

HPV vaccine prevents cervical cancer in deprived groups: study

The Hindu Bureau

The human papillomavirus, or HPV, vaccine is cutting cases of cervical cancer right across the socio-economic spectrum, with most cases being prevented in more deprived groups, according to a major study funded by Cancer Research UK.

Until now, there had been concerns that the HPV vaccine could have an unequal impact across society. After carrying out

the longest follow-up on the effectiveness of the HPV vaccine, researchers at Queen Mary University of London concluded the HPV vaccination programme in England is helping to close some inequalities in cervical cancer. The results were published in the journal *BMJ*.

Public interventions

Due to a typically higher incidence of cervical cancer in more deprived groups, researchers found

that more cases were prevented in the most deprived group (around 190), compared to the least deprived group (around 60) in a study that included approximately 6,50,000 people offered vaccination aged 12-18 years in each of the five deprivation groups.

The study reflected the huge success of the school-based vaccination programme, showing that well-executed public health interventions can

help to reduce health inequalities.

The study adds even more weight to the evidence that HPV vaccination works. Researchers found that over a 12-year period, the vaccine reduced cervical cancer incidence rates by nearly 90% and pre-cancerous conditions by around 95% in women who were offered routine vaccination at 12-13 years old in England. The study shows that the vaccine is much more effective

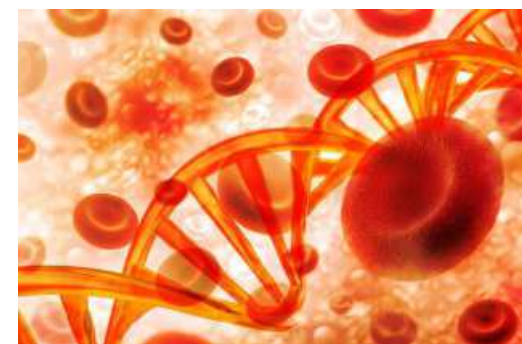
when taken up by children aged eight years (12-13 years) than later in life.

Although the life-saving HPV vaccine currently reaches people from all backgrounds, Cancer Research U.K. warns that some inequalities remain in cervical cancer incidence, and more work is needed to improve the health of the most deprived groups. Overall, cervical cancer rates are higher in people from deprived backgrounds across the

U.K. Researchers said this is partly due to people being at greater risk from HPV and barriers that can drive lower screening attendance.

Cancer Research U.K. scientists helped to prove the link between HPV and cervical cancer 25 years ago. Cervical cancer rates in the U.K. have fallen by almost a third since the early 1990s. The HPV vaccination programme was first introduced to England in 2008.

SNAPSHOTS



Miniaturised probe help track blood clots in tiny arteries

Researchers have engineered a tiny, snake-like imaging probe – a miniaturised endovascular neuro optical coherence tomography – that can navigate the labyrinth of tiny arteries in the brain, offering a tool to guide medical interventions for strokes and other artery conditions. In a human trial, the probe captured disease-linked features in blood vessels, supporting its diagnostic and clinical utility. The probe successfully captured 3D images of the patients' arteries and various artery segments.



Tool use promotes foraging success in sea otters

Using tools, like shells and rocks, to open their often thick-shelled mollusk prey increases foraging success in sea otters and protects their teeth from damage by allowing the animals to eat prey that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The findings suggest that this behaviour is a necessity for the survival of some otters in environments where preferred prey is in short supply. The tool-use frequency enabled the use of a variety of prey, which led to higher energy consumption rates and reduced tooth wear.



Intermittent keto diet causes less damage to mice cells

A new study in mice suggests that intermittently following a ketogenic diet could render the austere diet less damaging to major organs, including the heart and kidneys. This diet has gained popularity as a treatment for resistant epilepsy and, in other cases, an approach to weight loss. Ketogenic diets are very high in fat and especially low in energy-fueling carbohydrates. They coerce the liver to produce fat-derived energy in a process known as ketosis.

Women with no sexual autonomy twice likely to get STIs: study

One in nearly every twelve married women in the age group of 15-49 years in India had experienced at least one sexually transmitted infection or reproductive tract infection over a period of one year

Maitri Porecha

Women who had controlling husbands and had experienced intimate partner violence in their married life are more at risk of developing sexually transmitted infection (STI) or reproductive tract infection (RTI) than women who do not report facing control or intimate partner violence (IPV) in their marriage, a new study reveals.

The study analyses data obtained from a sample size of 73,895 women in National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-2021) and was conducted by researchers in the School of Health Systems Studies in Mumbai-based Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Centre for Study of Regional Development in JNU.

One in nearly every 12 married women in the age group of 15-49 years in India had experienced at least one sexually transmitted infection or reproductive tract infection over a period of one year, the study states.

To gauge if women had experienced STI/RTI, those who reported being sexually active, were asked whether they had a disease through sexual contact, a bad-smelling abnormal genital discharge, and a genital sore or ulcer in the last 12 months preceding the survey.

The study analyses in detail questions posed to women in NFHS-5 pertaining to sexual autonomy – if a wife knows her husband has a sexually transmitted

Association between STIs and intimate partner violence

Women who experienced intimate partner violence are more at risk of developing sexually transmitted infections

- 18.4% of women who experienced intimate partner violence had substantially higher sexually transmitted infection (STI) or reproductive tract infection (RTI), compared with 9.7% who did not face intimate partner violence
- 15.9% of women who faced controlling attitudes of the husband reported STI/RTI
- Women with no sexual autonomy and exposed to intimate partner violence were 2.3 times more likely to have STI/RTI
- Women without sexual autonomy and who faced controlling attitudes by husbands were twice more likely to be exposed to RTI
- Women with sexual autonomy had 12% lower likelihood of having STI/RTI when sociodemographic factors were controlled
- Prevalence of STI/RTI was higher among younger women aged 15-24 years (13%) and 25-34 years (13.2%), compared with older women aged 35-49 years (11.6%)



Grim: 31% of 73,895 women faced intimate partner violence – physical or sexual

disease, is she justified in asking use of a condom when they have sex; if a wife knows her husband has sex with other women, is she justified in refusing to have sex with him; and can a wife say no to her husband when she does not want to have sexual intercourse with him.

The study reveals that a majority – 73% women of the total sample size claimed that they had sexual autonomy. A third of the same sample size (31%) had faced intimate partner violence which included the husband pushing the wife, kicking her, dragging or punching her and so on, sexual which includes the husband forcing the wife to have sex with him or emotional where the husband has humiliated or threatened to hurt the wife or

someone close to her or insulted her. Also, 46% of the same sample size said that they faced controlling attitudes from their husbands, which included the husband being jealous if the wife talked to other men, frequently accusing the wife of being unfaithful, not permitting the wife from meeting female friends, trying to limit wife's contact with her core family, insisting on knowing where she is at all times, and not trusting her with money.

"The study reveals that STI/RTI infection was substantially higher among women who experienced intimate partner violence (18.4%) as compared to those women who did not (9.7%). Also 15.9% women who face controlling attitudes of their husbands reported STI/RTI as com-

pared to 9.4% women who reported STI/RTI but did not face control from their husband," said Pintu Paul, co-author of the study.

Controlling attitudes

Women who had no sexual autonomy and were exposed to intimate partner violence were 2.3 times more likely to have STI/RTI than those who had sexual autonomy and were not exposed to intimate partner violence. Similarly, women without sexual autonomy and whose husbands endorsed controlling attitudes were over twice more likely to be exposed to RTI than those who had sexual autonomy and had not experienced their husband's controlling attitudes.

Mr. Paul further said women who had sexual autonomy and freedom of

physical mobility were 24% less likely to experience RTI compared to those who did not. Women's freedom of movement is measured by their ability to go to the market, the health centre and places outside the village or community.

However, the influence of household decision-making was greater than physical mobility in reducing the risk of RTI among women. "Women who had sexual autonomy and decision-making autonomy had a 36% decreased likelihood of having RTI infection than those who had not," Mr. Paul emphasised. A woman's household decision-making ability is assessed in terms of whether she can take decisions about her own health care, make large purchases for the household and visit family or relatives.

Mr. Paul also said, "After controlling for sociodemographic factors in the full model, women with sexual autonomy were associated with a 12% lower likelihood of having STI/RTI than those without sexual autonomy."

Also, the prevalence of STI/RTI was higher among younger women aged 15 to 24 years (13%) and 25 to 34 years (13.2%) as compared to older women aged 35 to 49 years (11.6%).

"Our findings call for policy-level interventions to prevent child marriage and domestic violence against women and change regressive social norms that curb women's decision-making ability and freedom of movement," Mr. Paul added.

Can humans get H5N1 by consuming raw milk?

R. Prasad

Even while no case of H5N1 infection in humans has been reported after consuming raw milk, scientists believe that the virus can be transmitted via an infected cow's milk that has not been pasteurised. The lone reported human case in the current outbreak of cattle spread across 49 herds in nine States in the U.S. has been a dairy farm worker who had direct exposure to cows and developed conjunctivitis. The Atlanta-based CDC has advised people to desist from consuming uncooked dairy food products such as raw, unpasteurised milk, or raw cheeses from animals with suspected or confirmed H5N1 bird flu virus infection.

While FAO noted that H5N1 virus was detected in "high concentrations in milk from infected dairy cattle and at levels greater

than that seen in respiratory samples", there are no reports of viable H5N1 virus being found in raw milk samples. "I have not come across any report of actual isolation of influenza viruses from raw milk. Most reports on viral loads in milk are based on molecular sequencing data rather than actual isolation of the virus from milk. It will be RT-PCR or sequencing of fragments," immunologist Dr. Vineeta Bal, a visiting faculty at IISER Pune says in an email to *The Hindu*.

Despite CDC warning people to avoid consuming raw milk, sales of raw milk in the U.S. has increased sharply since the H5N1 outbreak in cattle was first reported there on March 25 this year. Yet, there has not been any reported case of human infection after raw milk intake. Even as it makes eminent sense to avoid consuming raw milk,



Remote: Almost all human influenza virus infections are respiratory infections unlike in some other mammals. REUTERS

especially in places where H5N1 outbreak in cattle has been reported in the U.S., how likely are people to be infected with H5N1 via raw milk? "We need to remember that viruses outside a cell do not have life of their own. The biological plausibility of transmission through milk is very limited," Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya, physician epidemiologist and a public policy and health systems expert says in an email to *The Hindu*.

"There are very few human cases reported so far and almost all of those were in farm workers who had come in close contact with infected animals. In these cases, the likely route of transmission was airborne. Raw milk from H5N1 infected cows may not cause illness in humans as the route of introduction of the virus is oral rather than nasopharyngeal," says Dr. Bal. "Theoretical possibility of a human being catching H5N1

infection from infected raw milk is very low. Till date, there has been no documented evidence of H5N1 transmission from animals to humans via the oral route."

Dr. Bal goes further to underscore the odds of H5N1 infection in humans through the consumption of raw milk. "Almost all human influenza virus infections are primarily respiratory infections unlike in some other mammals where gut infections are reported. Based on that it can be stated that consumption of heavily infected H5N1 containing raw milk is unlikely to cause illness in human beings."

There are many reports of cats being infected with H5N1 in the current outbreak in the U.S. In a recent study, domestic cats fed with raw, unpasteurised colostrum and milk from affected cows developed fatal systemic in-

fluenza infection, thus demonstrating the oral route of transmission in cats. "Some birds (poultry) as well as cats do show susceptibility to influenza virus infections via oral route. So far humans have not been infected by faecal-oral route even if the virus is shed by humans in the excreta. We know this from the SARS-CoV-2 example too," says Dr. Bal.

Despite the CDC's warning, there is a growing misconception among people in the U.S. that immunity against H5N1 virus can be developed by drinking raw milk containing viable viruses. These notions have no scientific basis whatsoever. "There is no basis for this assumption at all. Drinking raw milk might prove more risky due to the presence of many other pathogens which are known to be present in raw, unpasteurised milk," Dr. Bal cautions.



Question Corner

Perceiving colour

How does the brain turn light waves into experiences of colour?

Researchers have discovered specific networks of neurons in fruit flies that respond selectively to various hues. Hue denotes the perceived colors associated with specific wavelengths, or combinations of wavelengths of light, which themselves are not inherently colourful. Scientists had previously reported finding neurons in animals' brains that respond selectively to different colors or hues, say, red or green. But no one had been able to trace the neural mechanisms making this hue selectivity

possible. Now, the researchers have been able to find the fly brain connections. The intricate map details how some 130,000 neurons and 50 million synapses in a fruit-fly's poppy seed-sized brain are interconnected. With the connectome serving as a reference, the researchers used their observations of brain cells to develop a diagram they suspected represents the neuronal circuitry behind hue selectivity. The modeling helped reveal that these circuits can host activity required for hue selectivity.

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

Why is RBI keeping an eye on gold loans?

What prompted the central bank to increase its scrutiny of the gold loan business of NBFCs?

Prashanth Perumal

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) earlier this month asked gold loan lenders to stick to regulatory norms while lending in a bid to tighten its grip over Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs). The RBI has increased its scrutiny of NBFCs after it found certain NBFCs to be flouting regulatory norms. In March, the RBI banned IIFL Finance from issuing fresh gold loans after the firm was found violating lending norms.

What are the RBI's gold loan norms?

The RBI stipulates lenders to comply with certain norms while lending money in lieu of gold. For instance, lenders are not allowed to lend any amount of money that is greater than 75% of the value of the gold that is submitted as collateral by the borrower. This is to ensure that banks have sufficient cushion to absorb any losses by selling the gold in case the borrower defaults on the loan.

And in order to comply with income tax rules, the RBI also mandates that when a loan is disbursed to a borrower, no more than ₹20,000 can be disbursed in the form of cash; the remaining loan amount needs to be deposited in the borrower's bank account. It also instructs lenders to conduct the auction of any gold (in case a borrower defaults) in a fair and transparent manner in locations that are accessible to the borrowers.

It is believed that the RBI is working on detailed guidelines for gold loans that lenders will have to follow.

Why does the RBI want to reinforce these norms now?

The RBI says it has found some NBFCs to be violating regulations linked to gold-based lending. IIFL Finance was disciplined in March

for violating norms related to the size and form of loan disbursements, the evaluation and assaying of gold, the levying of charges, and irregularities in the auction process. For instance, the RBI found that there were loan-to-value irregularities in over two-thirds of defaulted accounts in the case of IIFL Finance.

It should be noted that NBFCs may want to increase the size of their loan book at an aggressive pace in an attempt to grow their business, and thus may be willing to offer loans of value that exceed 75% of the value of the underlying collateral. To do this, NBFCs may try to deliberately overestimate the value of the gold that the borrowers submit as collateral. It is thus not surprising that the RBI has raised concerns about the way in which gold is assayed and valued by NBFCs.

Lenders such as IIFL Finance were using internal assayers to evaluate the value and the purity of the gold offered as collateral by borrowers. This is in contrast to gold loans extended by banks wherein external assayers determine the value and purity of the gold. It should be noted that the gold loan portfolio of NBFCs has increased at an aggressive pace since the pandemic, growing over four fold from about ₹35,000 crore at the end of financial year 2020 to about ₹1,31,000 crore by the end of FY 2023.

The RBI may fear that such aggressive lending by NBFCs is happening in widespread violation of lending norms and that this could potentially cause systemic trouble in the future as the gold loan industry grows in size rapidly.

How will the RBI's scrutiny affect NBFCs?

The NBFCs expect the RBI's scrutiny of their lending practices to affect their growth and profitability. The RBI's insistence that no more than ₹20,000 shall be disbursed as cash when a loan is approved, for instance, is expected to make NBFC gold loans less attractive.

The NBFCs have taken pride in offering emergency cash to borrowers at short notice unlike banks, particularly to those who are not part of the banking system and deal primarily in cash. Many NBFCs might also have to become less aggressive in their lending practices as the RBI enforces the loan-to-value rules more strictly.

It should be noted that the RBI had temporarily allowed lenders to make loans up to 90% of the value of the underlying gold collateral during the pandemic to help borrowers, and this also helped NBFCs expand their loan books aggressively.

Further, measures to make the auction process more transparent and accessible to borrowers could increase the cost of doing business for NBFCs and lead to higher borrowing rates for lenders. The RBI, on the other hand, may believe that its lending norms will make the gold loan business more sustainable and help avoid systemic risks in the long run.

The takeaway from Mumbai hoarding tragedy

Did the massive structure at Ghatkopar meet size and safety norms? Who is responsible for the construction and maintenance of advertisement hoardings and ensuring rules are being followed? With extreme weather, what do infrastructure projects need to look out for?

G. Ananthakrishnan

The story so far:

A giant advertisement hoarding in Mumbai's Ghatkopar area collapsed in a dust storm in Mumbai on May 13, killing at least 16 people. The brunt of the monstrous 250-tonne structure's fall was borne by a petrol pump below, where many of the victims were either fuelling up or going about their duties. The owner of the hoarding erected on massive metal frames in April, 2023 on Government Railway Police (GRP) land, Bhavesh Bhide, absconded after the crash, but was later arrested in Rajasthan.

Who is responsible?

Pressure has built up on the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (BMC) to inspect and take action on illegal or unstable hoardings in the city, and to ask Railways and Mumbai Port Trust to provide stability certificates for others. Other cities too responded to the incident. Officials in Chennai, where a ban on hoardings is being lifted, removed over 460 structures. Several hundred applications to install hoardings are pending in the city. In Pune, a large hoarding fell on a parked truck soon after the Ghatkopar incident, but caused no injuries.

What safety norms apply to hoardings?

Local bodies issue licences for advertisement hoardings, particularly in bigger cities, stipulating that these structures should be approved by an executive authority. In Mumbai's case, the Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act (MMC) dating back to 1888 and amended over time stipulates that written permission of the Municipal Commissioner is needed to put up such structures under Section 328A.

