



SATURDAY, MARCH 8 2025

lounge

EMBRACING GREAT ART

Gulammohammed Sheikh's retrospective at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi distils a lifetime's mastery over art and its healing powers. Despite its cerebral focus, Sheikh's art rests on an abiding faith in humanism.

SEE PAGE 11



TEXTILES SECTOR EYES ZERO TARIFFS IN INDIA-US TRADE | PAGE 16



SWEET SPOT

GOING OUT FOR DESSERT IS AN ACTIVITY IN ITSELF. LOUNGE PICKS 25 FAVOURITE DESSERT DESTINATIONS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY



THINK  
A seasoned speaker spills the tea on lit fest fiascos

TASTE  
*Bring spring to your kitchen*

STREAM OF STORIES  
Oscars 2025, 'Anora' and the fabulous Baker boy

BUSINESS LOUNGE  
*Meet K.P. Singh of DLF*

A NOTE FROM  
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

Room for  
dessert

ISTOCKPHOTO



This week's cover really put our writers through the wringer—we had to taste countless Basque cheesecakes, choux pastries, kunafa bars and other confections in half a dozen cities before we picked what we think are the 25 best spots for dessert. It was deliciously hard work to put together a list of spaces that make dessert the destination, the main character of the menu, an experience in itself.

Going out for ice cream—to scoop spots like Corner House in Bengaluru, Naturals Ice Cream in Mumbai or Snofield in Chennai—was always a way for families to have some fun on a Sunday evening, but chefs have now elevated the family night out, serving beautiful, delicious desserts in spaces that are unique and interesting in themselves. They're giving new meaning to the reminder to "leave room for dessert".

We didn't decide to find India's best sweet spots on a whim or because we wanted to eat a lot of dessert (that was just the icing on the cake, okay, no more puns). We really wanted to remember the simple joy of sinking a spoon into a well-made tiramisu, feeling and hearing the layers as the spoon slip-cuts through, and tasting it without feeling any guilt. If you're out for dinner now, it's likely that at least a third of the table will say they don't eat sugar, and then enumerate the many ways in which it will ruin you (and yes, we might contradict ourselves and do a cover on bad sugar too, in future). The best reaction is to say, "good, leaves more dessert for the rest of us" and order, but then there's always the edge of guilt while you scrape the bowl and lick the spoon. We're not denying that the sugar haters are right—they do have lots of research on their side—but if you're a healthy, happy person, we're suggesting you quiet the voices of doom for a moment and enjoy our list of some of the best desserts in the country.

Other good reads include an account of a writer's bizarre experiences at lit fests and a look at why athletic records are tumbling every other week. Gulammohammed Sheikh walks us through his *Of Worlds Within Worlds*, a grand retrospective of his brilliant life at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi.

Quite a few sweet spots in these pages.

Write to the editor at [shalini.umachandran@htlive.com](mailto:shalini.umachandran@htlive.com)  
✉@shalinimb

NEW ON SCREENS

The director of 'Parasite' returns with a sci-fi dark comedy film, a documentary shot within a video game and other titles



THE LEOPARD

Netflix takes on another literary classic after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *The Leopard* was a 1958 novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, about an aristocratic family in 19th century Sicily. It was made into an acclaimed 1963 film by Luchino Visconti, now adapted as a six-episode series. (Netflix)

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

One of the more acclaimed Marvel television ventures was *Daredevil*, which ran from 2015-18. Fans saw its gritty tone, violence and impressive action sequences as a welcome change of tone from the big screen MCU films. Cancelled after three seasons, the show has been revived and continued as the series *Daredevil: Born Again*, with most of the original cast returning. Charlie Cox stars as the blind crimefighter Daredevil, while Vincent D'Onofrio is the main antagonist, Kingpin. Also starring Deborah Ann Woll and Jon Bernthal as The Punisher. Created by Dario Scardapane along with Matt Corman and Chris Ord. (Disney+ Hotstar)



Compiled by Uday Bhatia

MICKEY 17

Korean director Bong Joon-ho returns after *Parasite*, perhaps the most significant Best Picture Oscar win of the last 25 years. His new sci-fi film is based on a 2022 novel by Edward Ashton, and stars Robert Pattinson, Naomi Ackie and Mark Ruffalo. (In theatres)



GRAND THEFT HAMLET

During the covid lockdown in the UK, Sam Crane and Mark Oosterveen attempted a production of the Shakespeare play *Hamlet* in the video game *Grand Theft Auto*. The documentary *Grand Theft Hamlet*, directed by Crane and Pinny Grylls. (MUBI)



PLAN THE WEEK  
AHEAD



SLUMBER OR SILENCE?

Delhi-based Pristine Contemporary gallery is presenting *In the Land of Dreams*, a solo exhibition by Iranian artist Ebrahim Barfarazi. A set of 18 canvases feature people in different stages of sleep. The artist uses this slumber as a metaphor for people's silence as the world around spirals into disorder. In the artist note, Barfarazi says the works are a commentary on the condition of human consciousness. "My hope is that these works serve as a mirror, one that urges us to wake up before it's too late," he states. This is in sync with the artist's overall practice of showing intensive, symbolic and introspective work.

At *Pristine Contemporary*, New Delhi, till 10 April, 10.30am-6pm (Monday to Friday).



THE IDEA OF SPACE

Artist-architect Martand Khosla is presenting his first exhibition in Mumbai, titled *Escape Velocity* at Nature Morte. Through sculptures and dimensional drawings, Khosla challenges perceptions of space, material and movement. According to an exhibition note, Khosla's works challenge us to look at how structures might be at once gravity-bound and simultaneously liberated from it. He works with diverse materials such as wood and metal, but removes them from their actual function through processes such as bending, cutting and burning.

At *Nature Morte*, Mumbai, till 12 April, 11am-7 pm (closed on Sunday).

—Compiled by Avantika Bhuyan

LOUNGE  
ONLINE

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NOW THROUGH  
THE WEEK

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from the week gone by



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WEAR

A make-up guide for  
that glow at any age

Finding the right make-up routine for mature skin can be challenging. Skin is generally drier, and layering too many products, whether foundation or primer, is not the best idea, given they might make pores and fine lines more visible. Plus, much of the information online and trends are directed towards younger skin. Recent appearances of celebrities like Jane Fonda and Demi Moore on the red carpet, however, offer examples of some simple steps and ample self-confidence keeping keep the skin shining no matter what one's age. **Dhara Vora Sabhnani** speaks with celebrity hair and make-up artist Pooja Rohira Fernandes to put together a simple make-up routine for glowing mature skin.



DRINK

Bartender, make  
mine non-vegetarian

A handful of bars in India now have non-vegetarian ingredients in their cocktails. At Bumipura in Mumbai, founder Ming Yang Chai offers options like crab in a drink called Gloves and Bibs, chicken in another cocktail named Old Hen and a mutton libation Fat in Between. Bengaluru's newest Siren-Cocktail Bar features the drink Peking Duck, which aims to translate the popular dish's savoury notes with duck fat-washed whisky and hoisin sauce, among other ingredients. In Kolkata, Sienna's new bar menu has both a seafood and a chicken drink. Creating non-vegetarian drinks can be challenging. **Priyanko Sarkar** examines this growing trend and how bartenders are pushing boundaries.



LIVE

AI contest heats up:  
It's Apple vs Google

Next month, if you have one of the eligible iPhones, iPads or Macs, Apple's generative AI features will become available via a software update, giving you access to all of Apple's shiny, new Artificial Intelligence tools to play with. Google phones already have AI baked in, with features such as live transcription of audio recordings, an AI image editor to retouch photographs, a window to create whimsical images using Google's AI engine and more. The widespread rollout of AI features across Apple products may prompt more Android brands to offer similar features. **Shouvik Das** finds out how these features stack up against one another in terms of functionality and user experience.



TRIBUTE

The intensity of artist  
Himmat Shah

Artist Himmat Shah brought a certain intensity to any medium that he worked with, be it his bronze sculptures, drawings or burnt paper collages. The artist, aged 91, died on 2 March in Jaipur, and since then tributes have been pouring in from across the art ecosystem. Everyone is united in remembering his distinct visual language that drew from local traditions while pushing the boundaries of form and medium. In this tribute put together by **Avantika Bhuyan**, curators, gallerists and artists mentored by him remember the reverence with which Shah treated the process of creating art. For him, it was not the final artwork that was significant but the act itself, and that made him a special artist.



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# Source

A compendium of pretty objects that make a multicolour splash



**SHOW BAG**  
**Paul Smith Women's 'Dusky Swirl' Leather Hobo Bag**  
Crafted from luxurious leather, the hobo bag features the house's staple faded "Swirl" print throughout. Available on Paulsmith.com; ₹77,900.



**COLOUR WAVE**  
**Missoni Sleeveless Chevron Lamé Dress**  
Sleeveless halter neck mini-dress features a lamé chevron knit embellished with sequins. Available on Missoni.com; ₹1.67 lakh.



**FLORAL SHEEN**  
**Organza Garden Print Shirt**  
Relaxed-fit shirt made with organza features dropped shoulders, Cuban collar and a vivid garden print. Available on Geneslecoanethe-mant.com; ₹6,999.



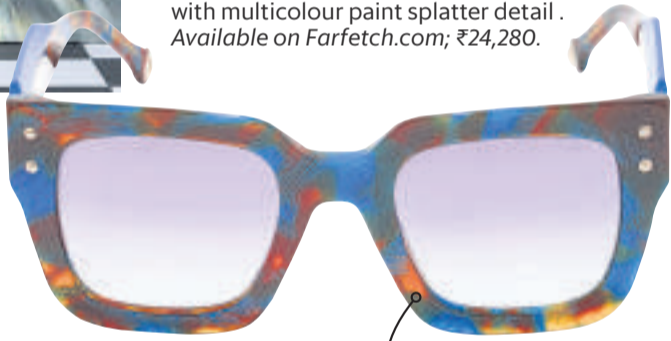
**RAINBOW SILK**  
**Raw Mango 'Satpura' Sari**  
Silk sari with woven multicoloured Madras checks in rani pink, lime and emerald green, and a lime palla. Available on Rawmango.com; ₹49,900.



**SHADE CARD**  
**Christopher John Rogers 'Crayon' Striped Twill Shirt**  
Multicoloured shirt cut from striped twill in a slim shape with dropped shoulders. Available on Net-a-porter.com; ₹85,081.



**SOLE PLAY**  
**Giuseppe Zanotti Frankie Paint-Splatter Sneakers**  
Round toe lace-up fastening shoes with multicolour paint splatter detail. Available on Farfetch.com; ₹24,280.



**TEMPLE TONE**  
**Carolina Herrera Square Frame Sunglasses**  
Sunglasses crafted from tortoiseshell acetate with contrasting outline on the temples. Available on Carolinaherrera.com; ₹29,748.



**BRACE-UP**  
**Lauren Rubinski 'Strength' Bracelet**  
Chunky bracelet with sterling silver beads that spell "Strength" and rainbow enamel beads. Available on Net-a-porter.com; ₹1.07 lakh.

Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

## LOUNGE LOVES

Things to watch, read, hear, do—and other curated experiences from the team



**MILK WITHOUT MILK**  
Nut milks and non-dairy alternatives are easily available in most cafes, but going off milk in India can still be quite a trial since getting non-fat milks to foam precisely for a cappuccino is a challenge many baristas aren't up to. Getting the ratio can be a toughie too, especially with almond milk, which tends to separate if added to hot coffee too quickly. I've switched to black coffee since cafes in most cities make an abysmal almond milk cappuccino—by just replacing the milk but not really working on technique of warming rather than heating. On a recent Sunday though, at the restored Ajji House by Subko in Bengaluru, I decided to try an almond milk cappuccino and was impressed by how beautifully the barista had crafted it with the perfect foam and creaminess that didn't overwhelm the taste of the coffee.  
—Shalini Umachandran



**SCARE TACTICS**  
Listening to episodes of the award-winning podcast *Lore* is like huddling under the blanket on a cold night, feeling chills go up your spine as a master raconteur tells ghost stories. In every episode, host Aaron Mahnke tells you a story that originates in folklore but has real-world origins and consequences, usually dark ones. Many of the episodes are related to American traditions but there are exceptions, and often folklore seems to have resonances across cultures, which are fascinating to explore. The very first episode I heard, about the enduring horror that surrounds stories about asylums with terrible goings on (season 1, episode 6, *Echoes*), was enough to get me hooked. *Lore* is for lovers of Gothic fiction and anyone who enjoys horror.  
—Shrabonti Bagchi



**EXPERIMENTAL BEATS**  
Every year since it began in 2023, the Mahindra Percussion Festival has managed to entice me solely with the artists it invites. This year, I discovered SNAX there, a Chennai-based band formed by mridangam player Sumesh Narayanan and drummer Ramkumar Kanakarajan. Performing a set list of compositions from their latest album, *Thriller*, they introduced the audience to their experiments of mixing electronica samples with pure beats. Their single *Headbang to a Deathband* is a must listen. High on tempo, the act was proof that artists who are masters of their craft will always find their audience when they collaborate to create their own kind of music.  
—Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran



**THE VERSATILE KALARI**  
A recent conference in Delhi on the culture of milk had an interesting tasting session. Chris Zandee, a Dutchman settled in Pahalgam, brought with him a selection of cheese made by his venture, Himalayan Cheese, in the Kashmir valley. The highlight among these was the *kalari*, which is typically made by local pastoralists. The cheese was paired in a myriad ways with seasonal local produce by Dhruv Oberoi, executive chef, Olive Qutub and The Grammar Room. The tasting was significant because the conversation around homegrown artisanal cheese is on a rise yet there is still very little awareness about indigenous cheese such as the *kalari*. To me, the sheer versatility of the *kalari* is interesting—it tastes equally good raw, paired with *jamun* jam, grilled with *kulcha* or fried with tomatoes.  
—Avantika Bhuyan



STREAM OF  
STORIES  
RAJA SEN

## The fabulous Baker boy



Sean Baker's *Anora* won four Oscars.

AFP

The entertainment industry has been vocally resistant to Artificial Intelligence, believing that unchecked usage will endanger the work of writers and visual artists. It is ironic, then, that one of the most emphatic arguments in its favour was made at this year's Academy Awards, when Conan O'Brien attempted to speak in Hindi—and sounded far worse than Siri ever did. O'Brien, 61, has always been an atypical and freewheeling talk show host, but he handled the biggest stage in unmemorable fashion. The 97th annual Academy Awards (streaming in India on JioHotstar) were a lacklustre affair, better read about than watched live.

I love award show pageantry. A couple of weeks ago Kristen Bell killed it while hosting The Screen Actors Guild Awards (Netflix) and a couple of weeks before that, David Tennant brought the house down with the British Academy Film Awards. Compared to those clever, witty shows—and efficiently timed ones, coming in at just over 2 hours—the Oscars, weighing in at nearly 4 four hours, were an interminable drag. Also, the 50th anniversary special of *Saturday Night Live* in February actually featured the one thing the Oscars may currently be missing most: Jack Nicholson in the front row, wearing sunglasses and a grin.

