underscore a precarious environment where tensions can easily escalate. While Bangladesh’s interim government claims the arrest is justified on charges of sedition, the perception of targeting a prominent Hindu figure risks stoking communal insecurities.

The reaction from India, expressing concern for the safety of minorities, has added a diplomatic layer to the incident. Relations between the two nations, which were robust under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, have grown tense since her ouster. Sheikh Hasina’s exile in India complicates matters further, with her presence serving as both a symbol of unresolved political turbulence in Bangladesh and a diplomatic tight-rope for India. The violence following Mr Das’s arrest, resulting in the death of a Muslim lawyer, highlights the volatility of communal tensions. Such incidents reveal the thin line between maintaining law and order and preserving social cohesion. The interim government, under Muhammad Yunus, faces the dual challenge of asserting its authority while ensuring that justice is seen as impartial and inclusive. Mr Yunus’s calls for calm are timely, but the perception of bias, whether real or imagined, could undermine these efforts. From a governance perspective, the incident exposes the fragility of Bangladesh’s socio-political fabric. The nation’s progress on economic and developmental fronts is already being overshadowed by recurring communal flashpoints. These challenges are exacerbated by the current political vacuum and uncertainty surrounding elections. Without a credible electoral process, Bangladesh risks further polarising its population, complicating efforts to foster unity.

For India, the issue of minority rights in Bangladesh is as much about domestic optics as it is about foreign policy. Raising concerns serves to reassure its own population of its commitment to Hindus abroad while subtly pressuring Dhaka to act responsibly. However, such interventions risk being perceived as interference, potentially straining bilateral ties further. Ultimately, Bangladesh’s long-term stability hinges on its ability to uphold the principles of justice and communal harmony. Arrests, protests, and diplomatic exchanges must not be allowed to erode progress made in fostering social cohesion. The interim government must prioritise inclusivity and transparency, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their faith, feel protected. In navigating these challenges, Bangladesh can reaffirm its commitment to being a diverse and harmonious society, a goal essential for both its internal stability and international relationships. At the moment, though, Dhaka seems to be floundering.

# Tyranny of broligarchs

**Tech bros are the new Pharaohs and modern-day czars in the digital age. They are the self-appointed guardians of public trust, gatekeepers to corporate culture and thought. Tech billionaires are creating a world where the rich wax, the middle-class wanes and the poor live in hard-scrabble conditions**



In his much-celebrated book, *The Third Wave*, futurist Alvin Toffler describes technology as “the dawn of a new civilisation”. Technology has made great strides, solving many of our problems. Technology has also been part of the knowledge production system and institutions. Today, we not only use technology, we live technology.

But technology is not created in a vacuum. It is not a one-click solution either. What is worrying is the geopolitics of the big tech. High-tech has come to signify high politics too. Experience suggests that digital and tech advancements are geopolitical issues of the highest order. When technology is created, it is built with the developers’ worldviews, values, beliefs and assumptions.

Today, the new plutocrats of Silicon Valley are working like predatory wolves. Must we be surprised when America’s high-tech czars led by Elon Musk should be taking the country towards what Japanese economist Taichi Sakaiya called “a high-tech Middle Ages?”

How has the US, the world’s high-tech leader, come to such a stage? Why is the American dream cracking? The answer is obvious. The economy in the “land of the dream” has become global but politics hasn’t. No wonder therefore, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard should describe the US as a land of “utopia achieved.” If you “get out of your car in this centrifugal metropolis, you immediately become a delinquent: as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road”

Innovation serves the plutocrats. Today, technological solutionism has become the romantic utopia in the US. You may call it a techno-utopian pipedream. When the technological future becomes unpredictable, policy-makers drive in the dark.

It has also impacted other sectors including academia. As the *Washington Post* writes, the Trump-aligned America First Policy Institute is working on a proposal to Make America First in AI. Marc Andreessen, a venture-capitalist billionaire, has published a “Techno-Optimist Manifesto” in which he claims, technology is the solution to environmental degradation. He further writes that AI is a ‘philosopher’s Stone’ that can stop pandemics.

If the likes of Andreessen have their way, Trumperica will be marching towards the ‘dark academia’ and ‘choose your own adventure’ epistemology will gain respectability. Andreessen boasts, “we are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt...” “We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us.”

Musk holds the media in disdain. He has won the battle for attention against the media. His X has turned into MAGA’s mouthpiece.

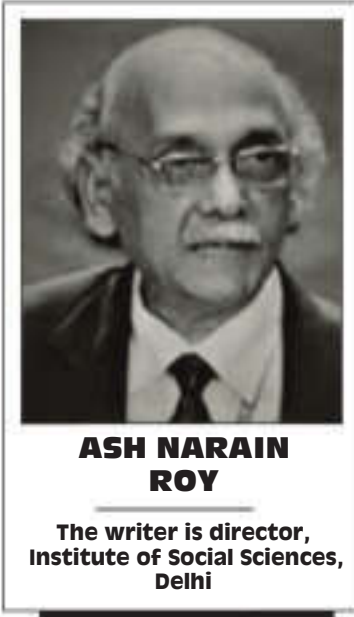
Brooke Harrington in his book “Offshore: Stealth Wealth and the New Colonialism” uses the term “Broligarchs” referring to America’s big tech bros who are now shaping American politics. The male tech plutocrats from the Silicon Valley now run the country with their dark money. They are known for their desire for what one analyst calls power without accountability.

Tech bros are the new Pharaohs and modern-day czars in the digital age. They are the self-appointed guardians of public trust, gatekeepers to corporate culture and thought. Tech billionaires are creating a world where the rich wax, the middle-class wanes and

the poor live in hard-scrabble conditions.

Barrington explains that the big bros are a class apart. But they are by no account anarchists. They don’t wish to break rules. In fact, they need a government. They believe they are smarter people who deserve to be above the law. They are natural allies of Trump as they see any form of democratic control as illegitimate.

Big bros claim a special status: The Sovereign Individual, to borrow the title of James Davidson and



ASH NARAIN ROY  
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William Rees-Mogg’s book. That explains why the tech bro-in-chief, Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy will be leading the department of government efficiency in the Trump Administration. Their task will be to dismantle the government bureaucracy, slash excess regulations, cut wasteful expenditure, and restructure federal agencies. Musk has already begun the job.

He has suggested mass-firings as is publicly identifying “fake jobs” and associated federal employees on X. These tactics are aimed at sowing terror and fear in federal employees. The missionary big-tech oligarchs often blame the immigrants and minorities of various hues for all the ills. They may occasionally castigate the amorphous elite but never the capitalist class. What one sees in the US and elsewhere is what a columnist with *The Nation Magazine* Stephen Crowley calls “oligarchic capture of politics”. Tech bros have found a way to deal with Trump: chin up and whistle. How have tech bros acquired such power? The reasons are not far to seek. Both Republican and Democratic governments have

weaponised the world economy by allowing the tech giants and other garden-variety oligarchs to have a stranglehold on key sectors. Business commands the resources.

Cloud computing is the exclusive preserve of mega firms like Amazon and Microsoft. Communication channels have for long been monopolised by business groups. The submarine fibre cables too are in the hands of the private companies. No wonder, the private sector dominates major levers of power.

Musk is a class apart. As *Time Magazine* writes, his monopoly of low orbit satellite communications has enabled him to hold “unprecedented level of privatised geopolitical power concentrated in the hands of a single, politically erratic tycoon.” Consequence-free bad behaviour is his passport to success.

As journalist and media entrepreneur Natalia Antelava explains, “the Broligarchs of Silicon Valley have not just grabbed untold riches, they have created products that none of us can or want to live without”. We are so used to this ecosystem, that the power and ubiquity of these devices and their services have taken hold of our lives. Tech bros have built “the digital architecture of our lives.”

The tech industry in the US is still a boys’ club. The doors to the technology field remain virtually closed to women. Musk often mocks advocates of the LGBT+ community. It is anybody’s guess where women will find themselves in his scheme of things. He would perhaps expect women to “follow the white rabbit.”

One analyst calls Silicon Valley “feudalism with better marketing.” It harbours new robber barons. They expect the Trump Administration not to Make America Great Again but to usher in a new gilded age. The broligarchs’ real aim is to make America and the world in their own image.

## Accessibility of healthcare in Bangladesh

Health is a fundamental human right and all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status, have the right to enjoy optimal health. This article emphasises on the issue of equity in health systems. It underlines the importance of a comprehensive multisectoral approach to improve the health system. Though Bangladesh has an adequate health infrastructure, a cause for concern is the uncontrolled growth in the private health sector. The challenge is to regulate the mushrooming private sector from exploitative cost of treatment. The aim is to ensure that the disadvantaged and vulnerable population have better access to basic healthcare without the current back-breaking cost.

The government needs strengthen the Primary Health Care (PHC) system in partnership with the NGO sector. The NGOs lead the way in community-based initiatives and outreach at the grassroots. Utilising the private sector is also a priority but needs coordination and regulation. At the macroeconomic level, initiatives need to be undertaken that nudge the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) towards reform and the adoption of new evidence-based practices that strengthen the health information system.

While the public health infrastructure in rural areas is considerable, this infrastructure needs an upgrade for maintaining quality PHC services. The

### The Daily Star

quality of services remains a major issue, areas that need urgent attention is lack of investment in facilities.

There is also an imbalance between availability and placement of human resources in the healthcare system. Frequent staffing mismatch in relation to demand-supply affect efficiency. The regulatory process to implement policies and laws is slow and often delayed in operation.

As Bangladesh becomes increasingly urban, the government’s role in establishing a PHC infrastructure to deliver services in urban areas appears to be lackadaisical at best.

Most commentators want to see the government considerably strengthen and fulfil its governance role in overseeing and monitoring aspects of health services. The government also needs to coordinate critical strategic developments, especially around the financing of this sector.

This begs the question, what should be the government’s main role in health service delivery? Both the NGO and private sectors could be given specific tasks that are quantifiable to assess progress. They can develop guidelines and operational plans to help the ministry, donors, NGOs and the private sector work in a more coordinated manner.

Meanwhile, health experts in Bangladesh have felt a dire need for greater inter-ministry and intra-ministry coordination and collaboration. This is especially true between the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP), and between the MOHFW and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD). With the latter being responsible for urban health, there is a need to decentralise the urban health system whereby city corporations can take primary responsibility for the health of urban people.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

## Lurking danger

SIR, Across Purba Bardhaman district, there are thousands of tea stalls, serving millions of cups of tea every morning, evening, and night. While many stalls have reintroduced clay cups for serving tea, a new danger lies hidden elsewhere ~ in the tea strainers. Be cautious wherever plastic tea strainers are used, as they pose a significant health risk.

The heat of hot tea can cause harmful chemicals like Bisphenol-A (BPA) or Phthalates to leach from plastic strainers. These chemicals can disrupt hormonal balance, reduce reproductive capacity, increase the risk of cancer, harm the liver and kidneys, reduce their functionality, and exacerbate neurological disorders. Long-term exposure can

also disrupt the endocrine system, leading to a range of diseases. Additionally, microplastics may enter the body, further aggravating health risks. Switching to alternatives like steel, ceramic, or bamboo strainers is much safer. The price difference between steel and plastic strainers is minimal, while steel strainers last significantly longer. However, due to a lack of awareness about the dangers, tea vendors continue to use plastic strainers.

Recently, a non-governmental organization carried out awareness campaigns in Burdwan town regarding this issue. However, widespread campaigns are needed across both rural and urban areas of the district and the state. Every grassroots organization and admin-



istrative body is urged to promote the use of eco-friendly and reusable alternatives to plastic products.

This is not only essential for protecting human health but also for safeguarding the environment.

Yours, etc., Sandipan Sarkar, Pallaroad, Purba Bardhaman, 28 November.

### UNFORTUNATE

SIR, It is unfortunate that both Houses of Parliament were adjourned twice at the beginning of the Constitution Day week on November 25 and 27. This deprives citizens of the opportunity to get a glimpse of a true and healthy picture of political problems, controversial issues and suggestions and its remedial measures through parliamentary discussions and debates.

It is unnatural that both Houses of a democratic nation where people’s representatives are supposed to speak for the people are repeatedly adjourned. What is the harm in discussing matters related to Adani, Manipur and Sambal with neutrality as a priority?

Or, do the respected presiding officers want politicians to speak on the basis of unauthorized information and mislead the people at road junctions and public meetings?

The time has come to remind everyone that in the interest of the people, representatives of both the

### DISRUPTION

SIR, Donald Trump is on the warpath to make America great again, with a dream team of the best minds to assist him. In all likelihood there is going to be a disruption far greater than the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts.

The proposed tariff of 25 per cent on Chinese goods would cause a retaliation from China and as a result there would be trade war pushing up inflation in the entire world. Surprisingly, Canada too is facing a slightly lesser tariff.

India has so far been spared but there is no telling when Trump may decide otherwise. The dollar is only going to get stronger and make the Indian economy a little more fragile than it is at present.

Yours, etc., Anthony Henriques, Mumbai, 28 November.

opposition and the ruling parties, and respected presiding officers of both houses, must have an honest and impartial view on every issue and the ability to distinguish between good and bad.

Yours, etc., Rupam Guha, Kolkata, 28 November.

### INACTION

SIR, I agree with the analytical two part article “Toxic living” by Jaydev Jana. But I wonder why during the proclamation of recent by poll results political parties resorted to bursting of crackers to celebrate their victories.

The Pollution Control Board and the administration was temporarily in trance. The air and sound pollution created by such activities are never decied nor any

cases registered against offenders. Yours, etc., Basudeb Dutta, Santipur, 28 November.

### PRIORITIES

SIR, The Congress party’s desire to regain access to paper votes poses mojar critical issues about accountability. Is criticising EVMs a technique to avoid internal failures? Given Congress’ sloppy election outcomes, should it prioritise policy and voter participation instead of blame technology? How can the party restore trust with voters while correcting its own errors? These enquiries require serious thought by Congress leaders as they navigate their futures.

Yours, etc., Anshu Bharti, Begusarai, 28 November.





# Human rights begin at home

SANTHOSH MATHEW

Once, human rights were understood as the simple principle that one person's rights should never extend beyond the tip of another's nose - unless invited. On December 10 each year, the world comes together to observe International Human Rights Day, a day that underscores the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.

First recognized in 1950 under the guidance of the United Nations, this day has evolved into a global call to action for the protection and promotion of human rights worldwide. Yet, despite decades of progress, violations persist across the globe, reminding us that the fight for human rights is far from over.

The debate on human rights dates back centuries, and two of the most prominent figures in this discourse - Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine - left a lasting legacy that continues to resonate today. Burke, a supporter of the monarchy, saw the preservation of tradition and hierarchy as essential to societal stability, while Paine, a revolutionary thinker, championed liberty, equality, and the rights of individuals.

One of Paine's most famous lines, "We pity the plumage, but forget the dying bird," directly addressed the hypocrisy of focusing on superficial issues while ignoring the deeper, more urgent concerns. In modern times, these words still carry weight, highlighting how we often address surface-level concerns while systemic injustices persist, unnoticed or unchallenged.

The observance of Human Rights Day invites us to reflect on the progress made and the work still to be done. It is a reminder that the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948, remain crucial in shaping a more just and equitable world. However, despite the ground-breaking achievements of the UDHR, widespread violations continue, and the fight for human dignity remains on-going.

Throughout history, the struggle for human rights has been a journey

fraught with obstacles. One notable turning point in this struggle occurred in the United States during the 19th century. The abolition of slavery, a monumental achievement, came about through the tireless efforts of leaders like Abraham Lincoln, who, in 1863, led the nation to abolish the institution through the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. This was a transformative moment in the history of human rights. Despite the victory, however, African-Americans continued to face systemic discrimination and segregation for many years after.

The 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, where the US Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, was another significant victory for human rights in America. But even after this, African-Americans had to fight for basic rights like access to education, the vote, and an end to discriminatory laws. It was only in 1965, after decades of struggle and advocacy by civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that African-Americans were granted the right to vote under the Voting Rights Act. These achievements were monumental, but they were hard-won, demonstrating the lengths to which marginalized communities had to go in order to claim their human rights.

Internationally, the story of human rights has also been one of continuous struggle and progress. The United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was a defining moment. It set out, for the first time, a global standard for human rights, affirming the rights of individuals to life, liberty, and security, among other freedoms. The UDHR became the foundation upon which many countries would base their own human rights frameworks. But the road to realising these rights in full has not been easy.

Over the decades, the UDHR has been supplemented by two essential covenants - the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights - passed in 1966 to reinforce and clarify the rights outlined in the UDHR. One of the key figures behind the development of the UDHR was Eleanor Roosevelt, who, as the chairperson of the UN Human Rights



Commission, played a pivotal role in its creation. Known as the "mother of modern human rights," Roosevelt's vision for a world where all people were treated equally and with dignity shaped the discourse on human rights for generations.

Unfortunately, she did not live to see the full impact of the UDHR, passing away in 1962, but her legacy lives on. Since 1998, the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights has been awarded annually to individuals who have made significant contributions to the protection of human rights.

As we reflect on the history of human rights, we must also acknowledge the many challenges that remain today. In the United States, for example, despite significant progress, debates about gun control and mass shootings continue to spark deep divisions. The United Nations and various human rights organizations have called for greater restrictions on firearms, but powerful interest groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) continue to push back against any form of regulation. The on-going violence in schools and public places is a stark reminder that the struggle for human rights continues, and that the protection of human life and safety is an essential component of human rights.

In India, human rights protections are enshrined in the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life,

liberty, and equality. However, even in a country with such a strong legal framework, violations of human rights are not uncommon. Discrimination based on caste, religion, gender, and disability continues to affect millions of people across the country. While the Constitution guarantees equal rights for all, the reality often falls short. The National Human Rights Commission, which works to address these issues, plays an important role, but there is still much work to be done.

The issue of discrimination remains one of the most pervasive challenges to human rights. Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual assault, and trafficking, continues to devastate the lives of women and girls around the world. In many countries, LGBTQ+ individuals face violence, discrimination, and the denial of basic rights. Refugees and migrants, fleeing war, persecution, and poverty, are often subjected to inhumane conditions and denied their rights to safety and protection.

The most vulnerable members of society, including those who are stateless, face some of the most extreme forms of discrimination, and the international community must do more to protect them. On a global scale, poverty and inequality are also significant barriers to realizing human rights. Despite progress in some areas, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to

widen. Economic inequalities, along with the challenges posed by climate change, pose major threats to the realization of human rights for millions of people around the world.

The struggle for human rights is far from over. While progress has been made, there are still millions of people around the world who are denied their basic rights and dignity. The world must come together to address the root causes of discrimination, inequality, and violence. Human rights are not just abstract concepts; they are the foundation of a just and peaceful world. As we observe International Human Rights Day later this month, we must renew our commitment to these principles and work to ensure that they are upheld for all people, everywhere.

The fight for human rights is not just the responsibility of governments or international organizations. It is a responsibility shared by all of us, whether through advocacy, education, or simply standing up for justice. We must remember the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home." It is in our homes, our communities, and our everyday actions that the future of human rights will be determined.

(The writer is Associate Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

## POLITICAL DIARY KALYANI SHANKAR

# Lessons for Opposition in poll results

Every political party makes mistakes, but the smart ones learn from them and move forward. The growth and success of any party must reflect on past mistakes and use them as stepping stones for progress.

The Congress could not maintain momentum after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections six months ago when it doubled its seats.

What caused the decline in its performance? Did the Congress party, the oldest in India, fail to seize opportunities for learning and adaptation? Did the NCP and the Uddhav faction of the Shiv Sena misinterpret the signals? Did the BJP make errors in Jharkhand? The recent results from the Maharashtra and Jharkhand Assembly elections reveal missed growth opportunities.

Two things stand out in the Maharashtra and Jharkhand polls. The first is the size of the BJP-led NDA win in Maharashtra, defeating the NCP and Uddhav Shiv Sena, both of which had ruled Maharashtra earlier, and the ease with which Hemant Soren retained Jharkhand. Both were ruling their respective states.

The alliance could have performed better if Congress had learned from past experiences and made necessary adjustments. Unlike the Pachmarhi or Shimla conclaves, there has been a lack of post-election analysis.

Congress must address this lack of introspection. It could not have been due to a generational change, as change is constant. The succeeding generations must work to take the party forward. The Grand Old Party is entirely under the control of Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition, and his chosen associates. Rahul worked hard and campaigned, but the party must still get voters to the polling booths. The results suggest they have not learnt from mistakes of the recent Haryana Assembly elections, such as relying heavily on one leader, ignoring the others, and the wrong distribution of tickets, despite being in a winning position.

The most crucial aspect the Congress Party, NCP and the Uddhav faction of Shiv Sena must address is the narrative. For the Congress, the focus on caste issues, defending the Constitution, and making personal attacks on the Prime Minister has not resonated with the voters. This disconnect is a clear sign that the party needs to reevaluate its strategy and focus on issues that truly matter to the electorate, such as the bread and butter problems. It is a pressing concern that needs alignment.

Even within the INDIA alliance, there are frictions now. After the recent results, partners in the INDIA bloc like AAP and the Trinamool Congress are pursuing their own agendas and show

little interest in joint action for the current winter session of Parliament.

Even earlier, Rahul Gandhi's attack on Savarkar did not garner any support for Congress; instead, it created friction between the Shiv Sena, which idolised Savarkar, and Congress. These parties also did not realise the political impact of the BJP's parent organisation, RSS, which worked for the party's success.

The INDIA bloc did not specify the issues as they did during the Lok Sabha elections, focusing solely on defeating the BJP and its allies. This strategy influenced the Lok Sabha results, forcing the BJP to form a government with the support of two regional parties, the JD(U) and the Telugu Desam Party. The

Maratha strongman Sharad Pawar must feel disheartened after losing his party and the election to his nephew, Ajit Pawar, whom he groomed. The warning signs became clear when Ajit joined the BJP, betraying his uncle to help form the government.

The situation worsened when the Election Commission recognised Ajit's faction as the real NCP, despite Sharad Pawar having founded and led the party to power multiple times. This decision severely undermined Pawar.

The same applies to Uddhav Thackeray, son of Sena founder Bal Thackeray, who succeeded his father, lost the party and the elections to rebel



Eknath Shinde, who helped BJP form the government in Maharashtra in a coalition. Both must introspect about what led to their loss of popularity.

On the other hand, JMM, a partner in the INDIA bloc, has demonstrated how to win despite numerous challenges. JMM Chief Minister Hemant Soren and his wife, Kalpana, faced several hardships, including a jail sentence for Soren.