Advertisement hoardings must meet norms, and these were apparently liberalised for Greater Mumbai through the Policy Guidelines for Display of Advertisements 2018 to tap the city's full financial potential. It is this document



Deadly fall: Rescue and relief work underway at the site of the hoarding collapse at Ghatkopar, in Mumbai, on May 14. PTI

The Ghatkopar disaster makes it evident that high winds or a cyclone expose the weakest infrastructure links, with deadly consequences

that makes structural stability certification from a registered structural engineer a condition for putting up hoardings, including sky signs that are larger than 100 sq. ft. For an on-ground hoarding on a site other than the business premises, the size limit is 40 feet by 40 feet as per this document. By all accounts, the massive hoarding in Ghatkopar did not meet size norms but was not brought down by official agencies in spite of being a highly visible hazardous structure. The Government Railway Police, on whose land the collapsed hoarding and others elsewhere have been put up, cited an ongoing dispute with the Corporation for not enforcing the law on hoardings, and took action only after the disaster. It is notable that the policy guidelines say hoardings existing as of May 1, 2014 should be reinstalled incorporating structural stability requirements, on a single pole or bipole, indicating that the Ghatkopar display would have had to meet safety norms.

From a technical perspective, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) lays out specifications for wind loads on hoardings under IS875, Part 3, giving formulae on how to calculate the force coefficients applicable to these wind-facing structures. If such standards are indeed applied by municipal bodies around the country, the data is not made public. No database of permits could be located on the BMC website in the hoardings section.

Why are technical standards important?

State governments keen to raise revenues through outdoor advertisement hoardings have been adopting a more liberal attitude to big displays in public places, as urbanisation and consumption drive the economy. The advent of digital boards has brought with it the possibility of moving displays, opening up avenues for different advertisers to use the same screens to show messages, raising rents for hoardings companies greatly.

Several legacy-style hoardings built on heavy metal frames but lacking an adequately solid foundation coexist with the new displays, particularly along highways and wide urban roads. The MMC Act of 1888 provides some regulatory exemptions to hoardings on railway land. The Ghatkopar disaster demonstrates that extreme weather, such as high winds or a cyclone sweeping a city, quickly exposes the weakest infrastructure links, with deadly consequences. The focus now is also on how prepared municipal and disaster management authorities are to deal with the fallout in crowded cities. In the Mumbai incident, the presence of a petrol pump prevented personnel from using gas cutters to remove the twisted metal frame for fear of triggering a fire. Allowing hazardous structures to come up thus reduces the efficiency of disaster management expertise. Several local bodies lack the capability or administrative machinery to ensure structural stability of hoardings. Implicit in such incidents

is the role of corruption.

How is climate change a challenge?

The biggest threat to cities, especially along India's peninsular coastline, is extreme weather such as cyclones intensified by climate change. The northern Indian Ocean, which contributes extreme weather systems to the region, hosts 6% of global cyclones but has disproportionately high impacts each year. Scientist Roxy Mathew Koll of the Centre for Climate Change Research, Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, says the intensity of cyclones in the Arabian Sea has increased 20% to 40% over the past four decades. The Indian Ocean, which has a big impact on peninsular weather events, is projected to warm continuously and rapidly in coming years, intensifying cyclones in a matter of days. The sea surface temperature of the Arabian Sea responsible for cyclone formation is 1.2-1.4 degrees C higher than four decades ago, while the Bay of Bengal is comparatively less warm with a 0.8 degrees C rise.

Data shows that summer monsoon rainfall over the sub-continent may be decreasing overall, but the number of extreme weather events involving heavy rain in a short period is rising. Along with cyclonic winds, torrential rainfall and heavy winds threaten coastal cities. This is a clear call to city governments to review conventional ideas on giant outdoor open-sky hoardings put up close to human activity.

Don't governments have legal liability?

Yes, the government and the owners of the private structures do have liability. Most recently, in 2022, the Delhi High Court dismissed an appeal filed by the Bank of Baroda, against a single judge's order in *BoB versus Mahesh Gupta*, granting compensation in a case where a man was struck by a sign board and the head injury led to his death.

The bank contended that heavy wind struck Delhi on the day of the incident and it was thus an act of god. This was rejected by the court, which observed that since Delhi witnesses such winds in May each year, it was a foreseeable risk. Moreover, the bank had control of the signboard and had not proved that it had periodically inspected it to ensure its stability and integrity. Extreme rainfall and winds are foreseeable events now across the country, with clear warnings available from weather agencies. Governments have to show due diligence to avert harm to citizens from official actions. Much like the Ghatkopar case, where many people were trapped in a hoarding collapse, the court held in the Delhi case thus: the deceased writ petitioner was a passer-by who met with the accident while exercising his right of passage on a public pathway which abutted the building in which the bank was housed.

Applying such a principle clearly makes several connected individuals liable for negligence in the Ghatkopar case, beginning with the owners of the land, the agency that put up the structure and the line officials responsible for enforcement, extending to the civic officials and police who witnessed flagrant violation of rules but took no action.

The writer is a Chennai-based journalist.

What are the NIA's allegations against NSCN?

Why has the National Investigation Agency filed a chargesheet against five people in a Guwahati court? What is the link with the Naga insurgency group? Is the hill tribal group helping valley-based insurgents in Manipur? What are the three main ethnic communities in the State?

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:

In March 7, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) filed a chargesheet in a Guwahati court where it accused the "China-Myanmar module" of the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) of supporting cadres of two banned Meitei outfits, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Kanglei Yaul Kanba Lup (KYKL), to infiltrate India. The NIA alleged that their aim was to exploit the current ethnic unrest in Manipur, which began in May 2023, with a larger goal to destabilise the State and wage a war against the Government of India.

Which are the main ethnic groupings?

The Meitei, Naga and Kuki-Zomi-Mizo are the three main ethnic groupings in Manipur. The Meiteis, the largest community, account for about 53% of the State's total population of 27.21 lakh (2011 Census). The Nagas and the Kuki-Zo which are categorised into 34 Scheduled Tribes



Under the scanner: Cadres of the NSCN-IM in Dimapur in 2018. PTI

The chargesheet is the first official statement of links between the NSCN-IM and Imphal valley-based insurgent groups in the current crisis

constitute 17% and 26% of the population respectively. India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km unfenced border of 398 km along Manipur. In January, the Government decided to fence the entire border and end the Free Movement Regime (FMR) which allowed people to cross over without any documents or passport. People on both sides of the border share ethnic ties prompting the arrangement since 1968.

What is the significance of the chargesheet?

The chargesheet was filed against five persons, M. Anand Singh, A. Kajit Singh, Keisham Johnson, L. Michael Mangangcha and K. Romojit Meitei, and is the first official statement of links between the NSCN-IM and Imphal valley-based insurgent groups during the current ethnic crisis. The accused were arrested on September 16, 2023 by the Manipur Police while travelling in a vehicle dressed in camouflage, resembling uniforms worn by security personnel. Three weapons and ammunition looted from police armouries were recovered. Following the arrests, Meira Paibi, the women's collective in Manipur, staged protests and clashed with the police demanding their release. A court granted them bail, but Anand Singh was picked up by the NIA and brought to Delhi.

The NIA said that Anand Singh is a trained cadre of the PLA, one of the eight Meitei insurgent groups that have been banned by the MHA for "advocating secession of Manipur from India through armed struggle." According to the NIA, Singh revealed that at the height of ethnic clashes, he was involved in other subversive activities along with other valley-based insurgent groups. The NIA said Singh mobilised local youth for armed training and that in July 2023 he participated in a weapons training camp organised at the Selloi Langamai Ecological Park near Keikhu by PLA cadres where around 80-90 young men received training in handling firearms. The PLA was formed in 1978 and

continues to be one of the most violent terror outfits in the northeast and is currently led by M.M. Ngouba.

The NIA said the accused "criminally conspired with intent to carry out violent terror attacks targeting the rival Kuki-Zo community with prohibited arms and ammunition which were looted from various government sources."

Are there other active insurgent groups?

In 2008, 24 Kuki-Zo insurgent groups under the umbrella of the United Peoples' Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) signed a tripartite suspension of operations pact with the MHA and the Manipur government. On February 29 this year, when the pact came up for an annual extension, the Manipur government refused to send a representative, leaving the agreement in a limbo. Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh has accused the groups of violating the ground rules and instigating violence in the State. According to the ground rules, after a peace pact is signed, camps are earmarked for cadres and their weapons are accounted for through regular checks conducted by a security force decided by the government.

The agreement was signed in the wake of the Kuki-Naga clashes in the 1990s where hundreds were killed. The insurgent groups demanded an independent land for the Kuki-Zo people. The clashes and killings happened after the NSCN demanded that Kuki-Zo-inhabited areas be included in its proposed 'Greater Nagaland' project in the 1980s.

What is the NSCN's stand?

After *The Hindu* reported the NIA findings on May 14, the NSCN issued a statement, accusing the Indian security forces of helping the Kuki militant groups to wage war against the Meitei revolutionary groups in Myanmar. It said: "It is sensitive to the propaganda war waged by the Government of India against NSCN who had signed ceasefire with GOI and engaged in political talks for the last 27 years." Distancing itself from the violence in Manipur, the NSCN had said in a statement in August 2023 that "no ethnic blood should flow in Naga areas in the name of Meitei- Kuki-Zo ethnic conflicts."

PROFILES

India's gateway to Central Asia

Chabahar

The project, which was launched in early 2000s and saw sporadic progress over the years, mainly due to geopolitical reasons, got a booster last week as India and Iran signed a long-term agreement to further develop and operate the port

Suhasini Haidar

Before Partition, the town of Chabahar (earlier known as Tiz) was right at India's doorstep, situated in Iran's Sistan Baluchistan province where the Panchatantra was once read in Persian (entitled 'Kalleh-wa-Dimna'), and Hindustani Urdu is understood and spoken commonly. But ties between independent India and Iran, before the 1979 revolution, were never very close, given the Shah's U.S.-tilt, and India's Non-Alignment push. In 1970, it was the Shah who first conceived of developing Chabahar (he even planned a U.S. submarine base there), given its salubrious weather and the fact that the warm-water port was Iran's only such foothold in the Indian Ocean, strategically located just between the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz.

In 1993, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao travelled to Tehran for a path-breaking visit to build a new relationship with the Iranian regime. While the visit shored up Tehran's invaluable support to India on the international stage (Iran famously stopped a Pakistan-backed Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) proposal against India at the UN HRC in 1994 after an air-dash visit by then Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh to request President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani's help), it also began a conversation between the two countries over Chabahar.

In the 1990s, Iran offered India a chance to develop Chabahar, and some groundwork was laid. But it wasn't until Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Tehran in 2001 and then President Mohammad Khatami's visit to Delhi as the chief guest on Republic Day in 2003 that discussions sealed the Chabahar deal between the two countries. According to the Delhi Declaration signed by both leaders, the two countries decided to build the sea link from India to Chabahar, and "through Chabahar to the National Iranian Rail Road", enabling India to connect to Central Asia and Europe.

Iran invited India to develop a railway link from Chabahar to Bam, a city from where links to both



In the latest agreement, India has promised an outlay of \$120 million, and a credit line of \$250 million to further develop the port. GETTY IMAGES

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan could be made. Through the North-South Corridor (now called the INSTC), India would be linked through Iran to Russia as well.

Afghanistan was always part of the conversation over Chabahar. The 2003 India-Iran joint statement recorded that "India and Iran have cooperated closely on Afghanistan, especially in the shared objective of ridding that country of the evil Taliban forces. We agreed that our joint effort should now be to promote strong construction and rehabilitation work in that country including through development of alternate trade routes to Afghanistan through Iran as well as by undertaking a joint rail and road reconstruction project."

Strategic location

For India that has traded with Iran through the Bandar Abbas port for centuries, Chabahar's chief attraction was not about its trade, but its location vis-à-vis Pakistan. Islamabad's constant resistance to allowing Indian trade to transit through to Afghanistan meant that the Chabahar route, through the

Iranian border town of Zaranj, was the most viable alternative. In 2005, India also began the perilous construction of Route-606 or the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which connected the border crossing from Iran to the rest of Afghanistan, in order to facilitate the trade. Its importance gleaned from the sacrifices made for it – as many as 135 personnel working on the highway were killed in attacks by the Taliban, including six Indian border road and ITBP personnel.

As a result, the Chabahar dream began to take shape as a hub of connectivity, with immense strategic potential as well as the desire to help Afghanistan, riven by bloodshed, to build a new future for itself. Over the years, Chabahar's progress was sporadic, constrained by the U.S.'s sanctions and demands on India to sever ties with Iran, and often spurred on by the challenge of China's competitive moves in the region. In 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she was having "very intense and very blunt" conversations with India and other countries urging them to join the U.S. in "isolating Iran"

line to Zahedan. However, geopolitics played spoiler with Chabahar again. In 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump walked out of the JCPOA with Iran, and restored all sanctions in 2018.

Trouble in ties

While the Modi government was able to negotiate a 'carve-out' from sanctions for Chabahar as a means to support Afghanistan, it decided to cave in on other deals, and announced in 2019 that India had "zeroed out" all oil imports from Iran. The threat of sanctions slowed India's responses on the railway project to Zahedan, and in August 2020, Iran dropped India from the project, deciding to go it alone. Another big shift followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021, and while India has kept its commitment on sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan via Chabahar, trade has been sluggish. Despite all that, the Shahid Beheshti terminal has handled 90,000 TEUs of container traffic, 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and other aid for Afghanistan, and supplied 40,000 litres of pesticide for Iran.

The latest agreement, signed on Monday, saw Indian Ports Global Ltd and Ports and Maritime Organisation of Iran sign a 10-year Long Term Contract in Tehran in the presence of Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and his Iranian counterpart, with India promising an outlay of \$120 million, and another \$250 million credit line to further develop the project. This will spur the next phase of Chabahar's development – with a plan to build 32 jetties and process about 82 million tonnes of cargo per year by the end of the fourth phase.

It remains to be seen whether the U.S. actually follows through on State Department comments raising the "risk of sanctions" against Indian companies participating in the contract, but the past few decades have shown that India's interest in the port will remain. While the dream of Chabahar, as envisioned decades ago, has yet to be realised and the project has moved to a glacial pace, it is now an irreversible reality, one whose location and geopolitical positioning, like its name (springing around the year), lend it an eternal charm.

THE GIST

According to the Delhi Declaration of 2003, India and Iran decided to build the sea link from India to Chabahar, and "through Chabahar to the National Iranian Rail Road"

In May 2013, three months after China announced it would develop Gwadar port off Karachi, then External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid flew to Tehran and announced that a trilateral partnership with Afghanistan was being readied

In 2016, Prime Minister Modi joined Afghan and Iranian leaders to sign the historic agreement, paving the way for India to invest \$500 million to build the Shahid Beheshti terminal

Putin's war manager

Andrei Belousov

The appointment of the civilian economist as Russia's new Defence Minister shows the central position the economy has taken in the war on Ukraine

Adithya Narayan

Vladimir Putin's inauguration as Russian President for a fifth time has spawned a slew of political moves in the country. Andrei Belousov was made Defence Minister, replacing Sergei Shoigu, who was sent away to head the National Security Council – a position held by Mr. Putin's key ally Nikolai Patrushev, who will oversee shipbuilding going forward.

Russia's official position regarding the Cabinet reshuffle is that with the war in Ukraine under way for two years now, military spending resembles Soviet-era levels of the mid-1980s. This calls for a better integration of the defence Budget into the overall economy, which will be achieved by having a civilian economist, such as Mr. Belousov, at the helm.

However, from the outset, things seemed to be going in favour of Mr. Shoigu, for the Ukraine war had finally gathered momentum. After remaining largely stagnant since December 2022, the Russian Army began advancing on the battlefield, capturing close to 800 sq. km this year.

What then would have prompted Mr. Shoigu's transfer? Parse through the history and the full picture emerges. Like Mr. Belou-



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

sov, Mr. Shoigu, too, hails from a civilian background. A civil engineer by profession, the 68-year-old started at the Emergency and Disaster Relief Department in the 1990s. Having proved his mettle there, Mr. Shoigu took over as Defence Minister in 2012. He orchestrated the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and masterminded Russia's military campaign in Syria to help Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Inner circle

His stature had grown by then and Mr. Shoigu became part of Mr. Putin's inner circle, even accompanying him on fishing trips. Speculation was rife that he would be considered a possible successor to Mr. Putin.

The first signs of trouble for Mr. Shoigu were visible with Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine that was launched on February 24, 2022. What was expected to be a quick campaign has dragged on

for more than two years.

The period also witnessed economic sanctions by the West and a mutiny at home by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin against Mr. Shoigu and military chief Valery Gerasimov. The final nail came in April with the arrests of Mr. Shoigu's deputy Timur Ivanov on corruption charges and another senior official from the Defence Ministry.

This may lead to the impression that graft and inefficiency on the battlefield led to Mr. Shoigu's removal. But then not every head rolled.

Mr. Patrushev's son, Dmitry, has been promoted from Agriculture Minister to Deputy Prime Minister, and so is Mr. Putin's main financier Yuri Kovalchuk's son Boris, who is assigned to lead Russia's audit chamber.

By tying the prospects of next-generation leaders to the current political dispensation, analysts believe Mr. Putin is trying to neutralise potential threats

from various quarters.

This makes Mr. Belousov, a civilian with a relatively low profile, the ideal candidate for Mr. Putin. The 65-year-old's stints, first as an Economic Development Minister and then as a Deputy Prime Minister, lend him enough heft to take on the role of Defence Minister. His interest in drones paints the picture of a technocrat, who can bring about the required 'innovation', which Russian officials believe is crucial to winning the war. His economic background should also help plug corruption and ensure money is allotted efficiently and effectively.

Most important, the fact that Mr. Belousov and Mr. Putin possess a set of shared beliefs, chief among which is an increased state role in the economy, solidifies his case. Mr. Belousov's efforts to this end – such as an increase in VAT in 2019 and a proposal to seize excess profit from 14 large metallurgical and chemical companies – must have caught the Russian President's attention.