The Oscars are supposed to be the most glamorous night in cinema. Where, then, are the A-listers, sitting in the front rows joshing affably with the host? Where are Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie, Meryl Streep and Leonardo DiCaprio? Where is George Clooney, turning on that effervescent charm? Are we truly running out of movie stars? Where on earth is The Rock when we need someone larger than life? (Please tell me he isn't already putting together an inevitable campaign to run for President.)

Instead here we are, forced to sit through forgettable music performances, the most painful of which was a tribute to James Bond that featured many current singers messing up iconic theme tunes: Lisa of the K-pop band Blackpink sang Paul McCartney's *Live and Let Die*, popstar Doja Cat sang Dame Shirley Bassey's *Diamonds are Forever*, and the British singer Raye sang Adele's *Skyfall*. This pointless 007 "tribute" officially kicks off the Amazon-Bond years: a time of remakes and reboots. Imagine, instead, Adele taking the stage to hit those high notes. Nobody does it better.

Still, these Oscars are worth celebrating because the best film won. Sean Baker's *Anora*—which I wrote about in last week's column—won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Editing and Best Actress for Mikey Madison. This unanimous sweep for a fiercely independent film, a film made for \$6 million, is a heartening thing. *Anora* did indeed win the top prize, the Palme d'Or, at the Cannes Film Festival last year, but rarely do these lines interject, with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences preferring more mainstream flagbearers. Whenever they do intersect—most recently with Bong Joon-Ho's 2019 film *Parasite*—the result is thrilling.

It's delicious, for instance, to see Madison winning Best Actress ahead of the odds-on favourite Demi Moore, nominated for the (overrated) body horror film *The Substance*. Conventional Oscar wisdom dictated a Moore victory, capping off decades spent in the movies, but instead Madison's many efforts—which included learning Russian and pole-dancing—were recognised. As gifted young Oscar winner Emma Stone handed the Oscar statue to Madison, it felt palpably exciting. Winners with their careers ahead of them are winners who can shape the trajectory of Hollywood itself.

Quentin Tarantino was the one giving out the Best Director trophy, making it one indie outsider with a distinctive voice passing the baton to another. Baker, who first thanked Tarantino for casting Madison in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* where Baker spotted her, took the opportunity to make a case for the big-screen movie experience, one that is increasingly under threat. "In a time in which the world can feel very divided, this is more important than ever," he said. "It's a communal experience you simply don't get at home. If we don't reverse this trend, we'll be losing a vital part of our culture. This is my battle cry."

Sean Baker is a street poet. *Tangerine*, shot on an iPhone, is a riotous sprint through Hollywood's fringes, a dazzling, donut-fuelled odyssey of survival. *The Florida Project* takes us into the pastel purgatory of a motel near Disney World, where childhood glows neon against economic despair. His cinema is urgent, intimate, and irresistibly human, and I'm so glad to see his work resonating this way, across juries, across audiences. At this ceremony, he became the only other person—after Walt Disney in 1954—to win four Oscars in one night. Take a bow, you fabulous Baker boy.

One Conan O'Brien line resonated, however. As the show dragged on and on, the lanky Irish comedian grinned at us: "For those enjoying the show, you have something called Stockholm Syndrome." This doesn't feel like a joke. I've been setting alarms to wake up for the Oscars for so many years that I can't quite explain why I do it anymore. Do awards matter? Do they go to the right people? Like democracy, awards most frequently exasperate. Yet I'll be up at dawn next year again, because the Oscars do matter. They will make more people around the world watch *The Brutalist* and *Emilia Perez* and *Anora*. Now there's a prize.

Raja Sen is a screenwriter and critic. He has co-written *Chup*, a film about killing critics, and is now creating an absurd comedy series. He posts @rajasen.

### STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, an irresistible and unforgettable satire, is streaming in India on Sony Liv. A wickedly elegant thriller, it slithers through class warfare, morphing from dark comedy to horror with hypnotic precision and brutal wit.

# ‘Sati’ was real. But it was also great propaganda



PAST PARTICIPLE  
MANU S PILLAI

In 1818 the rani of Travancore confronted a strange problem. A woman called Veeramma, widow of an immigrant soldier, wished to burn herself with his remains. Permission was denied, only for Veeramma to stage a protest. But the rani was firm—*sati* was not recognised in Kerala. On the contrary, custom offered women a different set of options here. The rani’s mother, for instance, had “repudiated” her first husband, married a second, and on his death, taken a third. The rani herself, having retired her “deranged” first husband, promptly chose his replacement from seven or eight candidates. The idea of a woman burning for a husband was preposterous not just to the queen but to her people at large.

In Malabar up north when two women wished to burn, similarly, locals “declared themselves against it”; the ladies had to travel to Coimbatore to perform the rite. After all, Kerala’s elite non-Brahmin groups were largely matrilineal—and whose widows remarried—while patrilineal Brahmins too had a ban on *sati*. The practice felt altogether alien on Malayali soil, therefore.

Outside Kerala and a few such pockets, however, *sati* did occur. Yet widow-burning is a subject that triggers many Indians today. Some deny it altogether, taking refuge in that tedious defence: “It is all British propaganda.” It is true that there was much ridiculous propaganda in the colonial period—more on that below—but *sati* was no British-invented

fiction. Another retort is that *sati* was a response to Islamic violence—it was to avoid falling into the hands of Muslims that Hindu women began to climb onto their husbands’ funeral pyres. But what then of the fact that references to *sati* exist in, say, the Tamil *Puranamuru*, the composition of which predates the first Islamic invasions of India by centuries? Or that a pillar inscription at Eran in Madhya Pradesh records the 510 CE immolation of a royal widow, one hundred years before Islam as a religion was even founded? The Greek writer Diodorus even records a case in the 300s BCE of an Indian fighter in Persia, whose death saw his two widows quarrel over the honour of going up in flames with his body.

So, yes, *sati* was very much part of Hindu society. But it is also true that foreign writers—part scandalised, part transfixed by such “exotic” customs—gave it all kinds of strange origin myths. Indians for one cast *sati* as a matter of wifely fidelity, good behaviour and even heroism. With outsiders, this logic was twisted. The same Diodorus, thus, explained its genesis as follows: apparently in India, people married “independently of the wishes of their parents”, with the callow youth frivolously choosing partners. But as often happens, couples fought, got bored and otherwise came to regret decisions made in the heat of passion. Since divorce was barred, women began to poison their husbands, thereby freeing themselves from bad marriages. When the male species figured this out, they devised *sati* as insurance—if men were to die, their wives would have to burn!

Over 1,500 years later, Europeans were still repeating this theory—*sati* as brown women’s fault for being too lustful, treacherous and untrustworthy. It was a measure to keep them from resorting to those vials of poison.



‘A Hindu Custom now Suppressed: Preparations for a Sutte’, 1908; from ‘Harmsworth History of the World, Volume 2’. GETTY IMAGES

Into the colonial period, *sati* appeared regularly in European travelogues; indeed, most writers felt obliged to feature it in their works. Many claimed to be eyewitnesses. Some truly were, but others lied, simply rehashing previous writings to add texture to their own accounts. Responses too were not uniform: if certain Europeans were left in horror by the sight of widow-burning, others felt a degree of awe also at the composure of some of the women. In 1789, for instance, Benjamin Crowninshield, an American, wrote in detail about a *sati* in Bengal, jotting down

details on the woman’s posture, the way Brahmins advised her to place her hands and so on. While he pitied the lady, he could not help but add that there was something “very solemn” in the proceedings. “I did not think it was in the power of a human person to meet death in such a manner.” Earlier, in 1710, as many as 47 widows of the Ramnad rajah became *satis*. And while several carried themselves with stoicism, there were others in a state of “abstraction and bewilderment”. Unsurprisingly, one even attempted (and failed) to escape.

*Sati*’s occurrence varied from region

to region and often caste to caste. Bengal in the colonial period saw the highest numbers—hundreds every year in the official count—while in the Madras and Bombay presidencies the figures were typically in the double digits. So, from a total of 6,632 *satis* recorded between 1815 and 1824, only 635 occurred outside Bengal. And all this from a population of tens of millions.

Even in earlier times, the statistical incidence of *sati* could not have been too high. While memorial stones are strewn across India, their numbers, when placed against the size of the

country and its population, suggests it was not an everyday affair. The very fact, that *satis* were commemorated this way—as with hero stones celebrating warriors fallen in battle—indicates it was a rare enough event. Which is not to say that these fewer deaths were acceptable—even in the case Crowninshield witnessed there were men with sticks ready to push the widow down should she try to run. Considering that reports exist even of child “widows”, every one of those 6,632 cases is tragic.

In the 19th century, however, with Christian missionaries entering the fray and the government (rightly) under pressure to outlaw *sati*, the propaganda battle to achieve this (wrongly) saw wild numbers being aired. This was also linked to the goal of conversion, which necessitated depicting the “native” as sunk in a barbaric religion—and what better, more shocking proof of such barbarism as *sati*? William Ward, for instance, estimated two *satis* per village in India, and arrived at a figure of 10,000 annual *satis* (oblivious, of course, that in territories such as the Travancore rani’s, there were 0 *satis*, and a woman like Veeramma was even offered a financial incentive to stay alive). Whatever their motives, the white man’s criticism roused Indians—and specifically Bengalis—to urge state intervention to put an end to a cruel tradition. While an orthodox faction resisted, most of Hindu society accepted the shift. Yet as the scholar Julia Leslie observes, even if *sati* figures were always technically low, this kind of death was still “reverenced”, creating a certain ideal for women. Which perhaps explains why as late as 1987, India still witnessed a stray case of widow immolation.

Manu S. Pillai is a historian and author, most recently, of *Gods, Guns and Missionaries*.

## A series of unfortunate lit fest events

A seasoned speaker spills the tea on lit fest fiascos, from managing venue mix-ups to indulging writers’ whims

Rahul Jacob

Imagine a literary festival not as encounters with favourite authors or listening to fascinating debates but instead as embarrassing onstage debacles, serialised episodes of misadventures that metamorphose in the mind into a very public pillorying. With this season’s calendar of lit fests, in locations as diverse as Jaipur and Thimphu, coming to an end, my bizarre experiences at Sri Lanka’s Galle Literary Festival last month reminded me of my accident-prone run on stage.

Consider my first invitation to moderate a panel for the Hong Kong Literary Festival in March 2003. The festival was held amid reports from southern China of a new, often deadly, virus. Within a couple of weeks of the festival, Hong Kong itself was reeling from the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS. One of the authors who pulled out was an obscure Turkish writer on the panel I was moderating. On the same panel was a British writer whose work had been part of what is referred to as AIDS denialism in the 1990s. A series of articles for *The Sunday Times*, of which Neville Hodgkinson was the science editor, had argued that the AIDS epidemic in Africa was a myth and that antiviral treatments were ineffective. Staring at what remained of the lineup the evening before, I wondered whether the panel was an elaborate prank. But the grim reality the next morning was worse than I had catastrophised.

My disastrous debut in Hong Kong has been followed by other mishaps at literary festivals from Beijing to Boulder. In Beijing, a taxi driver drove off with my suitcase. This run of bad luck continued at the Galle Literary Festival (GLF) in February, which was so shambolically organised it sometimes felt as if it were fiction: Except that the unsuitable, out-of-the-way accommodation without breakfast for speakers and to erratic transport options that arrived too early or too late and frequent bungling was sometimes near unimaginable. Minutes before an interview I was doing in Galle with Lakshman Joseph-de Saram, the



founder and artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Colombo on 8 February, I discovered there was no seating organised for the audience and the speakers, and not even microphones.

**A JINX IN THE MIX**

I have grandiosely come to believe I am the jinx that contributes to such fiascos, akin to Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, the narrator who sees events in his life as contributing to wrong turns in newly independent India. My reel of mishaps includes Arvind Subramanian, then chief economic adviser to the government of India, cancelling a couple of hours before the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) session on the Indian economy I was moderating a decade ago because his flight was delayed by Delhi’s predictably unpredictable January fog. This meant I made my way to a stage that morning before more than 10,000 people, having just torn up my questions and improvised as chaotic as anything I have witnessed. Noticing that the *Life of Pi* author Yann Martel was in the audience, I opened the Q-and-A early to use him as an additional panellist. He argued in favour of believing in religion, a counterpoint to Nasrin’s denunciation of organised religion as responsible for patriarchy and many of society’s ills. At the end, an American woman attendee pulled me aside. “You know by allowing that author all those questions,” she said indicating Martel,

admired her courage, and her novel *Lajja*, which examines how religious fanaticism corrodes a society. The controversy around the book resulted in her having to seek exile in Sweden after militant Islamists threatened to kill her.

On my way to the opening dinner the night before my panel, I decided that the only way to salvage the discussion was to centre it around Nasrin. To avoid having to introduce Hodgkinson, whose *Sunday Times* articles had been critiqued by the scientific journal *Nature* in a 1993 editorial as “seriously mistaken, and probably disastrous,” I thought I would have the two panellists introduce themselves and then put most of the questions to Nasrin. But that evening, Nasrin appeared to take as a personal affront that I did not speak Bengali, despite growing up in Kolkata because I had gone to boarding school in north India. She was completely unsympathetic to the problems of the session ahead.

The next morning, the discussion was as chaotic as anything I have witnessed. Noticing that the *Life of Pi* author Yann Martel was in the audience, I opened the Q-and-A early to use him as an additional panellist. He argued in favour of believing in religion, a counterpoint to Nasrin’s denunciation of organised religion as responsible for patriarchy and many of society’s ills. At the end, an American woman attendee pulled me aside. “You know by allowing that author all those questions,” she said indicating Martel,



Actor and playwright Manav Kaul (left) and economist Esther Duflo at Jaipur Literature Festival.

I have grandiosely come to believe I am the jinx akin to Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, who sees events in his life mirroring India’s wrong turns

“you just participated in what this panel was all about: the oppression of women by men.” The discussion was, in fact, titled “Writing for Change”.

**WHEN STORIES COME ALIVE**

I sometimes wonder why I keep going back. The truth is there is something thrilling about seeing hundreds, and on occasion thousands, of people, raply listening to authors speak about their books or to historians taking them back a couple of millennia. It was hard not to be moved by my first time at JLF while listening to a scholar of Pali from Sri Lanka reading from the *Therigatha*, poems by Buddhist nuns in India 2,000 years ago that discuss subjects as disparate as Brahmanical privilege and the ageing female body in terms so blunt that they would seem courageous if a woman did so in similar terms in 21st century India.

At the JLF satellite event in Boulder, Colorado, a decade ago, the author Anthea Min practically re-enacted on stage the

horrors of being a Maoist Red Guard sent to the countryside. Her mother’s severe scolding of Min for betraying her favourite teacher during China’s Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 was haunting because Min tells stories so vividly that they exist in a kind of present continuous tense. In more light-hearted vein, Min spoke of a lesbian affair with her unit’s commandant. She even demonstrated how she half-stood, half-squatted over open pit latrines in the countryside while swatting mosquitoes away from her exposed buttocks and legs. With such an inspired raconteur, I was reduced to a mostly giggling bystander on stage.