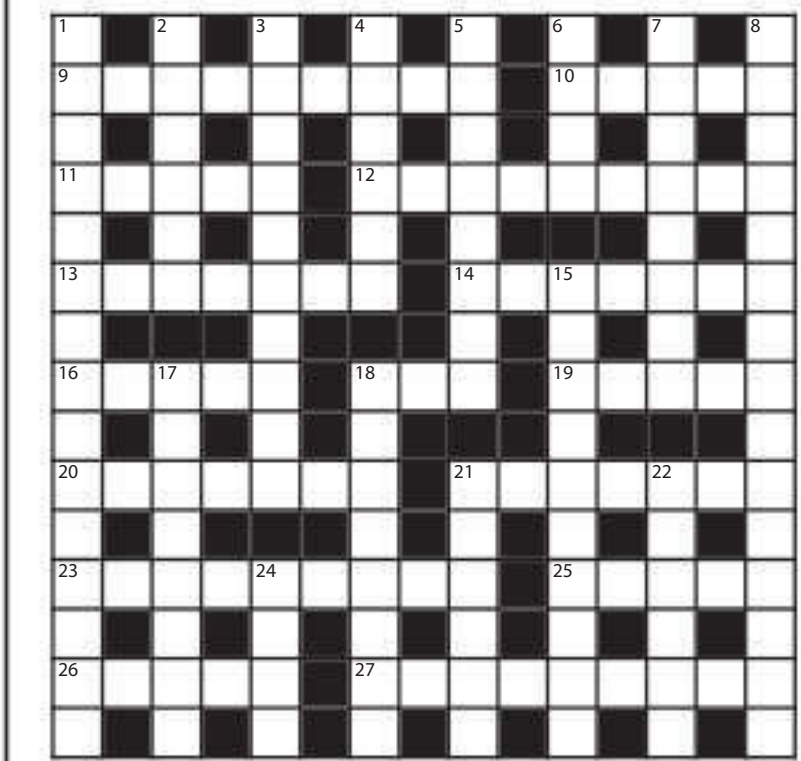
In India, elections occur almost continuously in one state or the other. So, the election season has not ended. The immediate test will be the Rajya Sabha elections for six seats on December 20. The NDA is expected to

win five of the six seats, while the Trinamool Congress will likely secure one. This might result in NDA getting the majority in the Upper House, which could further weaken the Congress Party's position in the Parliament. There are eight vacancies - four in the nomination category and four in Jammu and Kashmir.

Ultimately, wins and losses in elections are seen all over the world. Every election reveals the mistakes and successes of the players. But the real winner is the one who rectifies his mistakes without losing time. Winners must not become complacent, while losers need to stay motivated.

## CROSSWORD

NO-292970



### ACROSS

- See two newspapers coming round for church feature (5,4)
- Longer and shorter periods reversed in final letter (5)
- Excellent daughters returned to home land (5)
- Designer makes Catholic dose with ecstasy during play (9)
- Artist seen in every echo? Listener's smart! (7)
- Recline to consume honeyed drink and quencher (7)

- Fine beer to be sent round for beast (5)
- See 20
- Correlation shown where moon follows rodent (5)
- 20/18 It needs treatment, rough, for backing protocol row (7,3)
- By it one develops feeling for character (7)
- Hearings in case due to be rescheduled (9)
- Money short, then endlessly given in tax (5)
- Fish served with duck's tongue (5)

### DOWN

- Busy work mounting bugs famed oil worker (6,9)
- Aura surrounding old tribe in Moroccan location (6)
- Lark circling sailor caught — a bleak prospect? (10)
- Gypsy turning up with beer and spirits (6)
- Large adhesive label covers disciplinarian (8)

- Here camels roaming spit on one (4)
- Material about eastern Mediterranean region (8)
- Reproduction Stonehenge assembled in capital (15)
- Tees upset about hypocrisy concerning trade (10)
- Notice six-footer eating cake that's rich (8)
- Deeply impressed after heartless 18 Across, but

- miserable (8)
- Split in religious group that goes both ways? (6)
- Reprieves ram trapped among the French (3-3)
- Poet's black book one that's devious keeps (4)

NOTE: Due to technical reasons, we are unable to publish the solution to yesterday's crossword. We apologise to our readers.

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

## NOW AND AGAIN

### CASHLESS TRANSACTIONS

SUNIPA BASU

I am not a great fan of cashless transactions though I am slowly beginning to appreciate the benefits. I no longer have to stock up small change for small purchases or wait for days for a cheque to be credited because of intervening bank holidays. Amitabh Bachchan in his popular game show "Kaun Banega Crorepati" is forever showing how UPI credits your bank account instantaneously. I however must confess that I am still thrilled to get a 10 rupee coin which I can pop into my piggy bank.

It is also to be noted that his game show is peppered with RBI warnings on online frauds with the slogan "Jankar Baniye Satak Rahiye" that inhibits people like us. Sociologists are yet to fully research the impact that cashless transactions are having on the human mind and society: whether people are more generous or stingy, cautious or reckless, practical or impractical, planned or un-planned, trusting or suspicious and whether society has become a safer place or plagued by unseen dangers in cyber space.

Just the other day, I was a witness to a novel cashless transaction closer home that provided answers to some of these questions.

Urmila, the lady fishmonger, has been a common figure in our neighbourhood. She carries a big aluminum vessel on her head, full of fish. Over the years she has built up a fixed clientele that reduces her labour and very often on festive days or home celebrations fetches her extra orders. Getting on in years, she developed knee pain that prevented her from climbing stairs.

This is where our caregiver Gita, her old friend, stepped in. Every morning she accompanied Urmila on her rounds chit-chatting on the way, helping her in loading and unloading the vessel on her head, most importantly carrying it up the stairs on her behalf. Urmila gave her the fish left over at the end of the day.

Just a few days back, Gita came in the evening with a delectable dish of Sarse (mustard) Chingri (Prawns). It so happened that Urmila got a big order of Golda Chingri (Golden Prawn) for a home occasion in our complex. Gita had helped in carrying the fish to the third floor and Urmila had saved some pieces for her friend. We were lucky to share the delicacy that Gita had cooked with loving care - two pieces for her family and two for our family. This was a cashless transaction bridging the era of the barter system before money was invented to the current one through a human relationship that is invaluable and hence cashless.

## 100 YEARS AGO

### WORK FOR THE VILLAGES

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."

SIR,—In his two interesting letters on the subject of the water-hyacinth pest in Bengal Dr. Brühl has sounded a timely warning, and now is the time for the Government and the people of Bengal to take note and move.

I remember having read in the papers of some experiments being made by Sir J. C. Bose in regard to the water-hyacinth, and I think a committee was formed to report on the matter. I do not know what has been the fate of the committee's labours.

Dr. Brühl in his second letter notes that the "older members of the community are often apathetic and unwilling to exert themselves or even to allow others to do the work" of clearing tanks and *khals*, which is occasionally undertaken by the younger men. I happen to be associated with a small organization named the "Kodali Brigade." The activities of this society are similar to those suggested by Dr. Bruhl. The Brigade is composed of a number of young men who generally spend their Sundays in visiting villages in the interior and cleansing jungles, tanks and drains. In their operations these boys have met with queer instances of opposition from the older people. On one occasion the boys were not allowed to work in a filthy drain for the simple reason of their being mostly dressed in khaki. This the gentleman owner of the drain apprehended to be a sign of enhanced taxes payable to the municipality. It is needless to say that the young men had as much to do with the municipality as with the man in the moon!

On another occasion a rather big tree which was hanging over a little *doba*, and thereby polluting the water, was not allowed to be cut down. When a member of the Brigade asked why that useless tree could not be cut down, the owner replied with all seriousness that the tree was believed to shelter a "spirit" and if the tree was hewed down the wrath of the spirit would fall upon the family. The youth came back disappointed—but wiser!

Yours, etc.,  
ANADI MUKHERJI.  
3, Ultadanga Junction Road,  
Calcutta



“Music is the tool to express  
life and all that makes a  
difference”  
— **Herbier Hancock**



# A VOICE THAT HEALS



**KAILASH KHER'S** journey from humble beginnings to Padma Shri is truly inspiring. Through his music, he has touched millions, sharing the struggles and moments that shaped his path and the deep connection he holds with his fans, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

“जो टूट कर बना, जिसे मौत ने जाना,  
वो क्या टूटे, वो और क्या मारे”  
(What was broken and revived,  
what death tried to take away,  
how could it be broken again?)

These words, spoken with quiet strength, hold the raw truth of *Kailash Kher's* life. A life that, much like the music he creates, has been a journey of hardship, healing and everything in between. He has faced loss, endured difficult times and seen some of the darkest days. Yet, his songs are always filled with hope. This is what makes him not just a singer, but a storyteller of the human experience, a poet of strength. His music isn't just sound; it's a conversation with the soul. A conversation that comes from the heart of *Kailash Kher*, a man whose very being is felt in every note he sings. When he speaks about his journey, you can almost hear the weight of each experience in his voice, as if every word he shares is filled with emotion, shaped by years of struggle and success. In December 2016, a moment that would forever change his life arrived, though it took another few months for the reality to sink in. By April 2017, it was confirmed, he was to receive the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian awards. The news was a whirlwind of emotions, not just for him, but for his family. “I first told my sister,” he recalls with a soft smile. “It was a moment of joy because, in Delhi, we had suffered a lot. We left our homes, lived like orphans and went through many different experiences. We saw the world changing, relationships changing and people's attitudes changing, all of these shifts happened at a young age” His journey from hardship to honour is one of resilience. He talks about his childhood in Delhi, a city that seemed to change before his very eyes, as people, relationships and even attitudes shifted. Yet, despite the hardships, Delhi, in all its complexity, gave him the opportunity to realise his dreams. The recognition came not just for his music but for the spirit with which he has approached life. From a young age, music was more than just a

passion, it was his way of being. “As a child of 4 or 5, I was already curious about music, but I didn't sing the popular songs of the time,” he shares. Instead, he gravitated toward unique sounds that defied the norm. “I didn't sing filmi songs, ghazals, bhajans or qawwalis. I didn't sing what was already there. People were curious, what does this child sing and how?” It was this originality that later led to the birth of *Kailasa*, a name that would become synonymous with spiritual and soul-stirring music. As his career grew, his live performances became a way for him to connect deeply with his audience. “In Kota, Rajasthan, a girl came to one of my shows with a blade, saying she would harm herself if she didn't get to meet me. She was a devotee and my music was more than entertainment to her, it was her lifeline,” he remembers. “When I found out, I asked her to drop the blade, and she did. It was one of those moments that reminded me of the emotional power music holds. It's not just about melodies; it's about healing.” Every song he writes, sings and composes holds a piece of his soul. “When I sing, it's a reflection of my own emotions. But once it's out there, it becomes part of someone else's story too,” he explains. His music resonates with listeners in a way that breaks through language and culture, offering a universal connection. Despite his success in Bollywood, he differentiates the impact of film music from his non-film compositions. “Film audiences are looking for light entertainment but non-film music carries deeper emotions,” he says. “Non-film music touches the soul, while film music is more fleeting. Each platform has its unique audience and I enjoy the challenge of catering to different frequencies.” But no career comes without its challenges and his own journey wasn't without rejection. He remembers the time when his song “Allah Ke Bande” was initially dismissed. “At the time, I didn't understand the film industry very well. They told me it was a film song but it didn't have the usual budget. I had doubts. But when the song became a hit, the same people who rejected it came asking for collaboration. That song did become a turning point in my career and it was



IT WAS A MOMENT OF JOY BECAUSE, IN DELHI, WE HAD SUFFERED A LOT. WE LEFT OUR HOMES, LIVED LIKE ORPHANS AND WENT THROUGH MANY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES. WE SAW THE WORLD CHANGING, RELATIONSHIPS CHANGING AND PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES CHANGING, ALL OF THESE SHIFTS HAPPENED AT A YOUNG AGE

a lesson that sometimes the smallest beginnings lead to the biggest breakthroughs.” Reflecting on his career, he is humble about his influence. “People often ask me which of my songs defines me. It's difficult to choose. Life is so full of shifting emotions. Each song represents a different phase. Take ‘Piya Ghar Aavenge’, for example, it's about the anticipation of a reunion. Or ‘Teri Deewani’, which is about the intensity of love. And then there's ‘Saiyyan’, a song about surrendering to something greater than yourself. Each one reflects a part of my journey but none can define it entirely.” As for the impact of his music, he says that whether he is performing in India or abroad, the connection is the same. “Wherever I go, people connect with my music because it speaks to their hearts. Whether in the US or India, our indian audience understands the joy of life. But in Delhi,” he adds with a mischievous grin, “there's a certain energy here, a special ‘dhamaal’ that is unmatched.” He may not have imagined this journey when he first started singing as a child, but today, his music has touched the hearts of millions. It is the story of a boy who didn't follow the conventional path, a boy who sang from his heart and whose voice continues to resonate with the world. The Padma Shri award is just one chapter in his extraordinary journey, a journey that continues to inspire and uplift. *Kher's* journey is a beautiful reminder of the power of music to connect us to something deeper within ourselves. *Kailash kher* doesn't just make music; he shares pieces of his own story, inviting us all to reflect on our own. Every track, *Kher* insists, is a piece of his soul. “They're not just songs,” he says. “They're my prayers, my truths. And once they're out in the world, they take on lives of their own.” Much like the lyrics of *Piya Ghar Aavenge*, “आज मेरे पिया घर आवेंगे, हे—री, सखी, मंगल गाओ री, धरती—अंबर सजाओ री, उतरेगी आज मेरे पी की सवासे”, they speak of waiting, of anticipation, of the quiet joy that comes from knowing something beautiful is about to happen. Waiting isn't always celebrated, but his music shows us that there is beauty in the moments in between. The stillness and hope that accompany the wait remind us that sometimes the most profound moments in life aren't the arrivals, but the journeys we take while waiting. In his own way, *Kailash Kher* teaches us that there is an art to waiting. It's in those moments of anticipation when we hold our breath and trust that what we're waiting for will be worth it. Just like the joy in the song, the waiting itself is part of the magic, making the reunion all the more meaningful when it finally arrives.

## FROM THE MAN HIMSELF

What one piece of advice to your younger self, the *Kailash Kher* just starting out, what would it be and why?  
I would say, “You have never slept for 12 years, nor eaten properly. How did you survive without eating and sleeping? Eat a little, sleep a little and embrace life fully. Be human.” I lived like this, living many lives within one birth.

Is there any collaboration or project you have been wanting to do but haven't had the chance yet?  
I have no desires or plans. I am a man with no plan and I cherish that state of being. My only “want” is that I have no wants and my only “desire” is to have no desires. I believe life flows best when you're not tied down by endless aspirations. Instead, I would advise others to focus on taking care of themselves first physically, mentally and spiritually, before chasing desires.

What message will you give to the younger generation who are coming into music?  
I don't give advice often because I believe when you give something valuable, it should be respected. Because when you give something that holds value, it is respected. If you give it for free, it is not. If someone truly wants it, they will take it. If they don't want it, they won't. That's why I believe one should stay true to themselves, neither giving nor taking. If someone insists and asks me for advice, my advice would be this: “Never give advice to anyone. Neither give nor take. Just stay within yourself, and truly be true to yourself.

Who do you think would be the right person to portray your entire journey, from childhood to the present, in a film?  
I don't look at it from that perspective and that's why I never have. Most people aren't fully honest in their work. In creativity, too, many people repeat the same things in the name of “new.” They claim to be creating something very unique, but it's already been done. Everyone's life and story are unique and to capture that uniqueness, you need a creator who's equally different. It's possible that someone who's never done it before, or even if they have, can bring something fresh to it because they understand the nuances of art and craft. If they can get it right, then it will have that newness and originality.







(left to Right) - Chef Mattea Nasi and Chef Alessandro Liberatore

perfection, with the prawns' sweetness melding beautifully with the risotto's rich texture. Every plate seemed to have the same meticulous attention to detail, leaving no palate unfulfilled. Throughout the evening, the service was impeccable, attentive without being intrusive. The vegetarian focus of the menu was a refreshing change, with every dish crafted with the same thought and care as any meat or seafood counterpart. It felt as though the vegetables were the stars of the show, celebrated for their natural flavours and textures rather than treated as just substitutes. Dessert was another highlight: a *Chocolate Cocoa Short Crust Pastry* filled with raspberry cream and chocolate ganache. The sharp tartness of the raspberry paired beautifully with the velvety richness of the chocolate, creating a harmony that felt like the perfect conclusion to an already outstanding meal. Yet, it was the final offerings under *Until We Meet Again* that left me in wonder.

The Selection of Tea and Coffee was perfect to wind down, but the real treasures were the petit fours. These weren't just bite-sized treats; they were flavour bombs that delighted and surprised. My personal favourites, *Cabosse*, *Noisettes*, *Mango & Coconut Petit* each carried a distinct personality, but together, they created a symphony of textures and flavours that blew my mind. The Signature *Lemon*, *Chocolate & Coffee Petit Four* were as indulgent as they were unique, leaving a sweetness that felt like a parting gift.

*Zanotta's* charm lies not only in its food but in how every aspect of the experience is curated to perfection. Chef Liberatore's collaboration was a reminder of why Michelin stars matter, not for their prestige, but for the heart and soul they demand from a chef. Whether you're a vegetarian, a seafood enthusiast or simply someone looking to experience an unforgettable meal, *Zanotta* delivers on every front. It's not just a meal; it's a memory, a moment and a masterpiece rolled into one. For me, it was proof that fine dining isn't just about eating, it's about truly living.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

# MICHELIN MAGIC ON A PLATE

Imagine indulging in a meal where every bite feels like a discovery where flavours, textures and creativity come together in perfect plate. That's exactly what you can expect at Zanotta, where Michelin-starred Chef Alessandro Liberatore's culinary genius takes fine dining to a whole new level, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

For anyone who considers themselves a foodie, there's an unmistakable thrill in the promise of a Michelin-starred experience. It's not just about eating; it's about savouring stories told through food, each dish a chapter of creativity, tradition, and mastery. As a vegetarian, I've often found myself navigating the labyrinth of fine dining, where plant-based options can sometimes feel like an afterthought. But my recent visit to *Zanotta* at *The Leela Ambience*, for a unique collaboration with Villa Cora's two-Michelin-Key Chef Alessandro Liberatore, turned all my expectations on their head.

Picture this: a sparkling Gurugram skyline, soft live music and the kind of atmosphere that makes you lean in just a little closer to hear the clink of glasses and the hum of conversation. That's the setting at *Zanotta*, perched elegantly on the sixth floor. *The Leela Ambience* Gurugram Hotel & Residences proudly presented this iconic pop-up featuring VillaCor, the prestigious two-Michelin-Key hotel from Florence. The stage was perfectly set for a menu promising innovation, comfort, and the finest ingredients, all tied together with a ribbon of Italian finesse. It began with what could only be described as edible art: a

*Deconstructed Bruschetta*, forget the standard fare of toasted bread and diced tomatoes; this was a vivid celebration of marinated cherry tomatoes, bursting with flavour and delicately balanced with a drizzle of herbaceous olive oil. It was light, refreshing and a reminder that sometimes, the simplest ingredients hold the most potential. The next dish, *Millefeuille Aubergine*, was a revelation. A delicate layering of eggplant, tomato coulis, buffalo mozzarella and basil pesto transformed the humble aubergine into something extraordinary. Each bite was an orchestra of smoky, creamy and tangy notes that remained long after the plate



was cleared. It felt like comfort food, but with the refinement you expect from an Italian maestro. Then came the *Potatoes Gnocchi*, a dish that, quite frankly, stole the show. The *gnocchi* were soft, pillowy, and bathed in a luxurious cacio e pepe sauce. But what set it apart was the addition of sour vegetable brunoise, which



provided a sharp, tangy contrast to the creamy richness. It was bold yet understated, the kind of dish that makes you pause and appreciate the skill behind it. And then, the pièce de résistance: *Tomato Tarte Tatin*. If there's a dish that can truly redefine your perception of vegetarian food, this was it. Caramelised tomatoes, their



natural sweetness amplified, rested atop a perfectly flaky pastry. The balance between the sweet and savoury flavours was brilliantly done, showcasing Chef Liberatore's ability to surprise and delight. For non-vegetarians, the feedback I heard was just as glowing. The *Red Prawn Risotto* was singled out as a showstopper, cooked to



Immersing the Italian cuisine in his own taste and style, Michelin-starred Chef Mattia Bianchi made his India debut with the Italian restaurant *Sorrento* at *Shangri-la*, New Delhi. The feast was filled with the signature collection of dishes by Chef Bianchi himself and was made available for the people for five days. Being known for their artistic composition, Chef Bianchi's food was a culinary delight. Bringing a slice of authentic Italian cooking, his pop-up dinner was a symphony of flavours, textures, and impeccable artistry, designed to tantalise the most refined palates. The menu was a love letter to Italian cuisine, featuring dishes that showcased Chef Bianchi's innovative



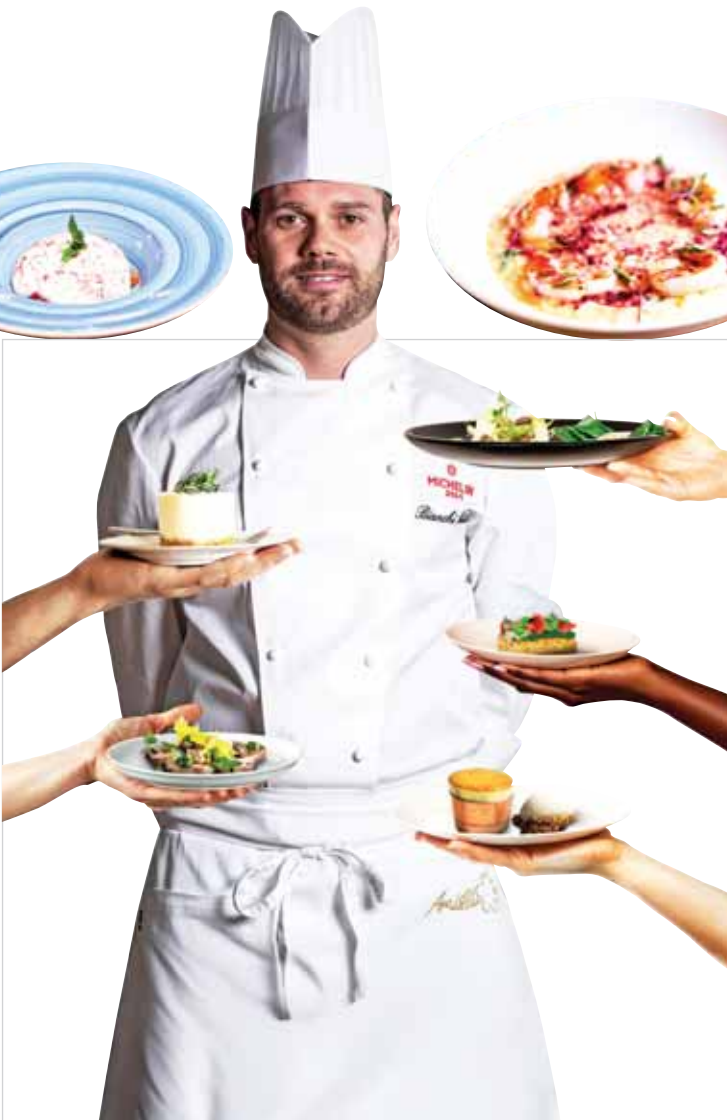
techniques and passion for fresh, locally sourced ingredients. The meal started with Chef Mattia's *Degustation Menu* with the *Caprese Cloud* for the vegetarian and *Mediterranean Fantasy* for non-vegetarian. *Caprese Cloud* served with *Fratelli Noi* had delicate foam of Buffalo Mozzarella paired with a medley of roasted cherry tomatoes, garnished with basil leaves with a mouth-watering taste. *Mediterranean Fantasy* on the other hand was a luxurious blend of shabu shrimps and salmon eggs atop silky potato foam, dusted with tomato powder and infused with Mediterranean aromas for a sensory delight served with *Fratelli Noi*.