By appointing an economist at the helm, the Russian President realises the role played by the economy during wartime. This means Mr. Belousov has his task cut out and will have to straddle the economy and the war optimally.

Universal cinema

Festival de Cannes

This year's edition is significant for India with the country ending its 30-year wait to compete for the Palme d'Or, or golden palm, the honour for the best film at the festival

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

The world of cinema finds itself revolving around the Palais de Festivals hall in the quiet French Riviera city of Cannes every May when the Festival de Cannes opens its curtains. The longest running celebration of films in the world, the festival aims at "encouraging the development of the cinematographic art in all its forms" and fostering "spirit of collaboration between all film-producing countries".

The brainchild of French writer and art critic Philippe Erlanger, the festival first took shape in 1939 in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Erlanger was a member of the jury for the Venice Mostra in 1938, held in Italy under the rule of Benito Mussolini. Erlanger and other members of the jury were outraged with the Mostra when it went against the jury's calls and awarded the Mussolini cup, the festival's top prize, to Nazi propaganda film *Olympia* and Italian film *Luciano Serra, pilota*.

After leaving the Mostra vowing not to return, Erlanger contacted French authorities to set up a rival festival before the next Mostra, and the authorities took it as a state affair. After much planning, the fes-



AFP

tival was scheduled to open at the Winter Casino in Cannes on September 1, 1939. But fears of an imminent war forced the invitees to leave Cannes.

Germany invaded Poland on the day the festival was scheduled to begin, leaving authorities with no choice but to postpone. The declaration of war two days later meant the end for the first edition which only screened William Dieterle's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in a private screening. The six-year war did not dampen Erlanger's spirit, and the festival began again with its second first edition on September 20, 1946.

Having been born under such dramatic fashion symbolising resistance to Fascism and growing along with the post-war Europe, Cannes festival soon became the meeting point of arthouse movies from around the world.

But Cannes got its reputation not from the countless masterpieces it pre-

miered and screened year after year, but from a disrupted edition that was forced to shut down without completion. In 1968, while France was reeling under nationwide student protests, Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, pioneers of French new wave cinema, led a group of directors and jury members to disrupt proceedings at Cannes in solidarity with the students.

"We are talking solidarity with students and workers, and you are talking about dolly shots and close ups," Godard said, during the commotion, kicking off the perennial debate about the nature of cinema's relation with society.

History of resistance

This edition of the festival is not short of its own contributions to the rich history of resistance and solidarity the festival holds. Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, whose film *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, was scheduled to be

screened, is facing an eight-year prison sentence in Iran for his public statements. He managed to flee the country in silence days before the festival's opening. *The Guardian* reported he walked across the border after discarding all trackable devices and has found shelter in Germany.

This edition is also taking place against the backdrop of a #metoo campaign making waves in France, with director Judith Godrèche premiering her short film *Moi Aussi* (Me too), months after she alleged two prominent filmmakers sexually abused her when she was a teenager. This year's festival is significant for India with the country ending its 30-year long wait to compete for the Palme d'Or, the honour for the best movie at the festival. India had made its mark at the fest in its inaugural edition itself, with Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* sharing the best picture award. Now *All We Imagine As Light*, a Malayalam movie directed by Payal Kapadia, is lining up against the likes of Yorgos Lanthimos's *Kinds of Kindness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis* for the major prize.

The last time an Indian movie competed for the prize was in 1994 with another Malayalam movie *Swaham*, directed by Shaji N. Karun.



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

‘Thanda’ election: Notes from Hindi heartland

There is no clear wave in favour of any party, but the BJP's organisational dominance, achieved through multiple messages from Ram temple to caste engineering, may have undermined the challenge from the Opposition

Compared to the fervour and excitement of 2014 and 2019, this year's election is *thanda* (cold, lacklustre, uninspiring) — that's the judgement of most political pundits and the majority of ordinary voters. The sheer dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the lack of any serious alternative is certainly part of the reason. Some unhappiness and grumbles on the part of the BJP's core supporters have also dampened enthusiasm. The BJP's deliberate changing of emphasis depending on the phase of the election also contributes to mixed messaging. In addition, the BJP may have peaked too soon with the consecration in Ayodhya happening in January. The BJP's well-known organisational dominance has undermined the challenge from the opposition parties still further.

There seems to have been a decline in voter turnout in the first few phases. Among multiple explanations offered are: Increased voter registration, a lacklustre campaign on all sides, and the clear winner apparently being obvious in advance. Beyond all this,

two further aspects of the 2024 Lok Sabha election in Uttar Pradesh (UP) are noticeable: One, the manner in which the BJP has achieved its unassailable position, which we may call the Gujarat model of election dominance; and two, the salience of "law and order" and therefore, praise being heaped on "Yogi", i.e., UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath.

As always, the BJP election campaign has been carefully planned and systematically orchestrated. The consecration of the statue of Lord Rama in Ayodhya on January 22 was evidently part of the plan, and it did indeed lead to a crescendo of excitement. The three months of January, February, and March were, as one office-bearer of the BJP put it, "the last trimester of gestation and thus crucial in terms of preparing the booth-level workers to get ready for the delivery". Indeed, during these months, it appeared that there was a clear "Modi wave". However, it seems that the peak was attained too soon and, by the time of actual voting, excitement had been replaced with resignation and apathy.

In the first few phases of voting the BJP's key task in the crucial battleground of western UP, with its sizeable Muslim population reaching in some constituencies as high as 40-50%, was to consolidate its core vote base. Due to the Hindu-Muslim faultline, inflamed locally since the riots of 2013, it appeared to be an easy task for the BJP.

Meanwhile, the chief minister remains a strong positive point. Even while probing voters on national issues and on Modi's record, the respondent would frequently switch to Yogi's contribution to maintaining law and order in the state.

In February and March, the lull in the electorate's enthusiasm was palpable. Some were of the view that there was no clear wave but still, there were multiple ripples in the form of angst against sitting MPs. We came across numbers of respondents who were frustrated with the BJP due to inflation, roving cattle menace, or wrong candidate selection. But when it came to casting their vote, most admitted that they would vote for the BJP regardless.

Whatever speculation there may be around the low percentage voting turnout, on the ground, the BJP is attempting the Gujaratisation of UP. By this, we refer to building their vote base through caste engineering and reducing the space for the Opposition. It is striking how many opposition leaders at the booth and district levels have switched sides and joined the BJP. The BJP has succeeded in undermining the Opposition, mainly the Samajwadi Party (SP), almost everywhere in the state. Except in its pocket boroughs of Etawah, Mainpuri, and Kannauj, nowhere does the SP appear to be organisationally strong. This marks a clear shift from the situation even as recently as the 2022



Shashank Chaturvedi



David N Gellner



Sanjay Kumar Pandey



With voters of the Opposition parties in UP realising that a win for their candidates is not the likely outcome, apathy has begun to set in

assembly elections. A Hindi newspaper reported that around 11,000 party workers from SP, BSP, and Congress have joined the BJP in the last few months in the Gorakhpur region alone. In fact, five of the 10 sitting BSP MPs in UP have joined the BJP in less than two months. The BJP has particularly targeted ex-MLAs and MPs from the Opposition who did not get a ticket or who are sidelined in their respective parties for whatever reason. Ex-MLA Nathuni Prasad Kushwaha of SP, who gave a close fight to the BJP in Kushinagar in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, has recently joined the BJP. Similarly, the 2019 Congress candidate for Gorakhpur joined the BJP on the day of nomination of local candidates.

As an organisation, the BJP faces the huge challenge, as it has in Gujarat, of building up the party and accommodating newly recruited opposition leaders, while simultaneously keeping their own workers happy. Inevitably, there is some discontent among the BJP rank and file. One such annoyed worker stated: In its attempt to make India

"Congress-mukt" (Congress-free), the BJP has become "Congress-yukt" (Congress-ised or tied to Congress). However, in reality, despite its weaker starting position, this organisational conundrum is hurting the SP more than it hurts the BJP. The BJP, sensing the SP's weakness, has strategically deployed its Yadav CM of Madhya Pradesh. Mohan Yadav has become a poster boy for the BJP in UP and Bihar as the BJP seeks to lure Yadav votes away from the SP and RJD.

With voters and supporters of the opposition parties in UP realising that a win for their respective candidates is not the likely outcome, apathy has begun to set in. One respondent summed it up: Thanks to Yogi ji, the situation of Muslim and Yadav voters in UP is similar to that of Brahmmins and Kshatriyas in Bihar and UP in the 1990s. They do not have any incentive to go out and vote as it will not lead to any gain for them.

Two challenges are troubling the BJP organisation in UP. First, voting turnout seems to be almost 5% down in the first two phases in UP, roughly translating into 8.9

lakh fewer votes in little more than a dozen constituencies. This is alarming for a party that counts every single vote at every booth and always tries to do better at each and every election. Second, Modi's calls for "ab ki baar, 400 paar" (this time, let's go beyond 400 seats) have backfired. The party was momentarily pushed onto the backfoot. However, with the subsequent phases, it is expected that the voting percentage will go up and the gap with the 2019 figures has in fact narrowed by the fourth phase. Faced with the highly plausible charge that the BJP was seeking such a huge majority in order to reduce or end reservations (which was highly effective against them in the Bihar state elections of 2015), the party has mobilised all available arsenals, including the longstanding Hindu-Muslim trope, to mitigate the crisis.

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SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



What if TN Seshan were leading the EC today?

I'm strict and I may be stern but I'm always fair and transparent. You get what you see. There are no sides to me." This was how TN Seshan, arguably the Chief Election Commissioner who made the Election Commission of India an admired institution, used to describe himself. Then he would add "whilst I sit on this chair I have a job to do and I'll do it to the best of my ability. Wild horses can't stop me". No wonder he was fondly called "Bulldog Seshan". It was a moniker he revelled in.

Alas, the Commission of today behaves like a very different animal. It's more pet dog than guard dog, if you want to extend the analogy. It seems to have forgotten the need for fairness and transparency. It is no longer determined to do its job even in the

teeth of fierce resistance. Instead, it seeks the easy way out.

A month has lapsed since Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's Banswara speech — in fact, in 13 days from now voting will have concluded — but the Commission has barely acted in response to accusations of PM blatantly breached the model code of conduct as well as the Representation of People Act. Consider what it's done.

Unlike the case of K Chandrashekar Rao, A Raja, Supriya Shrinete and Ran-deep Surjewala, it decided not to issue a notice directly to Modi. Instead, it wrote to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president JP Nadda on the flimsy grounds that Modi is the party's star campaigner. The notice did not mention the PM by name or designa-

tion. Only the annexed documents did that. When the party failed to respond on the specified date, it readily agreed to a week's extension. Thereafter, it agreed to one week more. Even after receiving a response, the Commission is in no hurry to take a decision. This deliberate prevarication suggests it is playing for time.

Meanwhile, what has the PM done? On virtually a daily basis, he's continued to demonise Muslims in Hindu eyes with repeated allegations that reservations intended for OBCs, STs and SCs will be snatched and given to them. Even *mangal-sutras* and *streedhan* — and if you have two buffaloes, one of them — will be grabbed and given to Muslims.

Is this not compounding his original breach by careful and deliberate repetition? Is it not disregard for and defiance of the Commission's authority?

All the Commission seems to be able to do is sit back, listen and twiddle its thumbs. Why has it not taken tougher action? Why has it not moved to act *suo motu*? Why has it not called out the PM or, at least, the BJP for this continued, actually ceaseless, defiance? Article 324 of the Constitution gives it all the powers it requires.

What it lacks is the willingness to exercise them. That means it lacks the commitment to a fair election. It lacks the moral imperative to act fairly, equally and trans-

parently.

Imagine what Seshan would have done. He would have called out the PM, loudly, bluntly and unhesitatingly. He would have barred him from campaigning for two or three days. And then he'd have held press conferences and given interviews to explain and justify his action. In return, the country would have applauded and breaches of the model code would have immediately ceased.

No wonder Ramachandra Guha, one of our highly-regarded historians and an astute public commentator, says the present three commissioners have brought "dishonour and disgrace" to the institution. He adds when the history of the Commission is written, they'll be remembered as amongst the worst. He's right.

But the sad truth goes deeper. In the first instance, the injury is to our democracy. We're proud of being the world's biggest but the Election Commission is following out that boast. And don't think the world won't notice. Their correspondents are on top of the story.

Ultimately, of course, it's us, "we the people", who'll pay the price. By failing to act, the Commission has let all of us down.

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

The timelessness of Surjit Patar's poetry

Only a few poets have an appeal that reaches beyond the literary and poetic communities. Punjabi poet Surjit Patar (79), who passed away recently, was one such.

Patar began writing at a young age and stayed engaged until his final day, making him a contemporary of nearly all generations of modern Punjabi poets, carrying his style, thoughts, and language across the decades. He was consistent yet diverse, soft yet stubborn, classy yet grounded. When he took the stage to recite his poems/*ghazals* or sing his songs, his breath would speak as much as his words. He comprehended not just the music of poetry, but also its origins. In a poetry workshop at my university, his words resonated with the young poets: "Music's essence may be felt via one's breathing rhythm, eliminating the need to seek it elsewhere". And, then he recited his couplet, "Eh pandit raag de taan pichhon sadiyan baad aunde ne, mere hauke hi pellaan taan meri varjhli de saah bande" (These pundits of the music appear centuries later, initially, my sighs transform into the breath of my flute).

Patar was born in Pattar Kalan village in Jalandhar. He took his PhD in Punjabi literature (Transformation of Folklore in Guru Nanak Vani). Patar's book of prose, *Suraj Mandak Diyan Paudiyan*, is a major work in Punjabi literature due to its poetic style. It complements his collections of poems such as *Hawa Vich Likhe Harf*, *Birch Arz Kare*, *Hanere Vich Sulagdi Varnmala* (awarded by the Sahitya Akademi in 1993), *Lafzaan di Dargah*, *Patjhad di Paazeb*, *Surzameen*, and *Chann Suraj di Vehanghi*.

Patar's poetry covers a wide range of issues and themes reflecting the problems of the contemporary world. He depicted the quandary of an ordinary individual during the era of terrorism in Punjab by stating, "Kujh keha taan hanera jarega kiven, chup reha taan shamaan di kehange, get di maat is raat je ho gayi, mera jeena mere year kinjh sehange" (How will the darkness react if I speak, and what will the lanterns convey if I stay silent? If the song were to cease tonight, how would my pals cope with the reality of my existence?). He further writes, "Ujije sheeha saahven mainu chir takk na kha-

liyar, maile mann waale mujrim nu is maute na maar" (Do not force me to see my reflection in this pristine mirror, save the one with a confused mind from such severe punishment).

His ability to articulate and blend modern difficulties showcases his intellectual and poetic prowess, which astounds the reader. He discusses delays in litigation, and how this ultimately leads to the collapse of families in one of his well-known *ghazals*: "Is adaalat ch bande birakh ho gaye, faisle sundeyan sundeyan suk gaye, aakho ehna nu ujije gharin jaan hun, eh karon teek ethe khade rehange" (While awaiting the hearings and rulings, individuals have transformed into trees in this court of law, tell them to return to their distressed homes now, how much longer do they intend to wait?).

Patar's creative intellect could perceive the mundane and transform it into something spectacular. His poetry added a unique and unmatched perspective to the teachings derived from the lives of the Gurus. He writes, "Jo lau mathe chon futadi hai, oh asli taj hundi hai, tawi de takht te beh ke hi sachche patshah bande" (The light emanating from the forehead is the real crown; real kings are created by sitting on the furnace throne).

Despite being the tallest poet of his time, Patar was a well-grounded human being. He knew his verses were not only his but have their roots in the larger social canvas: "Kadi dariya ikalla tai nahin karda disha aapni, zam-een di dhaal, jal da veg hi ral mil ke raah bande" (Never does a river decide its course, the slope of the land coupled with the flow of the water make way for the river to flow).

It is only physically that Patar has departed, his philosophy and verses shall live on in the way he expressed himself: "Jadon takk lafz junde ne sukhanvar jaan mer ke vi, oh kawal jism hunde ne jo siwayan vich sawah bande" (Poets endure as long as their words remain alive; only their physical bodies turn to ashes in cremation grounds).

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Gagan Deep Sharma

Rites of passage: From children to young adults

The board results are out. Children have been placed into slots depending more upon their ability to memorise than their understanding of the 14-year dialogue experienced in school, which was intended to identify their talent and potential.

The transition from being a high school student to being a young adult is a fluid stage. With many options available, their lives may undergo many changes — from identity to geographic location, from friend groups to world views, and even romantic partners. They may experience a level of independence that they have never had before.

Unlike the West, in India young adults are encouraged to live with their parents and often with extended family members. This prevents them from making that leap into independence within an expected time frame. This generation faces enormous pressures, devastating political and environmental issues, academic stress and a sense of loneliness and disengagement. Every child who passes out of school should thus be initiated into adulthood, not to fit into a prescribed societal box but to help her understand who she is.

We need to facilitate young people in deepening their knowledge of the self, developing real-world skills, experiencing the change that comes with accomplishing major goals and navigating the unknown to strengthen their identity. Unfortunately, today we do not have such rites of passage. As a result, young people are taking longer to find their footing as adults.

Without the availability of an external or internal support system, our young experience confusion and alienation as many come

from nuclear families. Students today have become accustomed to being told what to do. American educator and author Julie Lythcott Haims writes, "The problem is that parents believe that childhood must have a checklist and the checklist consists of the fears, dreams, and aspirations of the parents themselves. The checklist was safe, structured and planned for what parents felt was necessary for the success of their child."