Despite my being a walking Rubik’s Cube of undesirable public speaking outcomes, the invitations to lit fests come in now and then. This year I was invited to JLF, but the email went to a defunct email address. I had already bought my plane ticket to attend the Galle Lit Fest before the mix-up could be rectified. My first event as an interviewer at the swanky Aman hotel in Galle had me wishing things had been the other way round. After fruitless calls to the GLF organisers and almost no help from the hotel, we got the conversation underway after volunteers heroically dragged chairs and pool-side sunbeds to create a semblance of audience seating. This event, expensively ticketed and billed as cocktails with a Q-and-A, featured few cocktails and no canapes. Not even a can of Coke seemed available, the request of Joseph-de Saram, thirsty after performing in the un-airconditioned 18th-century church next door.

As an audience member at Galle, my experience was different: I attended animated discussions, including those by the gifted Sri Lankan writers V.V. Ganeshanathan and Radhika Hettiarachchi. But, on the sidelines, I heard a discordant soundtrack of complaints about the accommodation provided to authors and speakers and organisational blunders worthy of a remake of a South Asian *Faulty Towers*.

Ahead of the final event I moderated in Galle, a lunch with the Hong Kong-based food writer Susan Jung, the hotel hosting it pulled out two days before. This was the result of another organisational miscommunication so epic it would require a novella to recount the details. Jung and I arrived early, but most of the attendees showed up at least half an hour late—because they hadn’t been informed the venue had changed. During lunch, an electricity blackout in many parts of Sri Lanka caused by a single monkey, presumably with the strength of Hanuman, meant we had to occasionally shout over the restaurant generator.

But Jung has an extraordinary breadth of knowledge about food and restaurants across Asia and the audience’s questions and observations were charming and engaging. In its triumph of intelligent, convivial conversation despite adverse conditions, the afternoon seemed emblematic of what makes lit fests special. Or perhaps I am beginning to enjoy the challenge.

Rahul Jacob is a former travel, food and drink editor of Financial Times, London and was its Hong Kong bureau chief. He is a columnist for Mint.

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**BRUSH WITH THE HILLS**  
These handcrafted pieces by the Nilgiris-based pottery brand Nakumora portray the age-old technique of blue and white pottery. The fluid brushstrokes in blue also represent the mist in the Nilgiris. To buy, contact [info@nakumora.com](mailto:info@nakumora.com) or call 96276 81289; price on request.

# Spring on the table

March spells spring and new beginnings with fresh blooms, cuckoo songs and vibrant blue skies. Capture these elements with objects to brighten daily as well as celebratory meals



**A FEAST OF LEAVES**  
Potter Karuna Kathpalia from Pune designed these earthy pasta plates in different sizes to suit serving portions. Each handmade piece can be customised to your preference. Available on [@maatikruti](https://www.instagram.com/maatikruti), Instagram; price on request.



**BOWLED OVER**  
A conceptual bowl by Delhi-based sculptural artist Vaishnavi Wal is the perfect centerpiece for a dining table. Available on [vahe.co](https://www.vahe.co); price on request



**FROM THE TREETOPS**  
Table linen bordered in bright yellow accented by motifs of monkeys, cuckoos and mangoes capture the season's key elements in an endearing and fun manner. Available on [artchivesindia.com](https://www.artchivesindia.com); Price ₹5,800 for a set of 4 table mats and napkins.

To curate a (near) perfect selection of tableware for spring, the approach was two-fold—pick elements to represent Pantone's colour of the year, Mocha Mousse, and combine it with elements of spring. Mocha Mousse symbolises connection and harmony making it meaningful for a dinner table, while borrowing inspiration from nature is a ticket to a brand-new season. For crockery and tableware enthusiasts, the easiest way to portray Mocha Mousse is through clay and ceramics, while spring is marked by vibrant prints and design accents of birds and bees. Conceptual pieces, ceramics from Korea and art-forward essentials bring a unique touch. Wrap it all up with your brand of hosting, warmth and joy.

—Jahnabee Borah



**TERRAIN AND TUMBLERS**  
Wabi-sabi in all its glory and whimsical colours to symbolise trees and undulating landscapes on these handmade ceramic tumblers by Nashik-based pottery brand Matkaa Ghar. Available on [@matkaaghar](https://www.instagram.com/matkaaghar), Instagram; price on request.



**PAINTED PLATTERS**  
These collectibles from the Korean brand Yehhee can be used for all three meals as well as snacking. Their signature style is handcrafted and handpainted ceramics in uneven shapes. Available on [yehheeceramics.com](https://www.yehheeceramics.com); Price ₹3,498 (approximately)



**FOR A BUZZY PARTY**  
A bee sits pretty on this ceramic dipping bowl that can double as a desert bowl. The piece is wheel-thrown and hand-glazed. Available on [OlkeMaatee.com](https://www.OlkeMaatee.com); ₹1,000



**DRINK LIKE A BIRD**  
Add a touch of playfulness with Eileen drinking glasses inspired by birds dipping in and out of water fountains. These truly signify the spirit of spring. Available on [ladimoraselections.com](https://www.ladimoraselections.com); Price ₹3,200 for a set of two.



## Spotlighting lesser-known Andhra food

Several micro-cuisine restaurants are focusing on the diversity of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana



A chicken dish at Antera; and (below) Terrāi's brinjal preparation.

Ruth DSouza Prabhu

Like most states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have diverse culinary regions. There is coastal Andhra cuisine, the food of Rayalaseema that is further inland, Telangana cuisine that is divided into food from the Deccan Plateau region and Hyderabad cuisine and Uttarandhra food from the northernmost part of the state. Andhra restaurants, particularly chains, tend to offer homogenised menus that club all these culinary regions, making Andhra chilli chicken and meals served on a banana leaf the most popular representation. Restaurants like Nagarjuna (Bengaluru), Nandhana Palace (Bengaluru and Chennai), Rayalaseema Ruchulu (Hyderabad), Telangana Bhavan canteen (Delhi) and Andhra Bhavan canteen (Delhi) will always have their loyal patrons and with good reason. But as newer Andhra micro-cuisine restaurants open, lesser-known foods of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are now in the spotlight.

The early 2000s saw the opening of The Spicy Venue (central Andhra cuisine) in Hyderabad, which today, has made it to most eat-at lists for dishes like their *natu kodi* (country chicken curry) with *garlu* (deep-fried rice flour and lentil fritter), and *mamsam iguru* (mutton curry).

Sainma, serving Telangana food, opened in Hyderabad in 2018. Antera Bar and Kitchen, focusing on the Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema cuisines, opened three branches across Hyderabad and one in Bengaluru from 2021-24. Palle Vindhu (Rayalaseema and Telangana) and Telugu Medium (Andhra and Telangana) opened in Hyderabad in 2023. In the same year, Dakshin Udyavan came up in Guwahati, Assam, which has a good representation from all regions of Andhra. Hyderabad also has Isthm Kitchen (Rajahmundry, Kakinada and Andhra Coastal cuisines) and Terrāi (Telangana) which opened last year.

"There's a growing appreciation for regional and micro-cuisines, driven by a shift in consumer preferences towards authenticity and nostalgia. People no longer want generic south Indian food; they want specificity—whether it's Rayalaseema *ragi sangati* (finger millet/ragi balls with rice mixed in it), Nizam-era Telangana *nalli nihari* (slow-cooked stew with mutton shanks) or Konaseema's prawn *pulusu* (tart prawn curry). This shift is also fuelled by younger diners seeking culinary storytelling and deeper cultural connections. We regularly use storytelling menus, chef's tables and live interactions to introduce our cuisine," says Rohit Kasuganti, founder of Terrāi.

### MYRIAD FLAVOURS

The approach to showcasing micro-cuisines of the states has taken various forms across restaurants. You will find classics or little-known dishes alongside innovations and bar menus that showcase ingredients and flavours of the state.

"One of the key differentiators for restaurants like Antera is that we don't serve *thalis* or meals. We are more of a 'comfort dine' space" says Ashish M. Reddy, founder and managing director. Here you will find classic Andhra dishes like the *avakaya pappannam* with *pachi pulusu* (raw mango rice with a raw tamarind *rasam*) and *raju gari kodi pulao* (a mushy chicken and rice dish cooked in milk). Antera also has Telangana dishes like the *dalcha* mutton with *bagara rice* (mutton with lentils and spiced rice), *vankai pulao* (brinjal rice), dishes from Rayalaseema like the *chitti mutyala keema pulao* (an aromatic short grain rice and mince), and *mokka jonna palakura iguru* (maize and spinach curry).

"Our *golchina mamsam*, a Telangana mutton stir-fry, surprises first-timers. Many expect the cuisine to be predominantly spicy curries but this is a slow-cooked dish where the meat is seared with hand-pounded spices, garlic and curry leaves, resulting in a rich, caramelised texture. The uniqueness lies in its '*goli-china*' (stir-fried) technique, which intensifies the flavours... Diners are often amazed at how the simplicity of the preparation brings out such bold and complex flavours," says Kasuganti.

The current customer profile has grown to appreciate an interesting cocktail menu. "I see upmarket Andhra cuisine restaurants with cocktail menus leading the race. Globalisation has led to an evolved consumer profile. With most European and Pan-Asian restaurants in cities having bar and cocktail menus, micro-cuisine restaurants found they were losing a segment of customers. Introducing cocktails has accounted for 25% of the business revenue for such restaurants. For a cosmopolitan diner, walking in for a cocktail and a few small plates of a micro-cuisine makes things approachable," observes Hyderabad-based Sankalp Vishnu, author, food critic and food consultant.

And so you can try the likes of cocktails like Telugu Medium's Bellam Balaraaju, with tequila, jaggery, tamarind and green chilli, or Antera's Atluntadi Manathoni at their Hyderabad outlet with whisky, infused chilli vodka, pineapple and citrus. There are plenty of mocktails across the menus, including something as simple as the Mirapakaya (chilli) Soda of Palle Vindu.

Creativity has been another great way to get people to try out Andhra micro-cuisines. The Spicy Kitchen has the MLA Potlam Biryani, which is a mix of mutton *keema* and prawns wrapped in a thin omelette, similar to the Japanese *omurice*. In its showcase of Telangana cuisine, Terrāi emphasises sourcing hyper-local, organic ingredients from small-scale farmers and cooperatives across Telangana. This translates into dishes like the Farmers Staple Khichdi, a take on the classic, with foxtail millets, native lentil and *ghee*-roasted spices and the use of locally grown Amaranth leaves and seeds to coat cutlets to give them an earthy flavour.

Promoters of Andhra's and Telangana's micro-cuisines agree that there is a lot more that can be brought into the limelight. Vishnu says food from the Rayalaseema and Godavari regions is slowly gaining popularity. Reddy agrees adding that cities will see a rise in premium and comfort-dining Andhra micro-cuisine restaurants. With a return to roots being the flavour of the season, there is a lot of Andhra and Telangana deliciousness we can look forward to.

Ruth DSouza Prabhu is a features journalist based in Bengaluru.

# The science toppling all athletics records

Is it the ‘super shoes’ phenomenon? Is it the faster tracks? No world athletics record is safe anymore. These are the reasons why

Rudraneil Sengupta

On 28 February, in the small city of Clermont-Ferrand at the foothills of the French Alps, Armand “Mondo” Duplantis stood for a moment, looking askance at the crossbar that rose more than 20ft in the air above him. Then he propelled forward, an unwavering grip on the 15ft pole he held in his hands, his hair flying, legs pumping hard, eyes set with a predator’s focus at the spot where he wanted to land the pole.

And then there he went, jack-knifing and soaring through the air, clearing the crossbar like a diving dolphin, fists pumping even as he fell backwards towards the cushion, his mouth open in a roar matched by the crowds at the stadium.

Duplantis had broken his own world record. For the 11th time. The record now stood at 6.27m or 20ft, 7 inches and some.

It’s not just Duplantis—world records in athletics are falling at a remarkable and unprecedented pace. From the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, till now, world records have fallen (in some instances more than once) in the 400m hurdles, half-marathon, 5km (road), 10km (road), 50km (road), 100km (road), 3,000m steeple-chase, 2,000m, mile (road), marathon, 3,000m, 20km walk and 35km walk, shot put, discus throw and pole vault in the men’s category. In the same time frame, women broke records in the 10km, half-marathon, triple jump, 100m hurdles, 50km, 35km race walk, mile, 5000m, 10km, 5km, 4X200m relay, 10,000m, high jump, 1500m, 2000m, 400m hurdles, and marathon.

In one crazy week in February this year, six world records in athletics fell in the space of nine days, the most important being Ugandan Jacob Kiplimo, who obliterated the half-marathon record by 48 seconds and became the first person in history to drop the time below 57 minutes.

Some of the reasons for these new from-



REUTERS

tiers in athletics is well known, none more than the “super shoes” phenomenon.

When Nike revealed their Vaporfly shoes in 2017, a new design that featured US space agency Nasa-designed foams, a stiff carbon-fibre plate in the sole, and an elaborately curved, boat-like shape, “super shoes” became the raging debate of the running world. Some argued that the shoes were akin to performance-enhancing drugs, the athletics world body or World Athletics considered banning them, and arguments flew back and forth about whether they conferred an unfair advantage. Eventually, it came to a decision—a shoe was going to be allowed in

competition only if its kind was reasonably available to all competitors. This made sense. While it was once worn only by a select few runners like the marathon legend Eliud Kipchoge, shoes like the Vaporfly have now become the default choice for all runners, even at amateur levels, levelling the playing field but also raising it.

While the exact science behind why a stiff carbon-fibre plate results in better running efficiency is still not clear, the big mass of soft foam with unmatched spring-like qualities have been proven to return energy to the feet after each strike. These foams are lighter, easier to compress and rebound with far more efficiency than

Armand Duplantis in action in Clermont-Ferrand, France, on 28 February.

In one crazy week in February this year, six world records in athletics fell in the space of nine days, the most important being Ugandan Jacob Kiplimo

anything ever used in shoes, returning up to 85% of the energy a runner uses to compress them. These shoes have been proven to cut marathon times by approximately ninety seconds for male runners.

The marathon world record now stands at an improbable 2 hours and 35 seconds, closer than ever to the 2-hour barrier that many scientists had theorised was impossible for the human body to breach. The record was set by the late Kenyan runner Kelvin Kiptum in 2023 wearing super shoes.

With this spectacular success in road running, manufacturers brought their focus to the spiked shoes worn by track runners. Using the same ideas—patented foams, stiff carbon plate, and boat shapes—the spikes were rolled out well in time for the Tokyo Olympics, which saw an avalanche of records falling at track events, including Jamaica’s Elaine Thompson-Herah Olympic record in the 100m, breaking a 33-year-old mark, and the total obliteration of the 400m hurdles world records in both men (Karsten Warholm) and women (Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone, who has broken her own record multiple times since). In both these events, even the silver medallists ran faster than the previous world record; in the men’s event the bronze medallist broke the previous world mark too.