Then came the *Risotto* with the dish *Herbs Whisper's* *Risotto* as the signature dish served with *Fratelli J'Nooon White*. It was a Creamy risotto in a wild herbs infusion, topped with crunchy smoked umami almonds powdered with tangy sumac. *Pastas* entered the third round of the menu with *Fusilli Rock n Roll* which had vibrant fusilli infused with beetroot extract,



Chef Bianchi's Culinary Debut in India was a delight to the tastebuds at Sorrento in Shangri-la, New Delhi, writes **ABHI SINGHAL**



crowned with tangy goat cheese crumble and aromatic rocket pesto, perfectly paired with the rich notes of *Fratelli Sette* wine. *Fusilli Citrus* was served with *Fratelli Sette* wine with lime scented fusilli cooked in beetroot extract and garnished with raw marinated scallops.

The main course showcased a togetherness of flavours, led by the *Sunlit Chicken Rhapsody* with Chicken supreme with butternut squash and *Medley Feast*, a culinary masterpiece perfectly paired with *Fratelli J'Nooon Red* wine. The addition with the same wine glasses was *Bitter Bliss* with roasted baby gem, caper fruits, pine nuts and beurre blanc sauce, making the plate look like a painted canvas.

The end was saved for the best: the dessert with three types of symphonies, namely *Autumn*, *Summer*, and *Winter*. The *autumn* was the *Tiramisu Delight*, with traditional Tiramisu with mascarpone cream and marsala-kissed sponge cake veiled in the coffee crumble. The *Winter* Symphony featured *Midnight Silk* with dark chocolate cloud, gilded almonds, and frozen hazelnut cream. The *Summer* symphony had *Summer Ode* with exotic fruits soup-bathed yogurt pearls on vanilla sable. The overall experience of the dessert was a unique one blended with music. There were cards explaining how the desserts explain the personalities of the people.

The experience at *Sorrento* was more than just a meal; it was an unforgettable journey through the heart of Italian gastronomy, curated by Chef Mattia Bianchi's masterful touch. Each dish was a testament to his ability to merge tradition with innovation, creating a dining spectacle that celebrated the art of food. The guests were left in awe, their taste buds delighted and their senses elevated. Chef Bianchi's debut in India with his pop-up at Shangri-la, New Delhi, left an indelible mark on every diner who had the privilege to partake in this symphony of flavours.



## World Food Carnival

By TEAM **AGENDA**

Worldmark Aerocity in New Delhi recently hosted the *World Food Carnival*, a feast for the senses that brought together food lovers from across the city. With over 30 stalls offering a wide range of cuisines, Mexican, Italian, Indian, Middle Eastern, and more there was something for everyone. Renowned restaurants like Kampai, Café Delhi Heights, and Monsoon showcased their signature dishes, elevating the food experience to new heights. The carnival opened with a lively performance by "The Artictern," setting an upbeat tone for the day. Cultural performances like the Dragon Dance and a saxophonist added a magical touch to the atmosphere. Guests enjoyed live face painting and an instant GIF creator, which kept everyone entertained and added a fun element to the event. The Kids' Zone was a family-friendly highlight,

offering activities to keep children busy while parents could indulge in the food offerings. On the second day, the excitement continued with live bands "The Gus Band" and "The Cherish," whose performances had the crowd swaying to their beats. An African Dance performance added a vibrant touch, and the food stalls kept everyone's taste buds satisfied. The carnival also featured plenty of activities for children, from magic shows to face painting. What stood out was the way the event brought people together. It wasn't just about the food; it was about creating an experience that celebrated culture, community and fun. The carnival's vibrant atmosphere, combined with delicious food and entertainment, made it a memorable event. For anyone who loves good food and a lively atmosphere, the World Food Carnival at Worldmark Aerocity was an experience not to be missed.



# DECCAN Chronicle

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Ranjona Banerji

Off the beaten track

## Can a moral elitist make friends on social media?

Have I told you this before? Long ago, my closest friend said this about me: “Ranjona is not prejudiced. She just hates everybody”. I have learnt over the years to disguise my lack of prejudice and ahem, that other thing, but it can be a struggle for me. In the workplace, I could never suffer fools gladly. Socially I have to swallow my annoyance to even look at bigots and conservatives with a semblance of politeness. I think I have a fake smile down pat, but who knows?

How many of my secrets have I given away just now?

It was intriguing, therefore, to hear a fascinating talk the other day by Satish Kumar, founder of Schumaker College, environmentalist, ecologist, and thinker. Sat by a lily pond, under the trees, he talked about the ever-growing barriers between Humans and Nature, our erroneous belief that we are in fact outside nature and the need for the world’s economic system to include ecology in its practice and theory. As we watch the destruction around us, thanks to greed and often stupidity, Kumar’s words resonated. In inspirational but also very sad ways.

One of Kumar’s pet subjects is a tough idea, which he wrote a book about in 2023. Radical Love, where you try and love beyond yourself, your likes and dislikes, your ideas and your core. Love for those who you do not agree with, who you find it difficult to accept, whom you just cannot abide. This is not of course a new idea. Kumar quotes Jesus Christ’s “love thine enemy as thyself”. But as we all know all too well, this notion finds no takers. Whether in the religion formed in Christ’s name or really in any other. As we know to our everyday misfortune, religions love division but let’s not wander into that black hole.

It might seem like an extremely simplistic idea — to love unconditionally. And most people will associate this sort of love in a clichéd manner with a mother and child. The sad reality is that parents can do awful things to children and children to parents. Unconditional love is not our reality. Look around you. “Cow is our Mother”, says the politician. But looks away when cows wander around eating plastic bags. Wilful disassociation. Or do I mean hypocrisy? Now that’s a more realistic Mother for humankind.

Kumar is looking at our larger perspective — of the planet, the cosmos and the larger role we play in the world aside from our petty everyday wants and needs. Anyone who has any understanding of the environment and ecology knows that we stand on a precipice. Intelligence and awareness have not convinced us to step back. Who knows, maybe love can. We can but try.

And for us today at this point in time, we exist not just in the physical world, but also one that’s up in a metaphorical cloud, fed by cables under the sea and connected by satellites orbiting the earth. It’s a lot of work to look at cure cats and dogs or abuse each other’s politics, but it appears to be integral part of life.

In this cyber social media world, there’s been a bit of a churn after Donald Trump won the US presidential election again. Many social media users, including thinkers, academics, activists, writers, mainstream media, felt that a certain toxicity had controlled the discourse around the election. Part of the blame for this pervasive misinformation and hatred was thanks to Elon Musk, owner of the site X, formerly Twitter. Musk supported Trump, undoubtedly his right. But also used the platform to push Trump’s extreme right-wing and often illogical agenda.

Thus, there has been an exodus or “Xodus”, if you want to use the “in” word, to another platform. Bluesky is a little different in the way it is run, not that I understand it fully. Whatever its shortcomings, as of now, there is no central dictatorship that runs it.

There is optimism on this platform, and joy that the people of X have not made it here. But like so much of human behaviour, this euphoria is all too ephemeral. At some point, the worst of us will most likely emerge. Can we manage our social media, our other presence, using the principles of radical love?

I foresee a certain amount of nostalgia will consume us at first, together with the excitement of something new. These are not at odds; far from it. We love as humans to dream of some golden age. Regardless of the reality of those times, and the horrors they presented. We are like that in the most superficial way. Hence the generational conflict, which is based largely on nostalgia playing tricks on all of us.

In the meanwhile, though, as I too make this shift to Bluesky, I feel I must work on myself. Mixing Kumar’s ideas with my own shortcomings. To not get angry with every idiot I meet. To try and love the idiot for being an idiot, because it can’t help being an idiot and whatever other reason I can come up with at the time. When I say “idiot”, I don’t mean to offend anyone in particular, especially in these over-sensitive times in which we live. I mean people that I find it difficult to stomach and those who fill me with horror. I know, tall ask. I shall just try and apply my friend’s definition of my character and be equal in my feelings to all humanity.

Tough it will be, and not just for me. So, if you meet me in either world, physical and cyber, when I smile sweetly at you, you might think “what a sweet person with a sweet smile”.

Or I might remind you of Louis Armstrong singing Mack the Knife: “O the shark has pretty teeth dear, and he shows them a pearly white...” And you might never know which is the correct thought.

*The writer is a senior journalist who writes on media affairs, politics and social trends. She tweets at @ranjona.*



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Subhani



## India-China buffer zones new threat to sovereignty



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

The 1959 Chinese claim line continues to be a central issue in the ongoing India-China border dispute. Rooted in historical negotiations and shaped by geopolitical dynamics, this claim line underscores China’s strategic push to assert control over contested regions. Analyzing its origins, impact and role in recent disengagement talks is essential to understanding the challenges to India’s territorial integrity and its broader security concerns.

**Tracing the Roots of the 1959 Chinese Claim Line:** The India-China border dispute has its origins in the un-demarcated border between the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir and Tibet that was quasi-independent under the loose suzerainty of China after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

Despite repeated attempts by the British to demarcate the border and the frontier going back to the Johnson-Ardegh Line of 1867, foreign office line of 1873, Mac-Cartney-MacDonald Line of 1899 and the 1914 Shimla Convention, where British India, Tibet and China sought to define their territorial boundaries, the borders in the western, central and eastern sectors remained undefined.

Though the McMahon Line established the eastern sector boundary in 1914 in Shimla, China initiated the agreement, but later refused to ratify it, arguing that Tibet lacked the sovereignty to negotiate. India adopted the McMahon Line as its northeastern boundary upon gaining independence in 1950.

Tensions escalated in January 1959 when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai formally contested the McMahon Line in a letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Calling it a colonial imposition, Zhou also laid claim to Aksai Chin in the western sector, where China had constructed the Xinjiang-

Tibet highway. This was a defining moment as Chinese maps began to reflect these claims.

Zhou proposed mutual withdrawals to reduce tensions, retreating from the McMahon Line in the east and from areas under “actual control” in the west. However, Nehru rejected these proposals, recognising them as attempts to legitimise Chinese territorial gains, particularly in Aksai Chin. This rejection strained relations, eventually leading to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, during which China advanced to its 1959 claim line before declaring a unilateral ceasefire.

**The 1959 Claim Line and Its Modern-Day Implications:** India has consistently rejected the 1959 Chinese claim line. Yet, this contentious line continues to surface in diplomatic discussions, especially during recent disengagement talks following the 2020 Galwan Valley standoff. That clash, which occurred 800m west of their own claim line, underscored China’s intent.

Recent disengagement agreements in areas like the Depsang Plains and Charding La near Demchok have reignited concerns about potential concessions to Chinese claims. On October 22, 2024, Indian and Chinese forces began withdrawing from these areas, with officials confirming a return to pre-2020 positions and the restoration of patrolling rights. However, lack of transparency around the terms of these agreements has raised fears that India may have inadvertently ceded ground to align with the 1959 claim line of China.

**Strategic Significance of Depsang Plains and Charding La:** The Depsang plains hold immense strategic value as they offer access to the Aksai Chin plateau. Before 2020, Indian patrols regularly reached patrolling points (PPs) 10 to 13, but a Chinese blockade severely restricted this movement. The recent dis-

**The India-China dispute has its origins in the un-demarcated border between the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir and Tibet, quasi-independent under the loose suzerainty of China after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911**

engagement agreement reportedly restores these patrolling rights, yet concerns linger about whether Chinese patrols might gain access near the critical Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road, a key route linking India to Aksai Chin. Allowing such access could tacitly validate China’s territorial claims.

At Charding La, the disengagement process appears to restore the pre-2020 status quo. However, doubts remain about whether the arrangement sufficiently protects India’s broader strategic interests, given the region’s proximity to the 1959 claim line. Any concessions in this sensitive area could weaken India’s defensive position in an already tense border region.

The 1959 claim line is more than a boundary proposal; it reflects Beijing’s broader strategy to secure control over key territories. In the western sector, it includes areas like the Bottleneck in Depsang near the vital DSDBO Road, reinforcing China’s access to its G219 highway. In the eastern sector, it challenges Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, particularly along the McMahon Line.

**Buffer Zones, a Double-Edged Sword in Border Agreements:** The establishment of buffer zones has emerged as a controversial aspect of recent India-China disengagement deals. Designed to prevent direct confrontations, these zones restrict military patrols on both sides. However, they have often limited India’s operational access to areas it historically controlled.

In Pangong Tso, for example, the buffer zone created after the 2020 standoff bars Indian patrols between Finger 4 and Finger 8, effectively conceding strategic vantage points to Chinese control. Similarly, in the Galwan Valley, buffer zones

east of PP-14 prevent Indian forces from accessing historically significant areas. Experts warn that such measures risk legitimising the 1959 Chinese claim line as the de facto boundary.

Recent agreements in Depsang and Charding La avoided the creation of buffer zones, restoring patrolling rights. Yet, the lack of clarity around these deals has fueled concerns that they may still align with China’s broader territorial goals, potentially undermining India’s long-term strategic interests.

**Transparency and the Need to Safeguard Sovereignty:** The Indian government’s approach to recent disengagement talks has faced criticism for a lack of transparency. Public trust depends on clear communication about the terms of these agreements. The government must assure citizens that the 1959 claim line has not been tacitly validated. The shadow of the 1959 Chinese claim line looms large over India-China boundary talks. Disengagement agreements may reduce tensions, but their opaque nature has fuelled fears of unintended concessions. Restrictions on patrolling and buffer zones further complicate the issue, risking a gradual acceptance of a claim line India has consistently opposed.

While diplomacy and de-escalation are crucial for resolving boundary disputes, they must not compromise India’s strategic interests. Transparent communication and accountability are vital to addressing public concerns and ensuring negotiations do not inadvertently advance China’s territorial ambitions. As negotiations move forward, India must remain firm in rejecting the 1959 claim line and prioritise its territorial sovereignty. Transparency and informed public discourse are essential to countering Beijing’s calculated moves and protecting national interests. Addressing these challenges decisively is critical to ensuring India’s long-term security and strategic integrity.

*Manish Tewari is a third-term Lok Sabha MP and former Union minister of information and broadcast-*

LETTERS

**BANK FRAUD**

This refers to the report that the Central Crime Branch has arrested a man for cheating Indian Bank in Chennai. Every bank has a legal department and it is their duty to check the genuineness of the documents submitted by borrowers. How come the loan for such a huge amount was sanctioned without proper verification? There is more than what meets the eye in this case. These days, there have been several instances of “insiders” colluding with fraudsters in cheating the banks. Some officials, on the verge of retirement, indulge in financial irregularities, thinking that they would have demitted the office by the time the fraud comes to light, if at all.

*P.G. Menon, Chennai*

**DISRUPTING HOUSES**

As an Indian who is paying all the dues of the Central Government in the form of income tax and GST for anything I buy in stores I am deeply saddened by the way my tax monies are frittered wasted and exploited by the MPs especially those belonging to the opposition who never allow Parliament to function in the normal way. I presume common and apolitical people and the millions of taxpayers of the country also do feel the same way. The MPs seem to forget the fact that every rupee they get as pay, perks and even pension is from the taxes paid. Taxpayers expect the Speaker to enforce pay cuts for each day of disruption which at least is likely to infuse sense in the minds of delinquent MPs.

*Marudamalaiyan, Coimbatore.*

**POLL PROMISES**

The Chief Minister has been repeatedly telling in the media that his government has fulfilled all his election promises, and he is going one step forward in addressing other issues also not mentioned during his election campaign. Though he is able to mesmerise the public by his eloquent statements, he has forgotten to ponder that the most important one, and that is converting the bi-monthly reading of EB consumption to monthly status, which will be beneficial, and bring solace to the consumers already struggling due to the steep hike in corporation taxes. It will be highly appreciated, if the CM immediately takes a positive decision in implementing the monthly billing system in EB, and wins the appreciation from the public.

*P.S.Rajagopalan, Chennai*



Mahir Ali

## Annual COP-out: Can humanity recover from the bungle in Baku?

Even the low expectations that preceded the 29th Conference of Parties (COP29), which concluded in the early hours of last Sunday, turned out to have been too high.

After the gavel came down in Baku on a deal proposing \$300 billion in financial assistance by 2035 to developing nations struggling to decarbonise and cope in other ways with the swiftly mounting consequences of climate change, Indian representative Chandni Raina justifiably derided a “stage-managed” process that had produced “nothing more than an optical illusion”.

A week earlier, Pakistan’s former climate change minister Sherry Rehman had declared: “We’re here for life and death reasons”, demanding “internationally determined contributions” from the biggest historical contributors to global heating, and pointing out the pitfalls of leaving too much to the private sector.

Inevitably, given the timing of the conference, the malevolent spectre of Donald Trump hung over the proceedings. Even

at the best of times, the US has hardly stood out as a leader in the combat against devastating climate change, with the majority of its legislators — all too many of them addicted to contributions from fossil fuel firms and lobbyists — turning pale at the prospect of a Green New Deal. But Trump and some of his closest associates are seemingly determined to pump up the volume of oil and gas extraction because all the hullabaloo about climate change is, after all, no more than a hoax.

He may well agree with Argentina’s Javier Milei, a kindred spirit from the loony right who claims to have been hailed by Trump as his “favourite president” — and who withdrew his nation’s delegation from Baku after the first three days — that the climate crisis is just a “socialist lie”.

What is a little more perturbing is that Azerbaijan’s leadership appears to be on more or less the same page, with President Ilham Aliyev hailing oil and gas as a “gift from God”, with no acknowl-

edgement of the various other natural wonders that are at risk because humans insist on burning fossil fuels for energy. Besides, aren’t alternative sources of energy such as sunshine and wind equally gifts from the same source?

There’s no dearth of sunlight in Azer-bai-jan, but 90 per cent of its foreign income comes from fossil fuel exports — which include nearly 40pc of Israel’s oil imports, currently facilitating a genocide. The quid pro quo is weapons supplies from Israel, which may well have facilitated the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. It certainly might be worthwhile conducting such conferences in oil- and gas-producing nations genuinely interested in reducing their reliance on fossil fuels. But this year’s host appeared to be even less interested in investigating that path than last year’s previous petrostate venue.

COP28 in Dubai was presided over by the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, and swarmed with oil and gas lobbyists. The conference formally

acknowledged for the first time the link between fossil fuels and climate change, something that was evident decades earlier. And it did so in the face of staunch resistance from Saudi Arabia, where the crown prince’s now diminished Vision 2030 excludes any inclination towards compensating the victims of its incredibly lucrative oil boom. By all accounts, the Saudis were again desperate to achieve the same outcome at Baku. Their play flopped again. But does it matter?

The previous \$100bn-a-year finance deal did not add up until well after its 2020 deadline. Its tripling (or doubling, if inflation is taken into account) is likely to meet the same fate. The 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold might be breached as soon as this year, amid an increase in emissions notwithstanding previous COPs, and a near-consensus that 2024 will turn out to be the hottest year on record. Climate scientists are constantly being flabbergasted by what Harold Macmillan might have designated as “events, dear boy, events”. Who knows where the

world might be in 2035, by when the \$300bn level is supposed to be reached. That’s only a fraction of the notionally required resources, and it may even be too late to make much of a difference with the trillions that no one seriously expects to be doled out.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the UN’s efforts to tackle the climate emergency have been ineffective. But anyone who suggests that a failing process should be abandoned must present a viable alternative. That’s not easy, short of straying into fantasy world. It’s a small mercy that COP30 will take place in Brazil, whose present government is dedicated to thwarting climate change. Perhaps putting the remarkably astute Greta Thunberg and fellow young activists from around the world in charge of working out the way forward might be the ideal option. But I must be dreaming.

*— By arrangement with Dawn*



{ BIG PICTURE }

Ananda Banerjee



# Climate crisis: A Plan B needed for wild weather

Going for smaller tangible targets instead of chasing net zero could be a way to arrest the spiralling climate crisis

This was India's warmest October in 123 years. It was also the month when Bengaluru got flooded, and cyclonic storm Dana ripped through three of Odisha's districts, with damages pegged at ₹600 crore.

Extreme and unseasonal weather events have dotted 10 months of 2024 before the countries in the world met in Baku, Azerbaijan, to discuss the climate crisis. Earlier, in the last leg of the monsoon, it felt like 52 degrees in Guwahati. Assam and parts of other northeastern states were hit by an unprecedented heat wave in September that claimed several lives and forced schools to shut, whereas, in the same period, neighbouring West Bengal bore the brunt of flooding in six districts. Remember, throughout January, there was not a flake of snow in Gulmarg and other places in Kashmir. This was followed by a hellish summer that saw a record number of heatwaves and heat-related deaths nationwide. Leh, a cold desert, was too hot for flights to take off. Delhi's heat index touched 53°C, recording the longest heatwave streak, which lasted over a month (May 14-June 21).

Similarly, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai,

and smart cities like Vadodara, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Kota, Nashik, and Surat fell apart on a heavy rainy day. The tragedy in Wayanad, Kerala, and other heavy landslides in Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand should serve as a reminder that extreme weather is a harsh reality. And not just India. Australia experienced its hottest winter at 41.6°C, and Bandar-e Mahshahr, Iran, reported a heat index of 66.7°C in August. Mount Fuji remained snowless for the longest time, and flash floods in Spain and in the Sahara are grim reminders that we are drifting deeper into a climate catastrophe.

The world experienced a new global record of unprecedented heat for a continuous 14 months, from June 2023-July 2024, when the Earth's average temperature reached or exceeded 1.5°C above the pre-industrial era. In all likelihood, the mean global temperature in 2024-2028 will exceed 1.5°C, undermining the 2015 iconic Paris Agreement pledge to try and keep temperatures from rising by more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Fossil fuels are toxic for the climate, and to stay

**GHG EMISSIONS ARE NOW AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH WITH NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN AS GOVERNMENTS HOP FROM ONE ENVIRONMENT SUMMIT TO ANOTHER**

below 1.5°C warming, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions need to be cut by 43% by 2030, which seems unlikely now with another failed climate conference. India rejected the \$300-billion climate finance target pushed through by the developed nations, calling it an optical illusion. At the same conference, Haitham Al Ghaiss, the secretary general of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec), said crude oil and natural gas were "gifts from God". A concrete plan to reduce emissions did not materialise, and may never happen as Donald Trump returns to the White House in 2025. Trump is likely to accelerate the production of fossil fuels and withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement.

Global climate talks began in 1991, but GHG emissions and global temperature have been rising faster than ever. GHG emissions are now at an all-time high with no signs of slowing down as governments across the world hop from one environment summit to another.