We need to open up our children to themselves. Every year, students who pass out from schools seem more accomplished than those who came before them — higher scores, longer resumes, impressive and diverse areas of internships, international exchange programmes, and sometimes even a state or national award. But, strangely, they are completely unaware of even the fact that they have a self to find. Everything that they do is connected with the outside world. Their inner world has become very distant.

School was supposed to be the place where their passion and potential were identified, and the seeds of awareness and interdependence were sown. However, it is difficult to find even a clutch of 18-year-olds who have found what they would like to do. This is the time and opportunity to figure out who you really are and the purpose of your path. Culturally, the nature of parental authority is a byproduct of a value system that sometimes derails youth choice and advocacy in India.

To be sure, no child is meant to know what he or she will do for the rest of their lives the minute they step out of school. It is, therefore, important to take time and locate yourself in a space of your own making. Figure out what you are good at, what you love and what you value; the intersection in the Venn diagram of



Transition from being a high school student to being a young adult is a fluid stage

these questions is the key to a life of your choice.

The checklist that you should make for yourself is to be kind across people and processes; this may sound very trite, but kindness opens the gateway to collaboration and networking. It's important to work hard because life never offers any free lunches, something that is never taught in schools. Kindness and hard work help overcome complexity, confusion and contradictions.

Become activists of thought. You have to summon the courage to shift your practices and beliefs to enable personal growth because you are moving from a world that has gone beyond being volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) to one that is brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible (BAN).

Schooling taught you the three Rs — Reading, writing and arithmetic, you now need to move towards the new three Rs — Resilience, Reflection and Relationships. These will develop through mind training, which will promote the compassion circuits of the brain. You will face an increasingly febrile future. The answer is not to better what you have done before but to do something new.

The skills that you will need are dexterity, participation, trust, networking and open-

ness. The challenge that you face is existential; if you have to flourish, you have to find your highest potential in helping to resolve issues that confront you. This goes beyond future readiness and literacy. It is a capacity to support transformation. Tomorrow will need you to be innovative, responsible and sensitive, to be creators of the products, services and models of the future. You will have to be alert to the claims that others make about you and open to the deepest emotion that human life confers.

Understand what you love to do, particularly in the offline world, to attain a sense of balance. Reflect if there is anything that you wish you knew how to do, a skill or a disposition that you would like to develop. Identify an issue or a cause that you care the most about. Spend time creating reflective and action models that will bring change.

In an age when the line between childhood and adulthood is blurrier than ever, these rites of passage will make children finally grow up, if one can paraphrase journalist and writer, Julie Beck.

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Ameeta Mulla Wattal

SUNDAY LETTERS

SHGs play key role in empowerment

This is with reference to "How SHGs influence women voters in India" by Lalita Panicker (May 12). Women, empowered by self-help groups, have begun to realise that their influence at the grassroots can affect power structures all the way up to Parliament. We must encourage such empowerment.

Deepa Yadav

Respond to the bird flu threat

This is with reference to "Vaccine stockpile could help in battling bird flu" by Ramanan Laxminarayan (May 12). The government has to contend with the emerging bird flu threat, which may soon affect us. Before the threat turns worse, urgent measures should be taken.

Amarendra Singh

Mystic music of silent letters

This is with reference to "Listening to silence in the dance of language" by Karan Thapar (May 12). My regards to the author for this beautifully written piece highlighting the mystic use of silent letters in English language.

Anuradha Bisaria

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WHAT IS the most debated issue in the fiercely contested Lok Sabha elections that are underway? On one side is Mr Narendra Modi and a few allies. On the other side is a multi-pronged challenge spearheaded by Mr Rahul Gandhi and powerful and independent state-specific commanders.

Each of the challengers has raised vital issues — unemployment, inflation, communal divide, inequality, weaponisation of laws and misuse of investigation agencies, crimes against women, Chinese troops occupying Indian territory, discrimination in the devolution of funds and subjugation of the media. Mr Modi dismissed these issues as distractions. He deftly side-stepped them, clean bowled the combined opposition *à la* Mr Jasprit Bumrah, and set the narrative with a truly inspired idea — **inheritance tax on buffaloes**. I suspect the idea was born out of years of research into 'entire political science'. There is a nationwide animalated — sorry, animated — debate on the question, 'Will the Union finance minister levy an inheritance tax on buffaloes? Let me try to enrich the debate.

TAXES ON ANIMALS

The fundamental question that will arise is, whether the levy of such a tax by the Union government would be constitutional? Entry 58 of List II of the Seventh Schedule reads "Taxes on animals and boats." *Prima facie*, the power to levy a tax on animals is reserved to the state governments. *Per contra*, the central government may justify the tax under Entries 86, 87 or 88 of List I that deal with, respectively, tax

on capital value of assets, estate duty, and duties in respect of succession to property. In legal jargon, is a buffalo always an *animal* or, when it is 'inherited' or passes through 'succession', does the buffalo become an *asset*? The question may require a Presidential reference to the Supreme Court and a decision by a Constitution Bench. The animal spirits of senior counsel will be in full play.

THE TAX BASE

The author of the idea said 'if you have two buffaloes, one will be taken away', implying that inheritance tax will be levied only on two or more buffaloes and the tax rate may be 50 per cent.

I am afraid the tax is not easy to administer. If there are two buffaloes, which buffalo will be taxed and snatched by the tax collector? If both are of the same gender and colour, she may pick any one as long as she was not caught in the dilemma faced by Buridan's ass (read: buffalo) and died of exhaustion. However, of the two buffaloes, if one is a 'he' and the other is a 'she' which one will she choose? Moreover, buffaloes come in at least four colours — grey, black, white and black-brown. Suppose the two buffaloes are black and white, which one will the tax collector choose? The Central Board of Direct Taxes may be required to frame rules to avoid the charge of gender bias or racial prejudice. Furthermore, a peculiar problem will arise if the estate consists of an *odd* number of buffaloes: how will the tax collector apply the 50 per cent rate *and*

avoid the charge of buffalo slaughter?

RATE OF TAX

The author proposed a tax rate of 50 per cent. Will the law not be vulnerable to challenge because the rate is, *prima facie*, confiscatory? If the current rates of corporate tax (15, 22 or 30 per cent) or the personal income tax rates (up to 42.8 per cent) are applied, a neat and elegant tax conceived by the author will become a convoluted one like the Gabbar Singh Tax (GST), and the buffalo tax will be universally detested. The debate on the rate alone may consume several days in Parliament.

THE CHARGING SECTION

The charging section is the essence of a tax law. The draftsman will face several difficulties in choosing the appropriate words. Eventually, the CBDT may have to adopt a buffalo-headed approach, summarily reject the various objections and settle on a text fully conscious of the possibility that the charging section will be challenged in the Courts on various grounds.

UNIQUE TAX?

The author contemplated the inheritance tax on buffaloes as a unique tax at a uniform rate of 50 per cent. Most definitely, he did not propose an inheritance tax on *all* the assets of the deceased.

Presumably, he thought that the buffalo deserved a special treatment. In Indian mythology, *Yama*, the god of death, comes riding on a buffalo. It would be sacrilege if *Yama's* divine vehicle is clubbed with vehicles like car or bike or cycle invented by mortal humans. In case the tax-hungry CBDT succeeded in persuading the finance minister to impose an inheritance tax on *all* the assets of the deceased, the buffalo will be clubbed with other taxable assets and the inheritance tax on buffaloes may become a 'progressive' tax relating to the wealth-slab of the deceased.

BUFFALO IS THE FUTURE

Mr Narendra Modi is known for his profound knowledge of public finance, especially the principles of taxation. He has proposed a revolutionary tax that will pave the way for future tax innovations. To milk the cash-buffalo, the central government may launch a new programme to promote buffalo-rearing and provide an initial outlay of Rs 806,000 crore (at the rate of Rs 1000 crore per district of India). Male buffaloes may replace mechanized ploughs for farming, saving diesel. Buffalo manure may replace harmful chemical fertilizers. Buffalo milk may become the milk of choice in India.

I salute the author's vision of *Viksit India*. Surpassing other countries, India will have two national animals: the magnificent tiger in the jungle and the multipurpose buffalo in human habitations.

Fifth COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH
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Competitive populism

THE PRIME Minister chose to make a mockery of Rahul Gandhi's usage of the expression '*khatakhata, khatakhata*' (fast, fast) to describe how rapidly money would be distributed to the poor if the Congress wins this election. I wish he had listened a little more seriously. Personally, I found Rahul's speech scary because it revived memories of a time when Indian voters believed that the government was their only benefactor. It was a time when voters thought of themselves as humble supplicants whose only role was to pay obeisance to their political leaders in the hope that this would bring some benefits their way.

In the '*khatakhata, khatakhata*' speech, Rahul promised to give every woman in every poor family in the country a monthly cheque of Rs 8,500. "Modi gives money to his rich friends," he said, "but I will give money to you. *Khatakhata, khatakhata*." He implied that the money up for distribution belonged to him and not to taxpayers. Days later, the Congress President declared that the BJP was only giving 84 crore Indians five kilos of free rations a month but if the Congress formed the next government, this would be doubled to ten kilos of free rations. In this race to show how much poverty and the poor are revered, the BJP is very much in competition with the Congress. The only difference is that when Modi makes his 'guarantees', he also mentions what he has already done.

His welfare schemes have created what Amit Shah described in an interview last week a voting bloc of 'crores of beneficiaries'. These are those people who have got not just free rations every month in the past decade, but also subsidised toilets, gas cylinders, homes and health insurance. These welfare schemes have helped reduce poverty in rural India. The problem in these last weeks of the election campaign is that the fine line between real welfare schemes and unproductive largesse has become so blurred that it is hard to distinguish between the two.

There is a vital difference. Real welfare schemes empower people living in extreme poverty. Large handouts of cash usually turn very poor people into eternal mendicants. As someone who remembers those days when it was a common sight to see long lines of supplicants form outside the homes of political leaders, it worries me when voters who have only just learned to become more aspirational are now being persuaded to become supplicants once more.

In those supposedly glorious socialist decades, when voters were supplicants and high officials thought of themselves as rulers, official businessmen were humiliated as much as the very poor. Nobody enjoyed this more than the mighty mandarins who controlled the levers of the Government of India. They sat in their vast offices with smug expressions on their faces as petitioners lined up before them. I remember one of them telling me with a proud smile on his face, "I may not have made much money in my life as a bureaucrat, but I have seen the richest men in India come before me on their knees."

His words sickened me then. And it sickens me today, when I hear our political leaders speak in grandiose terms of how much they are going to 'do for the poor' if they get elected. Naturally, they do not dare admit that the money for their 'povertarian' schemes will have to be taken out of budgets for infrastructure, schools and hospitals. If 'the poor' knew this, they might suggest that instead of freebies being thrown into their begging bowls they would prefer it if the school in their village was improved and if the project to bring drinking water into their homes was built faster. This is not a choice that political leaders have offered during this election campaign because for now all they want are votes. Talk to any politician these days and he will tell you that voters are not impressed with real welfare schemes. It is populism that works.

It has saddened me to see that the Prime Minister has plunged the murky depths of populism in his campaign speeches. He did not need to. He continues to be in pole position. So, it cheered me up to hear him say truthfully in an interview to *India Today* last week that those who talked of how unequal India had become in the past decade seemed to prefer that everyone live forever in poverty. "When prosperity comes," he said, "inevitably some people rise quicker than others and inequality increases." When asked about the charge Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly made that Modi's best friends are Ambani and Adani, he said that we should be proud of those who create wealth.

Yes, we should. And we should be ashamed of politicians who are trying to turn rich against poor and upper caste against lower caste. These divisions exist today but those who remember that era of socialism as well as I do know that these divisions have sadly always existed. If anything, they have faded a little with the prosperity that India has seen only since the license raj ended.

What we have not shaken off is the habit of turning voters into mendicants with a begging bowl always in their hands. What we have not shaken off is that very bad habit of allowing our elected representatives to think of themselves as rulers instead of as servants of the people.

inside TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



BEST-LAID PLANS

ASPOET Robert Burns once cautioned, even the best-laid plans of mice and men can go awry. The PMO's team had superbly conceived and choreographed the Ram temple consecration at Ayodhya to kick-start the 2024 BJP election campaign back in January. But it ignored some crucial pointers. The temple issue peaked far too early and there is a law of diminishing returns when you repeat the same emotive issue in each election. The EC has not helped the ruling party by stretching the election campaign over six weeks in the scorching summer sun and the harvest season.

A clear-cut election narrative is difficult to focus on over a span of many months. An interperate cacophony of accusations and counter-accusations on social media concerning reservations or amending the Constitution have often diverted attention from the main issue the BJP wanted to project: comparing the PM's towering image with other Opposition leaders.

NEW-FOUND CONFIDENCE

What appeared to be a certain victory earlier this year has, judging by the nervousness of politicians, institutions and the markets, is turning into a nail-biting finish closer to counting day. The halfway mark is 272. In 2019, the BJP won an amazing 303 seats. Together with its allies, the NDA had 353 MPs. The BJP, in fact, notched over 50% of the vote share in 224 Lok Sabha seats. Despite these odds, some optimists in Rahul Gandhi's war room visualise a more rosy picture this time. For starters, their leader is no longer disparagingly referred to as "Pappu" by the electorate.

The Opposition's new-found confidence is based partly on the fact that this time Modi minus Balakot does not appear quite so formidable. Particularly in the first phase of the campaign, it was practically a one-man show. Yogi Adityanath was one of the few exceptions to be inducted into the campaign. Surprisingly for a seasoned communicator, Modi has in this campaign been caught more than once on the back foot. What makes this election difficult to predict is that there is no discernible wave for or against the government in most parts of the country.

THEORY OF ATTRITION

The Opposition is banking on what is termed as the "theory of attrition". It believes the BJP is bound to face reversals since its high of 2019. This time, it reckons on the BJP to perform badly in Maharashtra and Karnataka. In 2019, the BJP won 25 seats in Karnataka and 23 seats Maharashtra. Apart from a loss in numbers in these states, there could be a marginal decline in seats in states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, UP and Bihar. The calculation is that the BJP cannot get a clear majority on its own and, besides, most of BJP's formidable allies have exited the NDA.

Countering the "natural attrition" argument, BJP loyalists argue that any decline in seat-share in Maharashtra and Karnataka would be from the kitty of BJP allies and not from its own tally. Also, the losses in some states will be compensated by gains in others, such as Bengal and UP. Even diehard BJP loyalists admit privately that they do not bank on even four seats from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Opposition's counter-argument is that the BJP's expected gains from West Bengal, where it won 18 seats in 2019 are unlikely, what with major fighting between the BJP old-timers and turncoats from the Congress and TMC.

MAHARASHTRA, THE KEY

Maharashtra is the focus of much attention in this election. The state has 48 MPs and has often been described as the bellwether state in parliamentary polls. Strategically located between north and south, it has often proved to be an accurate barometer of voting patterns in the country as a whole. Maharashtra is a difficult state to analyse, with traditional alliances turned upside down in this election. The state is hit by agrarian distress, water shortages and a Marathi reservation agitation.

Sharad Pawar, normally a man of few words, sees a comparison between this campaign and the 2004 poll, when the BJP campaign theme was "India Shining" and the Vajpayee government was taken by total surprise when the results started coming in. But Team Modi is far less complacent than Pramad Mahajan, Vajpayee's campaign manager. The BJP campaign has headed early warning signals. For instance, the monotonous Modi guarantee ads have been slowly replaced by posters urging the electorate to come out and vote instead. The PM last week even denied ever playing the Hindu-Muslim card. Modi's people prefer to compare 2024 with the 2012 Gujarat election campaign and last year's MP Assembly campaign. In both cases, the BJP came from behind to win handily eventually.

History HEADLINE

DEVYANI ONIAL



Growing up with pines & needles in Uttarakhand

FOR CHILDREN of a certain vintage, holidays to the hills meant collecting cones of chir pine and lugging them back home with the lofty aim of painting them. The more artistic and sincere proceeded to do so while in most other homes, the cones lay around moping till someone finally threw them out. But until then, they would stoke our memories of mountain slopes covered with chir pine trees, the ground below them a brown, slippery carpet of needles on which kids would slip and slide, cutting down on their walking time to school. The emblem of Mussoorie's Woodstock School, called the Lyre Tree for its shape like the Greek instrument, was the chir pine that grew outside its main building until a few years ago. These days, though, as forest fires rage through Uttarakhand, the chir pine with its inflammable leaves or needles has been in the news for less benign reasons.

A conifer that can grow up to a height of about 30 metres, the chir pine covers almost 16.5 per cent of Uttarakhand's total forested area. It owes its scientific name, *Pinus roxburghii*, to William Roxburgh, a Scottish doctor and naturalist, who went on to become superintendent of the East India Company's botanic garden at Calcutta and who is widely regarded as the father of Indian botany.

PINE TREES, A HIMALAYAN NATIVE

Native to the Himalayas, chir pine or the longleaf Indian pine, was not introduced to the Himalayas by the British, as is often believed, though they certainly gave it preference for its commercial use, mainly lumber and resin. Found all over the Western Himalayas at an elevation between 1,000 and 2,000 metres, it covers large parts of Garhwal and Kumaon where it can be seen growing on steep slopes and can be identified by its three needles and its round cone (unlike the elongated cones of other pines).

"During forest fires in Mussoorie and Landour, one of the frustrating things would be that people fighting the fire would put it out in a certain section but one of the pine cones would catch fire up above and come rolling down and start it all over again. They are round, and roll down the hill and are full of resin, so it's just like a fire bomb going off," says Stephen Alter, author of *Wild Himalaya: A Natural History of the Greatest Mountain*



The chir pine, which covers almost 16.5 per cent of Uttarakhand's total forested area, has inflammable leaves or needles.
Stephen Alter

Range on Earth. "Chir pine has been here for centuries but during the British period, it was promoted for tapping its resin. For a long period in the middle hills, oak forests were cut mainly to make coal and wood charcoal and that allowed the chir pine to expand more," says Dr G S Rawat, emeritus scientist, Uttarakhand Council for Science and Technology.