Adding to the shoes is another technological advancement—the track itself. With each passing year, manufacturers are finding ways of making the tracks faster too—using some of the same tech as in the shoes, for example, a thin layer of highly compressible and elastic foam on top of a layer of stiff material, all precisely structured to allow just the right amount of shock absorption and the maximum possible energy return. At the 2024 Paris Olympics, track manufacturer Mondo claimed that they had made the fastest surface ever, which included mussels and clam shells in its stiff layer, and “elliptical geometric air cells...which significantly enhance the absorption and return of

energy...” in its springy top layer.

“It’s super quick,” British 800m sprinter Keely Hodgkinson told reporters after her heat. “My legs were turning round and I was trying to slow down.”

Former Dutch Olympian turned marathon coach Hugo Van Den Broek, who runs an elite running centre in Iten, Kenya, says there are other science-based reasons for the enhanced athletic performances we are seeing now.

“It’s because sports science knowledge and access to biometric measurements have become very widespread,” Van Den Broek says. “At the elite level, all runners are training in a scientific way. They are constantly getting feedback from their smartwatches and other devices, which are then used to look at what is optimal training for that particular athlete, and what are the things that need to improve.”

This kind of bespoke training, and the immense body of scientific research that informs it, has also seen unprecedented democratisation. Once the realm of secretive training centres in ambitious countries with massive budgets for sports, sports science has now seeped down to just about every athlete from every country that’s at the Olympics.

Outside of technology, Van Den Broek says, it’s also important to look at human psychology.

“Once a record falls, that’s the new mark, and others now think that it’s possible to get there, so they work towards it,” Van Den Broek says. “It’s a ripple effect.”

It’s a bit like that famous incident attributed to the British runner Roger Bannister: “*Après moi, le deluge*”, he reportedly said, after becoming the first person to run a mile in under 4 minutes. A French saying that translates to, “after me, the flood”, Bannister was talking about how it takes one man to pioneer a new standard, and inevitably, waves of others will follow.

Rudraneil Sengupta is the author of Enter the Dangal, Travels through India’s Wrestling Landscape.

## Vidya Balan aligns with Federal Bank and creates a brand revolution



Left to right: MVS Murthy, chief marketing officer, Federal Bank; Venkatraman Venkateswaran, group president & CFO, Federal Bank; Federal Bank’s first ever brand ambassador, Vidya Balan; KVS Manian, managing director & CEO, Federal Bank; Harsh Dugar, executive director, Federal Bank

Federal Bank, a leading name in the Indian banking sector, announced a significant milestone in its brand evolution by appointing Vidya Balan as its inaugural brand ambassador. This partnership, presented during a ceremony in Mumbai, is set to redefine the bank’s market presence.

“Federal Bank has established itself as a strong national brand, and our goal is to enhance that presence across the country, expanding beyond our core territories. Vidya Balan’s personality mirrors the ethos and values of our brand, making this association a perfect fit. We believe that with Vidya as our brand ambassador, we can transcend regional divides and align perfectly with our growth objectives,” emphasised KVS Manian, managing director & CEO of Federal Bank.

With Vidya Balan on board, Federal Bank aims to connect across demographics and regions, infusing its brand with vitality and relatability. While praising Balan’s widespread appeal and her ability to bring depth to diverse roles, MVS Murthy, chief marketing officer, Federal Bank said that the choice was natural, “Vidya possesses a unique blend of charisma and insight, making her an ideal messenger of our values.” Murthy said.

While recognising Federal Bank as a powerhouse in the Indian financial landscape, Balan—celebrated for her roles in films like *Parineeta* and *Mission Mangal*—expressed keenness about this association. She said, “Federal Bank’s legacy in fostering growth from

the grassroots level up is impressive. Their ‘Human at the Core, Digital to the Fore’ philosophy resonates with me.”

This collaboration marks a new chapter for Federal Bank as it expands its reach. The partnership spans multiple marketing initiatives, including television and digital campaigns to narrate the bank’s story and deepen its connection with stakeholders.

Federal Bank, known for its customer-centric approach, strives to employ empathy and digital innovation to enhance the customer experiences. This ethos aligns well with Balan’s professional narrative of embracing complex characters that resonate with audiences across different divides.

The appointment coincides with Federal Bank’s strategic plan to pursue breakthroughs across its products and services. By aligning with Balan, the bank further aims to position itself as a leader in delivering customer-centric solutions, while continuing to support diverse communities and champion an inclusive work culture, especially for women. In summary, Vidya Balan’s arrival as Federal Bank’s brand ambassador symbolises a shared vision of innovation, empathy and progress. Just as Balan has paved new paths in Indian cinema, Federal Bank is determined to redefine the banking experience, making this partnership a harmonious blend of shared values and aspirations dedicated to fueling prosperity for all.

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# HITTING THE SWEET SPOT

Going out for dessert is an activity in itself, with dessert bars, dessert-tasting menus and specialised patisseries becoming destinations to dine at even as chefs expand our understanding of what dessert means. Lounge picks 25 of its favourite spots across the country



The café at Manam Chocolate Karkhana, Hyderabad.

## MANAM CHOCOLATE KARKHANA BANJARA HILLS, HYDERABAD

**N**amed one of *TIME* magazine's "World's Greatest Places 2024", the "chocolate karkhana" run by Indian bean-to-bar chocolate company Manam is a space where you can watch every step of the process of converting cacao beans into the rich, magical product we know; attend chocolate-tasting workshops, including making your own signature chocolate bar; shop for Manam's huge range of cacao products; hang out at the lush café; and taste their chocolate-based desserts made fresh every day, ranging from single-serve pastries to loaf cakes, tarts, layered cakes, macarons and an assortment of Viennoiserie.

**Must-have:** Fig & Mascarpone Tart



Meringues at SAPA Bakery.

## SAPA BAKERY GOKULAM, MYSURU

**W**hile this German bakery, started by Dina Weber in 2019, is best-known for its Christmas stollen, it puts out a Strawberry Cream Cheese Doughnut, the Linzer Torte (spiced hazelnut and walnut biscuit layered with strawberry and raspberry jam), Passion Fruit Milk Chocolate Choux and Viennoiserie favourites like the Strawberry Cream Cheese Danish.

**Must-have:** Apple Crumble Tea Cake

## TWENTYSEVEN BAKEHOUSE BANDRA WEST AND MAHALAXMI, MUMBAI

**T**here's something about the hands of pastry chef Rachelle Andrade who heads the kitchen at TwentySeven Bakehouse. The clipped nails and burn scars are proof of the dedication she puts in, in perfecting the bakery's Florentines, biscotti and gluten-free orange almond cake. These reached celebrity status when they were picked as part of the TV show *Koffee with Karan*. The crunchy, caramelly Florentines are usually made on request and, if you are lucky, you will occasionally find them at one of their two outlets in Bandra West and Mahalaxmi. The menu is centered around European-style nostalgic baked items and some have a gourmet twist. Their seasonal drops like the roasted strawberries and balsamic glaze maritozzi and the delightful Christmas cookie box are worth the wait.

**Must-have:** Florentine, hazelnut biscotti, choux and palmier



Croissant Cereal at Larder + Folk.

## LARDER + FOLK PANAJI, GOA

**I**t has one of the best cookies that you can sink your teeth into: the perfect crunch, not too crumbly and with enough chocolate to make the world seem a better place. Larder + Folk, helmed by Priyanka Sardesai and her husband Siddharth Sumtiran, is a place meant for indulgence. Of the sweetest kind.

On offer are exquisite creations, easy on the eye and delicious to boot. There are bombolinis, sugar dusted and packed with vanilla, tiramisu or coconut lime; crunchy cookies as big as your hand, moist banana cake, and the newest creation, a cinnamon croissant cereal. They also serve stellar sandwiches and good coffee.

**Must-have:** Bombolinis, cookies



Mango Choux Bun at Padaria Prazeres.

## PADARIA PRAZERES PANAJI, GOA

**T**here are some places in Goa that are worthy of being in every guidebook and on every tourist wish list. Ralph Prazeres and Stacy Gracías' café Padaria Prazeres may have become popular with the hipster crowd but their food is as good as the day they began in 2021. Go here for the chance to try some of the best *pastéis de nata* (Portuguese custard tarts) in the state. Being a café, they do sandwiches, small bites and beverages, but their patisserie and Viennoiserie are exemplary: cookies, chocolate and banana cake; stuffed Berliners, palmier, Danishes and croissants. Look out for daily specials.

**Must-have:** Pastéis de nata

## Team Lounge

**I**t is 9.30pm, and there is a patient, gregarious crowd outside the newly opened LICK (Lavonne Ice Cream Kitchen) in Bengaluru's Indiranagar. Inside, the energy is almost night-club-like, with peppy music, neon lights and servers bustling about scooping ice-cream into shiny golden cups and arranging elaborate sundaes. "People crave new dining experiences and desserts are delivering," says chef Vinesh Johnny, co-founder. "Dessert has evolved in India. From a time when people thought macarons were 'too expensive', we now have super-specialised patisseries doing only one thing and doing it well—tarts, or gelato or cupcakes. There is a lot of scope for innovation and re-imagination, and for desserts to be the primary attraction when you dine out."

Whether it's dessert bars, gelato bars, Japanese and Korean dessert spots or good-old cafés, desserts have become the star of the show when it comes to dining out. Restaurants, especially high-end ones, have extensive dessert menus featuring gourmet concoctions—where once we went straight for the caramel pudding or black forest pastry, we are now offered compotes and coulis and choux pastries. Chefs are marrying French pastry techniques with Indian ingredients and flavours.

One of the vanguards of India's dessert landscape is Pooja Dhingra, who started Le15 Patisserie in 2010, making bold innovations like infusing macarons with local flavours. "We had green chilli macarons, masala chai macarons and *paan* ones, inspired by Dadar market. They stayed on our menu for a long time and now come back for Diwali," says Dhingra. She believes influences like these make Mumbai's dessert experience unique, also exemplified by places like Bombay Sweet Shop and Maska Bakery, both of which offer contemporary *modaks* and *gujyas* during the festive season. Where the likes of Le 15 Patisserie led the way, we are now seeing an explosion of dessert options in urban India. Even Delhi, which till a few years ago didn't see too much experimentation barring places like The Big Chill and Wenger's, is witnessing the beginnings of a sweet revolution. New dessert bars like Torte in Gurugram, founded by chef Rhea Wadhawan in 2019, specialise in what it calls "experimental yet nostalgic desserts".

Chefs are also pushing the boundaries of what we understand as dessert. If LICK does an Avocado Toast ice-cream scoop and Subko has Curry Leaf Infused White Chocolate Cashews, chef Jenny Clint, who runs Sakaré in Bengaluru, whips up a five-course dessert-tasting menu every weekend that features unusual creations like the Concombre (pickled cucumbers, kiwi, lemon curd and cucumber granita). Arriving at this list of our favourite dessert spots around the country was not easy, and we do not claim it is either exhaustive or objective. Besides the team, we reached out to foodies, food writers, chefs and people clued in to the dining-out scene in various cities to compile a list of places that not only serve great desserts but are (mostly) standalone, indie, chef-run brands. The focus was also on physical outlets, because we see a huge surge in the culture of going out for desserts, so cloud kitchens and home-bakers, alas, could not be included; we also looked for new-ish places that are less than five years old. We hope you enjoy this list and find yourself heading out this weekend for some sweet indulgence.



Daab Delight at Bonne Femme.

BONNEFEMMEKOLKATA@INSTAGRAM



Scooping it up at LICK: Lavonne Ice Cream Kitchen.



Liam's Teddy Bear at Momoka.

## MOMOKA PANAJI, GOA

**I**t's a sleeping teddy bear, cute and cuddly until you slash into it. Liam's Teddy Bear is made of 46% Belgian chocolate mousse shielding a raspberry compote centre. It is the star dessert at the two-year-old Momoka in Panaji. Momoka is a cute space with Japanese curios, posters, and an array of sweets and plated desserts like yuzu cookies, Hokkaido tarts, soufflé cheesecake; the treats are seasonal. Don't expect sushi or ramen here.

**Must-have:** Liam's Teddy Bear or *Pebu*, the "dog" made of Japanese black sesame paste, salted caramel and crisps

## BONNE FEMME HINDUSTAN PARK, KOLKATA

**W**hen the scion of an iconic confectionery enterprise starts a restaurant, expectations run high. Bonne Femme on Rashbehari Avenue in south Kolkata is the brainchild of Sudip Mullick of the Balaram and Radharam Mullick *mishdi* empire. The menu is eclectic, a mix of good 'ol Kolkata favourites like Chicken Dak Bungalow and adventurous innovations like Chicken Baked Rasogolla. But it's the desserts that take the cake.

Take your pick from a traditional cheesecake with a twist (topped with a donut and a scoop of ice cream), a chocolate soufflé nestled in an orange, or Za'e-e-Shahi, a Mughal-era dessert of tiny *gulab jamuns* in a bed of *rabri*. If you like subtler flavours, try Daab Delight, a concoction made of cottage cheese and coconut flesh served in half a green coconut.

**Must-have:** Daab Delight



Belgian Chocolate with Crisp Chocolate Balls and Mango Sorbet with Fresh Fruits Toppings at Cream Choc at Cream Choc.

## CREAM CHOC SIOLIM, ANJUNA, MIRAMAR AND PORVORIM, GOA

**N**eed a midnight treat? Craving a pick-me-up? All roads lead to Cream Choc. This gelato spot has become everyone's go-to for icy treats, since it first opened in Anjuna. Davide Fassarella just wanted to serve people good gelati and through Cream Choc—now in Siolim, Miramar, and Porvorim—has been consistently doing it for a decade. The gelati are cool, creamy and delicious with flavours that are familiar: chocolate truffle, hazelnut, After Eight, bubblegum, rum and raisin, Bailey's kahlua; there are some vegan options too. Cream Choc also does shakes, sorbets, frozen yogurts and some savoury dishes.

**Must-have:** Any gelato



Banana Split Sundae.

## LICK: LAVONNE ICE CREAM KITCHEN INDIRANAGAR, BENGALURU

**I**f the queues outside are anything to go by, this is the hottest dessert spot in Bengaluru right now, serving up scoops and sundaes made fresh in a buzzy, neon-lit space with a high-energy vibe. Watermelon Feta, Carrot Milk, Avocado Toast, Lemon Strawberry, Strawberry Tomato and Melon-Ginger are just some of the scoop flavours here, while the sundaes are complex, textured creations, such as Beach Party (toasted coconut ice cream and tropical fruit sorbet with mango and pineapple confit, coconut tres leches, tropical coulis, with pineapple shaved ice and boba) or Kaapi Crunch (filter coffee and tiramisu ice cream with feuilletine crunch). What's more, they have drool bowls for your pets as well.

**Must-have:** Pinkie Swear (lychee and raspberry ice cream sitting over creme fraiche cheesecake, lychee panna cotta, berry confit, pickled berries, topped with raspberry paper)



Millefeuille with white chocolate cremeux and strawberries at Sakaré.