Further, not a single target on climate, biodiversity, or sustainability has been met. Only the goalsposts keep changing, with new jargon and timelines. An analysis of 1,500 climate policies (in force between 1998 and 2022) reveals that they have done little to prevent the acceleration of the climate crisis. The irony is despite all the talk on targets, clean energy, and the phasing out fossil fuels, the climate crisis is unfolding at a frantic pace.

This year, domestic coal production rose by 5.79% and coal imports were up by 2.2%,



An analysis of 1,500 climate policies (1998 to 2022) shows they did little to prevent the acceleration of the climate crisis

PTI

while the country's renewable energy capacity crossed 200 GW, on track to reach 500GW by 2030. But, according to Czech-Canadian scientist Vaclav Smil, energy transitions take decades, and not mere years; the promises of accelerated energy transitions in large economies will have a protracted realisation due to technical and infrastructural imperatives and unforeseen socioeconomic issues. At a three-day Oil and Gas Expo in December in Delhi, India's role in future global oil and gas markets will be discussed, with the energy demand projected to double by 2050.

Climate scientists are giving up hope. No one thinks limiting warming to 1.5°C is possible. It is time to look at smaller, more tangible targets for mitigation, such as cutting global food waste that itself is responsible for 10% of GHGs and managing urban waste. About 60% of India's population will

be living in cities by 2050. So, climate-resilient design and environmental sustainability in public infrastructure must be given emphasis. At the time the Baku talks were on, the Green Building Congress in Bengaluru slipped under the news radar: These events where "green" policy for infrastructure is discussed deserve better traction if we want a climate-resilient future.

Chasing net zero will not help. Artificial intelligence (AI) and other new technology that we hope will help ameliorate our climate pains are energy guzzlers, and, at least as of now, energy is rarely green. For example, the growth of solar and wind energy means more mining for lithium, cobalt, copper, silver, nickel, and other minerals, which will leave its own massive carbon footprint and deplete forest cover, thereby affecting the planet's carbon absorption capacity. Against such a back-

drop, can we confidently say we will live to see 2070, the year India hopes to become net zero?

While a third of our economy relies on nature, we can't grow by exploiting the environment. We must have a Plan B, for there is no escape from extreme weather events turbocharged by the climate crisis: the excessive heat, rain (or the lack of it), and now the severe winter, signalled by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) due to La Niña. At this pace, 2024, the warmest year on record, will surpass the previous year as the year with the most number of days that saw extreme weather events in India. The number was 318 days out of 365 in 2023.

Ananda Banerjee is an author, artist, and wildlife conservationist. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## On interviewing and the art of interrupting

I am often told I interrupt too much. That seems to irritate several viewers of my interviews. "Let me hear what your guest has to say before you butt in", is the most common response. These responses raise the question, when is an interruption unavoidable? Not just understandable and forgivable but also necessary and, even, required. Indeed, when would it be remiss not to interrupt? Or, is it the case that an interviewer must never interrupt and wait patiently till the guest stops, no matter how long that takes?

It all depends on what the interviewee is saying and its relationship to the question asked. In turn, you have to bear in mind that an interview is not a platform for the guest to say what he wants and at whatever length he chooses. It's a question-and-answer-based discussion. The question frames it. The answer is the response.

So the first answer is an interruption is essential and unavoidable if the answer has no bearing to the question. That could be the case if the guest is simply waffling and doesn't know or if he's chosen to deliberately steer off-course and, even, consciously waste time. In time-based interviews, the last could be a careful strategy, i.e., exhaust the allotted time and thus reduce what's left for further inquiries.

An interruption is also necessary to get clarity and remove confusion. If a guest relies on unfamiliar acronyms, you need to interrupt to spell out what they mean. More importantly, if a guest's meaning is lost in a long-winded or confusing expression of the point, you need to interrupt to clarify what he's trying to say. It may be apparent to him or, even, you, but if you suspect it's not clear to the audience you need to interrupt for their sake. This, no

doubt, is annoying for those who are easily following the point but, remember, there are others who may not be. They are the reason for seeking that clarification with a well-timed interruption.

However, an interruption is also called for when the guest is factually wrong. As an interviewer, it's your duty to ensure what's told to the audience is correct. If it's not, a polite but immediate and firm interruption is required. That's also the case if the guest is potentially libellous, rude or obscene. Such interruptions are by way of caution, in case zeal or passion has overcome judgement.

Finally, there's the interruption that occurs as part of an animated conversation. When two people are locked in a forceful and contentious argument—and that often happens in an interview—they can and will talk over each other. But these are not interruptions per se. It's just the way passionate discussions happen. This is often the case when the guest challenges the interviewer and is resisted.

But there are three essential warnings for all interviewers. First, never interrupt rudely and never lose your cool. The best way is to interrupt with an apology. It takes some of the sting out of it. Second, when you interrupt, ensure you do so successfully and, preferably, not frequently. Failed interruptions serve no purpose. Repeated ones, not surprisingly, annoy.

The third, however, is the most important. It has to happen at the right time. An

**AN INTERRUPTION IS DUE IF THE ANSWER HAS NO BEARING TO THE QUESTION. IT IS ALSO NEEDED TO GET CLARITY OR REMOVE CONFUSION. FINALLY, IT CAN OCCUR SOMETIMES AS PART OF AN ANIMATED CONVERSATION**

alert interviewer will sense the need to interrupt far sooner than the audience. But if he jumps in at that point it will be too early. The audience won't be ready to accept it. So wait and let the viewers realise the guest's error. Then stop him. Now the audience is likely to be on your side.

In fact, that's the key to a successful interruption. You must convince the audience it was necessary. The reason for that is simple. For them, an interview is a sort of "performance". Two people "staging" a conversation. It's the audience's appreciation both seek. If you lose it, the interview will lose its *raison d'être*. That applies to interviewers as much as it does to their guests.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## Redesign POSH law for informal sector

In the recent assembly polls, we were once again inundated with information about how much of a difference the women's vote made to the outcome. Indeed, in many places, they seemed to have swung the election decisively, and schemes that prioritised their needs were seen as a major factor behind the way they voted.

Having said this, given the ingrained violence against women and the systemic issues they face, it is not surprising that once polls are over, it is back to a very hard grind for many, especially those in the informal sector like agriculture. A study by Nalini Nayak on behalf of SEWA Bharat on women in agriculture shows that apart from the physical labour of transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying headloads of produce, the working conditions of women farmers, especially the marginal ones, are gruelling. They have little to no health care, no maternity leave, and no protection from the harsh climate conditions in which they work. Sexual harassment is a constant for many of them.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) 2013 (POSH) Act, in its present form, has only the local committee mechanism to deal with workplace abuse for informal workers. Nayak says, "These committees have been created in many states, but the people on the committee know very little about the workplaces of informal workers like the streets for street vendors, the homes of home-based workers, the forests for forest workers, and so on. They do not understand how to deal with such cases. Moreover, the resolution mechanism is very vague as committees cannot take any punitive action."

She calls for a rethink on POSH implementation in the informal sector. "While every department and agency laments the lack of coordination among different departments in dealing with the issue, no serious effort is made to develop a convergent action plan

and establish clear responsibilities and mechanisms for accountability," she says.

In the case of domestic workers, where the workplace is the employer's home, there are examples of workers taking complaints to the local committee. In such cases, the employers say the complaints are fake and filed in response to action taken against theft by the domestic worker. Such backfiring ensures workers choose to just leave the job rather than complain.

Although India is one of the few countries with a law against workplace sexual harassment, the implementation is limited, with a lack of actionable content.

Female agricultural workers face severe exploitation and violence that goes unaddressed due to their fear of losing work, social stigma, and power dynamics that favour landowners and male counterparts. They work on farms they do not own, under sharecropping arrangements or for daily wages. Their jobs are equally strenuous, yet they are paid less than men. The harassment they face often escalates to sexual violence.

Women's groups like SEWA Bharat have advocated a different mechanism under the POSH Act for informal workers: The committees need to involve local social organisations. They also need to reach out to workers through surveys and interviews instead of waiting for complaints. Further, their findings need to be taken seriously and the committees should have the power to summon the perpetrator as well as to file cases against them if found guilty. Adds Renana Jhabwala of SEWA, "Ninety per cent of women working in the informal economy face violence including sexual in the workplace. Although the POSH Act includes them in theory, in practice they have no protection. A strong mechanism is needed at the district and local levels to make workplaces safe for women."

The views expressed are personal

## Gandhi's other great trial & Manu Gandhi

Among all Gandhians or associates of Mahatma Gandhi, Mridula Gandhi (1927-1969) stands out. Manu, as she was known, was with Gandhi when he faced his most acute inner crisis. She was with him when it resolved to give him a "clear glimpse of truth and purity". She was a partner, on equal terms, in his final *yajna* (sacrifice), and she was with him when he breathed his last. Yet, Manu had remained something of an enigma.

The mystery around her was partly due to a set of diaries she maintained during the two periods of her stay with Gandhi. Much of its content had not been in the public domain but they came to be lodged in the National Archives of India about a decade ago. They have been published in two volumes, the first in 2019 and the second recently. This may be the most awaited event in the world of Gandhian scholarship in our times. *The Diary of Manu Gandhi* (NAL and Oxford University Press), edited and translated from Gujarati by Tridip Suvridd, enhances our understanding of Gandhi's *sadhana*, and also helps us appreciate Manu's contribution to it, as a witness and a collaborator.

When Gandhi rushed to Noakhali in East Bengal in late 1946 to restore peace there, he found himself in utter despair. His decades-long observance of truth and non-violence, he believed, should have imparted to him a purity that should have dispelled the evil of communal hatred. As the editor-translator

explains in his introduction, Gandhi reasoned that his *ekadash vrat* — the 11 vows — could be working together as a whole, and his imperfection in one could be "choking" their action against the orgy of violence. He needed to look within and examine his observance of one vow in particular — Brahmacharya. For him, it was more than celibacy; it was a whole-hearted, ceaseless striving to dwell in the ultimate reality.

In the process, he also aimed to "enlarge and revise the current definition of Brahmacharya". What Gandhi intended to undergo was not a test of celibacy, but what he called a *yajna* to dispel any remnants of impurities within. It needed a partner, and he chose Manu, the granddaughter of a cousin, to be with him in this ordeal. The 19-year-old had been so devoted to her "mother" (he had been like her mother after the demise of her mother as well as of Kasturba) that she never had second thoughts about sharing a bed with him. Her diaries reveal the extraordinary discipline and sensitivity she brought to this responsibility. Gandhi advised his colleagues to write a diary, a spiritual exercise in ancient Western philosophical traditions, to cultivate the practice of self-examination. Manu had started writing a diary in April 1943, when she stayed with Gandhi in Aga Khan Palace, Poona. He then taught her how to write a diary and what to write in it, and the output was what could be expected from a 14-year-old.

In Noakhali, as she resumed diary writing, she wrote surprisingly eloquent entries. Even after starting the day at nearly 3 am, spending hours ministering to Gandhi and visiting Muslim families, and agonising over jealousies and intrigues of fellow workers, she found time and energy to write. Then she read it out to Gandhi, who put his signature on every entry and often wrote a short comment too.



Manu's diaries reveal the sensitivity she brought to her responsibilities

What she captured in it for posterity is much more than the testimony of the *yajna* itself. Gandhi often explained to her the deep significance of their joint endeavour. His talks then expanded to cover a vast range of topics — the importance of service, compassion, discipline of desire and prayer. He would start by talking in detail about, for example, girls' clothing, its effects on physical and moral health, and the talk would expand to the future of India and culminate in spiritual matters. As Gandhi told her, "The lessons that I give you are the essence of my heart." Manu jotted it all down.

Gandhi told Manu to emulate Mahadev Desai, his personal secretary, who in his diaries recorded not only the innermost

thoughts of the Mahatma, but also what is rarely found elsewhere — the movement of these thoughts as they were taking shape. The two diarists differed in their linguistic abilities but not in their devotion to Bapu. Her diary preserved what Gandhi said were his "deepest thoughts". What we have received from her, belatedly, is an invaluable gift, a testament to the trauma and triumph of the Great Soul. *The Diary of Manu Gandhi* is both a matchless historical document and a masterpiece of spiritual literature.

Gandhi's great *yajna* was going to culminate in Delhi. Manu, the partner, was to bear witness now to its culmination, as he had often told her. "[I]f it occurs to me to utter the name Rama with my last breath, it should be taken as proof of the success of my attempt. And as you are a witness to this *yajna* of mine, I do wish that you should be my witness in this..."

That she was there to bear witness can be taken as proof of her attempt too.

Ashish Mehta is a Delhi-based Gandhi scholar. The views expressed are personal



Ashish Mehta



SCIENCE

Food remains in fossil dung reveal clues to the rise of dinosaur

The Hindu Bureau

An international collaboration has been able to identify undigested food remains, plants and prey in the fossilised faeces of dinosaurs, which helped reconstruct the rise of the dinosaurs to become the dominant players in Earth's ancient ecosystems. The study has been published in the journal *Nature*.

The analyses of hundreds of samples provide clues about the role dinosaurs played in the ecosystem around 200 million years ago. Fossil records show that dinosaurs evolved during the middle part of the Triassic period (247 to 237 million years ago). However, the domination of dinosaurs in terrestrial ecosystems was not seen until approximately 30 million years later, early in the Jurassic period. Many non-dinosaur tetrapods (four-limbed vertebrates) were displaced during this time, but what caused dinosaurs to dominate the ecosystem has remained in question.

The researchers have investigated this transition by reconstructing food webs using over 500 fossilised remains of digestive material (such as faeces or vomit), known as bromalites, from the Polish Basin, which span the Late Triassic to earliest Jurassic. Analyses of these remains (including 3D imaging of their internal structures to reveal undigested food contents) were compared to the existing fossil record, along with climate and plant data, to estimate the changes in size and abundance of vertebrates during this period.

Vegetation changes

These data indicate that non-dinosaur tetrapods were displaced by the omnivorous ancestors of early dinosaurs, who evolved to become the first carnivorous and herbivorous dinosaurs towards the end of the Triassic era. At this point, the authors suggest that environmental changes resulted in substantial vegetation changes that paved the way for an expansion of herbivore ecospace and the replacement of herbivores by larger and more diverse herbivore species ingested food of a broader range, even including burnt plants. This, in turn, led to the evolution of larger carnivorous dinosaurs by the beginning of the Jurassic period, and completed the transition to dinosaur domination within the ecosystem.

The analysis sheds light on the emergence of dinosaur dominance within the ecosystem of the Polish Basin. "We suggest that the processes shown by the Polish data may explain global patterns, shedding new light on the environmentally governed emergence of dinosaur dominance and gigantism that endured until the end-Cretaceous mass extinction," they write. Further research using this method could help to clarify this evolutionary history in other parts of the world.

SNAPSHOTS



A simple lab-free test helps detect bacteria in fluids

A novel test for bacteria in fluids makes it as easy as observing a colour change to confirm the presence of disease-causing pathogens, promising much easier diagnostic tests. The test uses harmless bacteriophages embedded in a gel to locate target bacteria in a sample of fluid such as lake water, urine, or a container of milk, even in low concentrations. The new process takes just hours, producing results much more quickly than lab cultures, which can take two days to generate results.

Emerging H5N1 mutations raise risk of human infections

Genome sequencing identified the PB2-E627K mutation in the British Columbia teenager, which is linked to faster replication in human cells and greater severity of illness, and likely emerged during the infection

Bani Jolly  
Vinod Scaria

Avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu, is a viral infection primarily affecting birds. A global outbreak of H5N1, a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, has been spreading across the world since late 2020, driven by a new emerging lineage of the virus — 2.3.4.4b. H5N1 has been a significant concern in global public health due to its potential to cause severe disease in humans and its ability to infect a wide range of hosts, including poultry, wild birds, and mammals. Since its emergence in the late 1990s, the virus has predominantly been an issue for the poultry industry, but sporadic human cases have raised alarms about its pandemic potential. However, recent human cases of H5N1 in British Columbia in Canada and California have increased concerns about the adaptability of the virus and possible mutations that could facilitate human-to-human transmission.

In November 2024, a teenager from Fraser Health, British Columbia was diagnosed with H5N1. This is the first domestically acquired case of human H5N1 infection in Canada. The teenager initially experienced conjunctivitis, fever, and cough, which rapidly progressed to acute respiratory distress syndrome, requiring intensive care. Genomic sequencing revealed that the virus be-

Inching closer towards human spread

A highly pathogenic avian influenza virus has been spreading across the world since late 2020 driven by a new virus lineage — 2.3.4.4b



Recent human H5N1 cases in British Columbia, Canada and California have increased concerns about the adaptability of the virus and possible mutations that could facilitate human-to-human transmission

These two cases have no exposure to H5N1 infected animals

The British Columbia teenager diagnosed with H5N1 in November 2024 initially experienced conjunctivitis and fever, which rapidly progressed to acute respiratory distress syndrome

Genomic sequencing revealed that the virus belonged to the 2.3.4.4b clade, genotype D1.1, consistent with strains found in wild birds

Health officials suspect that the virus may have evolved after infecting the teenager

Genome sequencing identified the PB2-E627K mutation in the teenager's sample

This mutation is linked to faster replication in human cells and greater severity of illness

longed to the 2.3.4.4b clade, genotype D1.1, consistent with strains found in wild birds in the Fraser Valley area and not directly related to outbreaks at poultry farms in British Columbia. The D1.1 is a different genotype than the one that has infected dairy workers in the U.S. and the child in California. Testing of household contacts of the patient, pets, nearby animals, and environmental samples returned negative results for influenza H5 and despite several efforts, health officials were not able to identify the definitive source of the teenager's infection.

In a media briefing, Bonnie Henry, British Columbia's health officer said that the "virus may have evolved after infecting the patient". The reason for suspecting this is because the teenager's symptoms began with conjunctivitis and then rapidly pro-

gressed to acute respiratory distress syndrome. Serial samples from the patient have been collected to identify any mutations that may have occurred over the course of the infection.

Genomic analysis

While no further cases were detected, genomic analysis of the viral isolate identified mutations in the virus that are potentially linked to increased adaptation to human hosts, including enhanced cell-receptor binding and deeper lung penetration. Genome sequencing identified the PB2-E627K mutation in the sample, which is linked to faster replication in human cells and greater severity of illness, and likely emerged during the infection. These findings raise concerns about the potential of the virus to cause more severe respiratory illness in humans. However, there is

currently no evidence that the H5N1 virus infecting the teenager in Canada has been transmitted to other people.

Concurrently, the U.S. CDC confirmed the first human case of H5N1 avian influenza in a child from Alameda County, California. The child experienced mild respiratory symptoms and is recovering after antiviral treatment. Health officials have found no evidence of human-to-human transmission, as family members tested negative for the virus. Although over 50 cases of human H5N1 infections have been reported from the U.S. in 2024, this patient is the second child in North America to be infected with H5N1.

The two cases are particularly concerning because their transmission routes differ significantly from the other cases of H5N1 that have been re-

ported from North America in 2024. Previous infections primarily involved people who were in close contact with infected birds, including dairy or poultry farm workers. According to the CDC, human H5N1 infections without a clear link to exposure to affected animals are rare and have predominantly been reported in other countries. These recent cases, therefore, underscore the importance of understanding the virus's evolving genomic characteristics, which may allow it to bypass traditional transmission barriers. Researchers are particularly vigilant for mutations that could enable the virus to spread more easily among humans, as such changes could pose a significant public health risk.

While these findings underscore the urgent need for understanding and addressing the evolving epidemiology of the H5N1 virus, they also highlight the need for increased surveillance and targeted public health interventions to control the virus's spread. Continued genomic surveillance of the virus will be critical to tracking its evolution, understanding mutation patterns, and assessing its potential to adapt and spread more effectively among human populations. Such efforts are essential to guide prevention strategies and mitigate the risk of a potential H5N1 pandemic.

(Bani Jolly is a senior scientist and Vinod Scaria is a senior consultant at Karkinos Healthcare)



Common heart valve disease linked to insulin resistance

A large population study indicates that insulin resistance may be an important risk factor for the development of heart valve disease — aortic stenosis. Data from over 10,100 Finnish men aged 45 to 73 years old, all initially free of aortic stenosis were analysed. After an average follow-up period of 10.8 years, 116 men (1.1%) were diagnosed with aortic stenosis. Several biomarkers related to insulin resistance (fasting insulin, proinsulin, and serum C-peptide) were associated with increased aortic stenosis risk.



Certain HRT tablets linked to heart disease, blood clot risk

Certain hormone replacement therapy (HRT) tablets containing both oestrogen and progestogen are associated with a higher risk of heart disease and rare but serious blood clots known as venous thromboembolism in women around the age of menopause, a study finds. Another HRT tablet was associated with an increased risk of heart disease but not blood clots, "highlighting the diverse effects of different hormone combinations," researchers say.

Loud noise and the heavy toll on ears



SPEAKING OF  
SCIENCE  
D. Balasubramanian

The festival of Deepavali is behind us now. All our festivals bring us joy, and the festival of light is also accompanied by a great deal of sound. There are pleas for the use of green crackers to bring down harmful emissions such as sulfur dioxide, and to reduce the noise created when they are ignited. These have been mandated by the Supreme Court, with detailed specifications such as a ban on the manufacture and sale of firecrackers that are joined into long rows. But every passing year, their loud sounds continue to be heard in festival seasons.

Public attention is focused on the resultant air pollution, but of equal concern is the damage that very loud sounds can do to our hearing. Going beyond firecrackers, the year-

round noise levels also get less attention than other forms of pollution. It is as if noise is more easily accepted as part of our surroundings, and acceptance is even easier when you are yourself creating the noise.

Sound travels in waves that carry energy. The more energy, the more intense the wave, and the louder the sound. The decibel scale is used to measure the loudness of sound. It is a logarithmic scale, so when the sound level is measured to have risen by 10 dB, the sound is ten times more intense. On the decibel scale, the threshold of human hearing is set at 0 dB. A whisper measures 30 dB, and normal speech is 60 dB. A loud firecracker, measured from 10 feet away, has an intensity of 140 dB. This can easily damage the hair cells in the cochlea of the ear, which receive vibrations from the eardrum and convert them to nerve signals. Damage to these hair cells makes them less sensitive to sound. As a result, louder sounds are



Hard to hear: A loud firecracker, measured from 10 feet away, has an intensity of 140 dB. FILE PHOTO

required before a hair cell can respond and nerve impulses are sent to the brain. The hair cells can recover somewhat from moderately loud sounds. However, unlike our skin cells, these cells are incapable of regeneration. Repeated assaults can make recovery difficult, resulting in noise-induced hearing loss.

Loud bangs are a serious hazard for the sensitive ears of young children, because even moderate hearing loss can impair their ability to learn. The acoustic trauma of overexpo-

sure to noise often leads to tinnitus, a ringing in your ears. This 'sound' is a sign of anomalous electrical activity from damaged hair cells. The ringing usually subsides, but prolonged exposure to noise events can make it a permanent feature of your life. Of course, tinnitus can also be present in the elderly, arising from age-related wear-and-tear.