Alter remembers going into pine forests when he was younger and finding almost every tree notched, with empty tins nailed into it to collect sap. "When we were children, we would break off the bark and carve it because it's very soft and light, and we would carve boats out of them and float them," he recalls.

Historian and environmentalist Shekhar Pathak says, "In the days before artificial resin, turpentine was made from resin from pine. In fact, in the colonial period, the first industry was a leesa (resin) factory in Kashipur around 200 years ago," says Pathak. Since the chir is hardy and fast growing, says Pathak, "even the forest department doesn't have to make much effort with the chir pine like they would to grow baanj (oak) which is a slow-growing tree."

After a government ban in 1981 on felling of trees over 1,000 mt above sea level, "the chir got an opportunity to spread lower in the foothills where the sal grows and above too, among the broad-leaved trees because it's the nature of the chir to colonise," says Pathak.

THE INFLAMMABLE NEEDLES

The tradition of burning chir forests is

perhaps as old as the tree. As Ramachandra Guha writes in *The Unquiet Woods*, "The needles of chir falling onto the forest floor both suppressed the grass and rendered the hillside dangerous for cattle. Thus, in late April or early May, villagers resorted to the time-honoured remedy of fire to obtain a fresh crop of grass." Steps taken by the British to stop this practice often sparked popular protests.

While its needles tend to catch fire easily because of their high resin content, the bark of the tree doesn't catch fire easily since it has a very high ignition temperature — which is why blacksmiths use the bark of the chir pine in their furnaces to melt metal.

A few years ago, the Uttarakhand government had considered cutting pine trees to combat forest fires, an idea it later abandoned.

"For the short-term and long-term management of the forests in Uttarakhand, the dense chir pine forest, more like monocultures, must be converted into mixed forests. More broad-leaf species should be promoted and the dense chir pine forests should be effectively managed and their wood used. The state could effectively manage the chir forests and earn some revenue as well as local people can be given some areas under Van panchayats," says Rawat

Both Rawat and Pathak emphasise that managing forest fires scientifically is the only way ahead.

"The tree is perennial but its needles shed maximum between fall and spring. The dry spell is also during this time. The needles should be removed in November-December as was done traditionally," says Pathak.

On the LOOSE

LEHER KALA

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Strong opinions, bad vibes

A NEW word "digitine", the modern equivalent of "guiltline", is currently trending in cyberspace, post a Let Them Eat Cake moment at New York's Met Gala on May 6. US influencer Haley Kalil, who has 9.9 million followers, attended the event in a dazzling gown adorned with crystalline flowers, and posted a video mouthing those legendary words attributed to Marie Antoinette. All the while, pro-Palestine protests were taking place right outside. This triggered the hashtag #blackout2024, a celebrity boycotting campaign targeting stars for tone-deaf responses to the Gaza conflict.

The inference is clear. In popular imag-

ination, the French Revolution was an uprising against the elite so disconnected from the poor, they casually suggested cake as an alternative to the humble loaf. Similarly, the outrage mob has reacted angrily to this era's royalty, Hollywood stars and millionaires for participating in a lavish party, while battered Palestinians are in the midst of a full-blown famine. Except, their ire is misplaced. The basic argument being there's nothing wrong with people going about their lives and, indeed, attending galas if that's part of their career agendas. They're not personally responsible for strife elsewhere on Earth, nor do they have any say in their governments' military decisions. In all likelihood, their understanding of complicated West Asian politics is superficial at best.

Besides, who decides that support for

the crisis in Gaza supersedes support for the war in Ukraine or starvation in Yemen? Even if a celebrity were to speak up for the beleaguered Gazans on Instagram, it would achieve nothing. It's not like Biden is seeking advice from Taylor Swift (post #blackout2024, she's lost 3,00,000 followers for her silence on the issue).

The logic behind #blackout2024 is that celebrities rely on social media engagement for advertising deals and blocking them en masse lessens their online stature, thereby, reducing their income. That a financial blow would arm-twist the famous into rallying behind Gazans and, somehow, this would influence policy and ultimately liberate Palestine, is laughably far-fetched. Recent history suggests that movements with huge traction like #metoo and the #arabspring

kick-started a conversation but ultimately fizzled out. Public memory is short. Internet trends, even shorter. Despite that there's a persistent, subliminal pressure not just for celebrities but everyone, that we must cultivate opinions on issues we have no expertise in. Pertinently, righteous indignation, or the need to be right, is spoiling relationships.

An earlier generation could engage in dinner table debates holding opposing points of view that would be forgotten by breakfast. I've lost count of the number of my friends who've fallen out because of ideological differences. Disagreeing civilly is a lost art. In the interest of preserving our sanity (and friendships) it's okay to keep shut and flatly acknowledge ignorance on some matters. It is worth remembering if we could solve the problems in our own lives

it would be a feat; better than offering half-baked solutions on issues beyond our level of competence.

Having said that, there's something deeply humbling about watching college students in the US demonstrate peacefully, undeterred by threats from the police, motivated purely by the heartbreaking plight of the underdog. Unlike the armchair activism of #blackout2024, they're forcing the world's gaze towards terrible injustice. It's only in the heady idealism of youth that one raises these legitimate if simplistic moral questions, like how can a mass annihilation occur before our very eyes? Vigils and marches for Palestine indicate that students are not hardened cynics, who've given up on a cruel world. Thank God for that.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Opinion

SUNDAY, MAY 19, 2024



Manchester United's Diogo Dalot and Bruno Fernandes during a lap of appreciation

Can Manchester City juggernaut be stopped?

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

The Terminator — that of the Arnold Schwarzenegger and James Cameron version — was relentless in its pursuit of the target and goal programmed in its system. No obstacle was insurmountable, and no situation too difficult for the shape-shifting cyborg. Whenever members of the Resistance think they have got the better of the self-aware synthetic intelligence system, their notions are soon disabused.

Manchester City have resembled SkyNet's most famous creation over the last decade or so, geared to annihilate all opposition to its objective of total domination, and Mikel Arteta may feel like Sarah or John Connor as they approach the final day of the 2023-24 Premier League season. No matter how many blows they land, how many shots they fire, and wherever on earth they hide, the Terminator keeps coming "back".

Four successive Premier League titles will define total domination, and Pep Guardiola's winning machine is three points away from becoming the first club to achieve that distinction. Not even the greatest teams constructed by Alex Ferguson could manage that. The top tier in England is considered the toughest domestic league in the world; when certain teams in Italy, France, and Germany go on title-winning sprees that can reach even a decade, the Premier League — with its unparalleled financial muscle — provides a dose of unpredictability with two or more teams regularly considered good enough to have a tilt at the crown.

To script a winning legacy in such an environment demands a special outfit, helmed by a once-in-a-generation manager. West Ham United, with David Moyes coming to the end of his tenure there, are not expected to pose much of a challenge at the Etihad Stadium. All Arsenal can hope for is to accomplish their end of the bargain against Everton and hope for a favour from their London rivals. Arteta and his players would have sleepless nights for the rest of their lives if they drop points in their final league fixture only for City to, somehow, go down at home against the Hammers.

Efficient and effective

The fate of the Premier League crown is no longer in the Gunners' hands, and they will secretly be ruing the home reversal against Aston Villa — no mean feat this season, as their top-four finish testifies — their only league defeat since the turn of the year. If even such a strong sequence of results comes up short, one can gauge what sort of force they have been up against.

Arsenal are still a young side and have done everything in their power to keep pace with the juggernaut. They had even scored the most goals and conceded the fewest till a couple of rounds ago before the beast awakened, and Erling Haaland and Co

decided to have a say in the matter. Now Arsenal can just win and hope, against hope and all probability, that City falter while "serving for Wimbledon", as Guardiola described his team's final game of the season.

It has been 12 years since the most famous season finale in Premier League history, when City scored two stoppage-time goals against Queens Park Rangers, including that "Agueeroooo!" strike with 93 minutes and 20 seconds on the clock. It remains to be seen whether this evening lives up to that drama, with fans tuned into the other game even while attending their own team's match. But whatever happens later today, this season has already given a lot to savour for football lovers around the world.

Liverpool kept pace with the other two teams before tiring out over the last month. It only showed that they are human, and three teams going toe to toe till the bitter end was a bit too much to expect. To catch or overthrow Manchester City in the flow they are in currently, a top team seemingly needs ice in its veins. Since they drew at home with Arsenal on March 31, City have won eight games in a row with a combined score of 30-5, in addition to a victory over Chelsea in the FA Cup. The last time they tasted defeat in the Premier League was a 1-0 reversal against Villa on December 6. Their only disappointment in more than five months would be their elimination from the Champions League despite dominating most of the two-legged quarterfinal against Real Madrid.

Even that setback may have worked out in City's favour in some respects, allowing them to train all their focus and energy into the final few weeks of the Premier League campaign.

The big picture

Man City have an enviable abundance of talent and one of the greatest man-managers, who is also a great strategist and thinker. But the relentless pursuit of greatness is a quality only the very best sports persons and teams possess. Guardiola is a driven individual and drives his players to keep improving. He may have almost infinite resources at his disposal, but cash splurges without getting the other parts of the jigsaw in place wouldn't get a club anywhere — as several under-achieving "big" clubs would testify.

If things somehow do work out in Arsenal's favour, it could be a big milestone and turning point in the club's history. The memory of the 'Invincibles', who won the title 20 years ago without losing a game, needs to be supplemented with fresh achievements, regardless of how many FA Cups they win. After their late collapse last season despite leading by eight points in April, this term has seen them take a few more steps in the right direction.

And if matters turn out as they are expected to, it would be another brick in the edifice being built in the blue half of Manchester. But even Guardiola would admit that he and his team have been in a battle, being pushed all the way to the finish line.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



...To milk the cash-buffalo, the central government may launch a new programme to promote buffalo-rearing and provide an initial outlay of ₹806,000 crore (at the rate of ₹1,000 crore per district of India). Male buffaloes may replace mechanised ploughs for farming, saving diesel. Buffalo manure may replace harmful chemical fertilisers. Buffalo milk may become the milk of choice in India

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Taxes on animals

The fundamental question that will arise is, whether the levy of such a tax by the Union government would be constitutional? Entry 58 of List II of the Seventh Schedule reads "Taxes on animals and boats." *Prima facie*, the power to levy a tax on animals is reserved to the state governments. *Per contra*, the central government may justify the tax under Entries 86, 87 or 88 of List I that deal with, respectively, tax on capital value of assets, estate duty, and duties in respect of succession to property. In legal jargon, is a buffalo always an *animal* or, when it is 'inherited' or passes through 'succession', does the buffalo become an *asset*? The question may require a Presidential reference to the Supreme Court and a decision by a Con-



PM Narendra Modi at an election rally for the Lok Sabha polls

Inheritance tax on buffaloes

stitution Bench. The animal spirits of senior counsel will be in full play.

The tax base

The author of the idea said 'if you have two buffaloes, one will be taken away', implying that inheritance tax will be levied only on *two* or more buffaloes and the tax rate may be 50%.

I am afraid the tax is not easy to administer. If there are two buffaloes, which buffalo will be taxed and snatched by the tax collector? If both are of the same gender and colour, she may pick any one as long as she was not caught in the dilemma faced by Buridan's ass (read: buffalo) and died of exhaustion. However, of the two buffaloes, if one is a 'he' and the other is a 'she' which one will she choose? Moreover, buffaloes come in at least four colours — grey, black, white and black-brown. Suppose the two buffaloes are black and white, which one will the tax collector choose? The Central Board of Direct Taxes may be required to frame rules to avoid the charge of gender bias or racial prejudice. Furthermore, a peculiar problem will arise if the estate consists of an *odd* number of buffaloes: how will the tax collector apply the 50% rate *and* avoid the charge of buffalo slaughter?

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facie, confiscatory? If the current rates of corporate tax (15, 22 or 30%) or the personal income tax rates (up to 42.8%) are applied, a neat and elegant tax conceived by the author will become a convoluted one like the Gabbar Singh Tax (GST), and the buffalo tax will be universally detested. The debate on the rate alone may consume several days in Parliament.

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Unique tax?

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minister to impose an inheritance tax on all the assets of the deceased, the buffalo will be clubbed with other taxable assets and the inheritance tax on buffaloes may become a 'progressive' tax relating to the wealth-slab of the deceased.

Buffalo is the future

Mr Narendra Modi is known for his profound knowledge of public finance, especially the principles of taxation. He has proposed a revolutionary tax that will pave the way for future tax innovations. To milk the cash-buffalo, the central government may launch a new programme to promote buffalo-rearing and provide an initial outlay of ₹806,000 crore (at the rate of ₹1,000 crore per district of India). Male buffaloes may replace mechanised ploughs for farming, saving diesel. Buffalo manure may replace harmful chemical fertilisers. Buffalo milk may become the milk of choice in India.

I salute the author's vision of *Viksit India*. Surpassing other countries, India will have *two* national animals: the magnificent tiger in the jungle and the multipurpose buffalo in human habitations.

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ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Best-laid plans

AS POET ROBERT Burns once cautioned, even the best-laid plans of mice and men can go awry. The PMO's team had superbly conceived and choreographed the Ram temple consecration at Ayodhya to kick-start the 2024 BJP election campaign back in January. But it ignored some crucial pointers. The temple issue peaked far too early and there is a law of diminishing returns when you repeat the same emotive issue in each election. The EC has not helped the ruling party by stretching the election campaign over six weeks in the scorching summer sun and the harvest season.

A clear-cut election narrative is difficult to focus on over a span of many months. An impenetrable cacophony of accusations and counter-accusations on social media concerning reservations or amending the Constitution have often diverted attention from the main issue the BJP wanted to project: comparing the PM's

towering image with other Opposition leaders.

New-found confidence

What appeared to be a certain victory earlier this year has, judging by the nervousness of politicians, institutions and the markets, is turning into a nail-biting finish closer to counting day. The halfway mark is 272. In 2019, the BJP won an amazing 303 seats. Together with its allies, the NDA had 353 MPs. The BJP, in fact, notched over 50% of the vote share in 224 Lok Sabha seats. Despite these odds, some optimists in Rahul Gandhi's war room visualise a more rosy picture this time. For starters, their leader is no longer disparagingly referred to as "Pappu" by the electorate.

The Opposition's new-found confidence is based partly on the fact that this time Modi minus Balakot does not appear quite so formidable. Particularly in the first phase of the campaign, it was practically a one-man show. Yogi Adityanath was one of the few exceptions to be inducted into the campaign. Surprisingly for a seasoned communicator, Modi has in this campaign been caught more than once on the back foot. What makes this election difficult to predict is that there is no discernible wave for or against the government in most parts of the country.

Theory of attrition

The Opposition is banking on what is termed as the "theory of attrition". It believes the BJP is bound to face reversals since its high of 2019. This time, it reckons on the BJP to perform badly in Maharashtra and Karnataka. In 2019, the BJP won 25 seats in Karnataka and 23 seats in Maharashtra. Apart from a loss in numbers in these states, there could be a marginal decline in seats in states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, UP and Bihar. The calculation is that the BJP cannot get a clear majority on its own and, besides, most of BJP's formidable allies have exited the NDA.

Countering the "natural attrition" argument, BJP loyalists argue that any decline in seat-share in Maharashtra and Karnataka would be from the kitty of BJP allies and not from its own tally. Also, the losses in some states will be compensated by gains in others, such as Bengal and UP. Even diehard BJP loyalists admit privately that they do not bank on even four seats from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Opposition's counter-argument is that the BJP's expected gains from West Bengal, where it won 18 seats in 2019 are unlikely, what with major infighting between the BJP old-timers and turncoats from the Congress and TMC.

Maharashtra, the key

Maharashtra is the focus of much attention in this election. The state has 48 MPs and has often been described as the bellwether state in parliamentary polls. Strategically located between north and south, it has often proved to be an accurate barometer of voting patterns in the country as a whole. Maharashtra is a difficult state to analyse, with traditional alliances turned upside down in this election. The state is hit by agrarian distress, water shortages and a Maratha reservation agitation.

Sharad Pawar, normally a man of few words, sees a comparison between this campaign and the 2004 poll, when the BJP campaign theme was "India Shining" and the Vajpayee government was taken by total surprise when the results started coming in. But Team Modi is far less complacent than Pramod Mahajan, Vajpayee's campaign manager. The BJP campaign has heeded early warning signals. For instance, the monotonous Modi guarantee ads have been slowly replaced by posters urging the electorate to come out and vote instead. The PM last week even denied ever playing the Hindu-Muslim card. Modi's people prefer to compare 2024 with the 2012 Gujarat election campaign and last year's MP Assembly campaign. In both cases, the BJP came from behind to win handily eventually.



Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot

Charlie Chaplin

newindianexpress.com

BIDEN'S RHETORIC, XI'S STRATEGY, INDIA'S OPPORTUNITY

MEANWHILE: an instructive term that helps convey the perils of inattention.

The parade of political rhetoric in India's 44-day-long election has sucked out the oxygen critical for debate. As India's parties grapple with words for votes, the spectre of a trade war is playing out. Ideally, matters concerning livelihood must occupy centre-stage, but are sadly waylaid by emotive issues. The fact is what happens in the global economy—as contestants wrestle with identity and ideology—has implications for the incoming government.

This week saw the Biden administration in the US imposing a steep hike in tariffs on a wide-ranging list of imports from China. It has trebled the duties on steel, aluminium, batteries, components and critical minerals to 25 percent, doubled duties on semiconductors and solar cells to 50 percent, introduced new levies on ship-to-shore cranes at 25 percent and on medical and other protective equipment at 50 percent, and ramped up tariff on electric cars from 25 to 100 percent.