## SAKARÉ HRBR LAYOUT, BENGALURU

**C**hef Jenny Clint, who grew up in the Andamans and went to Normandy in France for training, runs Sakaré, a dessert club where she curates a five-course dessert menu every weekend. The ingredient-driven menu changes every month, depending on seasonal produce, usually starting with a sweet-savoury bread course and moving on to sophisticated and light desserts. Past menus have included Clint's signature deconstructed *gajar ka halwa*; a take on the French millefeuille with a caramelised white chocolate cremeux and fresh strawberries; and La Vie En Rose (Rooftop Alza-infused rose apple, fermented star fruit and candied rose petals).

**Must-have:** The five-course dessert-tasting menu



Tiramisu Pour-Over at Vanilla Miel.

## VANILLA MIEL CAFÉ BANDRA WEST, MUMBAI

**V**anilla Miel started off as a delivery kitchen and won hearts with their tarts, dessert platters and entrees. In November, they opened a café complete with breakfast options, pour-over-inspired tiramisu and laminated pastries. It's the newest spot in Bandra West for fresh bakes like the churro reimagined as a donut with a crispy sugar and cinnamon coating and layered with gianduja cremeux. A unique feature on the menu is a short and sweet selection of dessert coffees.

**Must-have:** Berry passion tart, cinlettes (cinnamon sugar crisps) and the seasonal strawberries with vanilla cream



Macarons at Finale Patisserie.

## FINALE PATISserie ALWARPET, CHENNAI

**A** small space with a large communal table and a larger kitchen in the heart of south Chennai's Alwarpet, dessert at Finale Patisserie is all about style and presentation. The long display counter at this pastry shop is a delight to gaze at, filled with all sorts of goodies from oyster-shaped macarons and chocolate pavlova to butter croissants and pine sugar cookies. Finale's founder Anubha Reddy, an architect-turned baker who trained at London's Le Cordon Bleu, also runs baking classes, teaching adults as well as children to churn gourmet ice cream and prepare choux pastry and profiteroles.

**Must-have:** Brioche donut, tiramisu



Strawberry White Chocolate Cookie at Cacaoté.

## CACAO TÉ BILLIONAIRE STREET, AHMEDABAD

**B**ringing the Belgian chocolate experience to Ahmedabad, Cacaoté works with Valrhona chocolate to create bonbons in passion fruit, mango, matcha, mandarin, yuzu lime cheesecake and more. There are ganaches in red Thai chili, coffee cardamom, star anise and dark truffle in addition to those dedicated to single spices like ginger, cinnamon and mint. For some leisurely indulgence, the petit gâteau choices are those that dessert dreams are made of...think chocolate mandarin bergamot tartlet with whipped ganache, or the milk chocolate tahini gateaux.

**Must-have:** Citrus Cheesecake Bonbon



Bombay Sweet Shop, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai.

## BOMBAY SWEET SHOP KALA GHODA, MUMBAI

**L**ast October, the contemporary *mithai* brand Bombay Sweet Shop opened its second late-night dessert spot in the city at Kala Ghoda. It's the place to visit to satisfy midnight sugar cravings with offerings like *gulab jamun* churros, coffee *rasgulla* tiramisu and ice creams. You can also dig into a plate of *chole bhature* served *mezze*-style, *pyaaz kachori* and *avo papdi* followed by a generous helping of dessert.

**Must-have:** Coffee *rasgulla* tiramisu

## SUBKO CACAO SHOP COLABA, MUMBAI

**I**t's not merely a shop, but also Mumbai's first chocolate factory in the heritage neighbourhood of Colaba. At 2,000 sq. ft., the space is massive. It is designed as an experience centre complete with a museum for homegrown cacao. The hot-sellers are the chocolate cubes available in flavours such as *pista* (cherry, almond seabuckthorn) and the playful PB&J (peanut butter and jam). There's chocolate to be eaten, drunk and explored at the multiple workshops and factory tours, including one on spending a day at the mill, making chocolate bars and tasting cacao pulp.

**Must-have:** Toffees named Beta Bites, Cacao Terror Bars, Classic Hot Chocolate, Podi Milk Chocolate, Almonds, and sour dough toast with assorted chocolate spreads



Subko Cacao Shop.

TURN TO PAGE 10

FROM PAGE 9



Le Paris-Brest Pistache at Monique.

**MONIQUE**  
FRIENDS COLONY AND KHAN MARKET, DELHI

Located inside a boutique hotel in Friends Colony, Café Monique offers a flavour of southern France with its white-blue minimalistic decor and a delicious range of pastries and desserts, all inspired by the recipes of chef Maxime Montay's grandmother, Monique.

Besides the light and flaky croissants and tarts, there's Le Chambord, which combines dark chocolate and raspberry. The Le Paris-Brest Pistache, a pistachio-meets-orange twist on the traditional French Paris-Brest choux pastry, is perfect for spring afternoons. The Chocolate Madeleines should be savoured with their silky hot chocolate, and the gluten-free La Pavlova aux Fruits des Bois is a melt-in-the-mouth experience. Their savoury items like the Chicken Croque-Monsieur (also available in an avocado version) are also worth trying. Follow it with a portion of French toast with seasonal fruits and ice cream. Classic at its best.

**Must-have:** French toast with seasonal fruits and ice cream and Le Paris-Brest Pistache



MIAMPATISserie@INSTAGRAM

Fresh fruit tartlets at Miam.

**MIAM**  
LADO SARAI, DELHI

Bani Nanda's Miam patisserie is known for its Belgian dark chocolate and salted caramel cake. But we insist you try their twice-baked Goey Chocolate Cake—it's a perfect pick-me-up pastry-meets-dessert choice. If you are not into cakes, there's an Australian Macadamia Shortbread that combines macadamia flour with macadamia praline, orange marmalade and namelaka (a slightly firm style of ganache), and chef Nanda's take on the Burnt Basque Cheese-cake that comes flavoured with orange zest and cinnamon.

The best part is their pet-friendly Doggo Cake, made with peanut butter, carrots, rice flour and oats.

**Must-have:** Goey Chocolate Cake



ARTSROOMDELHI@INSTAGRAM

Coffee and cake time at Arts Room.

**ARTS ROOM**  
ELDECO CENTRE, DELHI

A newly opened vintage-style restaurant in Delhi's latest dining destination Eldeco Centre, Arts Room's menu offers a new take on classic desserts from across the world. Like Wimbledon, which brings together meringue, matcha-soaked sponge, strawberry and mint, or Bandel Basque Cheesecake served with *nolen gur* ice cream, or Courchevel Campfire that has a large plate full of marshmallows, Graham crackers, malted chocolate sauce, chocolate sticks, blackberries, peanut butter and seasonal fruits. There's also a pastry section that offers seasonal fruit tarts, croissants and pastries, and a range of savoury dishes like Spatchcock Chicken that comes with *togarashi* wasabi mash, pistachio tuile and salad, and lobster and caviar made using cognac and Sevruga caviar.

**Must-have:** Wimbledon

**NENAPU**  
JP NAGAR, BENGALURU

The barely three-month-old Nenapu bakery+bistro has managed to earn a lot more than hype on the Gram. Founded by Bengalurean Aniz Abbas and Puneekar Amabrish Nimkar, it has loyalists declaring its croissants to be the best in town. Including classic treats like the butter croissant and pain au chocolat, Nenapu bakes everything—including pillowy shokupan (Japanese milk bread)—fresh every day. The Nenapu Bounty, a rendition of the good ol' Bounty chocolate bar, is a crispy, flaky tart (made from laminated chocolate puff dough) with a generous topping of whipped hazelnut chocolate ganache, coconut fudge and coconut whip. Besides the bakery, Nenapu (Kannada for memory) has a limited savoury menu and serves a good range of coffees and cold beverages—the refreshing Espresso Mosambi is a clear winner.

**Must-have:** Nenapu Bounty; cinnamon swirl with a cup of Espresso Mosambi



NENAPUBLR@INSTAGRAM

Nenapu Bounty at Nenapu.



TORTE.IN@INSTAGRAM

The Floating Swan at Torte.

**TORTE EXPERIENTIAL DESSERT BAR**  
THE BOULEVARD, GURUGRAM

The newest kid on the restaurant block is Torte in Gurugram. From wall-to-ground windows overlooking coconut trees to mirrors painted with a garden, and cocktails and desserts garnished with flower petals, Torte's offerings scream Instagram-worthy. Among the highlights are The Floating Swan (a swan-shaped choux pastry with lemon white chocolate ganache, lemon gel, blueberry compote and butterfly pea sauce) and Over Easy Egg (vanilla mousse with mango compote, topped with passion fruit gel, chocolate soil, Belgian chocolate ganache and mango coconut sauce). There's a wide range of eclairs topped with flavourful ganache options and croissants, and ample savoury items to choose from, including Kaffir Lime Chicken and Avocado Croast (a take on a stuffed croissant).

**Must-have:** The Floating Swan



Coffee entremet at Lille Dessert Bar.

**LILLE DESSERT BAR**  
PARK STREET, KOLKATA

Park Street has a new address to satisfy sugar cravings — Lille Dessert Bar. The menu features decadent, hand-crafted desserts in pop colours and opulent textures—from pretty-looking entremets like the seven-tiered Vanilla Berry to the maritozzi (crème Chantilly and strawberry compote in brioche-like buns). Their buttery tarts topped with silken custard flavoured with lemons; a sinful combination of coffee-soaked Jaconde (almond-flavoured) sponge; and rum-infused ganache and mascarpone mousse are best-sellers.

**Must-have:** Dubai Chocolate Pistachio Kunafa Tart, inspired by the viral chocolate bar Can't Get Knafteh of It



PANDHALCAKESHOP@INSTAGRAM

Mattanchère Spice Cake at Pandhal Cake Shop.



MAKIPATISserie@INSTAGRAM

Lemon & Lavender Bento Cake at Mäki Pâtisserie.

**MÄKI PATISserie**  
INDIRANAGAR, BENGALURU

Mäki Patisserie by chef Aarohi Sanghvi prides itself on its ever-evolving menu. Just last month, it made the hit Strawberry Fraisier Bento Cake, with layers of vanilla sponge, strawberry compote, fresh strawberries and vanilla mousseline cream, a classic French dessert originally created to highlight seasonal strawberries. Their Tonka Chocolate Cake, Caramel Eclairs, Sticky Date & Dulce Cake with orange marmalade and exquisite bento cakes are all world-class, but they arguably make the best Basque cheese-cake in the country. The central location of the patisserie, with its minimal, airy decor and ovens on show, is also a draw.

**Must-have:** Burnt Basque Cheesecake, bento cakes



BRODBAKERYIN@INSTAGRAM

Cardamom buns at Brød Bakery.

**BRØD BAKERY**  
INJAMBAKKAM, CHENNAI

Everything about Brød Bakery evokes the image of Scandinavia, from the white, minimalist interiors to the long teak-wood-stained table and bench reminiscent of outdoor saunas. And then of course, there is the sourdough, cinnamon *gifler*, fudgy chocolate *kladdkaka*, cardamom *crao*, Swedish *semla*, and other breads and cakes in the tiny bakery named for the Danish word for bread. Like many other pandemic business babies, owner Subika Ganesan started as a home baker before opening the all-day café on Chennai's East Coast Road, where most locals head during the weekend for everything from surfing to relaxing at their farmhouses.

**Must-have:** Apple croissant, pain au chocolat



MAISONINDULGENCE@INSTAGRAM

Triple chocolate at Maison Indulgence.

**MAISON INDULGENCE**  
ALWARPET, CHENNAI

Choosing outdoor seating is brave in muggy Chennai but the cakes at Maison Indulgence more than make up for the weather. The name couldn't be more descriptive of the tres leches, kunafa bars, cookies, sundaes, hot chocolate bombs and choux buns that chef and owner Janani Kannan has conceptualised for this dessert-first café that also serves sandwiches, pasta and sourdough pizza. There's also a little counter at which you can make your own dessert—the chocolate bar is prepared by their team and you can then choose your own toppings and decorate it yourself. It's fun—just as dessert should be.

**Must-have:** Scones with clotted cream, Chocolate Indulgence—and the DIY chocolate bars

**PANDHAL CAKE SHOP**  
POTTAKUZH, KOCHI

While the Pandhal Cake Shop in Fort Kochi has been delighting tourists since 1984 (it is, perhaps, the most Instagrammed spot in Fort Kochi), this new edition opened just last month to give the rest of Kochi an experience of its many delights, from Sachertorte (a chocolate cake of Viennese origin made with apricot-flavoured chocolate), decadent Chocolate Pyramid, Black and White Torte Cake to Sticky Toffee Cake. One of Pandhal's biggest attractions is the Mattanchère Spice Cake, a plum cake infused with honey-soaked fruits left to mature for months, a tribute to the town of Mattancherry, an ancient centre of the spice trade. The best part? It's available all year through, not just at Christmas.

**Must-have:** Carrot cake with cream cheese frosting



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

# In the soothing embrace of art

Gulammohammed Sheikh's retrospective at KNMA distils a lifetime's mastery over art and its healing powers

Somak Ghoshal  
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Inside the dimly lit interiors of Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) in Delhi, 87-year-old Gulammohammed Sheikh leads a group of art enthusiasts on a walkthrough of his latest exhibition, *Of Worlds Within Worlds*. It's a chilly morning in early February, but this grand retrospective of a lifetime's brilliance runs till the end of June, which is just as well. To absorb the full magnificence of the show, you'll probably want to return to KNMA multiple times.

"Early on, I decided I'd bring as many worlds as possible into my work," Sheikh says, as we pause before *Returning Home After a Long Absence*, a magisterial oil on canvas he had made between 1969-73. It's a deeply moving, autobiographical work, with a portrait of his mother against the backdrop of the *mohalla* in Surendranagar, where Sheikh grew up, in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. She is waiting for her son to return home after his finishing his studies abroad.

But the appeal of the painting extends beyond the personal theme. Rather, it is sprinkled over the curious assembly of details coming together in a marvellous collage of mythic, art-historical, realist and dream-like motifs, creating a plane of existence in which the ancient past and the present moment coexist, even become one and the same.

On the top is a depiction of the Prophet on his winged horse Buraq, drawn from a typical Persian-style painting. He is pursued by a flock of angels in Asian attire, though the composition harks back to the presence of cherubs on the edges of neo-classical European art. There is also a *chinar* tree, from the world of Mughal miniatures, overlooking a cluster of houses. The dome of an azure mosque rises among the foliage, all conjured out of vivid blocks of colour. Stare at it long enough, and the scene starts looking like a dreamscape, painted by a modernist artist like Rene Magritte, in collaboration with colleagues from different times and geographies.

It is this strategy of using "quotations" from diverse sources—from European Old Masters to the scroll painters of Bengal and *kaavadiyas* of Rajasthan—that lends a unique intellectual frisson to Sheikh's work. Great art emerges out of the interplay of influences, by bringing the legacy of the past to bear upon the urgency of the present. Hidden in the



(from top) 'Alphabet Stories II'; 'Speechless City'; Gulammohammed Sheikh; and 'Kaavad Travelling Shrine Musings and Miscellanies'.

poetic lines of Rabindranath Tagore is the cadence of Kalidasa, while the devotional hymns of the Bhakti poets ring through his songs. But ultimately, it is Tagore's singular genius that gives his work the aura of profound originality. So it is with Sheikh.