Occupational noise

Long exposures to moderate-intensity sound levels can

lead to hearing loss as surely as loud bangs will. Road traffic in Indian cities has been measured to range from 60 to 102 dB in a day. A 2008 study in the *Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* on Hyderabad city traffic policemen with five years of service has found varying degrees of hearing loss in all of them, as reported by Subroto Nandi and Sarang Dhatri in their survey of occupational noise in India.

Preventive measures, such as the wearing of earplugs, help reduce the risk of hearing loss. Some professions, such as the construction industry, have been adopting these where required, but the practice needs to be more widespread. Perhaps, even before green crackers prevail, earplugs will someday be a common sight on festival nights.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling. sushilchandani@gmail.com)



Question Corner

Launching seeds

How does the squirting cucumber squirt?

The squirting cucumber (*Echballium elaterium*) is named for the ballistic method the species uses to disperse its seeds. When ripe, the fruits detach from the stem and eject the seeds explosively in a high-pressure jet of mucilage. Through mathematical models and by conducting a variety of experiments, researchers have elucidated the key components of the plant's dispersal strategy. In the weeks leading up to seed dispersal, the fruits become highly pressurised due to a build-up of mucilaginous fluid. In the days before dispersal,

some of this fluid is redistributed from fruit to stem, making the stem longer, thicker, and stiffer. This causes the fruit to rotate from being nearly vertical to an angle close to 45 degrees, a key element needed for successful seed launch. In the first hundreds of microseconds of ejection, the tip of the stem recoils away from the fruit, causing the fruit to counter-rotate in the opposite direction. Due to the components above, the seeds are ejected with an exit speed and launch angle that depend on their sequence.

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







## *The man behind the surge*

# Devendra Fadnavis

The BJP leader, with close RSS ties, is credited with sculpting the party's turnaround in Maharashtra, where it won 132 of the 148 seats it contested for the Assembly, a few months after it suffered a setback in the Lok Sabha polls winning just nine out of the 28 seats contested from the State

Today, as his couplet goes viral on the Internet due to the landslide victory of the Mahayuti alliance in which the BJP has performed impressively well with a strike rate of almost 90%, the focus is back on Mr. Fadnavis, or 'Deva bhau' as the BJP campaign had branded him in September, ostensibly to negate the references to caste politics, where the Maratha-dominated political landscape

He is the second youngest Chief Minister of Maharashtra, the second youngest Mayor in the history of the country, and one of the only two Chief Ministers to complete a full term of five years in the State. His supporters claim that his leadership transformed Nagpur, the *karmabhoomi* of both Mr.



After the split in the Shiv Sena in 2022, when Eknath Shinde joined hands with the BJP, many of Mr. Fadnavis's supporters expected that his name would be announced as the

As a politician, he is extremely guarded and careful about the perception created about him. Several of his political opponents refer to him as simultaneously meritorious and insecure, someone who doesn't take very kindly to competition. Unlike many senior politicians in Maharashtra's political ecosystem, he isn't known as someone who openly discusses his thoughts and plans. He is also someone who is seen to have climbed the ladder quite fast. In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had thanked Nagpur for "giving the gift of Devendra Fadnavis". In 2024, after the State Assembly victory, Mr. Modi referred to him as 'param-mitra' (eternal friend).

“But when a political party grows, it has several considerations beyond individual aspirations. It has a plan for 25 years ahead. So one should not look at it as a preference for or against a leader. But a vision for the party. That is how larger decisions are taken. It may not have a bearing on an individual leader,” said another leader.

His supporters claim that his leadership transformed Nagpur, the *karmabhoomi* of both Fadnavis and Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, while the Opposition says Fadnavis had failed to develop the city

## Trump's research czar

# Jay Bhattacharya

A Stanford doctor who opposed lockdowns and authored a declaration advocating for youth herd immunity during the pandemic will head the U.S. National Institutes of Health

The NIH's parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, will be headed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. "Together, Jay and RFK Jr. will restore the NIH to a Gold Standard of Medical Research as they examine the underlying causes of, and solutions to, America's biggest health challenges, including our Crisis of Chronic Illness and Disease," Mr. Trump said in a social media post.



Dr. Bhattacharya is not a practising physician and counts public health policy, specifically centred on infectious diseases and COVID, as well as health economics as his domains of expertise. He came into the public spotlight during the pandemic years for his forceful advocacy against lockdowns, his belief that civil servants had too much power over federal policy during that time, and his criticism of Joe Biden's

Along with Sunetra Gupta, an Oxford professor of theoretical epidemiology, and Martin Kulldorff, a Swedish epidemiologist and former professor at Harvard, Dr. Bhattacharya authored the 2020 'Great Barrington Declaration', a public health manifesto. The authors mooted an approach called "Focused Protection", whereby they suggested that COVID be allowed to spread among young healthy people who were "at minimal risk of death" and could thus develop natural herd immu-

His appointment heralds a new chapter in American public health. Reacting to his nomination, Dr. Bhattacharya wrote on X: "We will reform American scientific institutions so that they are worthy of trust again and will deploy the fruits of excellent science to make America healthy again!"

## Veiled face of PTI

## Bushra Bibi

The November 25-26 rally by PTI supporters in Islamabad, which resulted in violent clashes, saw Imran Khan's wife emerging into the political spotlight

Hailing from a landowning family in Punjab, little was known about Bushra Riaz Wattoo prior to her marriage to Mr. Khan in 2018. A follower of Sufi



The contrast between Mr. Khan's two ex-wives and his current spouse is stark. British journalist Jeemima Goldsmith and Pakistani journalist Reham Khan are both public figures, who have made several statements about their ex-husband, praise or otherwise. In comparison,

Bushra was also accused of hoodwinking Mr. Khan, according to *Tribune*, by presenting information previously passed to her by ex-ISI chief Gen. Faiz Hameed as 'divine intervention', thus reinforcing Mr. Khan's belief in her powers. Her ex-husband Mr. Maneka moved an Islamic

Since her release, Bushra and Aleema Khan, the former PM's sister, have become the PTI's rallying point as most of the party's top leadership is in jail. From attacking Saudi Arabia to demanding immediate release of Mr. Khan and other PTI leaders, Bushra's presence, in spite of her lack of experience, has filled a leadership vacuum in the party. November's rally brought Bushra under the political spotlight, though the protesters were called off in the face of state crackdown.



{ BIG PICTURE }

Ananda Banerjee



# Climate crisis: A Plan B needed for wild weather

Going for smaller tangible targets instead of chasing net zero could be a way to arrest the spiralling climate crisis

This was India's warmest October in 123 years. It was also the month when Bengaluru got flooded, and cyclonic storm Dana ripped through three of Odisha's districts, with damages pegged at ₹600 crore.

Extreme and unseasonal weather events have dotted 10 months of 2024 before the countries in the world met in Baku, Azerbaijan, to discuss the climate crisis. Earlier, in the last leg of the monsoon, it felt like 52 degrees in Guwahati. Assam and parts of other northeastern states were hit by an unprecedented heat wave in September that claimed several lives and forced schools to shut, whereas, in the same period, neighbouring West Bengal bore the brunt of flooding in six districts. Remember, throughout January, there was not a flake of snow in Gulmarg and other places in Kashmir. This was followed by a hellish summer that saw a record number of heatwaves and heat-related deaths nationwide. Leh, a cold desert, was too hot for flights to take off. Delhi's heat index touched 53°C, recording the longest heatwave streak, which lasted over a month (May 14-June 21).

Similarly, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai,

and smart cities like Vadodara, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Kota, Nashik, and Surat fell apart on a heavy rainy day. The tragedy in Wayanad, Kerala, and other heavy landslides in Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand should serve as a reminder that extreme weather is a harsh reality. And not just India. Australia experienced its hottest winter at 41.6°C, and Bandar-e Mahshahr, Iran, reported a heat index of 66.7°C in August. Mount Fuji remained snowless for the longest time, and flash floods in Spain and in the Sahara are grim reminders that we are drifting deeper into a climate catastrophe.

The world experienced a new global record of unprecedented heat for a continuous 14 months, from June 2023-July 2024, when the Earth's average temperature reached or exceeded 1.5°C above the pre-industrial era. In all likelihood, the mean global temperature in 2024-2028 will exceed 1.5°C, undermining the 2015 iconic Paris Agreement pledge to try and keep temperatures from rising by more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Fossil fuels are toxic for the climate, and to stay

**GHG EMISSIONS ARE NOW AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH WITH NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN AS GOVERNMENTS HOP FROM ONE ENVIRONMENT SUMMIT TO ANOTHER**

below 1.5°C warming, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions need to be cut by 43% by 2030, which seems unlikely now with another failed climate conference. India rejected the \$300-billion climate finance target pushed through by the developed nations, calling it an optical illusion. At the same conference, Haitham Al Ghaiss, the secretary general of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec), said crude oil and natural gas were "gifts from God". A concrete plan to reduce emissions did not materialise, and may never happen as Donald Trump returns to the White House in 2025. Trump is likely to accelerate the production of fossil fuels and withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement.

Global climate talks began in 1991, but GHG emissions and global temperature have been rising faster than ever. GHG emissions are now at an all-time high with no signs of slowing down as governments across the world hop from one environment summit to another.

Further, not a single target on climate, biodiversity, or sustainability has been met. Only the goalsposts keep changing, with new jargon and timelines. An analysis of 1,500 climate policies (in force between 1998 and 2022) reveals that they have done little to prevent the acceleration of the climate crisis. The irony is despite all the talk on targets, clean energy, and the phasing out fossil fuels, the climate crisis is unfolding at a frantic pace.

This year, domestic coal production rose by 5.79% and coal imports were up by 2.2%,



An analysis of 1,500 climate policies (1998 to 2022) shows they did little to prevent the acceleration of the climate crisis

PTI

while the country's renewable energy capacity crossed 200 GW, on track to reach 500GW by 2030. But, according to Czech-Canadian scientist Vaclav Smil, energy transitions take decades, and not mere years; the promises of accelerated energy transitions in large economies will have a protracted realisation due to technical and infrastructural imperatives and unforeseen socioeconomic issues. At a three-day Oil and Gas Expo in December in Delhi, India's role in future global oil and gas markets will be discussed, with the energy demand projected to double by 2050.

Climate scientists are giving up hope. No one thinks limiting warming to 1.5°C is possible. It is time to look at smaller, more tangible targets for mitigation, such as cutting global food waste that itself is responsible for 10% of GHGs and managing urban waste. About 60% of India's population will

be living in cities by 2050. So, climate-resilient design and environmental sustainability in public infrastructure must be given emphasis. At the time the Baku talks were on, the Green Building Congress in Bengaluru slipped under the news radar: These events where "green" policy for infrastructure is discussed deserve better traction if we want a climate-resilient future.

Chasing net zero will not help. Artificial intelligence (AI) and other new technology that we hope will help ameliorate our climate pains are energy guzzlers, and, at least as of now, energy is rarely green. For example, the growth of solar and wind energy means more mining for lithium, cobalt, copper, silver, nickel, and other minerals, which will leave its own massive carbon footprint and deplete forest cover, thereby affecting the planet's carbon absorption capacity. Against such a back-

drop, can we confidently say we will live to see 2070, the year India hopes to become net zero?

While a third of our economy relies on nature, we can't grow by exploiting the environment. We must have a Plan B, for there is no escape from extreme weather events turbocharged by the climate crisis: the excessive heat, rain (or the lack of it), and now the severe winter, signalled by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) due to La Niña. At this pace, 2024, the warmest year on record, will surpass the previous year as the year with the most number of days that saw extreme weather events in India. The number was 318 days out of 365 in 2023.

Ananda Banerjee is an author, artist, and wildlife conservationist. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## On interviewing and the art of interrupting

I am often told I interrupt too much. That seems to irritate several viewers of my interviews. "Let me hear what your guest has to say before you butt in", is the most common response. These responses raise the question, when is an interruption unavoidable? Not just understandable and forgivable but also necessary and, even, required. Indeed, when would it be remiss not to interrupt? Or, is it the case that an interviewer must never interrupt and wait patiently till the guest stops, no matter how long that takes?

It all depends on what the interviewee is saying and its relationship to the question asked. In turn, you have to bear in mind that an interview is not a platform for the guest to say what he wants and at whatever length he chooses. It's a question- and answer-based discussion. The question frames it. The answer is the response.

So the first answer is an interruption is essential and unavoidable if the answer has no bearing to the question. That could be the case if the guest is simply waffling and doesn't know or if he's chosen to deliberately steer off-course and, even, consciously waste time. In time-based interviews, the last could be a careful strategy, i.e., exhaust the allotted time and thus reduce what's left for further inquiries.

An interruption is also necessary to get clarity and remove confusion. If a guest relies on unfamiliar acronyms, you need to interrupt to spell out what they mean. More importantly, if a guest's meaning is lost in a long-winded or confusing expression of the point, you need to interrupt to clarify what he's trying to say. It may be apparent to him or, even, you, but if you suspect it's not clear to the audience you need to interrupt for their sake. This, no

doubt, is annoying for those who are easily following the point but, remember, there are others who may not be. They are the reason for seeking that clarification with a well-timed interruption.

However, an interruption is also called for when the guest is factually wrong. As an interviewer, it's your duty to ensure what's told to the audience is correct. If it's not, a polite but immediate and firm interruption is required. That's also the case if the guest is potentially libellous, rude or obscene. Such interruptions are by way of caution, in case zeal or passion has overcome judgement.

Finally, there's the interruption that occurs as part of an animated conversation. When two people are locked in a forceful and contentious argument — and that often happens in an interview — they can and will talk over each other. But these are not interruptions per se. It's just the way passionate discussions happen. This is often the case when the guest challenges the interviewer and is resisted.

But there are three essential warnings for all interviewers. First, never interrupt rudely and never lose your cool. The best way is to interrupt with an apology. It takes some of the sting out of it. Second, when you interrupt, ensure you do so successfully and, preferably, not frequently. Failed interruptions serve no purpose. Repeated ones, not surprisingly, annoy.

The third, however, is the most important. It has to happen at the right time. An

**AN INTERRUPTION IS DUE IF THE ANSWER HAS NO BEARING TO THE QUESTION. IT IS ALSO NEEDED TO GET CLARITY OR REMOVE CONFUSION. FINALLY, IT CAN OCCUR SOMETIMES AS PART OF AN ANIMATED CONVERSATION**

alert interviewer will sense the need to interrupt far sooner than the audience. But if he jumps in at that point it will be too early. The audience won't be ready to accept it. So wait and let the viewers realise the guest's error. Then stop him. Now the audience is likely to be on your side.

In fact, that's the key to a successful interruption. You must convince the audience it was necessary. The reason for that is simple. For them, an interview is a sort of "performance". Two people "staging" a conversation. It's the audience's appreciation both seek. If you lose it, the interview will lose its *raison d'être*. That applies to interviewers as much as it does to their guests.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## Redesign POSH law for informal sector

In the recent assembly polls, we were once again inundated with information about how much of a difference the women's vote made to the outcome. Indeed, in many places, they seemed to have swung the election decisively, and schemes that prioritised their needs were seen as a major factor behind the way they voted.

Having said this, given the ingrained violence against women and the systemic issues they face, it is not surprising that once polls are over, it is back to a very hard grind for many, especially those in the informal sector like agriculture. A study by Nalini Nayak on behalf of SEWA Bharat on women in agriculture shows that apart from the physical labour of transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying headloads of produce, the working conditions of women farmers, especially the marginal ones, are gruelling. They have little to no health care, no maternity leave, and no protection from the harsh climate conditions in which they work. Sexual harassment is a constant for many of them.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) 2013 (POSH) Act, in its present form, has only the local committee mechanism to deal with workplace abuse for informal workers. Nayak says, "These committees have been created in many states, but the people on the committee know very little about the workplaces of informal workers like the streets for street vendors, the homes of home-based workers, the forests for forest workers, and so on. They do not understand how to deal with such cases. Moreover, the resolution mechanism is very vague as committees cannot take any punitive action."

She calls for a rethink on POSH implementation in the informal sector. "While every department and agency laments the lack of coordination among different departments in dealing with the issue, no serious effort is made to develop a convergent action plan

and establish clear responsibilities and mechanisms for accountability," she says.

In the case of domestic workers, where the workplace is the employer's home, there are examples of workers taking complaints to the local committee. In such cases, the employers say the complaints are fake and filed in response to action taken against theft by the domestic worker. Such backfiring ensures workers choose to just leave the job rather than complain.

Although India is one of the few countries with a law against workplace sexual harassment, the implementation is limited, with a lack of actionable content.

Female agricultural workers face severe exploitation and violence that goes unaddressed due to their fear of losing work, social stigma, and power dynamics that favour landowners and male counterparts. They work on farms they do not own, under sharecropping arrangements or for daily wages. Their jobs are equally strenuous, yet they are paid less than men. The harassment they face often escalates to sexual violence.

Women's groups like SEWA Bharat have advocated a different mechanism under the POSH Act for informal workers: The committees need to involve local social organisations. They also need to reach out to workers through surveys and interviews instead of waiting for complaints. Further, their findings need to be taken seriously and the committees should have the power to summon the perpetrator as well as to file cases against them if found guilty. Adds Renana Jhabwala of SEWA, "Ninety per cent of women working in the informal economy face violence including sexual in the workplace. Although the POSH Act includes them in theory, in practice they have no protection. A strong mechanism is needed at the district and local levels to make workplaces safe for women."

The views expressed are personal

## Gandhi's other great trial & Manu Gandhi

Among all Gandhians or associates of Mahatma Gandhi, Mridula Gandhi (1927-1969) stands out. Manu, as she was known, was with Gandhi when he faced his most acute inner crisis. She was with him when it resolved to give him a "clear glimpse of truth and purity". She was a partner, on equal terms, in his final *yajna* (sacrifice), and she was with him when he breathed his last. Yet, Manu had remained something of an enigma.

The mystery around her was partly due to a set of diaries she maintained during the two periods of her stay with Gandhi. Much of its content had not been in the public domain but they came to be lodged in the National Archives of India about a decade ago. They have been published in two volumes, the first in 2019 and the second recently. This may be the most awaited event in the world of Gandhian scholarship in our times. *The Diary of Manu Gandhi* (NAI and Oxford University Press), edited and translated from Gujarati by Tridip Suvrdd, enhances our understanding of Gandhi's *sadhana*, and also helps us appreciate Manu's contribution to it, as a witness and a collaborator.

When Gandhi rushed to Noakhali in East Bengal in late 1946 to restore peace there, he found himself in utter despair. His decades-long observance of truth and non-violence, he believed, should have imparted to him a purity that should have dispelled the evil of communal hatred. As the editor-translator

explains in his introduction, Gandhi reasoned that his *ekadash vrat* — the 11 vows — could be working together as a whole, and his imperfection in one could be "choking" their action against the orgy of violence. He needed to look within and examine his observance of one vow in particular — Brahmacharya. For him, it was more than celibacy; it was a whole-hearted, ceaseless striving to dwell in the ultimate reality.

In the process, he also aimed to "enlarge and revise the current definition of Brahmacharya". What Gandhi intended to undergo was not a test of celibacy, but what he called a *yajna* to dispel any remnants of impurities within. It needed a partner, and he chose Manu, the granddaughter of a cousin, to be with him in this ordeal. The 19-year-old had been so devoted to her "mother" (he had been like her mother after the demise of her mother as well as of Kasturba) that she never had second thoughts about sharing a bed with him. Her diaries reveal the extraordinary discipline and sensitivity she brought to this responsibility. Gandhi advised his colleagues to write a diary, a spiritual exercise in ancient Western philosophical traditions, to cultivate the practice of self-examination. Manu had started writing a diary in April 1943, when she stayed with Gandhi in Aga Khan Palace, Poona. He then taught her how to write a diary and what to write in it, and the output was what could be expected from a 14-year-old.

In Noakhali, as she resumed diary writing,



Manu's diaries reveal the sensitivity she brought to her responsibilities

ing, she wrote surprisingly eloquent entries. Even after starting the day at nearly 3 am, spending hours ministering to Gandhi and visiting Muslim families, and agonising over jealousies and intrigues of fellow workers, she found time and energy to write. Then she read it out to Gandhi, who put his signature on every entry and often wrote a short comment too.

What she captured in it for posterity is much more than the testimony of the *yajna* itself. Gandhi often explained to her the deep significance of their joint endeavour. His talks then expanded to cover a vast range of topics — the importance of service, compassion, discipline of desire and prayer. He would start by talking in detail about, for example, girls' clothing, its effects on physical and moral health, and the talk would expand to the future of India and culminate in spiritual matters. As Gandhi told her, "The lessons that I give you are the essence of my heart." Manu jotted it all down.

Gandhi told Manu to emulate Mahadev Desai, his personal secretary, who in his diaries recorded not only the innermost

thoughts of the Mahatma, but also what is rarely found elsewhere — the movement of these thoughts as they were taking shape. The two diarists differed in their linguistic abilities but not in their devotion to Bapu. Her diary preserved what Gandhi said were his "deepest thoughts". What we have received from her, belatedly, is an invaluable gift, a testament to the trauma and triumph of the Great Soul. *The Diary of Manu Gandhi* is both a matchless historical document and a masterpiece of spiritual literature.

Gandhi's great *yajna* was going to culminate in Delhi. Manu, the partner, was to bear witness now to its culmination, as he had often told her. "[I]f it occurs to me to utter the name Rama with my last breath, it should be taken as proof of the success of my attempt. And as you are a witness to this *yajna* of mine, I do wish that you should be my witness in this..."

That she was there to bear witness can be taken as proof of her attempt too.

Ashish Mehta is a Delhi-based Gandhi scholar. The views expressed are personal



Ashish Mehta



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

### Look beyond welfare schemes

This is with reference to *Welfare politics swing the polls* (November 24). There is no doubt that welfare schemes clinched the deal for the ruling alliances in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, but time has come to look beyond these schemes and provide social security, skills and jobs to empower women.

### Need rethink on electronic voting

It is unfortunate that the Supreme Court refused to entertain a plea seeking that voting be done through paper ballots. The reason given by the apex court that only the losers in the elections complain against the electronic voting system is not a sound one.

### Can't cure misogyny with misandry

This is with reference to *Misandry cannot ensure safety of women of UP* by Karan Thapar (November 17). All prejudiced attitudes need to be discouraged in order to build a stable society based on trust and equality.

Tharcus S Fernando

Anuradha Bisaria

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Across  
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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Indians and the Indian government are passionate and vocal about the rights of Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan... But when other countries or human rights organisations question India on the treatment of minorities, the Ministry of External Affairs springs into action to warn them, 'don't interfere in our internal matters'. The hypocrisy is apparent

Mahayuti's campaign: Trick, not treat

MY COLUMN published on November 16, 2024 (*The Indian Express*) was headlined *Maharashtra is the Prize*. I have no hesitation in acknowledging that the *Mahayuti*, an alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena and NCP, won the prize decisively. *Mahayuti* won 230 of the 288 seats.