The case for raising tariffs has long been in the baking. There is the goal of economic resilience—the pandemic unravelled the fact that the global supply chain was verily a Chinese supply chain. There is also the political compulsion. There is a rare and strong consensus in polarised US on the need to constrain/corral China. Biden's rhetoric is not dissimilar from that of Trump when in 2018 he imposed tariffs on \$300 billion of Chinese goods. The mild schadenfreude in India must confront the fact that the Trump tariffs on India are still in place.



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
Author of *The Gated Republic*, *Aadhara: A Biometric History of India's 12-Digit Revolution*, and *Accidental India* (shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

The ratcheting up of tariffs triggered a calibrated response from China—it has termed the new tariffs a unilateral action in violation of World Trade Organization rules and vowed to defend its interests. As yet, there is no signal of retaliation. Interestingly, the action has neither shaken nor stirred the Chinese stock markets. Indeed, the Chinese state agency Xinhua quoted Nietzsche to troll the US action stating, "What does not kill you makes you stronger."

Unlike other economies that play checkmate chess, the Chinese play wei chi, where the goal is to conquer through encirclement. If China appears to have brushed off the new tariff regime, it isn't about what it will do, but what it has already engineered to circumvent the new regime. China has used a pathway via Vietnam and Mexico—which are reliant on Chinese inputs—to reach the American consumer. Unsurprisingly, in 2023 Mexico emerged as the largest trading partner of the US.

In April, US trade representative Katherine Tai pointed out that China has used non-market practices—state-subsidised investment in emerging sectors to create capacity, and carve market share with predatory pricing—and that steel is coming through the backdoor as Mexican steel. It used a similar template to capture markets in EVs, batteries and solar panels. The route is effective as Mexico enjoys privileged access to US markets as a member of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

A report by the Coalition for a Prosperous America, a non-profit outfit, reveals that Chinese companies are investing in manufacturing units in Mexico. Chinese FDI into Mexico is rising and US imports from Mexico contain an increasing amount of Chinese value. Indeed, during his recent visit to Hungary, Serbia (the largest recipients of Chinese FDI in the last three years) and France, Xi Jinping explored the potential of expanding the market for Chinese EVs and other goods by inducting China into the supply chain in Europe.

Why and how does this matter to India? Soon after the announcement of Biden's tariffs, the IMF cautioned that trade restrictions lead to fragmentation and could dent global growth by 0.2-7 percent, depending on the magnitude. Any slowdown in global growth has implications for the aspirations of a billion Indians. India's challenge is that 45 percent of its workforce is dependent on agriculture and lives on a sixth of national income—they must be moved to higher-yield sectors. Politically, if there is one question that has dominated the elections it is the issue of employment. On Friday, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman underlined the government's aim to boost India's participation in global value chains and expand manufacturing.

India's ambition faces a barrage of challenges. Advanced economies are fashioning industrial policies to re-shore manufacturing despite warnings by the IMF that industrial policy is not a magic cure for slow growth. Ironically, they are doing exactly what they were scornful of. The glossary of rising protectionism includes the Inflation Reduction Act and Chips Act in the US, and the Net Zero Industry Act and Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism in EU.

Politics matters and so does cost economics. India must capitalise the headline attention of global funds and consultancies to attract investments away from Vietnam, Mexico or Indonesia. It needs to scale up skills for smart manufacturing, clean up its labour laws, enable plug-and-play sites and unclog the regulatory cholesterol. The stellar performance of Apple and others in India must be leveraged for branding.

A good start would be to understand what Tamil Nadu or Gujarat is doing right to woo investments, create jobs and catalyse growth, and deploy the template across the economy. Hopefully, at some election in the future, competitive ideas for prosperity and not compulsive rhetoric about identity will define the mandate.

IMAGINING A FUTURE THROUGH SCHOLARS PAST



OPINION

SHIV VISVANATHAN
Social scientist associated with the Compost Heap, a group researching alternative imaginations

RECENTLY, I was moodily staring out of the window one night and thinking over the last two months. This was a consequential period, packed with public and personal events. Publicly, the elections have dominated the imagination even when they are being presented as a *fait accompli*. BJP's victory is seen as obvious, a prophecy foretold. Personally, one was affected by the death of two outstanding social scientists. Professor Jeet Singh Uberoi, a sociologist, died last month, and Sudhir Kakar, a psychoanalyst, passed away a fortnight ago.

They were two outstanding scholars, both public intellectuals in a classic sense. Their passing set me wondering how they would have reacted to the elections. Both were sardonic, ironic and sceptical of the obvious, and the elections so far had been a predictable exercise. I decided to use them as lenses for reading the present. The present, I realised, would be an idiocentric exercise, but worth its weight in an ambush of insights.

I decided to summon Jeet Uberoi first. The election, he said, was a momentous event that was misread as a message. It was not the return of the BJP that was critical. India had been a monolingual exercise for long. The election was not about party victory, it was a disguised way of announcing the intellectual death of Mahatma Gandhi. So far, Gandhi had been an afterthought in Indian politics. Today's democratic politics has erased his intellectual legacy.

I looked at Kakar for a reaction. He said his guru Erik Erikson would have

put it better. "This is a time for Gandhi's truths. The BJP has created a new form of Taylorism, a calibration of hate. Winslow Taylor had created the domain of time and motion studies. Electoral democracy has created a Taylorism of hate, where majoritarianism has constructed democracy as a hegemonic category and violence as an act of consumption and management. There is a banality to democracy as an electoral affair that needs to be decoded. This election is an expression of such an event." I was stunned. Politics looked more frightening than ever before.

Both Uberoi and Kakar tried to explain what they had boldly stated. Uberoi said, "Democracy is no longer a celebration of difference. It is about consensus as dominance. You agreed to a ratio of violence and hegemony in a society, and majoritarianism expresses the quotient." Kakar added that his colleagues had shown that development is a continuation of violence by other means: "Modi's favorite word is development. Self-styled, he guarantees development like a ration card. The Narmada Dam is a parody of development. Your calculus determines how many shall be erased, displaced or forgotten. Such a development as democracy facilitates the elimination of people. And electoralism nearly fetishises it. More votes are a claim to greater violence. Both development and democracy, as siblings, carry a genocidal impetus today."

What people miss out is that the current notion of social science adds to it. Kakar mentioned that both psychology and management have become behaviouristic: "The humanistic psychology of Erikson and Robert Jay Lifton makes no sense. Dissent has become elusive—

both in the social sciences and in democracy." Uberoi added wickedly that we desperately needed "misbehavioural science". He said democracy has created a second kind of body count—not of votes, but of defeated people. This is the future one has voted for.

Both scholars pointed out that the future was a different constituency of ideas and alternatives. The future provided an alchemical twist to democracy. The idea of the present merely being extrapolated into the future was a mediocre one.

Regime, they pointed out, represented an economy of violence. Science routinised the atomic bombings, and today supports biotechnology. It includes not just patenting as intellectual property, but the promotion of genetic engineering. Think of the one theme that has not entered Indian elections—the Anthropocene, the return of modified science to Mother Earth. Indians as devotees to development remain the biggest opponents of the Anthropocene. The biggest projects of ecology are not referred to in any election manifesto. Big science dominates. The Indian attitude to AI is similar. What suits the corporation is scientific. The philosophical debates about AI have disappeared. Modi is virtually subsumed to science in his policies.

Uberoi then offered a solution. He suggested what Erikson argued was not a Luddite. The real battle was Taylor versus Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj* has to be rewritten, as dissenting voices have repeatedly emphasised. Let us not forget that the loudspeaker was first introduced at a Gandhian rally. Gandhi worked with J C Bose and Rabindranath Tagore to set up Shantiniketan. One needs a new idea of memory to rewrite

the Indian future. Our current ideology of the future is uncertain and majoritarian. This is what the election is about. A majoritarian India can only reinvent the Anthropocene if it opens up to dissenters, marginals, nomads, ethnics. A standardised India of Modi's dreams only classes people. Our vote, in the long run, is a vote for erasure.

Uberoi added there was nothing futuristic in the Modi dream. Indian nationalism always presented an ascetic view of the world. There is also an indifference to suffering. We saw it during the farmers' strike, the various riots. People are made to be eliminated. Jeet added that only when democracy is about truth can it solve law and order issues. The notion of time as pluralistic has given way to nation states as ideologies. For once, India as a civilisation has been electorally indifferent to peace and the Anthropocene.

I was stunned. I also thought of Modi and the elections, but in a more erratic way. I saw him as a philistine; my colleagues read him as a theory, and created a possible ethnography of the future to show how genocidal India has become. Today, we read body counts like cricket scores. This is the future the election has opened up.

In a deep way, both scholars pointed to Gandhi as the future. Democracy needs constraint invention. Otherwise, we will turn mechanical, even autistic. Hannah Arendt warned about such formality. Adolf Eichmann, she explained, was a clerk carrying out orders. Soon we will have to ask our magistrates their body counts. There is something surrealistic in the way this election has been constructed. It is a formal ritual, a way of life. Yet, we are too blind to realise that our political assumptions are changing.

Indian social sciences have resisted banalisation. One thinks about Ashis Nandy, Rajni Kothari, Ramu Gandhi—but it is a duel of memory we are missing. Peace and democracy have to be orally alive, performances to be recited. Majoritarianism is another idea. To see it as the future is to deaden it.

I sat in silence thinking over what my colleagues had conveyed.



SUNSETS AND SON-RISES IN BIHAR



OPINION

D M DIWAKAR
Honorary Director, Development Research Institute, Jalsain; Former Director, A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna

THE emergence of Bihar's new political leadership signals the swan song of the previous generation's stalwarts. No corner of the state's polity seems untouched by such changes of guard. Let's see how these legacies might affect the political calculus.

Tejashwi Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal launched himself when his father Lalu Prasad was imprisoned on corruption charges. Lalu Prasad has mass appeal among the Yadavs and Muslims; he also has substantial support from the Other Backward Classes and Dalits. Therefore, Tejashwi has inherited a strong legacy. He established his leadership at the last assembly election, winning 75 seats out of the total 243 and emerging as the largest party. He impressed the masses by bringing back the issue-based politics of employment, education, health and inflation.

Chirag Paswan of the Lok Janshakti Party endeavours to continue the legacy of his father Ram Vilas. His support is among SCs, Dusadh and Dhari, followed

by Chamar, Mochi, Rabidas, Charkmar and Musahar castes, together making up almost 15 percent. He is contesting from Hajipur against Shiv Chandra Ram, a popular Dalit leader from the RJD.

The BJP has recently lost Sushil Modi, a senior leader and popular face in Bihar. The party has negligible youth representation in the state at present. It has been experimenting on weakening RJD's base by earlier fielding Ram Kripal Yadav, Nityanand Rai, Upendra Kushwaha and now Samrat Choudhary; but it has not succeeded in snatching the vote base of Lalu Prasad.

It's a similar situation for the Janata Dal (United), which is yet to launch a young person who can take charge after Nitish Kumar. All these prominent faces of Bihar, who emerged from the JP movement to restore democracy in 1974, are now near the end of their politics.

Bihar has been a laboratory of politics for the people down the ages. The Champaran Satyagraha, radical peasant movements and JP movement are a few landmarks in that legacy. Although Bihar was one of the first states to implement a law abolishing zamindari, land reforms remained on the back seat. The socialist regime of Karpoori Thakur tried to address several issues of social justice, but left the land issues largely untouched.

As a result, the state was engulfed in fierce land struggles and witnessed massacres by private armies in alliance with the state. JP held the ruling classes responsible for delaying land redistribution, which resulted in counter-retaliation too. Nobody from the private ar-

mies was found guilty. The courts neither passed a stricture against the investigating officers, nor instructed the reopening of cases.

JP's mobilisation was the next landmark. Chhatra Sangharsh Vahini, Tarun Shanti Sena and other groups came together against the issues of unemployment, inflation and corruption. This mobilisation turned out to be the breeding ground for the mass leaders of today—Lalu Prasad, Ram Vilas, Nitish Kumar and Sushil Modi. They have continued ruling the state with a few exceptions.

The previous generation of mass leaders—Lalu Prasad Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, Nitish Kumar and Sushil Modi—came up through the JP movement. The new gen is trying to find its own footing

Lalu Prasad weakened the feudal clutches and empowered the voiceless. Backward classes and Dalits had never before felt so empowered to deal with the feudal forces, the bureaucracy and the police. He strongly dealt with communal forces too and stopped L K Advani's Rathayatra. This act made him a champion of minorities, particularly of Muslims. Lalu's idea of Charvaha Vidyalay—an experiment in holding classes in field settings—got appreciated globally. However, it did not take off because of elitism among the bureaucrats, who were gener-

ally not happy with Lalu's regime because of two reasons. One, the RJD cadres started interacting with the bureaucracy as alert citizens. Two, there was a curious pattern of public expenditure shooting up in the last quarter every financial year; Lalu stopped this 'March loot'. However, Lalu was later implicated in the fodder scam and installed his wife Rabri Devi in the top seat.

Ram Vilas tried to compete with Lalu, but could not excel in state politics although he won parliamentary election with a record margin from Hajipur. Though he was a seasoned leader and acceptable to everyone, he lost Hajipur later and got back to parliament through the Rajya Sabha.

Nitish Kumar, despite belonging to the Kurmi caste that has a meagre 2.87 percent share of the population, has made himself indispensable in the state's politics. The upper castes and the bureaucracy supported him as a substitute to Lalu. Reservation, stipend to students and prohibition made him more popular than others to the state's women.

Creating the Dalit Vikas Mission to weaken the Paswans and further segregating the OBCs were masterstrokes in social engineering. This is why Nitish has been important to all comers. Division of the secular vote makes the BJP comfortable and opponents weaker.

However, changing his position time and again has dented his credentials. That JD(U) leaders are showing indifference and Tejashwi is showing an abnormal behaviour towards 'Chacha' Nitish are indications that a new script is being written for post-election Bihar.

QUOTE CORNER

The key point today is that Israel's declared aim of wiping Gaza from the map is about to be realised. Further, evidence of appalling crimes and atrocities is literally being destroyed and bulldozed, in effect wiping the slate clean for those who've committed these crimes and making a mockery of justice.

Vaughan Lowe, South Africa's legal representative, appealing to the International Court of Justice to order Israel to halt its Rafah assault

Before there were women in greenlight positions at studios, it was very hard for them to see themselves in a female protagonist.

Meryl Streep, winner of three Oscars for acting, at Cannes film fest

Will I be sad after this? Of course. Do I feel sad sometimes everyday because of this? Yes.

Sunil Chhetri, highest scorer for India in football, announcing his retirement after 19 years of playing for the country

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Transpoliticals welcome

Ref: *Transmogrifying taxonomy of turncoats & transpoliticals* (May 18). Kudos to the writer for his witty and engaging observations laced with neologisms. From the realm of taxonomy (of which I was a student), I'd like to single out the species of V Kartikeya Pandian, whom I'd prefer to binomially call *Kartikeyatamil Pandiodian*. Everyone should welcome people like Pandian, a genuine Tamil-odindian who can adapt to the ecology they have settled in, even as they don't snap the roots of their original habitat. This type of trans-politics is congenial for a pan-Indian ethos.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

Keep faith

An increase in the final polling figures released by the Election Commission does not mean some hanky-panky has happened. Copies of Form 17C are provided to the candidates' polling agents and the

voting machines are sealed in their presence after recording their signatures. We should have some faith in the constitutional bodies and not put too much burden on the top court.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Don't divide

Seventy-five years ago, we all endured the darkness of an all-out communal outburst that damaged our fine social fabric. Nationalist movements and value education succeeded in building the bridge of harmony. Nowadays, we often see leaders giving provocative speeches that create tension in our diverse country. We must fear a resurrection of the long-gone British policy of 'divide and rule'.

Muhammad Hashir, Puttur

Double whammy

Ref: *Supplementary ED chargesheet names Kejriwal, AAP* (May 18). The doctrine of vicarious liability may give protection to the leader of an organisation on exceptional grounds when misdeeds are committed without his or her knowledge. But in the liquor

scam, Kejriwal himself is accused of being the kingpin. That is a double whammy on Kejriwal and AAP. Collective corruption can also cause necrosis in the political party itself.

Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Apparent fragility

It looks Narendra Modi is realising he is on a weak wicket this time. The Haryana and Uttarakhand BJP governments have become fragile. Modi for the first time talked critically about Adani and Ambani in public. The other symptoms include not talking about his 10-year rule, focusing more on the Congress manifesto than the BJP's, Hindu-Muslim etc.

T Kailash Ditya, Hyderabad

Ineffective ban

The Centre has extended the ban on LTTE for another five years, arguing the group may otherwise affect the territorial integrity of India. Although LTTE was banned in 2019, it was carrying on its separatist tendency thanks to its sympathisers, particularly among some Tamil leaders. The ban's

extension, therefore, will not make any material difference. When those implicated in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination were being deported to Sri Lanka, a few leaders accorded them a tearful farewell.

P G Menon, Chennai

Proper targeting

The National Human Rights Commission chairperson Justice Arun Mishra has rightly pointed out that mostly those who have climbed up the social ladder are reaping the benefits of reservation (TNE, May 18). The Centre must ensure reservations are given only to those under the poverty line.

Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Cup hope

It is amazing to see Mumbai Indians at the last place on the IPL table. A team that has been champion five times is now at the bottom. This team has four national players including the team captain for the upcoming T20 World Cup. Hope India would perform well at the World Cup despite this fact.

V S Ganeshan, Bengaluru

"We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live; they travel far"
— Swami Vivekananda



The future of education in India isn't just about doing well academically, it's about empowering kids to follow their passions and create their own paths to success. And that journey is definitely worth talking about, ADITI SHARMA



CANVAS OF CHANGE

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION WITH CREATIVITY

When I was a child, for me the world was a blank canvas, ready to be filled with colors. Each brushstroke was like a step towards understanding everything around me. Art was just more than a hobby for me, it was a way of expressing myself and finding escape in midst of chaos. But as I grew older, societal expectations started weighing me down. My parents and teachers believed that success only came from excelling in traditional subjects like math and science, leaving no room for the creativity that fueled my soul. Elders often believe that stress and pressure are exclusively their burdens to bear, yet who acknowledges that even toddlers struggle to take their first steps and teenagers face immense pressure to prove their worth to the world. This is where schools step in, recognizing the importance of nurturing not just academic growth but also the social and emotional well-being of children.