## INNER DIALOGUES

In Sheikh's cross-referencing and nod to tradition, there is an urge to transcend the laws of nature, break through the barriers of time and space, to seek companionship with figures like Kabir and M.K. Gandhi, even as the artist remains in thrall to the upheavals of his time. As Roobina Karode, the curatorial mind behind the show, puts it, Sheikh's works are "not designed in linear time." So, his level of intellectual ingenuity demands a radical openness from the viewer, too.

Sheikh was trained at M.S. University in Baroda (now Vadodara) by artist K.G. Subramanyan, among others, known as the mentor of a generation of painters. Later,

he would go on to study in England and Italy. But be it at home or abroad, he heard the same refrain from his teachers: we can teach you technique, but we can't tell you what to do with it.

On graduating, Sheikh had a show at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai, inaugurated by M.F. Husain, whose paintings of horses struck a had chord with him.

But even early on, he knew his path clearly. "The horses I painted came from the ones that pulled the *tonga* in my home city, unlike the regal creatures of Husain, full of vitality," Sheikh says. Some of these early works, including several never-before-seen gouaches, are on display at KNMA.

Over the years, Sheikh's exchanges with senior artists, either contemporaries or from another era, would intensify, leading to art that is ambitious, both in terms of scale and conception. The arrangement of his works inside the gallery mimics this fluidity, as each room flows into another—worlds

opening out to other worlds—in an allusion to the title of the show. The unfolding is not chronological but rather follows a logic of spiritual affinity, the linkages are more thematic than stylistic.

Often, the artist seems to be in an internal dialogue with his shifting selves, as times change and his sensibility evolves. *Speechless City* (1975) and *Speaking Street* (1981), both cityscapes painted only a few years apart, appear like doppelgangers. The former was a response to the muzzling of free speech during the Emergency, where only dogs and crows are left in a ghost town. In this haunting work, Sheikh mixed Italian-style perspective on the top, while focusing on traditional horizontal representation below, complicating the grammar of his visual idiom.

In contrast, he returns to the cacophony of his childhood neighbourhood in *Speaking Street*, where angels descend from the heavens to lift him up from the roof of the local mosque, while life flows down below. Sheikh removes walls, turning the viewer into a voyeur, giving them slices of domestic drama—violence, love, solitude, conviviality. Each vignette has its own story, making it easy to miss the forest for the trees. "I wanted to translate the idea of a journey into a painting," Sheikh says. "So, I created a series of images flowing into one another, playing with proximity and distance." The viewer, too, is compelled to zoom in and out, by physically moving around a painting to grasp it in its totality.

## BURNT AND BROKEN

Despite its cerebral focus, Sheikh's art rests on an abiding faith in humanism. Having spent most of his life in Gujarat, he stands witness to many episodes of communal riots that have torn through the state. In one of his most powerful paintings, *Ahmedabad: The City that Gandhi Left Behind* (2015-16) for instance, the spiritual crisis of living through such turmoils is captured with unsparing bleakness.

Unlike the light touches in the paintings from the 1970s and 1980s (there is one in which former Miss World Reita Faria makes an appearance), a dark cloud hovers over this magisterial canvas. The city plunged into fear, while an autorickshaw burns in the middle, like a heart on fire. People from different social groups gather to around a fire in another panorama—an act of self-preservation that also carrying a whiff of menace, like the lingering smell of sulphur after a match is lit.

Rooted in his belief in the cathartic power of art, Sheikh reframes the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's lines. "There will be paintings about the dark times," he says, leading the rapt audience into the *kaavads*, inspired by the accordion-like structures used by storytellers in Rajasthan. He urges each person to step inside the room-like enclosures, painted all over with dense imagery, and look up at the canopy, where earth, water and sky become one. And just like that, for a fleeting moment, you feel soothed in the embrace of great art.

Of Worlds Within Worlds is on at KNMA, Delhi, till 30 June.



# Folk jams with electronic



Folk artists at Fieldlines.

COURTESY AAROHI MEHRA

A lilting flute melody floats uneasily over see-sawing synths and a bass attack so heavy that it rattles the delicate, coloured-glass windows. Percussive *dhol* rhythms find themselves wrapped in velvety reverb, as if trapped by the handpainted clouds covering the walls and ceilings. Inspired by the monsoon, Badal Mahal is a fine-dining restaurant that sits atop a 17th century Rajasthani fort, where patrons can cosplay as old school Indian nobility. But for a few days last December, its cloud-motif ambience incubated a very different kind of sonic thunderstorm, as UK producer Vivek Sharda and a group of Rajasthani musicians perfected their apocalyptic, awe-inspiring fusion of desert folk and post-industrial electronics.

Sharda—who performs as V.I.V.E.K—came up in the 2000s London dub-step scene, and specialises in brooding dub and bass music. The musicians sitting across from him—including Bhanwari Devi, Krishna Kumar, Kambhira Khan, Kutle Khan, Alser Khan, Mahmud Khan and Yusuf Khan—are hand-picked torchbearers of centuries-old Rajasthani folk traditions. Their unlikely collaboration has been orchestrated by the curators of Magnetic Fields—the boutique electronica music festival that takes place at Alsisar Mahal—for Fieldlines, their "inter-traditional and inter-generational" music residency programme.

Fieldlines has been one of the festival's major highlights since it started in 2019, consistently delivering one of the weekend's most fascinating and innovative sets. In 2022, for example, the residency featured a collaboration between Chennai electronic music producer Vinayakā and the Forgotten Songs Collective, which consists of eight members of the Biate tribe from Assam's Dima Hasao, supposedly the last remaining musicians in their community. It was, I'm told, the first time that this music had been performed outside the Biate homeland. That's exactly the sort of amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience that music festivals are uniquely positioned to facilitate. Sadly, it's an opportunity that few Indian festivals take advantage of.

So when I was invited to sit in on the studio sessions for the 2024 edition of Fieldlines and see how it all comes together, I jumped at the opportunity. In early December, a few days before the festival proper, I make my way to Badal Mahal. By the time I arrive, the musicians have been working together for five days and have a bunch of songs already prepared.

I watch them run through a rehearsal, the folk musicians sitting on the floor facing Sharda's desk—dominated by a massive sound mixer—behind which he stands like a moody orchestra conductor. Sometimes Sharda takes the lead, laying down glitchy, metronomic percussion and dubby bass, over which the other musicians improvise their folk melodies and rhythms. At other moments, the performance sounds almost like a traditional folk performance, until Sharda starts adding effects, transmuting an earthy vocal line till it sounds alien and hyper-digital, burying the bhapang's peculiar stringed-percussion sound under layers of sub-nautical reverb.

In between songs, the artists share their comments and feedback through interpreters. When they're playing though, the only communication happens through gesture and rhythm, with Sharda operating as an orchestral conductor. They've only met each other five days ago, but the musicians have already figured out their own shorthand. Though their shared love for music forms the basis of that connection, credit also goes to Akshatha Shetty and Piyush Goswami, the programme's cultural mediators.

"The way that a folk musician approaches the structure of music is very different to how an electronic producer or even a western-trained musician does," explains Magnetic Fields co-founder Sarah Elizabeth Chawla. "Akshatha and Piyush help bridge that gap, because they're so gentle and empathetic."

The duo—who run the "social-work-through art" non-profit Rest of My Family—have been working on Fieldlines since its inception. They tell me about everything that goes into facilitating such a collaboration—making sure that the artists are comfortable, helping them understand each others' creative processes, even serving as interpreters when needed. They also draw heavily on their experience working with folk and tribal artists.

"Much of the interfacing is being able to read between the lines, between the notes so as to what the two sides are possibly thinking or feeling and communicating that and translating that musically," they tell me.

Collaborations between folk and electronic artists often come across as remixes, with the producer treating the folk music as essentially samples that they plug into their own sound. But this collaboration is a much more equitable exchange, one that respects the context of tradition and faith within which folk music usually resides. Sharda tells me that he would encourage the other musicians to jam and then pull out tunes that he thought might fit, rather than use their music as exotic window-dressing.

The folk musicians echo that sentiment. "We haven't changed our music," says Kutla Khan. "We're playing the same music our ancestors played, and Vivek is just adding new rhythms and electronics to it. We find a lot of joy in taking our ancestral music and presenting it in new contexts. It gives new life to our art."

Ten days of rehearsal and collective songwriting culminate on the festival's final night with a performance in front of a couple of thousand people at the Jameson Connects South Stage. Bhanwari Devi's powerful voice stabs out at the sky, slicing through storm clouds of sub-bass. Intricate percussive patterns on the dhol are accompanied by sepulchral, scooped-out basslines to create drum-and-bass adjacent freakouts. The *bhakti* of Manganiyar and Sufi folk music meets the atheist fervour of the dance floor and breathes new life into the cliché of music as spiritual apotheosis.

Soon after the set ends, I find Sharda in the crowd and offer him all the money I have on me just so I can get a bootleg copy of the recording. He laughs it off, but I was entirely serious. Chawla tells me that they eventually hope to release music created under the Fieldlines programme, though there are no plans yet for this particular set. The festival organisers also want to travel with the show and are in the midst of talks with venues and international festivals. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. Partly because I really want to see the set again, but also because I think Fieldlines represents a model case for how a festival can leverage its resources to create deep, impactful engagement with music and culture. It's certainly a risk, but it's a risk worth taking. I just hope other Indian music festivals are taking note.

Bhanuj Kappal is a Mumbai-based writer.

K.P. Singh

## THE CITY BUILDER

The 95-year-old chairman emeritus of DLF on building cities, golf courses, relationships, and a life he didn't quite dream of

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

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Dressed in a claret-coloured shirt and dark slacks, K.P. Singh is just back in New Delhi from Lynndale, his 110-acre home in Mussoorie, where he brought in his 95th birthday with family and friends, and musicians flown in for the occasion. "I love music. I love to dance. I wish I could sing or play, but I can't, so I listen," he says, when I ask Singh, who is No.12 on Forbes' list of India's richest and rumoured to host lavish parties with the best bartenders, chefs and international celebrity musicians, how he celebrated his birthday. "My life, I take every day as a birthday."

Born in Bulandshahr in present-day Uttar Pradesh on 19 November 1929—online sources say 15 August 1931 "but you know how certificates were made in those days"—Kushal Pal Singh is chairman emeritus of DLF Ltd. He took over the real estate company, now India's biggest listed property firm by market cap, from his father-in-law in 1974-75. He was its chairman until his retirement in 2020, four decades during which his ideas and novel methods of implementation transformed the real estate business in India and, for better or worse, created a blueprint for upscale apartment living.

Until he decided to revive DLF, KP, as his friends refer to him, was known as an easy-going, fun-loving young former army officer, who ran the thriving Qutab Stud Farm in Delhi, managed the India operations for US company Universal Electric, and enjoyed partying every evening with his wife Indira and their friends. "My father-in-law said I would not be able to do it. Real estate is a dirty business; he thought I was soft," says Singh.

K.P. Singh managed to forge one of the first public-private partnerships to develop land, a model other builders would replicate

His father-in-law, Chaudhary Raghendra Singh, had been planning to sell DLF, which he started in 1946. It had had a good run developing residential colonies in Delhi, but land ceiling laws hit it hard, and by the mid-70s it had shrunk to a firm with little cash in hand, 30 acres of wasteland in Gurugram and one large building on Parliament Street in Delhi. Indira and her sister Prem didn't want to sell their shares and asked Singh to find a way to save their inheritance. Laws kept private developers out of urban planning, but Singh saw that Delhi was expanding and would soon run out of space. Those 30 arid acres everyone considered "too far from Delhi" could be the start of something big. "I imagined myself creating a city. I started my life in a village, but for polo and for business I travelled to London, Chicago, and I saw what real cities were like," says Singh. "Not many understood my vision because no one imagined India could ever be the way it is today."

Gurugram, home to small farmers and not yet zoned as "urban", was his playground, and he started with a plan for DLF City, which would integrate offices, homes, malls, hotels and special economic zones. Since the 1980s, DLF has built five phases in Gurugram, including DLF Cyberhub, and expanded to other cities. Among the properties DLF—with a current market cap of \$25.8 billion—has developed in Gurugram are the ultra-luxury Camellias and Dahlia, with rates of up to ₹180,000 per sq. ft. Though DLF was listed publicly in 2007, about 74% is still held by the promoters, Singh's family.

Much of Singh's story is well documented—the early public-private partnerships to develop land, spending time with farmers to convince them to sell, the careful fostering of relationships with people at all levels from Cabinet ministers to office clerks. He's contributed to this oeuvre himself with his recent memoir, *Why the Heck Not?* and his 2011 autobiography, *Whatever the Odds*, which focused on the business. "*Why the Heck Not?* is more about life itself, what I've learnt, the ups and downs, the peculiarities, how I dealt with my phases of my life, and putting those lessons down so it can be useful for someone else," he says. His is a complicated legacy and Singh revels in storytelling—he enjoys making himself the hero but there's also a calibrated cadence to the stories. He's comfortably aware of

the unique vision that allowed him to imagine a city beyond Delhi in the 1980s when most people lived in bungalows and worked in government offices, yet admits that Gurugram hasn't turned out as it should have due to a lack of planning that foregrounded people. He knows he's more ambitious and driven than most, but quickly counters any statement that could be seen as hubris with "these are all lessons we can all learn". He's aware of the role of serendipity in his life, but is equally certain that nothing can be achieved without hard work. He advocates grabbing any opportunity that comes one's way yet insists one needs a personal code of ethics.

He attributes "50% of success in life" to building relationships, describing being amiable as a way of living and explaining that in business, it's important to be likeable without being pliable. "The important thing is how to conduct yourself so that people like to be associated with you even when they are not agreeing with you."

He wasn't born with "this pleasing personality"; it is a lesson from sports—hockey, tennis, football, riding, polo—where he learnt to win, lose and lead. "It was because I was good in riding and tennis that a chance came for a scholarship to UK. There, tennis and polo are high society games so you learn to move in those circles. Then I joined Army, where you learn to move with everyone... My late wife was also like this—very friendly, very warm and we were both together a likeable couple." He digresses into long stories about friendships with M.F. Husain, Nat-

war Singh, Kamal Nath, Rajiv Gandhi and a host of others, all bonds of give-and-take, never cultivated with a goal in mind. Haryana chief ministers with whom he had similarly close ties that helped create a conducive business environment included Bhajan Lal, Devi Lal, Om Prakash Chautala and Banarsi Das Gupta.

His relationships have been controversial too, most memorably the 2012 headlines when DLF was caught in allegations of dubious deals with companies promoted by then Congress president Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law Robert Vadra. "Yes, there were many challenges—laws, changing land policies and zoning, you couldn't get money—it was what most people would call impossible. I've taken a lot of risks and there has been danger—police, politicians have been after me but I didn't give up. I had my vision.... and no one has been able to find fault because I always ran my business clean."