CLEVER MESSAGING

A debate has started on what was the main cause of *Mahayuti*'s victory. Most people seem to agree that it was *Ladki Bahin Yojana (LBY)*. Under the scheme, the Shinde government promised — and distributed beginning July 1, 2024 — Rs 1,500 per month to every woman whose family income was less than Rs 2,50,000 a year, and the number of beneficiaries amounted to 2.5 crore. *Mahayuti* also promised that, if re-elected, the amount would be enhanced to Rs 2,100 per month. The scheme clicked because of agrarian distress, high unemployment rate especially among rural women, stagnant rural wages and inflation. But it was not a novel scheme. It was a copy-cat scheme that had been implemented in Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Telangana. Besides, the main rival, *MVA*, had also promised a sum of Rs 3,000 to every poor woman if *MVA* came to power. On the balance of arguments, I do not think that *LBY* was the determining factor in the elections. In my view, the *new* factor in the

Maharashtra Assembly elections was the insidious message that was delivered to the Maharashtra electorate by the trio of Mr Narendra Modi, Mr Amit Shah and Mr Adityanath, and amplified by the army of RSS volunteers.

They coined '*Ek Hai toh Safe hai*' (if we are one, we are safe) and '*Batenge toh Katenge*' (divided, we perish) that were deceptively neutral exhortations but, in fact, were addressed to the members of a particular community. Inflammatory speeches on '*love jihad*' and '*vote jihad*' were frequently made in the campaign. Old war cries such as '*tukde tukde gang*' and '*urban naxals*' were revived. The messaging was clever, well-directed and found its mark. It recalled to my mind the poisonous barbs that were thrown during the Lok Sabha elections: '*If you have two buffaloes, Congress will take away one. Your mangalsutra will be taken away. And all that will be given away to people who bear more kids*'.

A MAHA YUKTI (TRICK)

There was no doubt which was the target community for which the messages were intended. And there was no doubt which community was the so-called danger to the target community. Mr R Jagannathan, columnist, usually sympathetic to the BJP, writing in the *ToI*, admitted that it was "a potent slogan for

Hindu vote consolidation". The new slogans were reminiscent of RSS Chief Mr Mohan Bhagwat's speech on Vijayadashami day this year in which he said, "Hindu community across the world should learn the lesson that being unorganised and weak is like inviting atrocities by the wicked." The slogans and the speeches were part of the hate campaign and part of the 'divide and win' election strategy. They were an abuse of the freedom of speech and expression. They cocked a snook at the Constitution of India. They trampled on Articles 15, 16, 25, 26, 28(2), 28(3), 29 and 30 of the Constitution. The campaign was a *Mahayukti* (grand strategy, trick) conjured by *Mahayuti* (grand alliance).

Every country has minorities. A minority could be religious or linguistic or ethnic or racial. The United States has black people and Latino people. China has Uighurs. Pakistan has Shias. Pakistan and Bangladesh have Hindus. Sri Lanka has Tamils and Muslims. Australia has aboriginals. Israel has Arabs. Several European countries have Jews and Roma. The Council of Europe has adopted the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 1998 to promote equality and preserve and develop the culture and identity of national minorities. Among the seminal laws are the Civil Rights Act, 1964 in the US and a raft of laws to protect the rights of aboriginals

in Australia. The far-sighted Dr Ambedkar elevated the rights of minorities in India to fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of India.

HYPOCRISY


Indians and the Indian government are passionate and vocal about the rights of Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan. We are concerned when Indian-origin students are harassed or killed in foreign Universities. We are incensed when Hindu temples or Sikh gurdwaras are vandalised in foreign countries. But when other countries or human rights organisations question India on the treatment of minorities, the Ministry of External Affairs springs into action to warn them, 'don't interfere in our internal matters'. The hypocrisy is apparent.

Spiteful speeches and actions are spreading around the world. Bangladesh arrested a Hindu monk and there is a clamour for a ban on ISKCON. The head of an Indian Mutt reportedly said 'Deny voting rights to Muslims' (*source: newindianexpress.com*). Both are unacceptable in a democracy.

The minorities issue will haunt India if the NDA continues to play its game of "divide and win". It is no different from the sinister British game of "divide and rule".

inside  
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Do It My Way

THE NDA'S Maharashtra victory overshadowed the significance of Yogi Adityanath's impressive feat in UP. The BJP alliance won seven of nine Assembly by-elections, turning the tables on the Opposition, which earlier represented six of the constituencies, including four by the SP. The BJP's gain of four seats is a remarkable achievement in the light of its poor showing in India's largest state a few months earlier in the Lok Sabha poll. Adityanath handled the campaign entirely on his own. No major BJP leaders came to canvass. In contrast, during the Lok Sabha campaign, the UP candidates were largely selected by the Delhi high command. Many believe this worked against the ruling party. This time around, the UP CM chose the candidates shrewdly and managed to breach SP bastions with his caste alliances. In Kundarki, a Muslim majority constituency, the BJP's Ramveer Singh created history by winning the seat for the BJP after a gap of 30 years. Significantly, Thakurs came out to vote in large numbers with an enthusiasm missing during the Lok Sabha polls. Yogi is now firmly ensconced not just as CM, but as one of the foremost players in the BJP's Gen Next. Even in faraway Maharashtra, Adityanath created ripples with his slogan "*Batenge to katenge*". The jury is still out on whether the PM's milder version, "*Ek hain toh safe hain*", was an endorsement or a snub.

History  
HEADLINE

HARISH DAMODARAN



In 1950s, when a business house stood in the dock

ON DECEMBER 11, 1956, the Union government under Jawaharlal Nehru set up a Commission of Inquiry on the administration of the Dalmia-Jain (DJ) Group of companies.

Among its terms of reference was to look into "any irregularities, frauds or breaches of trust or action in disregard of honest commercial practices or contravention of any law" in respect of these companies and "the nature and extent of the personal gains made" by the promoters along with "the losses suffered by the investing public".

The trigger for appointing the Commission — initially headed by Bombay High Court's Justice S R Tendolkar and later by former Supreme Court Judge Justice Vivian Bose — was a speech by the Prime Minister's son-in-law, Feroze Gandhi, in Parliament on December 6, 1955 that exposed the financial manipulations by India's then third largest business house after Tata and Birla.

The Lok Sabha member from Rae Bareilly had wound up his nearly two-hour-long marathon by suggesting that the government constitute "a Commission of Inquiry with full judicial powers to investigate the entire Dalmia-Jain affairs from 1945-46 or whenever it began up to date". The Commission — it also had N R Mody, chartered accountant with the audit firm A F Ferguson & Co, and S C Chaudhri, Commissioner of Income Tax, as members — submitted its 815-page report on June 15, 1962.

Compare that with the present time, where the Narendra Modi government is avoiding even a debate in both Houses, forget conceding to the Opposition's demand for a Joint Parliamentary Committee probe, on the allegations against the Adani Group.

It's not the contrasts alone, but also the parallels, that are striking. Gandhi's speech did to the DJ Group what the US investor-activist firm Hindenburg Research's January 24, 2023 report did to Adani, accusing it of stock price rigging and accounting fraud.

The DJ Group had interests in cement, banking (Bharat Bank and Punjab National Bank), insurance (Bharat Insurance), publishing (Bennett, Coleman), sugar, paper, chemicals, textile and jute mills, aviation, motor vehicles, light railways, collieries, electricity distribution, biscuit-making and dairy.

That made it a horizontally diversified conglomerate much like Adani, which has businesses from ports, airports, coal mining

and trading, thermal power, electricity transmission and distribution, renewable energy, solar photovoltaic manufacturing and natural gas supply, to cement, edible oils, road and rail development, data centres, grain handling and fruit marketing.

Adani is today India's No. 3 business house (after Tata and Reliance), just as the DJ Group once was. Both had upstart founders: Ramkrishna Dalmia's first venture was a sugar factory at Bihta (Bihar) in 1933, while Gautam Adani's Mundra Port at Gujarat took off only in 1998.

The similarities end there.

The Vivian Bose Commission showed how the funds of the DJ Group's public limited companies, banks and insurance firms were used by the promoters' proprietary concerns for speculative acquisitions or even personal purposes. The companies in which the public had invested their monies were often forced to lend without security at low interest rates. After being squeezed dry, even "the husks were discarded". The Commission documented many instances of companies taken into voluntary liquidation, and their account books and records destroyed to leave no traces of fraud committed.

There isn't evidence, so far, of such brazen fund diversion or embezzlement vis-à-vis the Adani Group. At least eight out of its 11 listed companies seem to be profit-making. Hindenburg's charges were primarily about the conglomerate pumping up its company stock prices, pledging these as collateral to take on too much debt relative to free cash flows, and parking shares with offshore shell entities

to conceal actual promoter ownership.

In the DJ Group case, not only was Feroze Gandhi allowed to speak, the Finance Minister, C D Deshmukh, helpfully buttressed in by noting Dalmia's "extraordinary capacity" to intermix the finances of his various industrial, banking and insurance concerns. The DJ Group challenged the Tendolkar/Bose panel's appointment under the Commissions of Inquiry Act, 1952, which, it claimed, dealt only with matters of public importance, as opposed to the conduct of individual persons or companies. The courts, however, upheld the government's position that the "grave consequences... ensued to the investing public" from the "gross irregularities" in the management of the DJ Group companies were matters of "definite public importance".

The government, then, didn't feel the need to defend Dalmia, who had to endure the ignominy of a two-year jail sentence as well as dissolution of his business empire. The group's most prized assets went to his son-in-law, Shanti Prasad Jain, and brother, Jaidayal. Gandhi's speech was the precursor to the nationalisation of India's life insurance industry, via an ordinance promulgated on January 19, 1956. It was also a time when India under Nehru had embarked on a strategy of planned economic development — in which the public sector, not private corporates, occupied the "commanding heights".

Cut to the present, where the government and the main ruling party have, at best, sought to deflect and distance themselves from the Adani Group. This is despite the latest charges — pertaining to a "bribery scheme" of over \$250 million payments to officials in India for securing solar energy supply contracts — coming from the US Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission, and not from some trader with short positions in Adani stocks.

The Modi government's apparent reluctance to act against Adani could be because it views, more than previous administrations, big business as a partner in nation-building and also serving the country's foreign policy and geostrategic interests.

But to what extent the current developments will impact the Adani Group's own stock valuations and ability to raise credit for funding its ambitious investment plans, both domestic and overseas, remains to be seen. Business history is littered with examples of over-leverage and over-diversification exacting a heavy price.

WEAK LINKS

At the start of the Maharashtra campaign, Sharad Pawar had urged Rahul Gandhi to publicly declare Uddhav Thackeray as the MVA's chief ministerial candidate; Gandhi declined to do so. Pawar urged Gandhi not to be complacent because of the MVA's sterling performance in the Lok Sabha poll. He warned that if the BJP won Maharashtra, it would gain momentum and a domino effect could come into effect in the ensuing Assembly polls, restoring Prime Minister Modi's image that slightly dented after the Lok Sabha poll. Neither of Pawar's two allies paid much heed. While the 83-year-old Pawar campaigned relentlessly covering six rallies daily, Gandhi made just half a dozen trips to Maharashtra. He and Priyanka Gandhi spent a disproportionate time in Wayanad, Kerala, where victory was assured. The state Congress had hoped the Gandhis would galvanise young voters. Uddhav Thackeray, meanwhile, did not overly exert himself cit-

MONEY SPEAKS

Many claim credit for the Ladki Bahin scheme which was viewed as a gamechanger in Maharashtra. In fact, the Congress first conceived the scheme in 2021 in the Assam elections, naming it Gruha Lakshmi and promising monthly cash transfers to BPL women. The Congress lost the election nevertheless. But the same poll guarantee helped the Congress swing the 2022 Karnataka poll. Shivraj Singh Chouhan copied the scheme in Madhya Pradesh re-naming it Ladli Behna and won the Assembly election. The Mahayuti did one better -- it did not simply include the programme in its poll manifesto, instead, to demonstrate the government's sincerity, Shinde as CM ensured that five monthly installments of Rs 1,500, worth Rs 7,500, were deposited in the bank accounts of women voters, before the elections were announced.

On the  
LOOSE

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IN A post on X, Kolkata's Indian Museum shared photos of West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose "unveiling" a bust of himself. The caption, in brief, read, "In alignment with his vision to foster creativity and cultural appreciation, we proudly hosted the unveiling of a bust of Dr CV Ananda Bose; by (Bose) himself."

Unsurprisingly, there were some chuckles and a minor furore with the ruling Trinamool Congress calling Governor Bose a "megalomaniac". CPI(M) leader Sujan Chakraborty said it was "unfortunate" and "...unbecoming of the Governor to unveil his own bust". The Raj Bhawan responded saying that a "common" sculptor from the

Going bust with statues

interior of Bengal created the piece as "a tribute borne out of deep admiration".

If beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, this figurehead was a resounding success because Governor Bose looked pleased as punch with it. For the rest of us, our frame of reference for sculpture is Michelangelo's David so it's hard to make sense of the image — the Governor in a black *bandhgala* and dark glasses peering at his eerie likeness (kitted out identically in a black *bandhgala*) with a much too shiny forehead and strangely beatific expression — while the museum staff clapped dutifully in the background.

Busts have been around since the Greco-Roman era to signify prominence and honor family lineage. Folklore has it that Michelangelo thoroughly examined corpses to make sure his creations were

anatomically correct. Replicating the human form can't be easy and I'm certainly no authority on the artistic merit of this bust, but speaking purely as an observer, if I was to stumble on these busts on a chilly dark night, I would flee, screeching, convinced a prop from *The Exorcist* has sprung to life to rip me to shreds.

Horror movie enthusiasts may recall the lurid 1975 film *Trilogy of Terror* where a waxen doll-like statue leaps out of a suitcase and sinks its teeth into the protagonist's arm. It was the bane of my childhood. Definitely, strolling down an ancient cobbled street in Rome, life-sized marble portraits of Gods and heroes transports one back to a glorious era but in 21st century popular culture, mannequins and busts are more likely to invoke a sense of creepy unease. Somewhere in our fertile

imaginations (at least mine) their lifeless humanity signifies death, if not a weirdly nightmarish rebirth. The mystery is why these vulgar travesties continue to be made when nine times out of ten, statues' facial expressions seem frightening, like they're grimacing in agony.

Fashions change. There was a time when a taxidermy tiger had a pride of place in aristocratic homes, some grand uncle having shot the magnificent creature in a *shikhar*. Nobody does that anymore. Only decrepit heritage hotels in Rajasthan have antler horns mounted on walls. Elephant tuskers and ivory tables too, have mercifully vanished over the years. Similarly, perhaps it's time to consign busts and statues to history since the emotions they evoke are either a shudder of distaste or a shiver up the spine. The Indian Museum, where a

future shrine to Governor Bose has been carved out, has plenty of other objects of fascination. There are red sandstone remnants of the Bharput Stupa, metal images from the 8th century and art from the Gandhara School. Occupied by such riches from the past, it's unlikely that connoisseurs of art or inquisitive students would be enamoured by figurines of current political appointees, however much they may consider themselves to be living legends.

In India, there's no getting away from politicians in power. They hog the limelight on prime time TV, page one in newspapers and even on the road, with their *lal batti* and VIP security. It's not such a big ask that the museum be spared from displaying them on pedestals as well.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Fifth  
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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Violence in  
wastelands

HAVE BOTH Hindus and Muslims gone completely mad in our beloved Bharat? I ask the question seriously. The reason why I ask is because it must be madness that becomes manifest when people who turn up to throw stones in defence of a mosque or to make hate speeches are so blinded by religiosity that they do not notice the bigger problems that surround them every day. All it needs is to watch carefully the visuals that appear on your TV screens every time there is a new fight over a mosque, or a temple and you will see what I mean about bigger problems.

For some days now I have watched the violent clashes over the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal and the aftermath. Instead of gazing at the white mosque that looms over shabby bazaars and slums, I have been more interested in what lies below this mosque with so grandiose a name. And I have been horrified by the slimy drains that line dilapidated alleys, the decrepit stairways that rise from hovel-like shops and the general sense of decay that hangs over everything. Images from the destruction of Gaza came to mind and not for the first time it shamed me to see that living conditions that usually come because of war exist in India in normal, ordinary peaceful times. Small towns in India are filthy, ugly and grim everywhere but if there was a competition, the fine state of Uttar Pradesh would win effortlessly.

This is what makes it so puzzling that Hindus and Muslims should be fighting about mosques and temples when they should be fighting for basic civic rights. I have personally not been to Sambhal but I have been to many small towns in Uttar Pradesh over the years and not come across one that showed the smallest signs of municipal governance. In these towns if there is one, clean and relatively attractive structure it is always a mosque or a temple that shine like beacons in the wasteland from which they rise.

Instead of fighting for the right to better living standards, Hindus and Muslims spend their time killing each other while trying to establish that beneath some mosque there may once have been a Hindu temple. Why do we not just agree that when Muslim invaders rampaged through India, they flattened thousands of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples? Why not just accept this ugly truth? Why do we need to continue blaming every Indian Muslim today for what his co-religionists did hundreds of years ago? Muslims are not innocent victims either. They rally in support of a Waqf Board that has been notoriously corrupt and criminally territorial for far too long. But when you have a Hindutva government trying to restrict the Waqf's powers there are inevitably suspicions that this is just one more attempt to humiliate Muslims in general.

As I write these words a certain trepidation comes over me because I remember that there is some Hindutva outfit called the Hindu Sena that is now trying to convert Ajmer Sharif into a Shiv temple. This is one of India's most revered dargahs (shrines) at which both Muslims and Hindus have worshipped for at least seven centuries so if there was a temple here once, does it really matter now? Do courts need to accept petitions that demand a survey of these Islamic places of worship when they come from lunatic fringe outfits like the Hindu Sena? Please remember that the man who heads this Hindu army is the same one who organised a 'havan' for Donald Trump's victory in the 2020 election. A mad thing to do. Right?

In all this madness, if there has been heard one sane voice it came, ironically, from the head of the RSS, Mohan Bhagwat, who warned when a survey was being conducted in the Gyanvapi mosque that it was wrong to go about searching for a Shivaling in every other mosque. Nobody listened to him but if he is backed up with other sane voices from religious and political leaders, it is possible that this tide of madness will be stopped. This is necessary because it really is time for both Hindus and Muslims to start demanding much more important things like municipal governance.

In towns like Sambhal people live without such basic amenities as running water and electricity. They live in homes that rise out of rotting garbage and when the rains come, their children play on mud floors that soak up sewage that pours in with the rainwater. These are towns in which temples, schools and hospitals often appear as if they have been built on layers and layers of garbage. The air stinks so much it is hard to breathe. And clouds of flies and mosquitoes block the light and settle on the faces of small babies. Could it be because people are forced to live in such horrendous conditions that the only way they find to release their rage is by joining religious processions that nearly always end in violence.

As someone who has traveled in much poorer countries than India, I often say in this column, that there is almost no country in the world in which I have seen living conditions more abysmal than in India. They will improve only when ordinary citizens discover that they need basic, civic governance more than places of worship.







## AT THE ROOT OF SLOWDOWN: IT'S POLITICS, STUPID

THE murmurs and fears echoing in living rooms, bazaars and C-suites for weeks and months have come home to roost. All is clearly not well with the economy. On Friday, the ministry of statistics informed India that GDP growth in the July-September quarter, at 5.4 percent, has fallen from 8.1 percent in the same period last year—the slowest in nearly two years. Gross value addition (GVA), at 5.6 percent, is lower than nominal GVA of 8.1 percent. Yes, it is still the fastest growing large economy, but the economy is growing well below its potential. Given India's demography, this entails risks in the medium and long terms, and carries political implications.

The reality of a slowdown has been manifest in high-frequency data on consumer demand visible across sectors and corporate earnings which, by one estimate, have hit a four-year low. Indeed, a study by Motilal Oswal suggests Nifty earnings may be dismal and grow by a modest 5 percent this year. Worsening the picture is a steady erosion in urban wages impacting consumption.

Data points, though, didn't shake or stir the nation's money manager. The Reserve Bank of India on October 9 recorded that growth was slower in the first quarter, but asserted that GDP growth in the second quarter would touch 7.2 percent. This column—in a copy titled '*Scent of a Slowdown*'—had observed that the forecast would be challenged. As per the RBI, real GDP growth for 2024-25 was projected at 7.2 percent. At the halfway mark, GDP growth stands at 6 percent and the strike rate required to achieve the forecast is challenging, to say the least.

The granular details of the slowdown are stark. Manufacturing fell from 14.3 percent in the second quarter of 2023-24 to 2.2 percent; mining, which clocked 11.1 percent last year, has slid into contraction territory. Agriculture, at 3.5 percent, is growing faster than manufacturing. The India story in recent years has been fuelled by public investment. On a year-on-year basis, the government's final consumption expenditure has dipped from 14 percent to 4.4 percent in the second quarter this year; the gross fixed capital formation, which is code for new investments, has slid from 11.6 percent to 5.4 percent.

Effectively, government expenditure is lower. Private sector capex is slower even as just the top 10 companies are sitting over a cash pile of ₹5.5 lakh crore. Private consumption is poorer as the desire and ability of consumers is haunted by the cost of living and employment uncertainty visible in shrinking hiring and campus placements. The net result is that the rate of growth is lower than the rate of inflation. The cliché is money makes the mare go round, fuelling investment, job creation, incomes and consumption. The lack of expenditure, investments, incomes and consumption is dragging down growth. In short, inflationary politics has deflated growth.

A parade of reasons has been offered for lower government expenditure—ranging from the many elections to extreme weather events. It is arguable that there is merit in the arguments, even if only in part. The villain of the slowdown is poor governance. Analysts have pointed out that state governments have overspent on sops—RBI data reflects the rise in revenue expenditure deployed for freebies—and underspent on projects. A recent report by India Ratings suggests that nearly ₹62,000 crore of the ₹11.11 lakh crore for infra may not be spent.

There is unspent money and there is the cost of money. Private consumption accounts for over 61 percent of the GDP, and both access to and cost of money matter for the sustenance of demand. Consumers are facing a double whammy—the crackdown on personal loans and higher interest rates. The RBI has much to answer for: from its forecasts for GDP growth to inflation targets. In January, the RBI argued that food price inflation was outside its realm, and in August, it argued that it is obliged to bring it down. Meanwhile, food inflation has averaged above 7 percent for over 18 months. In November, the consumer price index was at 6.2 percent and food price inflation at 10.9 percent. There is much lather about the need for a rate cut. Yes, it will help boost demand, but addressing the slowdown calls for more than a rate cut.

India's economy requires urgent structural reforms. Households have been forced to rejig budgets to accommodate the rise in food prices. Higher interest rates have scarcely dented the price line. The cause—beyond vagaries of weather and whimsical policies—rests in the inadequacies of availability, storage, distribution and processing. The answers squarely rest in the domain of state governments. Take employment generation, which calls for active investment promotion. It is no secret that labour laws hinder scaling up of businesses, yet the new labour codes designed in 2019 to ease matters are pending adoption in many states. Add cumbersome and archaic regulatory requirements.