Through socio-emotive learning, students develop vital skills such as problem solving, effective communication, conflict management, and self-care. These abilities enable them to understand and manage their emotions, build supportive and cooperative communities, and ultimately help both themselves and others thrive. One particular innovation that has impressed me is the use of Emotion Charts in schools. These charts have pictures of faces showing different emotions such as sadness, anger, surprise, happiness, silliness, fear, excitement, and embarrassment. Children can use these charts to express how they feel each day. The efforts made by schools to incorporate emotional learning are not only effective but also incredibly beautiful! This new approach to education is producing adults who are better at handling stress, managing their emotions, and controlling themselves.

When I was in 3rd grade, my mother always stressed about my exams and expected me to score a perfect 20 out of 20. This pressure pushed me into an exhausting race for marks. I believe children should be exempted from exams during their primary years so they can enjoy a stress-free childhood and focus on developing their creativity and skills. The new education system has introduced a change many of us wished for as children, which is no exams until 3rd grade. This shift creates a less pressured environment, allowing children to learn at their own pace without worrying about marks or grades. By eliminating early testing, we can cultivate a love of learning in a calm, supportive atmosphere, free from the anxiety of exams.

When my parents were in school, the main focus was on academics. When I was a student, we had academics as well as co-curricular activities and sports. But now, education has evolved even further. It includes subjects and activities like yoga, meditation, journal writing, and mindful coloring. This shift in education has had a significant positive impact on children. It has helped them in several ways with, aggression management, emotions regulation, making thoughtful decisions and better communication in relationships.

Back in my teenage years, the school syllabus was synonymous with exams. Schools viewed exams as a method of assessment, but to me, they were more like photographs. Students needed to memorize information and reproduce it exactly in their answers. It felt as though we were being asked to take a screenshot of our textbooks and paste it directly onto our exam sheets.

Traditionally, assessments focused purely on memory recall. However, today's educational landscape has evolved significantly. Modern assessments extend beyond paper and pencil, embracing practical, hands-on experiences and field experiments. These contemporary methods provide a more comprehensive evaluation of a student's understanding and skills, offering a richer, more meaningful approach to learning and assessment. Back in my 10th-grade days, I vividly remember yearning to choose subjects like English, Biology, and Fine Arts.

BOARDS! THE WORD ITSELF FEELS HEAVY WITH PRESSURE, EVEN THOUGH I NAVIGATED THEM LONG AGO. THE PRESSURE OF BOARD RESULTS WAS SUCH THAT, THOSE TIMES WERE SO STRESSFUL THAT EVEN A PEACEFUL BREATH FELT IMPOSSIBLE, AND MY ANXIETY WAS AT ITS PEAK

Unlike some education systems abroad, Indian education didn't grant us the freedom to pick our own set of subjects. But now, with the advent of the new education policy, the landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation. It's surreal to think that students today have the liberty to tailor their education according to their interests and passions. Imagine a science student delving into the world of music or arts and it's truly an evolution!

When I chose humanities, people often asked me what my future profession would be and if I could earn well with it. The rise in humanities enrollments has validated the importance of creative and critical thinking skills, fostering an environment that values artistic expression and cultural understanding.

BOARDS! The word itself feels heavy with pressure, even though I navigated them long ago. The pressure of board results was such that, those times were so stressful that even a peaceful breath felt impossible, and my anxiety was at its peak. My parents often reminisced about facing board exams in 5th and 8th grades, but as a child of the 2000s, I thankfully escaped that additional stress. For me, board exams were a daunting once-a-year event in 10th and 12th grades. It was a struggle to cover entire textbooks, and while I managed above-average marks, the pressure was intense. However, the upcoming change to split exams into two sessions seems promising. This approach will distribute the workload more evenly, reduce stress and give students more time to prepare for the next session. This division will allow timely feedback on performance, identifying areas for improvement and providing support before the next session, ultimately enhancing student learning and performance. My personal favourite change that has ever been happened in the

Indian education system has been the thoughtful replacement of the word "fail" with "essential repeat" and "back" with "supplementary." This shift was crucial, as the harsh terms "fail" and "back" often demotivate students and heighten the fear of judgment. The new supportive terminology boosts self-esteem and encourages students to persevere, fostering a more positive and resilient mindset.

Cross culture learning is also a major revolution which is crucial as it fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures, promoting empathy, respect, and global awareness among students. This inclusive approach not only enriches students' educational experiences but also equips them with the social and emotional skills necessary to navigate and contribute positively to a multicultural society. One of such is National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). NIOS offers flexible learning opportunities to students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those from rural areas, tribal communities, and marginalized groups. Through its inclusive curriculum and open learning approach, NIOS promotes cross-cultural understanding by catering to the needs and realities of various communities across the country.

In cultural exchange programs at my school not only exposed me to diverse perspectives but also highlighted the varied approaches to education around the world. Witnessing how children from different international cultures learn and left a profound impact, opens eyes to new possibilities in learning. My school had students from France and they spent a week immersed in the school's community. They also had the opportunity to explore Delhi's landmarks, museums, and cultural

sites, accompanied by local students who act as guides and ambassadors. In return, they organized reciprocal visits, sending groups of students to partner schools abroad to experience different culture.

It is an enlightening experience that underscored the importance of fostering international and global understanding through education, revealing that cultural exchange is not just a leisure activity but an essential aspect of comprehensive learning. With years these programmes have lifted students with gain of first-hand exposure to diverse perspectives, traditions, and ways of life. This experience not only broadens their worldview but also cultivates tolerance, appreciation for diversity, and intercultural communication skills. In the past, they often overlooked the importance of sports and physical education, especially during the crucial 11th and 12th grades. Previously, schools often overlooked this aspect of holistic development. However, there has been a shift in perspective, with educational institutions now recognizing the importance of nurturing not only academic excellence but also mental and emotional well-being through sports and physical activities. Speaking of mental health, it's heartening to see prestigious institutions like IITs and IIMs taking proactive steps to address the issue of student suicides. Programs focused on mental wellness and weekly counselling sessions are now becoming the norm, with institutions like IIT Guwahati leading the way.

Well on discussing mental health, pandemic has affected our minds and changed the way we view things around us. Were you a quarantine student too? Well I was. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ed-Tech was the only way we could learn. With the introduction of EdTech, students now have access

to a wide range of learning resources that may not have been available to them before. Online platforms offer educational materials such as e-books, videos, and interactive tutorials, making it easier for students to explore different subjects at their own pace. Who would have imagined that tools like ChatGPT could handle assignments, develop content, and become indispensable aids? AI, VR, and AR have transformed education, especially in the arts, by creating exciting opportunities for creative expression and discovery. AI personalizes learning and provides intelligent creative tools, VR immerses students in virtual environments for hands-on artistic experiences, and AR overlays digital information onto the real world for enhanced visualization. Together, these technologies make art education more engaging, interactive, and innovative, fostering deeper creativity and understanding among students. **The education system is changing, and it's not just about academic freedom. It's also about unlocking creativity and supporting overall growth.** As someone who truly believes in the power of art, I'm excited to see more recognition of artistic and creative careers. It's no longer just about commerce and science. With the increasing popularity of vocational courses in fields like culinary arts, design, and interior decoration, India is on track to become a center of creativity and innovation. My passion for improving education comes from wanting to see every child bloom with their innovative and extraordinary minds. I wish to advocate for a system that not only keeps up with the times but also nurtures each person's unique talents and dreams. **The future of education in India isn't just about doing well academically, it's about empowering kids to follow their passions, express themselves freely, and create their own paths to success. And that journey is definitely worth talking about.**



Laapataa Ladies Shines Bright

This Kiran Rao directed film is a must-watch for its engaging storyline, brilliant performances, and important social message, says SAKSHI PRIYA

Laapataa Ladies, is a perfect blend of humour, social commentary and a heartwarming storytelling. Marking Kiran Rao's return to the director's chair after several years, the film is a delightful surprise that resonates with the audiences. The original story by Biplab Goswami, screenplay and dialogues by Sneha Desai, along with additional dialogues by Divyanidhi Sharma contribute to the film's cohesive and engaging narrative. The film boasts a talented cast with Pratibha Ranta (Jaya), Nitanishi Goel (Phool Kumari), Sparsh Shrivastav (Deepak Kumar), Satendra Soni (Chhotu) and Chhaya Kadam (Manju Maai) along with the charismatic Ravi Kishan (Shyam Manohar). Each actor delivers a stellar performance, bringing their characters to life with finesse and authenticity.



The story unfolds with two young brides, Phool Kumari and Jaya, accidentally swapped during a train journey due to a veiled misunderstanding. As Phool's helpless husband, Deepak Kumar seeks help from a cop Shyam Manohar, a point when the journey of the perfect story begins. Kiran Rao's storytelling is exceptional, seamlessly weaving together elements of amusement, emotion and social commentary. The film's storyline is compelling, offering a message about the importance of women's empowerment and identity in society. Rao adeptly employs humour and the motif of veiled identity (*ghunghat*) to illuminate the pervasive influence of patriarchy within society. The dialogue is witty and the humorous scenes are executed with finesse, keeping the audience entertained throughout.

right as well." This powerful statement serves as a slap in the face of patriarchal norms, forcing viewers to confront the harsh reality of domestic violence disguised as love. Manju Maai doesn't stop there. Her wisdom shines through another impactful line: "Being happy on your own is the toughest thing, Phool, but once you've mastered it, no one can bother you." This resonates deeply, highlighting the importance of self-respect and the empowering freedom found in self-sufficiency. Pratibha Ranta and Nitanishi Goel shine in their roles, bringing depth and authenticity to their characters. Their fresh faces coupled with immense talent create magic on screen. Even actors with smaller screen time such as Satendra Soni as Chhotu, Durgesh Kumar as Dubeyji or Rachna Gupta as Deepak's sister-in-law deliver impactful performances showcasing the depth and richness of the film's ensemble cast.

One of the film's standout aspects is its emphasis on the importance of self-realisation and self-identity. Through the character's journeys, the audience is reminded that true happiness comes from within and that women are their own heroines. The film delivers this message with subtlety and grace, making it relatable to a wide audience. The performances in *Laapataa Ladies* are superb, with Ravi Kishan stealing the show with his impeccable comic timing. His portrayal of Shyam Manohar adds depth to the film with his acting leaving a lasting impression. Chhaya Kadam's portrayal of Manju Maai is undeniably impressive. She delivers her dialogues with a powerful mix of conviction, truth and humour. Particularly noteworthy is her line, "A man who loves you has the right to hit you and one day I exercised my

The film explores themes of identity, self-discovery and empowerment. It highlights the strength and resilience of women showcasing how they navigate through societal expectations and find their voice in a male-dominated world. *Laapataa Ladies* is a must-watch for its engaging storyline, brilliant performances, and important social message. Kiran Rao has once again proved her directorial prowess, creating a film that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. While viewers need to exercise patience as the film unfolds at a somewhat slow pace, this deliberate pacing contributes to the movie's beauty and its ability to make a significant impact on the audience. Despite its leisurely pace, the film's narrative depth and emotional resonance make it a worthwhile and memorable cinematic experience.

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PRINTMAKING

An exhibition showcasing the past five decades of printmaking through the works of works of five acclaimed artists, highlights the profound impact and continued relevance of the medium in today's art world, says SAKSHI PRIYA

The art world is a vast canvas, painted with vibrant strokes of creativity and innovation. Within this canvas, printmaking stands as a unique art form offering artists a medium to express their thoughts, emotions and perspectives in a distinct and appealing manner. Unlike painting or sculpture, where the final image is visible throughout the creative process, printmaking is a journey of revelation. The true image remains unseen until the very last stages adding an element of anticipation and surprise that makes printmaking so captivating. The exhibition, *Rupantar Panch Dashak: Five Decades of Printmaking*, delves into this alluring world of inked narratives. The preview of the exhibition was held at the Visual Art Gallery. Curated by Alka Pande, this exhibition is not merely a showcase of exquisite artwork; it is a celebration of printmaking's enduring legacy and its transformative power. Organised by Members of Multiple Encounters, the exhibition brings together the talents of five renowned printmakers: Anandamoy Banerjee, Kavita Nayar, Moti Zharotia, Dattatreya Apte, and Sushanta Guha. Each artist, a master in his or her own right, explores the art of printmaking as a tool of personal expression, transforming the medium into a canvas for their unique visions. The show promises to be a celebration of exceptional talent, presenting various printmaking styles and expressions. The exhibition's title, '*Rupantar*', perfectly encapsulates the essence of printmaking signifying the transformative journey of an artist's work over five decades, highlighting the evolution and innovation inherent in their creations. Beyond the individual narratives, '*Rupantar*' also offers a glimpse into the broader landscape of printmaking in India, showcasing its diversity, depth, and enduring relevance in the contemporary art scene. Anandamoy Banerjee, a recipient of prestigious awards like the AIFACS annual

best exhibition award, views printmaking as a reflection of his life experiences, dreams and artistic journey. His work, a blend of drawing, painting, prints and experimental pieces tells a story with each creation. Abstract and introspective, his works often present a colourful combination of human forms intertwined with abstraction. Dattatreya Apte, a founding member of the Indian Printmakers Guild draws inspiration from the world around him, the "reflections" and "impressions" that linger on surfaces. His prints whether painted, printed or physically cast, are a testament to his fascination with the art form's complex nature. Each piece showcases the evolution of his concept from an idea to the final artwork. Kavita Nayar's art reflects a deep personal journey, likened to the process of giving birth. Her focus on nature, particularly flowers symbolises life's cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Nayar's prints span five decades with works in oil pastels on paper and board. She also creates an installation with prints showcasing her diverse artistic expression. Moti Zharotia, an artist with a visionary approach, uses printmaking to delve into the essence of life. His silkscreen prints beautifully blend masculine and feminine energies, as seen in his theme *Purusha & Prakriti*. In his wider collection, 'Impressions on Impression,' Zharotia symbolises the harmonious interplay of life's core forces. His work not only showcases the harmony between humans and nature but also highlights their interconnectedness creating a profound sense of balance and unity. Sushanta Guha, known for his socially conscious art uses printmaking as a tool to address pressing issues affecting humanity. His work vividly contrasts the rapid urbanisation seen in modern development with the simultaneous decline of human values, leading to increased individual suffering and identity crises. Through his impactful woodblock prints and



lithographs, Guha urges viewers to contemplate the complexities of the contemporary world. His art serves as a poignant reflection of societal challenges particularly highlighting issues like violence and religious extremism. Alka Pande, the curator, describes *Rupantar* as an enlightening experience. Witnessing the development and transformation in the artist's practices over five decades offers invaluable insights for aspiring artists. Beyond showcasing finished works the exhibition sheds light on the "art of making" itself from the technical aspects of printmaking to the final artistic expression. *Rupantar* also bridges the gap between traditional printmaking and contemporary artistic practices. It

highlights how younger artists who may not specialise solely in printmaking, incorporate various printmaking styles into their mixed media creations. The art world is a diverse and dynamic realm offering a medium through which artists can express their creativity. Among these, printmaking stands out as a unique and fascinating art form with a rich history and enduring appeal. Printmaking is the art of creating images by transferring them from a matrix or plate onto paper or another surface. This process allows for the production of multiple copies of an artwork making it an accessible and versatile medium for artists to explore and experiment with. Ultimately, *Rupantar Panch Dashak: Five Decades of Printmaking*, is a multifaceted celebration. It celebrates the artistry and dedication of five master printmakers while also elevating the art form itself. It highlights the intricate techniques and rich history of printmaking while acknowledging its contemporary relevance. *Rupantar* invites viewers to delve deeper into the world of art and appreciate the story's work into every mark on the paper. This exhibition serves as a powerful reminder that printmaking is not merely a means of reproducing images; it's a dynamic and versatile art form capable of sparking introspection, igniting social commentary and revealing the intricate beauty of the artistic process itself. The exhibition leaves behind a legacy of artistic excellence and imaginative exploration. It is not only a celebration of the talent but also highlights the importance of printmaking in the art world. It has shown us that printmaking is not just a technique; it is a form of expression that can convey deep emotions, tell compelling stories and provoke thought and reflection. Let us recognise the significance of printmaking in preserving cultural heritage, promoting artistic innovation and enriching our lives with beauty and meaning.