Real estate remains a fragmented, chaotic business with most builders known for underhanded deals. "Yes, it is true, all my competitors are either in jail, bail or bankrupt," he says, chuckling. To an extent, DLF under Singh brought order and professionalism to an informal sector that was "like the Wild West" in the 1980s, and he says it's his values that kept him out of trouble even though the court cases on various counts, from land acquisition to delivery of properties, have been many.

The first of his "basic rules of business" is compliance. "Whatever the law, you have to be 100% in compliance, then no one can entangle you. Next, conduct your

**Favourite city**

Wherever I'm living at the moment.

**Golf handicap**

18. I used to be a very good golfer, but I just swing it around now.

**Biggest indulgence**

Living well. Whatever your stage, pay your taxes and live as well as you can.

business so that everybody gains. Means, when you buy agricultural land ensure farmers not only get paid for their land but also get a chance at prosperity. Build so that the person who buys the apartment sees a rise in prices and benefits. In other words, everybody associated with you must have a share in prosperity."

Singh's vertiginous, glass-clad towers have changed the landscape of all Indian cities and the way we live and work, creating gated communities and secure bubbles that rise above the reality of India. He describes DLF Phase V as "world-class, a world of its own", but hedges when asked if he'd live there. "Gurgaon is not there because DLF is owning; it's because people want that kind of city...." He doesn't disagree that the traffic, dangerous flooding and poor garbage and sewage management isn't what he imagined. "I imagined a green city environment because I was privileged like this," he says gesturing to the planned, though polluted, beauty of central Delhi beyond his gate.

In 2006, even as DLF was continuing to grow, Singh and Indira—who died in 2018 after battling cancer for more than a decade—decided "against all advice" to divide the company and their properties between their three children, with a controlling interest to son, Rajiv who is now the chairman. In 2017, he sold his one-third stake in DLF's rental arm to GIC, Singapore's sovereign wealth fund, for \$1.9 billion. "I kept just one property for rental income in Gurgaon and this house, which was special to my wife and I," he says. "I'm happy with the decision. Every-

one is a billionaire now. My grandchildren have entered the business and have brought their own touch," says the great-grandad of two, who has found love again at 90-plus in his companion Sheena de Boisgeline, a former model and entrepreneur he met through mutual friends.

"For a year or two after Indira died, my life was bad. Sixty-five years together... there can never be anyone like her, and when you have that kind of perfection, the happiest would be if you can both die together but that was not to be. I was at the age where all my friends were dead or disabled. I had no one," he says. Indira was always pragmatic and had told Singh to 'make your life again', but he began to drift. Television became his companion and a drink every evening. "I never take more than one drink, and one day I asked my longtime staff to bring me a second, and he said, 'are you sure?'," recalls Singh.

That pause made him remember his promise to Indira and he began travelling again, returned to golf thrice a week, "and in the course of all that I met a very wonderful lady though that is a very risky thing at my age". The wide age gap drew censure from his children, her children, her father and their many friends. "She has built a new social crowd for me, which I needed. I need activity and social life. This is all nonsense that we should live in a certain way at a certain age, give up everything and wait for death. I ignored them all and used my head to organise my life," he says. "Life *ka chakkar ho gaya* but wherever I have turned, it has been good."

In business, it's important to be likeable without being pliable, Singh believes. In 90% of cases, you can back off without losing out.

MINT SHORTS

Rupee jumps 17 paise to settle at 86.95 against US dollar

Mumbai: The rupee rebounded and settled with a gain of 17 paise at 86.95 against the US dollar on Friday, as the American currency index declined to its five-month-low level and crude oil prices eased on lower demand expectations. Volatile domestic equity market sentiment and uninterrupted outflow of foreign capital, however, weighed on the domestic currency, forex traders said, attributing the foreign investors' outflow to an increased risk aversion due to tariff ambiguity worldwide. PTI

Reliance, metals power Nifty 50 to best week in three months

India's benchmark index Nifty 50 logged its best week in three months, led by heavyweight Reliance Industries and metal stocks, as losses in the past three weeks triggered bargain buying. On Friday, the National Stock Exchange's Nifty 50 rose 0.03% to 22,622.5, while the BSE's Sensex ended 0.01% lower at 74,332.58. The Nifty rose about 1.9% this week, its best in three months, while the Sensex gained 1.6%, its highest weekly gains since January-end. REUTERS

Market regulator warns Nestle over insider trading norms breach

Nestle India on Friday said it received a warning from the country's markets regulator for a breach of insider trading regulations "by a designated person of the company." The Indian arm of Swiss food giant Nestle said its compliance officer received an administrative warning letter from the Securities and Exchange Board of India on Thursday. The firm did not reveal details from the letter or about the person. REUTERS

Positive strides after Modi-Xi meeting: China foreign minister

Beijing: Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi on Friday said India-China relations have made "positive strides" and achieved a series of encouraging outcomes at all levels after last year's breakthrough ending the over four-year-long military standoff in eastern Ladakh. Addressing his annual press conference in Beijing, Wang also said the boundary question or specific differences should not affect the bilateral relations between the two countries. PTI

RBI approves one-year extension for IndusInd Bank CEO Kathpalia

Private lender IndusInd Bank on Friday said it had received approval from India's central bank to reappoint Sumant Kathpalia as its chief executive officer (CEO) and managing director for a period of one year. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) approved Kathpalia's term to be extended from 24 March this year to 23 March 2026, IndusInd said. The private lender's board in September had approved Kathpalia's reappointment as CEO for a three-year term. REUTERS

Foreign secretary holds talks with Russian counterpart in Moscow

New Delhi: Foreign secretary Vikram Misri on Friday held talks with his Russian counterpart, Andrey Rudenko, focusing on various aspects of bilateral cooperation. It is understood that the conflict in Ukraine also figured in the talks. The foreign secretary is likely to meet a number of other senior Russian leaders. PTI

New Sebi chairman pledges reforms

FROM PAGE 16

of dissent or voting patterns within its board, and called for greater transparency in handling conflict of interest among Sebi board members. "Past concerns regarding conflicts involving a former chairperson highlight the need for clearer public disclosure of deliberations in such cases," Agrawal said. "Sebi does have a code on conflict of interests for board members, but how it is applied in real scenarios remains opaque. A periodic review and strengthening of this code into a regulation would improve governance at Sebi board meetings," he added. Pandey in his speech addressed concerns related to operational difficulties faced by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) and alternative invest-

ment funds (AIFs), signalling a willingness to rationalize regulations. "We will be happy to engage with FPI and AIF industry participants to address their difficulties and further rationalize regulations to promote ease of operation," he said. Arora of Saraf & Partners called for regulatory adjustments or rationalization of frameworks for FPIs and AIFs. "Our clients are suffering because of the regulatory actions taken in the name of transparency, which is forcing some of them to leave India," said Arora. "Regulators never face any consequence for making the law so tight that regulated entities cannot do legitimate business. However, it hurts business and ease of doing business." For an extended version of the story, go to livemint.com.

WTO chief seeks calm as trade war mounts

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GENEVA

The World Trade Organization (WTO) chief called for calm Friday in the face of a swelling global trade war as US President Donald Trump slaps steep tariffs against friends and foes alike. "I understand the enormous amount of concerns that people have about what is going on," Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala told a meeting at the WTO headquarters. She downplayed fears that the new US administration, which has been harshly critical of WTO, might decide to withdraw, as it has done from the World Health Organization and other UN bodies. Just back from Washington, where she met with US commerce secretary Howard Lutnick and trade representative Jamieson Greer, Okonjo-Iweala said "the indications I got is that they remain part of WTO." Since his return to office in January, Trump has introduced sweeping levies against several top US trading partners. Even though tensions eased a notch on Thursday, after the US hit pause on the 25% tariffs it slapped earlier this week on most goods coming from Mexico and Canada, the standoff with China continues. The European Union is also in the crosshairs.

HPCL gets new chief, four more large PSUs in queue

The petroleum selection board has put out ads for chiefs of ONGC, NTPC, BPCL and NHPC

Rituraj Baruah & Utpal Bhaskar  
NEW DELHI

The process of appointing new honchos for five large state-owned enterprises with combined revenue of more than ₹18 trillion found its first appointee on Thursday. Vikas Kaushal, a partner and chairman at consultancy Kearney's India operations, was appointed chairman and managing director (CMD) of Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), India's third-biggest oil marketing company by revenue, by the appointments committee of the Union cabinet for a period of five years. The move marks the first instance of a private sector executive being appointed head of an oil and gas PSU. To be sure, Kaushal earlier worked in HPCL along with other PSUs such as Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and NTPC in senior executive positions. Meanwhile, advertisements by Public Enterprises Selection Board (PESB) have sought applications for CMD posts in four other central public sector units (PSUs)—Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC), NTPC Ltd, BPCL, NHPC Ltd. The move is significant given that these companies are market leaders in their domains, and have a pivotal role to play in India's energy transition goals. While ONGC is India's largest hydrocar-



HPCL is India's third-biggest oil marketing firm by revenue.

MINT

bon and exploration firm, NTPC is the largest power generation firm. NHPC is the country's largest hydropower firm. ONGC is the latest public sector entity in the energy space for which the PESB has sought applications for the chairman's post. On Monday, PESB invited applications from qualified candidates, and the last date of receipt of applications is 11 April. The incumbent CMD, to be implemented. "Further, the appointment process also usually takes a few months, so a pool of qualified candidates should be prepared and the government should have

PSU LEADERSHIP HUNT

ONGC is the latest PSU for which the PESB has sought applications for the chairman's post

SOME former chairmen of large PSUs expressed reservations over the process followed

APPOINTMENT of CMD should be for a longer period than 2 or 3 years, said Singh, former NHPC CMD

Arun Kumar Singh, was appointed in December 2022 for a three-year term. Some former chairmen of these large PSUs expressed reservations over the process followed and the tenure of the leaders. A.K. Singh, CMD of NHPC from February 2020 to August 2022, told Mint that the appointment of CMD should be for a longer period than two or three years so that there is time for the vision of the board and the CMD

Will AWL's Tops buy pay off?

FROM PAGE 16

The deal value of ₹603 crore implies an enterprise-value-to-sales ratio of 1.6 times based on Tops' FY24 revenue of ₹386 crore. The valuation appears reasonable. AWL will initially acquire 80% of shares from existing promoters for an enterprise value of ₹603 crore and the remaining 20% in phases over the next three years. AWL will fund the buy from internal accruals and if needed, the initial public offering (IPO) proceeds. While Tops is strong in jams and sauces, its regional skew means AWL must expand its reach in underpenetrated western and southern markets to justify the valuation. AWL's timing seems opportune. Fresh off a strong December quarter (Q3FY25)—where revenue surged 31% year-on-year (y-o-y) and profit after tax more than doubled—the company is fast-tracking its FMCG pivot. The foods and FMCG business contributed 10% of consolidated revenues in FY24 at ₹4,994 crore, and grew 23% y-o-y. AWL aims for an over 20% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) in volume over the medium term and is targeting ₹10,000 crore in food and



AWL's branded edible oil sales are slowing and palm oil volumes saw double-digit decline in Q3

BLOOMBERG

FMCG revenue by FY27, up from ₹6,000 crore in the past 12 months, per the company. Growth will be driven by aggressive distribution, expansion and portfolio scale-up, particularly in staples like wheat flour, pulses, and basmati rice. However, execution risks remain. Q3 saw an Ebitda loss of ₹32 crore in the food segment due to a ₹50 crore rice inventory write-down. Management remains confident in long-term profitability, but

Adani Wilmar will fund the acquisition through internal accruals and, if needed, the IPO proceeds

near-term margin pressures persist. Ebitda stands for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation. AWL's direct retail reach, now at 820,000+ outlets, and e-commerce growth support Tops' national rollout. Yet, challenges persist—branded edible oil sales, the company's bread-and-butter business, are slowing and palm oil volumes saw a double-digit Q3 decline due to consumer downgrading.

Missing X-factor in dealing rooms

FROM PAGE 16

derivatives transactions, often involving high volatility and short-term trades on the National Stock Exchange Ltd and BSE. A bond dealing room focuses on government and corporate bonds, trading via negotiated dealing system-order matching, over-the-counter markets, and exchanges. The activity on an equity trading floor is far more frenetic. "We have to take instant decisions on whether to buy or sell (shares of a firm), and the order sizes can be large," said Radhika Maheshwari, lead dealer at WhiteOak Capital's portfolio management vertical. "In a volatile market like the one we are seeing now, the risk multiplies and only those with a strong risk appetite and risk management can confidently make quick, high-impact decisions." A trade call, often made in split seconds, can either boost or erode a client's portfolio.

The stereotyped belief that men are more attuned to such risk-taking prevents many women from applying for roles in dealing rooms even now. "In the futures and options (F&O) retail space, the number of women traders is quite low," said Salonee Sanghvi, founder of research firm My Wealth Guide. Sanghvi, who has worked with ace investor Rakesh Jhunjhunwala's RARE Enterprises for nearly a decade, estimates that barely 10-15% of all retail derivative traders in India are women. "We have women as senior executives in other teams like finance, marketing, but the dealing rooms are all-male," said a senior executive in the dealing room of one of the largest financial advisory firms. "Some [women] who came in the early years, asked for a transfer or left." dipti.sharma@live-mint.com For an extended version of the story, go to livemint.com.

Women's participation is higher in an industry like IT services at 36%, according to Nasscom

Cricket, beer, bites: Food firms expect 40% sales surge

FROM PAGE 16

finals—always drive up demand, both in bars and restaurants as well as home consumption. While a lot of restaurants are running offers to pull in crowds, we typically see a significant uptick in retail sales as well, since many people prefer watching from home with friends and family too," Ishwaraj Bhatia, chief operating officer and co-founder of Simba beer told Mint. He added that the company typically observes a 15-25% increase in beer sales during major sporting events. In Bengaluru the story is no different. Craft beer garden Geist Brewing Co., will be running schemes too. But there are those that will not as demand is already high on such days, said Mukesh Tolani, Toit Brewpub founder in the city. Cafe Delhi Heights in Delhi NCR is also running alcohol promotions across its outlets, expecting a 30% rise in business this Sunday. Meanwhile, Wow! Momo is tapping into its loyal customer base with targeted offers. "From our own loyal database we've identified specific consumer cohorts who are active on match days and are doing special targeted offers for them like deals on every six or four runs scored, and other things like on run-chases and every half-century scored. These will be pushed out through app notifications and WhatsApp messages," said Sagar J. Daryani, co-founder of Wow! Momo. "Across all channels we feel with the entire Champions Trophy and the upcoming match on Sunday, we should definitely see 30-40% increase in transactions than a normal day," he added. Daryani also said that not all big matches but select matches where India is playing always get more traction, especially towards the end of the tournament. This time it was also the India Pakistan clash two weeks ago where orders soared. This business is expected to be double that of weekend matches during the IPL.