It is not that the political class is unaware of the faultlines. The innovations visible in the electoral arena are expressions of awareness. The harsh truth is that the electoral algebra favours sops paid for by taxpayers over macro development for employment and growth. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton rode to power on the slogan 'It's the economy, stupid!'. In the Indian context, the essential cause of the slowdown is, well, the politics!

## YUNUS MUST FACE MODI-TRUMP WRATH



### POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

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IS the world religious order crumbling? Amsterdam to Paris and London to New York, vicious, violent mobs of immigrants have launched savage salvos against civilisation. Its new echo chamber is Bangladesh, where a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize seems to deserve the 'ignoble prize' for communal carnage.

Ever since Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser to the interim Bangladesh government, was imported to Dhaka from the West, an ethnic cleansing of Hindus started on a scale unprecedented since partition. The communal credentials of the darling of the Western Deep State are no secret: in 2005, he made it to the list of '*The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims*' compiled by the Amman-based Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre. The recent imprisonment of a former ISKCON spiritual leader, Chinmoy Krishna Das, on sedition charges shows the leopard hasn't changed its spots.

The citation of Yunus's Nobel reads: "Every single individual on Earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life. Across cultures and civilisations, Yunus and Grameen Bank have shown that even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development."

The Yunus paradox is that the man who established and headed the Bangladesh Information Centre in the US to promote the cause of his country's liberation from Pakistan, should now become Islamabad's puppet and Washington's lapdog by opening the sea route to Pakistan. Worse, Yunus, a former founding member of Nelson Mandela's The Elders—a group set up to "contribute their wisdom, independent leadership

and integrity to tackle some of the world's toughest problems"—presides over communal apartheid in his own country, where eight of every 100 citizens are deprived of their right to live safely.

In the past four months, many prominent Hindu and other minority leaders have been arrested on grounds that would make a walrus laugh. A puppet of the renewed CIA-ISI nexus, Deep State decoy Yunus hasn't abandoned his political ambitions although, in 2007, his Nagorik Shakti party was stillborn.

Now, Bangladesh is run by the 84-year-old who is standing by malefic fundamentalist insanity. He has turned India, Bangladesh's father, from an ally of decades into its most hated foe. He has ignored Indian generosity of over \$10 billion given for Bangladesh's development. The jihad-ists ignore that it is India which provides 25 percent of its electricity.

The anti-Modi, liberal Western collaborative umbrella protects Yunus to promote his regime without accountability. Sheikh Hasina was autocratic too. But on Yunus's watch, most of her cabinet ministers were killed or jailed; the judiciary was purged. Popular rage stoked by Pakistani provocateurs was directed more against India than Hasina. Yunus ordered the release of jailed anti-India elements, including former PM Khaleda Zia. The regime change led to the reversal of a secular polity by targeting minorities led by Hindus.

After suffering for a couple of months, the Hindu resistance was quelled by brutal force. Loyalists to the Constitution were arrested. ISKCON was banned even after its former leader Chinmoy Krishna Das clarified, "To all Sanatanis, I would like to request our beloved homeland, this Bangladesh—we do not want to leave this country. We are sons of this land. We would like to preserve the heritage and the culture of our land." His patriotism was ignored.

The influential Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council recorded more than 2,000 attacks on Hindus since August 5. The ball is in Modi's court now to deal with its genocidal neighbour. As the atrocities mount, his government is under immense pressure to take retaliatory and punitive steps.

The Sangh parivar has accelerated its campaign to complete its unfinished agenda of booting out infiltrators. Since its core causes—construction of the Ram Mandir, abrogation of Article 370, partial implementation of a unified civil code and cultural corrections in the Indian education system—have been resolved, they feel the time has come to oust illegal immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh to tame domestic fundamentalism. The number of infiltrators nationwide varies from 20 million to 25 million. The BJP perceives them as vote banks of the Congress and regional parties in Assam and West Bengal.

It was Modi who started the agitation against infiltrators when he was Gujarat CM. At a rally during his campaign for PM in 2014, he charged Mannohan Singh of protecting illegal immigrants: "Prime minister, the country wants to know what are you thinking about Bangladeshi infiltration. What are your policies? Will Bangladeshis have a sway in India?" After becoming PM, he asserted at his first public meeting in Assam: "I understand the sentiments of Assamese people. Even when it comes to land acquisition, we will bear national interest in mind and the interest of the people of Assam. I will make such arrangements that Bangladeshis, who infiltrate into Assam and trouble you, are pushed out. I left home to serve my motherland. And the land of Assam is also my mother."

Illegal intrusion has been a major poll plank of the BJP, even during the latest state elections. Modi declared in

Jharkhand, "Bangladeshi and Rohingya infiltrators have become a major threat to Santhal Parganas and Kolhan regions. The demography of these regions is changing fast. The tribal population is on the decline. The infiltrators are establishing control of the panchayat system, grabbing land, indulging in atrocities on daughters... Each Jharkhand resident is feeling unsafe".

Amit Shah promised, "Change the government once in Jharkhand. I want to assure you that the BJP will drive out Rohingyas and illegal Bangladeshis from Jharkhand, one by one." The home ministry is already tracking undocumented Bangladeshis in various cities—over a thousand have been deported. BJP-led state governments have appointed task forces to identify and point out suspicious residents to officials.

Change of regime and deportation aren't Modi's only weapons. An economic blockade can force Yunus to dial down the violence. During the 15 years of Hasina's regime, Bangladesh became India's largest development partner. It received a credit line of \$8 billion for infrastructure development. Bangladeshis are the largest group visiting India for leisure and work. Kolkata is a second home to many. Soon after the attacks on Hindus began, India closed its visa centre in Dhaka, which has seriously impacted local citizens.

Modi must use his global stature to isolate a communal Bangladesh. Its new leaders preach to India to "recalibrate their policy instead of crying foul on their issue. Accept the fact that Bangladesh has moved on, and [you] move on, too". Modi should definitely retaliate by moving faster and leverage his friendship with Donald Trump to withdraw American support to an extremist Yunus establishment.

During the election, Trump posted on X: "I strongly condemn the barbaric violence against Hindus, Christians and other minorities who are getting attacked and looted by mobs in Bangladesh, which remains in a total state of chaos." It is now up to Modi to wield the Excalibur of geopolitical power against India's communal connivers and protect Hindus and other oppressed minorities in other homelands, too, to become the warrior prophet of global Hinduism.

## DIFFERENT WOODS FROM THE SAME TREE



### OPINION

NAMRATA JOSHI

Consulting Editor

Follow her on X @Namrata\_Joshi

FORTY-thousand feet up in the air and 11 hours to kill. There's something about catching up with missed films when suspended in space and time on a flight. The latest I came upon was Nithish Sahadev's 2023 Malayalam movie *Falim* on my way to Marrakesh for the international film festival. It's a straightforward narrative about the complicated lives in a dysfunctional family and their convoluted journey to Kashi. Dramatic, with many unexpected twists on the road to Varanasi, the film could have easily become a cloying weepy, but Sahadev's light-hearted touch keeps it heartwarming.

What surprised me more than the film itself was the reaction of my fellow passenger who noticed me enjoying it. The gentleman from Canada had his curiosity piqued enough to take a peek at the film himself, said he found it relatable, and would be recommending it to

his friends. He also declared it didn't feel like an Indian film and that the quirky ensemble and their crazy journey reminded him a bit of the 2006 Hollywood film *Little Miss Sunshine*.

It got us talking about Indian cinema, how it largely continues to get identified in the West—not just by the layperson, but cinephiles too—with the song-nance and melodrama of commercial Hindi films. The huge success of *RRR* did appear to have got its foot in the door for other Indian languages. But, as with the airline's entertainment system, the vexing habit of clubbing all Indian films under the Bollywood umbrella has been hard to break.

Cut to a conversation I recently had with Marathi filmmaker Nikhil Mahajan, whose environment thriller *Raavsaheb* competed at the just-concluded IFFI in Goa. Mahajan was making a case for wider global patronage for films like *Falim* and his own. That international festivals pick up arthouse Indian films, while at the same time going for commercial Korean cinema, leaves middle-of-the-road filmmakers like him stranded. Semi-commercial films like his have no international festivals to find a home in.

Mahajan thinks that the Indian picks at festivals have a defined aesthetic and show only a certain side of India. Irony is that even arthouse Indian cinema hasn't had a consistent benefaction internationally. It took 30 years since Shaji N Karun's *Swaham* in 1994 for an

Indian film to find a place in the competition section at Cannes. No wonder, Payal Kapadia took her own sweet revenge in her Grand Prix acceptance speech for *All We Imagine as Light*: "Please don't wait 30 years to have another Indian film."



**Western audiences continue to club all Indian films under the Bollywood umbrella. On the other hand, global festivals mostly pick arthouse films from India. This denies international exposure to many worthy films made in the country**

Unlike Chinese or Korean cinema, a single, distinct Indian cinematic vocabulary remains elusive for the West to pin it down with. Just like the diversity among our people, languages and cultures, so is it for our cinema. I often try to reduce our multiculturalism for monocultures: think of us as a continent rather than a country. Similarly, think of our cinema like the motley bunch coming out of Europe, but even they're more artistically allied than the many-splendoured spread in India—from Punjabi to Bhojpuri, Marathi to Malayalam. The cinema from the Northeast has itself been speaking in lingos as varied

as Kokborok and Sherdukpen.

It's a relevant conversation to have yet again with the world at a time when Indian cinema is having a glorious year—the need to engage with Indian filmmaking in all its diversity and consistently so than offering us flash in the pan acknowledgements and those proverbial 15 minutes of fame.

Meanwhile, our own thought also needs to change radically when it comes to what we think constitutes Indian cinema. Not all commercial films might be necessarily bad and not all indies are about great filmmaking. For the Film Federation of India's Oscar selection jury to have roundly dismissed *AWLAL* as "like a foreign film and not Indian cinema" was imprudent. In an increasingly globalised times, all the world should be a stage for young Indian filmmakers with far-reaching exposure and influences from around the world.

Whatever be the influences of *AWLAL*, what's important is that it never panders to the West's expectations of Indian moviemaking. There is an honesty to the lived experience and evocation of urban loneliness on screen, a specificity to the struggles and solidarities of women that transcends boundaries.

It's the faithfulness to the local that makes it reach out globally. Just as it happened with *The Lunchbox* or *Monsoon Wedding* many moons ago. It's time then to broaden the horizons than trying to narrow definitions. Let a thousand Indian filmmaking flowers bloom.

### QUOTE CORNER

We have seen what you have done... gavelling and trying to ignore parties from speaking does not behave the UN system... We had informed the presidency that we wanted to make a statement prior to any decision on the adoption. However, this has been stage-managed. And we are extremely, extremely disappointed.

**Chandni Raina**, India's negotiator at the COP29 climate summit in Baku, objecting at the closing plenary to the final communiqué adopted

Your implication that I have been not diligent is totally incorrect. I don't have a car, I don't have a credit card, I don't have cash. I can't pay my bills.

**Rudy Giuliani**, former attorney for Donald Trump who was rebuked by a US federal judge in a case about paying two Georgia election workers \$148 million

We've got to give him our support and love and he will soon be fine... Sometimes when things are not working out, the idea is to keep things simple.

**Carlo Ancelotti**, Real Madrid coach, on striker Kylian Mbappe's lack of form

### MAILBAG WRITE TO

#### Ensuring hygiene

Ref: *Telangana school food supply needs overhaul* (Nov 30). As the editorial rightly says, politicising the tragedy of food poisoning in government schools and hostels in Telangana will never solve problem. No one bothers to find out the cause and call for rectifying measures. The need is efficient supervision of the purchasing and ensuring their cleanliness till cooked. Let's hope that after the high court's intervention, the administrators will be serious in preventing such incidents.

**Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda**

#### Audit supplies

Preventing food poisoning would require systemic reforms stressing safety, accountability and hygiene. Food supplies should be sourced from certified vendors with regular quality checks, while the kitchen staff must be trained in hygienic preparation of meals. Routine health audits conducted by

food safety officers are also vital for detecting contamination and ensuring the safety of students.

**Amal Fathima, Bengaluru**

#### Protect children

It is imperative that places for children like schools are scrutinised on a regular basis, as it is extremely disconcerting that basic requirements like hygienic food are not taken care of. It is bringing about grievous results such as the death of children, which must be avoided at all costs.

**Srujana Madangopal, Bengaluru**

#### Economic momentum

Ref: *Govt must raise capex as slower GDP growth changes calculations* (Nov 30). Given the growth slowdown, the government should prioritise not just raising capital expenditure but also focusing on manufacturing and infrastructure to stimulate short-term demand and long-term growth. Addressing inflation and improving consumer spending are equally critical for sustaining momentum.

**Lashmitha M, Bengaluru**

#### Wake-up call

This slowdown can be attributed to various factors, including inflationary pressures, subdued corporate performance, and sluggish private consumption. It is essential for the government to implement policies that promote investment, boost consumer spending, and support the manufacturing sector. It is also crucial to recognise the impact of global economic trends on India's growth. It is a wake-up call for policymakers.

**Raju Kolluru, Kakinada**

#### Neighbourly contrast

Ref: *Before Dhaka sets a fresh date with democracy* (Nov 30). Our neighbouring nations treat minorities with scant respect and do not act against violence committed on them by fanatics. It is in contrast to the treatment of minority sentiments accorded by most politicians in India. It is a pity we have leaders who hardly respect their nation's security. It is time for the people to stop this dangerous design followed by some power-hungry leaders.

**V S Ganeshan, Bengaluru**

#### Local focus

Ref: *A season for one nation, many elections* (Nov 29). Recent remarks by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge rightly emphasise the need for accountability and state-specific strategies to address electoral failures. His question about relying on national issues for state elections highlights a crucial gap in political planning. Parties must focus on grassroots realities, act swiftly, and ensure accountability to rebuild public trust.

**Irfana VPP, Payanghadi**

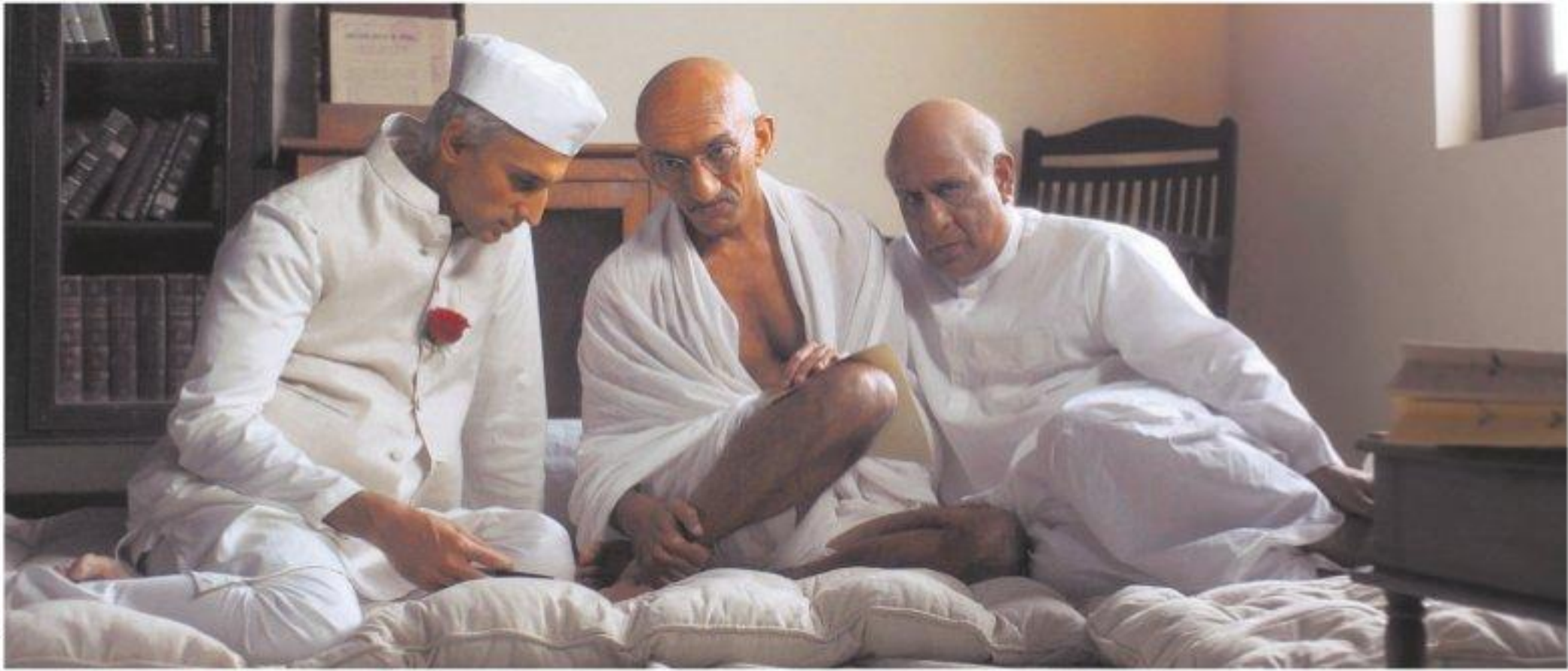
#### Study flexibility

Ref: *UGC approves flexible study duration of UG* (Nov 29). Students can now complete undergraduate programmes at their own pace. Those juggling jobs or other responsibilities can pursue education without adhering to rigid timelines. However, some challenges have to be crossed—ensuring uniform credit transfer mechanisms across universities could be complex. This flexibility is welcome, but it shouldn't compromise academic rigour.

**Shifana Shirin K C, Kannur**



Sidhant Gupta as Jawaharlal Nehru, Chirag Vohra as Mahatma Gandhi and Rajendra Chawla as Sardar Patel in 'Freedom at Midnight'.



# HISTORY IN HIS STORY

NONIKA SINGH

NATIONAL Award-winning director Nikkhil Advani's latest web-series 'Freedom at Midnight' might have opened to mixed reviews, but has an IMDb rating of 8.4/10. To those having issues with his historical saga, his tongue-in-cheek riposte is, "I am waiting to watch what they make and show what I have not shown... I read everybody's reviews and am often heartbroken and wonder where I went wrong."

Creator of 'Rocket Boys', 'The Empire' and 'Mumbai Diaries', one of the biggest challenges of recreating history for Advani was "to get it right". A history buff, he jokes how he spent most of the money he hoped to make through 'Freedom at Midnight' on books recommended by William Dalrymple and Anita Anand. Their podcast 'Empire' is often his go-to referral point. He adds, "There are far too many experts on Independence and Partition. Hence, the source material had to be correct."

Many feel the book by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins, on which the series is based, reads like a screenplay, a fact which served him tantalisingly well. Since his journey began with Kundan Shah, Sudhir Mishra, Saeed Akhtar Mirza and later coincided with the masters of mainstream like Karan Johar and Aditya Chopra, Advani's sensibilities were bound to be an amalgamation. He elaborates, "My voice tends to be closer to the Kundans, Sudhirs and Saeeds, but the treatment is more mainstream, highly dramatic." Precisely why, for the dialogues in 'Freedom at Midnight', he wanted the signature Salim-Javed touch—which his dialogue writer Divy Nidhi Sharma delivered on point.

After 'Rocket Boys', the creator in Advani realised, "Unlike Hansal Mehta's 'Scam 1992', the punches of dialogues were missing in our story of Homi Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai, which, perhaps, stopped the show from being elevated to the level (of popularity) it could have attained." Today, he is happy as viewer after viewer is mauling dialogues from 'Freedom at Midnight', and even he quotes one of his favourites, uttered by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, 'Yeh neta apne log dhoond lega...'

On the criticism that the blame of Partition is laid at Jinnah's feet and the British are given a

Nikkhil Advani's web-series 'Freedom at Midnight' transports the viewers to those rooms where heated pre-Partition discussions were taking place



Nikkhil Advani

clean chit, he reasons, "It is my humble submission, wait for the second season. Then, perhaps, we can revisit this question."

Part two of the series packs many more turns. We will see Lord Mountbatten being lauded as the architect of India's Independence, ready to pack his bags and leave India, while Cyril Radcliffe is told that instead of 13 months, he has just five weeks to draw the line between two nations. Then, there would be the princes and Kashmir. As he puts it, "If season one was like a ticking time bomb, part two will bring you face-to-face with the repercussions of the decisions made."

Whether the series will provide a healing touch to the horrors of Partition is met with a counter-question, "Have the wounds of Partition healed? If the answer is both yes and no, so is mine." There is, however, no ambiguity about what he has chosen to recount. His idea was to transport the viewers to those rooms where all heated discussions were taking place, and the leaders didn't have the luxury of hindsight and were taking decisions in

real time. He avers, "They had no idea Jinnah was dying; if they had, perhaps, things would have been different. I could be giving this interview from Karachi, an undivided India."

While he stands by all his editorial choices made in conjunction with his writing team as well as SonyLiv head Danish Khan, we wonder if making a series on a period far removed from the current dispensation puts additional pressure. His reply is cryptic, "I am telling the story of 1947, not 2024. If you are drawing any comparisons with India today, all I can say is that one thing that has not changed is the politics of this country." Advani's approach certainly undergoes a shift depending upon whether he is making a movie or a web show, since one is a sprint and the other a marathon.

For the director of successful movies like 'Kal Ho Na Ho' and 'Baatla House', OTT spells liberation from trying to figure out which formula works at the box office. He loves OTT. We will see him steer yet another historical saga on revolutionaries of the freedom movement. He shares, "Freedom fighters like Lala Hardayal, Kartar Singh Sarabha and more will figure prominently. After all, two states, Bengal and Punjab, played a stellar role."

Punjabis are special to him. He simply loves Mahabir Bhullar, who plays Master Tara Singh in 'Freedom at Midnight'. "I would cast him in every project of mine." As for his casting choices, which included rather young actors playing stalwarts, he smiles, "I could not have made Akshay Kumar play Gandhi." Seriously, he didn't want actors to play these tall leaders in his series and murderers in another and thus the pool became much smaller. But, in the end, he lauds his actors who researched voice, body language and underwent workshops for a year and a half. Net result, they emerged exactly as he wanted them.

Advani is in no quandary, "I don't stand in a disputable space. Season one begins with Gandhiji saying *batuara* over my dead body and part two closes with him making the ultimate sacrifice... Many thought that Partition will quell violence, except for one man, Gandhiji, who paid with his life for standing by his ideology. I am chasing that story."

As Rudyard Kipling said, "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten." Advani creates an unforgettable one.

# Complexity of being a migrant

BALVINDER RUBY

THE migrant journey is one of resilience, hope and uncertainty. For many who choose to uproot their lives in pursuit of better opportunities, the decision often comes at a cost — emotional, cultural and psychological. My own story, which began in the late 1990s when I left a secure job in India to migrate to Australia, is a case study of this enduring sacrifice. Today, as I see my children, now in their forties, settled in their own lives, I am confronted with a profound sense of reflection. Did I do enough for them as a father during those critical years of adjustment?

In 1999, with teenage children and a supportive spouse, I chose to leave behind a comfortable life in Chandigarh — a government job, a well-furnished home, and the stability of routine. Our children attended a prestigious school, and life seemed secure. Yet, like countless others, I envisioned a brighter future.

Australia was a blank slate. With no guarantee of work or clarity on what the future held, my focus was singular: to establish a foundation for survival. This consumed me. Finding work, integrating into a new culture, and ensuring financial stability became the immediate priorities. What I failed to see at the time was the silent toll this shift was taking on my family's mental and emotional well-being.

Migration literature often highlights the economic and social challenges of starting over, but the emotional strain on families is less discussed. Children, especially teenagers, navigate a complex web of identity, peer relationships and cultural expectations. Placing them in alien settings can create a sense of displacement that lingers well into adulthood.

In hindsight, I recognise how my singular focus on establishing ourselves in a foreign land may have unintentionally distanced me from the emotional needs of my children and wife. While I was physically present, my mind was preoccupied with survival. This is not an uncommon narrative. Scholars like Amartya Sen have highlighted the "development paradox" where economic mobility often comes at the expense of familial and emotional connections.

My children are now parents themselves, raising their own children with care and compassion. They are financially secure and in stable relationships, a testament to their resilience. Yet, I occasionally sense an unspoken void — a lingering feeling that perhaps they missed having a father who was fully present during their formative years.

This feeling is not a grievance they have voiced; it is a self-imposed reckoning. The historian and writer Robert Hughes, in 'The Fatal Shore', observed that "exile is not a location but a state of mind". For migrants, the exile is not just geographical but also emotional — a perpetual balancing act between the past and present.

The dilemma of balancing duty and affection is not new. Historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi often grappled with their responsibilities to family versus their broader missions. Gandhiji's relationship with his eldest son, Harilal, is a poignant example. While Gandhiji was deeply committed to the freedom struggle, Harilal felt abandoned, struggling with identity and a sense of neglect. This historical parallel underscores a universal truth: even the most well-intentioned sacrifices can create emotional rifts.

What, then, is the lesson? The migrant narrative, though often romanticised, is rife with complexity. It demands an acknowledgment that financial and material success cannot always compensate for emotional gaps. I am reminded of the words of Khalil Gibran in 'The Prophet': "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." These lines echo the reality that as parents, we are caretakers of not just their physical needs, but also their emotional and spiritual growth.

To my children, I owe gratitude for their silent strength and resilience. To myself, I owe forgiveness for choices made with the best intentions but imperfect foresight. And to fellow migrants, I offer this reflection: building a home in a new land is as much about nurturing bonds as it is about securing livelihoods.

The migrant story is not one of regret but of reconciliation. It is about finding ways to bridge the gaps, even decades later, and ensuring that the next generation carries forward not just the legacy of sacrifice, but also the gift of emotional presence.

— The writer is based in Sydney

## CAPTION CONTEST 1487



RAVI KUMAR

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

## SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1486



SPECTRUM NOVEMBER 24 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- Monumental steps — Sri Gopal Kaistha, New Delhi
- Wings on the wall — Neha Badsara via epaper, Bhiwani
- Steep chase — Sanju Panicker, Panchkula
- Wall street — Surendra Miglani, Kaithal
- Vertical limit — Khushpreet Singh via epaper, Ferozepur city

# How Lady Canning became ledikeni

RAHUL VERMA

THE much-loved *gulab jamun* has many variations. During a recent visit to Kolkata, I had one version — an elongated and slimmer cousin called *ledikeni*. Legend has it that it was prepared by a *halwai* in Bengal for Lady Canning to mark her birthday. The words 'Lady Canning' soon turned into 'ledikeni', which is how the sweet continues to be known.

Some of our most-loved food items come with interesting stories about the origin of their names. Some are mythical, some are true — but all equally appetising. Take the story about the sandwich. The 4th Earl of Sandwich in England loved to gamble. Once, back in the 18th century, he was so engrossed in his game that he didn't want to break for a meal. So, he asked his staff to get him something wholesome that he could eat with one hand, while he played with the other. The solution was a dish of two slices of bread with meat in it — which later took on the title of the Earl.

Some of these stories have many versions. Tales abound about the origin of the name *Eggs Benedict*. It is not a favourite dish of mine, for I don't like soft yolks in my eggs, but is a celebrated dish of poached eggs and ham or bacon on a muffin, topped with hollandaise sauce. One version has it that the dish was created in Delmonico's Restaurant in New York in the late 19th century. A regular patron — a certain Mrs Benedict — wanted something

Some of our most loved food items come with interesting tales about the origin of their names

special for lunch, and the chef came up with a dish that pleased her to no end. It consisted of poached eggs, bacon and hollandaise sauce. Another version states that it was named after a Wall Street stockbroker, Lemuel Benedict, at Waldorf-Astoria in 1894. Benedict wanted something to clear his hangover, and the answer was the dish of eggs subsequently named after him.

I like the story about the *Kakori kebab* — even though most food scholars scoff at it. The Nawab of Kakori near Lucknow had lost his teeth but not his zest for food. Since he loved meat dishes, he wanted something that wouldn't be too chewy. His chefs came up with a *kebab* that literally melted in his mouth. Another version holds that a high-ranking British officer had visited the Nawab, and complained about the hardness of the kebabs he had been served. The Nawab asked his *khanasama* to prepare something that would need no chewing — and the outcome was the airy *Kakori kebab*.

The *nargisi kofta* has a simpler story. This dish — consisting of a boiled egg wrapped in minced meat in gravy — gets its name from a flower: *nargis* or

Narcissus, which is yellow and white. I love the story about a *namkeen* called Congress *kadlekai*. This mix of *masala* peanuts got its name in 1969, when the Congress party split into two. The reference is to the peanut which has a line that divides it into two parts.

I have a Marie biscuit with my tea every morning, and never knew that it was named in 1874 after the Grand Duchess of Russia, Maria Alexandrovna, who married the Duke of Edinburgh. If you like your *peach Melba*, you may want to raise a toast to the Australian opera singer Nellie Melba. The celebrated French chef Auguste Escoffier conjured up this dessert of stewed peaches, drizzled with raspberry sauce and served with vanilla sauce or ice-cream, at the Savoy Hotel in London to celebrate her performance in 1892 or 1893. The Dame lent her name to another dish — the *Melba toast*, a thinly sliced, crisp and dry toast. Incidentally, March 23 is marked as Melba Toast Day in some parts of the world.

We should have a calendar to mark our special food days, too. Let's remember Beliram — the creator of a simple dish called *mutton Beliram*, prepared with curd, *ghee* and the usual *masalas*. One version of the story states that Beliram was Maharaja Ranjit Singh's chef. The Maharaja was so fond of this meat dish that he had it named after the chef. Another version says that Beliram had a shop in Lahore before Partition, and his mutton was so delicious that it would get sold in 30 minutes. So how about a Mutton Beliram Day?

— The writer is a food critic

## EGGS BENEDICT



### INGREDIENTS

■ Muffins (cut in half)	2
■ Ham (or bacon) slices	4
■ Eggs	4
■ White vinegar	1 tsp

### FOR HOLLANDAISE SAUCE

■ Butter	1 cup
■ Egg yolks	2
■ Cream	1 tbsp
■ Lemon juice	1 tbsp
■ Salt	To taste
■ A dash of pepper	

### METHOD

- Toast the muffin. Fry the bacon or lightly saute the ham, and keep aside. In a pot, add water and vinegar. When it boils, let it simmer, and carefully crack the four eggs into the water. Remove the eggs when the white is set and the yolk is soft.
- For the sauce, melt the butter. Blend the egg yolks, cream, pepper and salt. Add half of the melted butter to it, then the lemon juice, and finally the remaining butter in a steady stream. To serve, place an open muffin, add the ham or bacon and then the poached eggs. Drizzle the sauce on top.



# Nissim Ezekiel, my father

KAVITA EZEKIEL MENDONCA

*If I could pray, the gist of my  
Demanding would be simply this:  
Quietude. The ordered mind.  
Erasure of the inner lie,  
And only love in every kiss.  
(From 'Prayer I' by Nissim Ezekiel)*

THE year 2024 is the birth centenary of Nissim Ezekiel. For me, as his daughter, it is a time to celebrate his life firstly as a father, and then for the immense legacy he left for the literary world and his mentorship of many younger poets like Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Menka Shivdasani, Ranjit Hoskote and Sudeep Sen. He placed special emphasis on the craft of writing and on attention to careful and thoughtful revision of a poem. He created a space for poetry, both the reading of it at the PEN office in Bombay, and the publishing of poetry.

In 'Modern Indian Poetry in English' (1987), the first comprehensive overview of the field, American scholar Bruce King presented Ezekiel as a watershed in the evolution of Indian poetry in English; the poet who "brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry", separating poetry as a "hobby, something done in spare moments" from poetry as a vocation, to be pursued with "craftsmanship and purposefulness".

Ezekiel was a poet, playwright, editor, art and television critic, translator and professor. He wrote hundreds of book reviews and essays on poetry, travelling extensively in India and overseas on invitation, reading his poetry and speaking at literary events. He was invited as visiting professor at the University of Leeds in 1964 and Writer-in-Residence at the University of Singapore. By common consensus, he is remembered as the 'Father of post-colonial Indian writing in English', specifically in the field of poetry. He is also fondly known as the 'poet of Bombay'.

He was born in 1924 into a Bene Israel Indian-Jewish family in Bombay, a city he loved dearly and never wanted to leave. My father passed away in 2004.

The centenary celebrations have been ongoing throughout the year. They began with *The Nissim Ezekiel Poetry Crawl* hosted by Saranya



Nissim Ezekiel with daughter Kavita.

Subramanian, where people walked through the iconic city and poetic landmarks, stopping to read Ezekiel's poetry, and experiencing Bombay through the poet's lens. This was a part of the Mumbai Kala Ghoda Literature Festival held in January.

In August, the Sahitya Akademi held a seminar on Nissim Ezekiel's impact on Indian poetry in English. An interview conducted by Prof Malashri Lal with me about the centennial celebration volume '*Nissim Ezekiel, Poet & Father*' compiled by me, edited by Vinita Agrawal and published by Pippa Rann Books, was part of the inaugural session.

My father was a strong influence in my life in terms of the values and principles he held dear. He was always concerned about the welfare of others, especially the poor and the downtrodden. He himself was a simple man with few needs and a single-minded devotion to poetry. My name, 'Kavita', is the first bond I had with my father. My mother told me that he rejoiced at my birth as if he had written his best poem!

Though he never directly helped me with my writing, he would bring a variety of books and magazines home to encourage us to read widely. He knew I was writing poetry from the age of nine and was proud of that. He felt if he helped me with my work, it would mean to the world

that he was promoting his daughter. He did not feel that was the right choice to make. So, professionally, he was not involved in my writing. I attended his poetry readings, and he was my professor when I was doing my Master's degree at the University of Bombay.

Among my many poignant memories of him are of his daily routine and humour. At night, long after all the day's work, I could hear the creak of the old wooden stairs at 11 pm. His voice still rings in my ear, "Kavitam!", and I would know that he was home. His day was far from over. I'd see the lights in his room sometimes at 3.30 am. I would make my way to his room, knock, and call out, "Daddy, it's late. You should get some sleep." Sleep or not, he was at the PEN office by 9 am.

He took the train from Bombay Central to Churchgate after a 15-minute walk down broken sidewalks from my grandmother's home where he lived.

He never complained about anything, whether it was too hot, the train too crowded, or whether there was a caterpillar in his food at a restaurant one day! Finding the little creature in his food, he turned to a friend and exclaimed, "That must have been one very hungry caterpillar!" I promptly bought the children's book with the same name by Eric Carle. It is now one of the most beloved books on my shelf!

The poets my father admired were Rainer Maria Rilke, EE Cummings, TS Eliot, Ezra Pound and WB Yeats. He loved the writings of Henry David Thoreau.

When I retired after more than four decades of teaching, I was able to devote more time to studying his poetry in-depth. I realised that subconsciously, my poetry, like my father's, was about ordinary things and personal experiences. However, I will readily admit that it would take me many lifetimes to become a poet of his stature.

We each have our unique journeys, and I am humbled and proud to be his daughter. My father had a gift, one that he readily shared with others, giving generously his time and money to help them on their poetic journeys. Many of his poems are cherished by me, but if I have to single out one, it would be '*Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*':

*To force the pace and never to be still  
Is not the way of those who study birds  
Or women. The best poets wait for words.*



A lady in a rickshaw with liveried jampanis.

## Rickshaws in Shimla and a murder case



RAAJA BHASIN

SOMETIME in the early 1980s, we had taken cycle rickshaws while returning from a late night movie in Chandigarh's Sector 17. When we reached Madhya Marg, the central avenue, en route to the university campus, someone called out: "Let's have a race." Spontaneously, about half a dozen rickshaws disgorged their passengers. The rickshaw men, who had probably encountered similar situations before, stepped down without demur and for the moment became customers. With great fanfare and loud cries, hands on handles, feet on pedals, off we went. Within a short distance, that flourish turned to a whimper accompanied by a chorus of wheezes and coughs.

The question, without an answer, was passed around, "How do they do it?"

In the hills, given the terrain, rickshaws, till they were banned by a court order in the 1960s, were pulled by two men, pushed by another two and often had a fifth running alongside to help, or to serve as a replacement. In the absence of motor vehicles, these served as the primary means of transport in Shimla and several houses had their own rickshaws and liveried pullers — *jampanis*, as they were called.

The story is told of a rather large lady being propelled up a steep slope where on the final leg, one *jampani* cried out: "MacMunn, MacMunn, *poora das mun!*" (MacMunn, MacMunn, weighs all of 10 mun). A *mun* or *maund* was around 37 kg. The lady in question would have been Emily, wife of Lieutenant General Sir George MacMunn, Quartermaster-General whose *jampanis* were known as Faith, Hope and Charity. 'Faith' was the man at the back, for, Faith can move mountains!

Behind the gilded facade of colonial cities was another world. This was a dingy, if not dark, underside that polished the surface and gave it its gloss. For Shimla, this luminescence came in the shape of the resources of an entire subcontinent and in the labour of hundreds of workers. Some came from the neighbouring hill states, others from Ladakh, or territories of the North West Frontier Province, now in Pakistan.

The Pathans became known for their hardiness, and as the daredevil drivers of *tongas* with their 'hard held ponies' that plied on the Kalka-Shimla road till the arrival of the railway in 1903. Kashmiris and Ladakhis handled odd jobs. From the surrounding hills, women came to work as *aayas*, nursemaids and

men as rickshaw-pullers. The *aayas* and some other domestic servants were marginally better off than the others. At least for the period of their employment, they had food and a roof over their heads. Among the worst off were the rickshaw-men and in 1931, Shimla had 476 rickshaws and 2,863 licensed rickshaw-men — implying that a substantial portion of the town's population was of rickshaw-pullers. They lived in abysmal conditions, often on a rack above the rickshaws that they plied. There was minimal or no access to clean water or the amenities of basic hygiene.

It was only in the years close to Independence that better living conditions were made available in the shape of 'labour hostels and rickshaw sheds'; a couple of these structures survive.

In the same years, in the context of a small cottage with a grandiose name, a wag remarked that it "...would be in keeping with the Shimla practice of calling little things by big names". The trend seems to have spilled over post Independence and a house en route to Barnes' Court, today's Raj Bhavan, has pressed on to metamorphose from 'Yates' Place' to 'Yates' Palace'. In 1925, this was occupied by the head of the army canteen board, Mansel-Pleydell. On September 3 that year, Mansel-Pleydell was hosting a dinner and the rickshaws were lined outside his house, while their pullers whiled away their time as they waited for their passengers.

A man named Jageshwar was asleep under a covering when Mansel-Pleydell came out to summon the men. Jageshwar got entangled in whatever he had over him and this enraged Mansel-Pleydell, who kicked him repeatedly and pushed him around till the man collapsed. Among the terrified and mute witnesses was the hapless man's cousin, who later carried Jageshwar to the nearby police station at Chhota Shimla and asked for his statement to be recorded. As the man on duty did not do so, their *chaudhri*, headman, ran up to the house of Rai Bahadur Mohan Lal — all these places were within a few hundred metres of each other. Mohan Lal was an influential councillor and a close associate of Gandhiji. It was only on Mohan Lal's insistence that a case was registered at the Sadar Thana, the main police station below the Lower Bazaar. Meanwhile, Jageshwar died of broken ribs and a ruptured spleen.

Despite pressure to hush up the affair, the matter went to trial and the Press picked up the story and reported it almost blow by blow. Mansel-Pleydell was convicted and sentenced to a fine and rigorous imprisonment of a year-and-a-half. In years when all-too-common assaults on 'natives' could no longer be pushed under the carpet, his appeal to the High Court was dismissed and he committed suicide in prison.

—The writer is a Shimla-based author

## We are all human, only human

GURU NANAK's profound message, '*Ek Onkar*', is simple to understand. It is the assertion of the oneness of God, which underscores the unity of all creation and reminds us of our shared existence beyond divisions of race, religion, caste, creed, or status.

When we look at the divisiveness caused by "My God, your God", we have just to remember that there is one God, and we use many names for Him. Indeed, recognising humanity as one is fundamental to our being.

The modern world has made intercontinental travel easy enough, and as we see different parts of the world, we notice the similarities in human experience. We could focus on superficial differences, but we must resist the temptation and seek commonalities.

We saw an architectural expression of this during a trip to Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia. The Universal Temple, or Temple of All Religions, built by Ildar Khanov, a local artist, had religious architectural elements from 16 faiths. The visually arresting diversity in the same building was uplifting. Other trips gave us different insights.

In *Guru Granth Sahib*, Bhagat Kabir says, '*Aurval Allah Noor Upaya, Kudrat Ke Sab Bandedy/Ek Noor Te Sab Jag Upajya, Koun*

UNIVERSE  
ROOPINDER SINGH

*Bhalley Ko Mandey/Loga Bham Na Bhoolau Bhai.*" He asserts: "Allah created the Light and made all mortal beings; From the One Light, came the entire universe, so who is good, and who is bad? People, do not get deluded and meander."

How can we apply these lofty principles in our daily lives? We actively fight the notions that take us on the divisive path. We see other people as human beings — not limiting them to their caste, creed or religion.

In the Indian context, secularism has long been seen as respecting various religious beliefs. Indeed, as children, we often visit friends' homes without bothering about their religion or caste until the age-old prej-

udices passed on by elders intrude upon childish innocence. We must cling to this "childish" innocence and not let boundaries creep in where none are necessary.

Of course, there are differences. Guru Nanak emphasised the need to recognise different paths to God. He also stressed following the teachings of one's religion with diligence and devotion to become a better human. There are instances where he chides those who profess to be religious leaders but are not true to one's faith.

The Gurus taught us that true peace and happiness comes by following the injunctions of '*Naam Japna*' (meditation in God's name), '*Kirat Kami*' (honest work), and '*Vand Chhakna*' (sharing with others). These practices foster a life of humility and selflessness, encouraging us to see the Divine in every person and live in harmony with one another. In short, happiness results from living in harmony with oneself and others.

We seek the Divine who is within us. Once we are at peace with ourselves, we are also at peace with the world around us. We are tolerant towards others and more forgiving towards those who fail to meet our expectations. After all, we are all human, only human!

—The writer is a senior journalist

Once we are at peace with ourselves, we are at peace with the world around us

## Himalayan brown dipper, aquatic acrobat of the mountains

PARTH JOSHI

WALKING along the banks of Palachan river deep in the Kullu valley in Himachal Pradesh on a cold winter morning, a dash of brown in the middle of the river caught my eye, just for an instant. It disappeared into the freezing water, only to reappear on a boulder some distance away, frantically repeating this process going up and down the river. It was a Himalayan brown dipper, a bird whose remarkable abilities belie its plain appearance.

The Himalayan brown dipper (*Cinclus palasi*) is a riverine bird found in the cold, fast-flowing streams and rivers of mountainous regions — across the Himalayan belt, from Afghanistan and northern Pakistan in the west, through India, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, to parts of China and northern South-east Asia, at elevations ranging from 1,000 to 4,500 metres above the sea level.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Himalayan brown dipper is its ability to dive underwater to forage for food. Unlike most

birds in the mountains, which are primarily terrestrial (ground-dwelling) or arboreal (tree-dwelling), dippers have adapted to an aquatic lifestyle, almost like seabirds.

They possess strong legs and large webbed feet that enable them to grip wet and slippery rocks and navigate swift river currents, while the brownish-grey feathers with a thick layer of fat provide excellent camouflage as well as insulation against the cold water. Nasal flaps prevent water from entering their nostrils while diving, and their eyes are equipped with an additional membrane to protect them underwater. Such a list of unique adaptations enables the dipper to feed on food like aquatic insects, larvae and small invertebrates, with little competition.

The Himalayan brown dippers are solitary and territorial birds, and only migrate short distances up and down their altitudinal range with changes in weather. They are often seen perched on rocks in the middle of streams, bobbing or 'dipping' up and down — a behaviour that is thought to help them spot prey underwater, and also gives them their common name: 'dipper'. While they can also feed in shallow waters or along the



PHOTO BY THE WRITER

With its unique adaptations and vital ecological role, this riverine bird is a silent steward of mountain rivers

banks, the requirement of extra food during the mating season compels them to dive into deeper waters in search of prey.

The bird serves as an important bioindicator — species whose presence and health reflect the overall quality of its surrounding environment. Clean, unpolluted and well-oxygenated water is essential for the aquatic insects and larvae that the bird feeds on, meaning the dipper thrives only in pristine river ecosystems. Conversely, their absence can indicate pollution, reduced water flow, or ecological degradation, making them a valuable sentinel species for environmental monitoring.

Despite their inherently resilient nature, the Himalayan brown dippers face several threats. The construction of dams and diversion of rivers disrupt their natural flow, altering habitats and reducing the availability of prey. Loss of forest cover near riverbanks leads to erosion and sedimentation, while increased human activity, including unsustainable tourism, waste disposal and construction too close to streams and rivers, disturbs its nesting and feeding areas.

Due to climate change, rising tempera-

tures and melting glaciers are altering river dynamics, affecting the habitat and food sources. In lower altitudes of its habitat, industrial waste, agricultural runoff and untreated sewage also tend to reduce water quality, affecting the availability of prey.

On the banks of the Palachan river though, all was well for now, the crystal-clear water wearing dual shades of milky white and emerald green as it roared down the valley. The dipper seemed to be delighting in these pristine surroundings as much as its observer, making several dives into the frigid water, welcoming the bountiful harvest that lay underneath.

The Himalayan brown dipper, with its unique adaptations and vital ecological role, is more than just a bird — it is a silent steward of mountain rivers. Its survival is intertwined with the well-being of some of the planet's most fragile and vital ecosystems, and the communities that depend on it. As we marvel at the dipper's ability to navigate rushing torrents, let it also remind us of nature's ingenuity and resilience — and our responsibility to protect and nurture it.

—The writer is a climate expert and outdoor enthusiast



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