What reciprocal US tariffs could mean for India

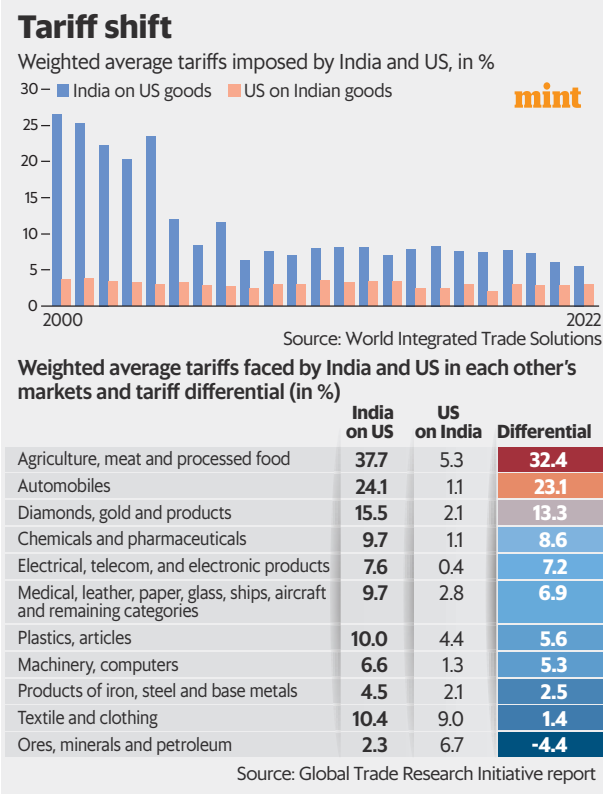
FROM PAGE 16

economies with US free trade agreements (FTAs), such as South Korea and Singapore, are less at risk, said a report by Nomura, dated 10 February. If the US imposes reciprocal tariffs, India's exports to the country could drop by \$2-3.5 billion in FY26, potentially hurting GDP growth by 5-10 basis points from the current estimate of 6.6%, notes Deven-dra Kumar Pant, chief economist and head of public finance at India Ratings, in a report dated 28 February. (A basis point is one-hundredth of a percentage point.) Which sectors are likely to be the worst hit? Even though Trump's threat has alarmed policymakers and economists alike, the actual impact of the tariffs will depend on whether they are applied at the product, sector or country level. A report by Global Trade

Research Initiative (GTRI) notes that if tariffs are imposed at the product level, the impact may be limited since India and the US do not necessarily trade identical goods. However, if applied at the sector level, entire industries could face major disruptions. At the broad sector level, the does—for all countries next month. He has already issued exemptions on Mexico and Canada after making them the earliest victims of his tariffs. India is currently weighing its options, and will watch Trump's actions against other countries for cues. To be sure, talks on a trade deal between the two countries are also ongoing in Washington, which could bring more clarity on tariffs.

If the US imposes reciprocal tariffs, India's exports to the country could drop by \$2-3.5 billion in FY26

favouring India. However, since their trade with the US is small in absolute terms, these sectors are likely to experience relatively less exposure to reciprocal tariffs. The full impact of the tariffs threat will become clearer once the Trump administration finalizes new rates—if it does—for all countries next month. He has already issued exemptions on Mexico and Canada after making them the earliest victims of his tariffs. India is currently weighing its options, and will watch Trump's actions against other countries for cues. To be sure, talks on a trade deal between the two countries are also ongoing in Washington, which could bring more clarity on tariffs.





# ICAI backs NFRA's revision of forex reporting norms

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The accounting profession's self-regulator and rule-maker, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI), has backed audit watchdog National Financial Reporting Authority's (NFRA) proposal to revise reporting norms for foreign currency operations, saying it will bring more clarity.

The amendments are proposed to apply from annual reporting periods beginning on or after 1 April 2025, according to the NFRA.

NFRA's board had last month decided to recommend to the ministry of corporate affairs to notify amendments to accounting standard Ind AS 21 dealing with 'effects of changes in foreign exchange rates'. Under the provision, financial reporting of operations in countries with extreme economic conditions such as hyperinflation, government controls or official exchange rates not reflecting market realities have to make more disclosures about their accounting approach, Mint reported on 5 March.

For example, Argentina's peso in recent years saw extreme fluctuations and the government is planning to lift its strict currency controls by next year.

Amendments to the accounting standard enable businesses to translate their operations in currencies in restricted environments into the reporting currency and capture their financial posi-



The amendments will apply from 1 April 2025, NFRA said.

tion more accurately.

ICAI's new president Charanjot Singh Nanda said the proposed amendments provide useful information to the users of financial statements.

Ind AS 21, as it exists today, specifies the exchange rate to use in reporting foreign currency transactions when exchangeability between the two currencies is temporarily lacking. But it does not specify such a rate when a lack of exchangeability is not temporary, Nanda said. Therefore, the provision had a limited guidance in this regard, he said.

Through these proposed amendments, comprehensive guidance has been added regarding lack of exchangeability, whether temporary or not. Amendments require an entity to apply a consistent two-step approach to assess whether a currency is exchangeable into another currency and, when it is not, to determining the spot exchange rate to use and the disclosures to provide," said Nanda.

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**Ica's president said the proposed amendments provide useful information to users of financial statements**

# RBI's VRR auction sees tepid demand as liquidity eases

Banking liquidity deficit has fallen from a peak of over ₹2 tn in Jan to about ₹20,000 cr in Feb

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The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) saw tepid demand for its variable rate repo (VRR) auctions as liquidity tightness in the banking system has eased following the central bank's measures.

Against a notified amount of ₹50,000 crore, RBI received bids amounting to ₹8,375 crore at the 14-day VRR auction, indicating low requirement of funds by banks. That also reflected in the lower demand seen in the daily VRR auctions held this week.

Barring Monday (3 March), when RBI saw demand worth ₹16,557 crore against an auction amount of ₹25,000 crore, the demand in the daily VRR auctions fell substantially as liquidity in the system eased 4 March onwards.

Against a notified ₹25,000 crore, the central bank received bids worth ₹5,855 crore on Tuesday, ₹5,089 crore on Wednesday and ₹4,442 crore on Thursday. At the three-day auction today, it received bids worth ₹3,970 crore.

While liquidity has been easing, RBI on Wednesday announced more measures to ease liquidity in the banking system. These include the purchase of government bonds ₹1 trillion under open market operations (OMOs) in two tranches, and a foreign currency buy/sell US dollar/Indian rupee currency swap auction of \$10 billion for a tenor of 36 months.

"The latest measures, expected to lift core liquidity to a surplus, suggest that the overall policy stance is clearly accommodative, with an eye on facilitating policy transmission," said Radhika Rao, executive director and senior economist, DBS Bank. "These steps are pre-emptive ahead of a seasonal squeeze in March,



While liquidity has been easing, RBI on Wednesday announced more measures to ease liquidity in the banking system. REUTERS

being a fiscal year end, besides other contributing factors," she said, adding that it could include forex market intervention, tax outflows, volatility in capital flows and currency in circulation.

"Concerted action, which includes tranches of OMOs, VRR auctions and FX swaps besides a CRR (cash reserve ratio) reduction in December, have added more than ₹4 trillion to the domestic banking system yet far," she added.

The RBI first announced measures on 27 January, which included OMOs entailing the purchase of government securities worth ₹60,000 crore in three tranches of ₹20,000 crore each. In addition to a \$5 billion swap, the regulator also announced a 56-day VRR auction for ₹50,000 crore. It later announced a three-year buy/sell dollar/rupee swap

auction on 21 February worth \$10 billion with the objective of meeting the "durable liquidity needs of the system."

Through the first round of measures, RBI is estimated to have infused at least ₹3.2 trillion, according to CareEdge. While that improved liquidity, "overall conditions remain tight" and more measures are needed, it said.

The liquidity deficit is estimated to have narrowed from over ₹1 trillion on Monday to around ₹20,000 crore on Tuesday, led by several measures taken by RBI over the past two months to inject durable liquidity into the system, according to market experts. System liquidity has been in the deficit since late November 2024. Since then, the deficit widened to peak at over ₹2 trillion in January before easing in February.

Among other factors, liquidity tight-

ness is also expected to have been due to RBI's intervention in the foreign currency market to protect the rupee. It is keen to keep the liquidity situation comfortable to ensure transmission of the recent policy rate cut. RBI cut the repo rate by 25 basis points on 7 February—the first cut in five years.

"A let-up in the global dollar rally saw the rupee post its single highest appreciation since February yesterday, closing below 87.0, de facto lowering intervention pressure in the near term," Rao said. "Looking ahead, a strong dividend transfer from the RBI in May will also provide a more durable liquidity injection, keeping the overall balance well in surplus," she said, adding that the FY26 budget projected dividend income from RBI and public sector institutions at ₹2.6 trillion.

**₹8,375 cr**  
Bids received at the 14-day VRR auction by RBI

**₹50K cr**  
Notified amount for the central bank's VRR auction

## CCI staff barred from stock bets to stop conflict

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Competition Commission of India (CCI) has proposed to prevent its employees from specified investments, including any direct or indirect investments in commodity derivatives and equity-related investments other than certain exceptions like mutual funds, to protect the integrity of its regulatory decisions.

CCI employees are covered by central civil service rules, and the proposed norms seek to add explicit additional conduct requirements for the regulator like in the case of other regulators, including the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). CCI has sought public feedback by 6 April on the proposals before giving effect to them.

The draft rules disallow staff from making direct or indirect investment in equity, commodity derivatives and equity-related instruments including convertible debentures and warrants. But, investments in mutual funds, non-convertible bonds and non-convertible debentures, IPOs and in rights issues in respect of the shares held by them are allowed.

In mutual funds, the investments go into a basket of different securities rather than to individual companies, making it an acceptable investment tool for employees.

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## Centre plans to double digital banks to boost inclusion

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The Union government proposes to expand the network of digital banking units (DBUs) across the country by nearly doubling their number to around 200 in just over a year. It may also allow DBUs to provide a larger bouquet of financial products, including insurance policies and other financial-inclusion products and schemes of the government, two people aware of the development said on the condition of anonymity.

DBUs are specialized, fixed-point business units equipped with certain minimum digital infrastructure to deliver digital banking products and services as well as servicing existing financial products and services digitally in a convenient and cost-effective way.



While DBUs provide ATM-like services, Centre plans to include financial products like insurance and pension. BLOOMBERG

"Ever since their launch in 2022, DBUs have constantly been expanded to cover all parts of the country, especially semi-urban, rural and remote areas that have limited access to banking services and no digital services. More than 100 DBUs are now operational and we want to fast-track the programme so that a similar number is added by the end of the

next fiscal year," said the first person cited above.

While DBUs currently provide ATM-like services—such as depositing and withdrawing cash from bank accounts—the government plans to expand their mandate to include financial products such as insurance and pension. For new products, assisted services will be available for ease of delivery.

"The idea is to extend basic digital services for delivering financial products through the infrastructure under DBUs. It will help DBUs turn to a major vehicle of financial inclusion, bringing banking and financial services to doorsteps of people in unbanked or areas with limited financial services," said a second person. The Centre is likely to nudge private sector banks to create DBUs in semi-urban areas to accelerate the growth of India's digital financial ecosystem.

Queries sent to the ministry of finance and the department of financial services remained unanswered till press time.

For customers who are adept at digital banking, DBUs aim to provide a fast, convenient and secure experience. They are

meant for remote areas with low banking penetration, significantly reducing the cost of operating bank branches.

But to create value at scale, the government will first need to spread financial literacy in rural and remote areas, said Aarthi Rangarajan, partner, financial services consulting at EY India. "To scale up and create value, DBUs must make it their priority to conduct financial-products advocacy, and spread digital literacy and awareness about security and fraud. For DBUs to expand and scale, the government must prioritise educating the masses on the basics of banking, how to leverage banks to enrich their lives, and cyber security," he said.

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**To create value at scale, the Centre will first need to spread financial literacy in rural and remote areas, say experts**

## Textiles sector eyes zero tariffs with US

FROM PAGE 16

tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico, till 2 April.

It has also imposed a 10% tariff on China on 1 February and another 10% on 4 March. In turn, China has announced an additional 15% tariff on US cotton, which will come into effect on 10 March. These developments are expected by the industry to indirectly benefit India, as Chinese products will become costlier and US cotton exports to China will not be profitable.

Further, when the US's 25% tariff on Mexico comes into effect, the cotton apparel opportunity is expected to shift to India and Bangladesh, while the man-made fibre apparel, such as Lycra and nylon wear, will likely move to Vietnam and Cambodia, according to experts. The share of Mexico in US apparel imports is 3.3%, and it mainly exports knitwear and denim, among others.

After the tariffs between the US and these countries come into effect, experts said the major destinations for US textile imports will be Vietnam, Bangladesh, and India.

As per Office of Textiles and Apparel (OTEXA) trade data, US apparel imports in CY24 stood at \$79.26 billion. India's share was 5.9%, amounting to about \$4.68 billion. China was the top exporter of apparel to the US, holding a 21% share amounting to around \$16.64 billion, followed by Vietnam at 19% (\$15.06 billion) and Bangladesh at 9.3% (\$7.37 billion).

According to a report by Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) released on 25 February, US exports to India face an average duty of 10.14%, while Indian textiles, fabric, yarn, and fibre face an average duty of 3.55%, resulting in a tariff difference of 6.59%. The trade think tank suggested in the report that the 'zero-for-zero' tariff strategy is India's best option and could be implemented quickly.

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For an extended version of this story, go to [livemint.com](#).

## 'We prepare graduates to learn how to disagree'

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MUMBAI

Learning to disagree, and working with people who have polarized views are lessons that prepares Kellogg School of Management grads for the real world. Dean Francesca Cornelli told *Mint* while attraction for an MBA degree hasn't dwindled, what is taught in the classroom has changed to keep pace with the global environment. Edited excerpts:

**Is the attraction towards MBA courses dwindling?**  
No. In fact, the number of

applications from students in India for Kellogg's full-time programmes rose 11.5% from 2023 (927) to 2024 (1,034). This upward trend has continued into 2025.

**What new courses have you introduced to help students adapt to changes in their work environment?**

One course that is not new but has been a staple for Kellogg students since well before the pandemic is crisis management. How do you communicate with your employees in the middle of a crisis, and not panic? This is important now, but it always has been. In fact,

the alumni got back to us during the pandemic and after to say that what we taught in the classroom helped them.

Now, we have added courses on leading with empathy; selling yourself as well as your ideas; everything an MBA must know about climate change; fintech and society; as well as for family business, keeping it all in the family. In addition to this, we

have Ryan Institute on Complexity, where our research uses aspects of physics to understand key social networking aspects. The insights guide our teaching, and students are taught how to use social media networks to come up with business ideas like a Uber or an Air B&B.

**Has AI been introduced in the courses?**  
We started teaching artificial

intelligence and analytics around six years ago. What we teach is how leaders can best use the scientists in the teams and how to reorganize the team to activate those scientists working with AI.

Kellogg is focused on how to bridge AI with the business. We are introducing multiple electives next fall that focus on AI, each coming from a different perspective of business -- finance, accounting, strategy, etc. Another course is human and machine intelligence and leading with networks.

Read an extended version of this interview at [livemint.com](#).

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