Brett Lee bats for Australian Avocados

BY GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Avocados Australia recently launched in the Indian market with Cricket Legend Brett Lee as its brand ambassador. Soon Australian avocados would be available in India. The Australian exporters are upbeat about the Indian market as they feel it is the place where they would have first mover advantage and would be able to appeal to Indian consumers with their superior quality. Avocados are to the West what mangoes are to Indians. Avocados, often hailed as a superfood, are not just delicious but also incredibly nutritious. Native to Central America, these green fruits are packed with healthy fats, fibre, vitamins, and minerals. They're particularly rich in monounsaturated fats, which are beneficial for heart health. Avocados are incredibly versatile and can be enjoyed in various forms: sliced on toast, mashed into guacamole, blended into smoothies, or even used as a substitute for butter in baking. In fact, Brett Lee was seen making a few of avocado recipes by himself. As he put it "for an athlete nothing better than having avocados for energy and



nutrition, just slice it and with a dash of lemon and salt and you have an excellent healthy snack." Their creamy texture adds depth to dishes while providing a host of health benefits. Beyond their nutritional value, avocados are also environmentally friendly. They require less water to grow compared to other fruits and can thrive in diverse climates. Avocados Australia Limited, representing the Australian avocado industry, has officially entered the Indian market, unveiling cricket icon Brett Lee as their esteemed brand ambassador. This collaboration signals a significant milestone for both Australian avocados and the burgeoning Indian fresh fruit market. Renowned for their

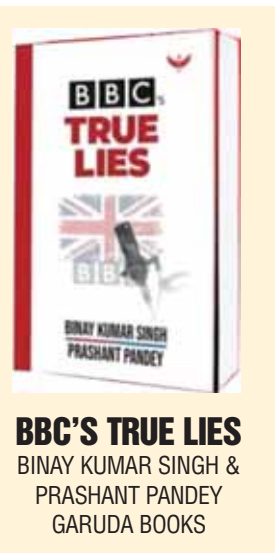
superior quality and health benefits, Australian avocados promise to tantalise Indian taste buds with a fusion of flavour, texture, and nutrition. With Brett Lee lending his endorsement, this launch aims to introduce a premium and healthy option to Indian households, advocating for the incorporation of avocados into daily meals and snacks. The avocado market in India is experiencing a notable uptick, mirroring a global trend of increased demand over the past decade. Avocados are hailed as a nutritious addition to all diets, particularly suiting vegetarian preferences. Australia's avocado industry is also on the rise, with production forecasted to surge from over 115,385 tonnes in 2022-23 to approximately 170,000 tonnes by 2026. Aligned with this growth trajectory, Australian growers are actively pursuing new overseas markets, including India, with increased exports crucial for the industry's long-term sustainability. So the next time you're craving something tasty and nutritious, consider reaching for an avocado - it's not just a delicious fruit but also a powerhouse of nutrients!

The real face of BBC's news coverage

BBC's *True Lies* is a signboard cautioning the common man about the dangerous acts perpetrated by the British Government owned media network, writes KUMAR CHELLPPAN.

There are enough laws in the Indian Penal Code to punish those involved in impersonation and cheating. Reports about fake physicians, engineers and lawyers getting caught and sent to prison are routine affairs in India. There are rules in the statute books to punish those engaged in food adulteration and marketing. There was an incident involving the Chennai Police arresting a Class VIII dropout by the name 'Professor Ravi Kumar Reddy' in 2015 who has been teaching advanced power systems at Saveetha College of Engineering for nearly three years. His colleagues and students never got a chance to doubt his credibility till one of the professors came across the real Prof Ravi Reddy who had been teaching at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. The Chennai 'Professor' turned out to be Ashok Kumar Choudhury from Guntur who was blessed with a photographic memory. We have legislations and provisions in the IPC to book such impersonators. Unfortunately, we do not have laws to prosecute fake journalists, the driving force behind media which is being flouted as the Fourth Estate of democracy. As on date most of the media and journalists act as propagandists while the line demarcating news and views have almost disappeared. There was a time when the English-speaking population

of Chennai woke up to their bed *Kaappee* and the morning newspaper which was known by the name *Mount Road Mahavishnu*. Not anymore. The moment readers understood that this *Mahavishnu* is feeding them fake and distorted news, they dumped the daily once and for ever. But the paper still survives because the minority community and Marxists believe only what is published in this newspaper. The story of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC World) is no different. The media house launched to disseminate to the world His Majesty's Voice (HMV) and counter the media blitzkrieg by Germany during the Second World War has degenerated into a fake news manufacturing plant. The last few decades of BBC's coverage of Asia and Africa speak volumes about its real intentions. The BBC is no more disseminating truths but specialises in spreading falsehood. There is a phrase which we regularly use; "*Suppressio Veri, Suggestio Falsi*" which means that suppression of truth is equivalent to suggestion of what is false. One need not elaborate on this as the term is self-explanatory. It may have a lot to do with the kind of statecraft and diplomacy being followed by the BBC. Author Binay Kumar Singh and columnist and Prashant Pandey, a seasoned journalist,



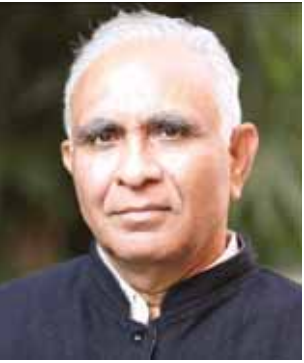
have come out with BBC's *True Lies*, a book which deals with the purpose for which the radio channel was launched, and its modus operandi. While in college, our teachers used to tell us to listen to BBC Radio news so that it would help us improve our English pronunciation. But I found the All India Radio's English news bulletins immortalised by the legendary Surjit Sen, always stand out. The day I started listening to the bulletins aired by the BBC, I could make out the distinct discrimination the channel had towards India. For the BBC editors, India was an uncivilized country of people believing in superstition and sorcery.

Although the Government of Britain claimed that they do not have any prejudice against India, the reality is quite the opposite. The authors explain how the BBC portrayed India taking over Goa as an armed attack on Portugal, a blatant case of misinterpretation of facts by the news channel. During 2023, student unions in Kerala were vying with each other in exhibiting the documentary film on Gujarat produced and aired by the BBC. The SFI students who always shunned the BJP were in the forefront of this campaign and made arrangements in campuses so that the gullible students could be fooled. Most of the viewers who sat throughout the documentary were in the dark about the facts that led to the riots. They were also ignorant about the Supreme Court verdict or the findings of the Special Investigation Team that interrogated Narendra Modi, the then chief minister of Gujarat for 19 hours. The BBC was rehashing and churning out charges levelled against Modi by TV journalists who had personal scores to settle with him. The most important thing to be borne in mind is that for the BBC, *jihadis* become terrorists only when they hurt British interests. All other *jihadis* are mere gunmen or liberators fighting against countries which Britain does not like. During the Cold War, Britain and the US had similar

criteria in identifying heads of nations. Those heading Communist/socialist/dictatorial regimes opposed to the then Soviet Union were friends of the US and UK. The best example was General Zia-ul-Haq, the Pakistani despot who perpetrated terrorist acts against India. There were many Latin American heads of nations for whom democracy was an alien word and who always were considered as friends of US and UK. The real face of BBC's news coverage came out in the open during the last 1970s when OP Tyagi introduced in Parliament a legislation named the Freedom of Religion Bill. The BBC started sounding alarm bells in its bulletins claiming that all religions other than Hinduism were in danger in India! Of late, there were allegations from various Hindutva forces that BBC was into religious conversion in a big way. It is for the BBC to prove that their hands are clean. Authors Binay Kumar and Prashant need to be appreciated for bringing out this book packed with explosive information. Since public memory is short, they are likely to forget what the media airs/publishes once they listen or read the contents. *BBC's True Lies* is a signboard cautioning the common man about the dangerous acts perpetrated by the British Government owned media network.

THE ENIGMATIC WORLD OF LEOPARDS

Leopards are the only large cat species with a widespread presence across the country, its conservation status and population dynamics serve as a barometer for the health of India's ecosystems



H S SINGH

The Indian leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*), a sub-species of leopard out of nine sub-species of leopard in the world, is found throughout India from Jammu & Kashmir in the North-West Himalayas to Cape Comorin in the south and, from the Gir forest (Saurashtra) and thorn forest in the arid zone (Kachchh) in the extreme west to the moist forest of Myanmar in the east. Although the majority of them, about 95 per cent are confined to India, its small populations, about 5%, are also found in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, east of the Indus River in Pakistan and a small area of southern China adjoining Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. Out of eight subspecies of leopards in Asia, except the Indian leopard, none of the other subspecies of leopards in Asia, have a population above a thousand, and few of them such as the Amur leopard, and Arabian leopards are Critically Endangered. Only two sub-species, the African leopard and the Indian leopard still have viable populations and distribution ranges.

POPULATION STATUS

Hunting records and British Gazetteers reveal that India had a large population of leopards before the Second World War. It is stated in the publications that about 150,000 leopards were hunted during a span of 50 years (1875-1925). Perhaps, the leopard population was in the range of nearly one lakh hundred years ago. The population drastically declined and reached to lowest level in the 1960s when about 6000 to 7000 individual leopards were estimated in the Indian jungle by the famous naturalist E P Gee (1964).

Protection and conservation measures by creating a network of Protected Areas and enacting laws have contributed to the leopard's recovery but the scale of poaching two decades ago slowed the recovery rate. When the scale of poaching declined, the population consistently increased in all leopard habitats, except Naxalite-affected states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Telangana, Odisha and part of Maharashtra, and states in the North East of India.

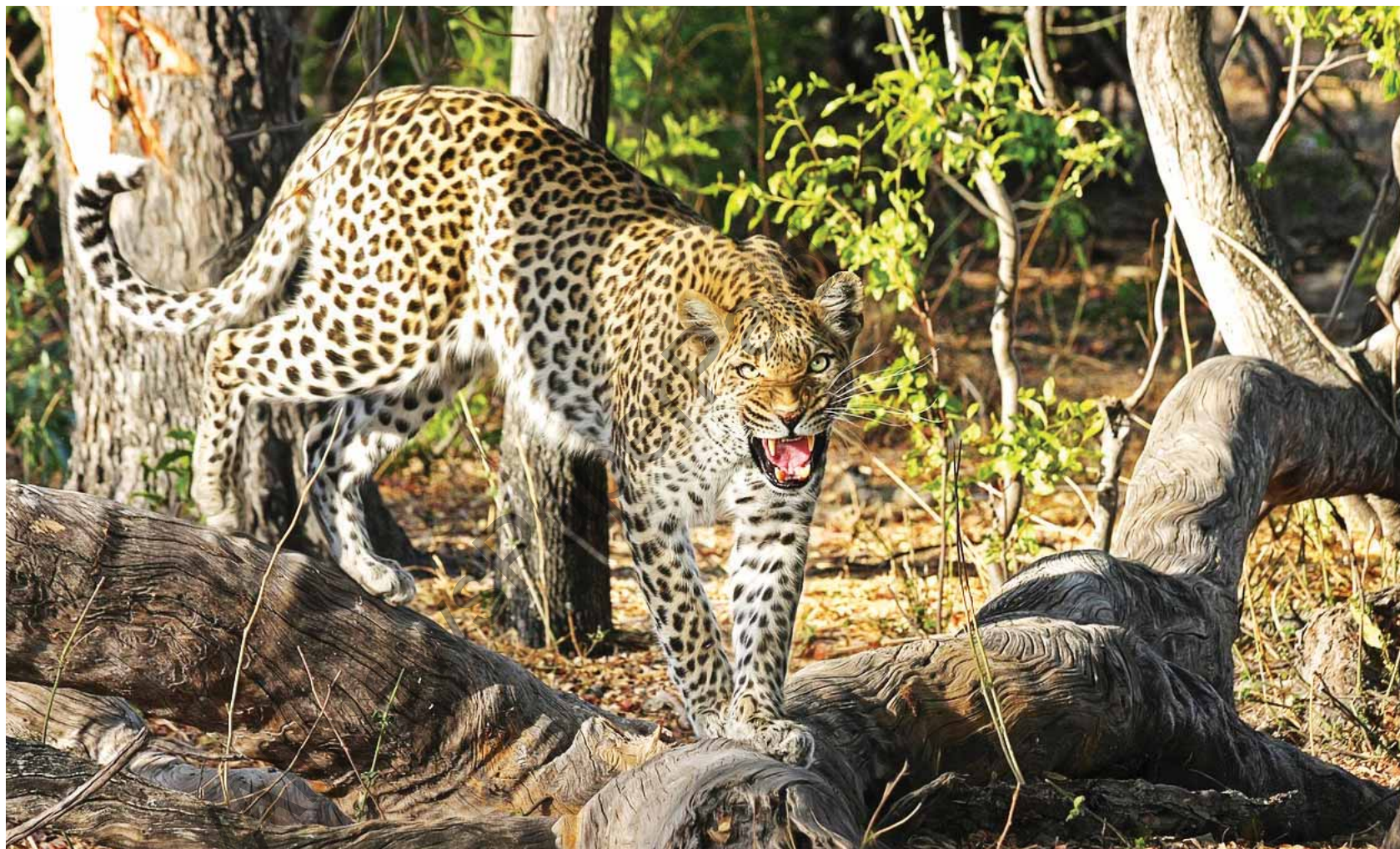
As per the report on the Status of the Leopard in India (2022), the overall leopard population in the tiger range landscape in 18 states of India was estimated at 13,870 subadult and adult leopards. In the tiger states also, the leopard-dominated area in Uttarakhand, major parts of North-East India and some other minor leopard habitats in those states were not covered in the survey. The Indian leopard occurs in 30 states and Union Territories whereas the population estimate in 2022 was only for major parts of 18 states.

Thus, the population declared in the leopard's report is only for two-thirds of the leopard distribution range, not for the entire India. Using data, as mentioned in the status report of leopard for leopard population in India by media and scientific communities is not correct. Major leopard states such as Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana and major parts of Uttarakhand and North-East states are not covered in this report.

After accounting for all habitats, the leopard population was over 8,650 in the Central India Landscape covering eight states. The second major population block supporting over 4,600 leopards in northern India: the Himalayas-Shivalik (Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal, Uttarakhand, terai belt of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and the northern plains). The third major population block supporting about 3,600 leopards is the Western Ghats (Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala).

The North-East and Brahmaputra plains have extensive forests but moderate to poor wildlife, including the Indian leopard and a total number of smart cats may be in the range of about 1,000-1,100 leopards. Gujarat Forest Department counted 2,274 leopards in the state in 2023.

Arid and semi-arid zones comprising Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat State, Dadara-Nagar Haveli and the Western Aravallis in Rajasthan support about 2,500-2,600 leopards. Additionally, leopards are also found in small patches of forests, tea gardens, sugarcane fields, ravine areas and other such lands that are not surveyed.



Man-eater leopards

Stories of man-eating leopards and hunting of innocent ones in search of punishing the culprit have been repeated over centuries. During Jim Corbett's time also, hunters killed several innocent leopards while targeting a man-eater. Like criminals in human society, the man-eating leopard always harmed innocent leopards. When two man-eaters killed one and a half dozen people in Dhanpur taluka in Dahod district in Gujarat in 2003, the authority punished innocent leopards by eliminating 14 of them from the area. When three children were killed between Talala and Veraval in Junagadh in February 2003, a total of 11 leopards were punished by removing them from the wild.

When one or two leopards killed five people in Mandavi taluka in Surat districts in the post-monsoon and early winter in 2010, the situation compelled the Forest Department to engage several trap cages in the area. While hunting and trapping the man-eater, about two dozen leopards, including cubs were eliminated from the six villages in three months. When a leopard killed five people in Veraval in Junagadh in March 2012, a total of nine leopards were trapped and removed from the area. Similarly, when a leopard killed eight people in Visavadar and the surrounding area, about one and a half dozen leopards were captured and removed from the area in the year 2019. When leopards caused the death of human beings in the sugarcane belt in the fringe of Gir forests, over two dozen leopards were caged in 2023.

The situation in Uttarakhand was not different. There were cases when people retaliated and eliminated a large number of leopards in Uttarakhand, unnoticed by the department when the leopards killed human beings. When people were killed in Borivali National Park near Mumbai by one or two man-eaters, a total of 37 leopards were removed from the park in three years. In Ahmednagar division in Maharashtra, a total of 57 leopards were captured during 2001-05

RANGE OF LEOPARD'S HABITAT

The occupancy area of leopards in the forests is over 320,000 sq. km. Leopards also occupy sugar-cane fields, tea gardens and other such vegetation cover. About one-fourth of the leopard's habitat overlaps with habitats of super cats - tiger and lion where leopards manage to survive under the persecution of the

supreme cats. Seven states - Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh support about two-thirds of the total leopard population. These states are rich in livestock, especially sheep, goats and dogs. As per the Forest Survey of India Report (2021), the extent of forest cover is 713,790 sq.

km. in India. Of this, 684,000 sq. km. is in the states and Union Territories which support leopards. One-third of the forest cover in the leopard's states may not be suitable for leopards. Thus, potential leopard habitats may range over 450,000 sq. km. of forest cover to accommodate the growing population in the present occupancy areas of the leopards. How many leopards or tigers or Asiatic lions can be managed in the Indian forests is a million-dollar question. The big cats are on the path of recovery (about 700 lions, 3,680 tigers and over 20,600 leopards at present) in India but the dispersing big cats do not find proper habitats due to their fragmentations and absence of prey base. There is scope to accommodate the growing population of leopards in the forests which are devoid of leopards and wild ungulates, if herbivores are restocked by taking up long-term habitat restoration works.

HUMAN-LEOPARD CONFLICTS

Only about 35 per cent of the leopard population is found within national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and the rest were counted beyond the Protected Areas' boundaries. Leopards are also found in good numbers in extended habitats such as sugarcane fields, tea gardens, ravines, Prosopis thickets and other such non-forest areas. There are about three dozen Protected Areas or sites in the country where leopard density is high, over 10 adult and subadult leopards per 100 sq. km. and a few of them have very high concentrations, about 20 leopards or more per 100 sq. km. Dhanpur forests in Dahod district, Jambughoda forest in Godhra, sugar-cane belt in Mandvi taluka in Surat, some fringe areas around the forests of Gir and Girnar in Gujarat; Sanjay Gandhi National Park near Mumbai, some sites in the districts of Nashik, Ahmednagar and Gunnar in Maharashtra; Rajaji National Park, some areas in Pauri Garhwal, Teri Garhwal and Almora districts in Uttarakhand; Katarnighat forests in Uttar Pradesh and Kuno and Panna National Park in Madhya Pradesh, Sariska Tiger Reserve and a forest block adjoining Jaipur in Rajasthan; the Western Dooars in West Bengal and some open forest mosaics of central Karnataka have such high leopard concentration and human-leopard conflicts.

Population management in the conflict areas is one of the key management strategies to avoid human casualties and, if it is not done, public unrest may start in a big way against conservation. High leopard density normally results in the depletion of prey and frequent leopard attacks in the villages, leading to the eruption of anger and public agitation. Since the leopard population has doubled in India during the last two and half decades and it is now no longer Endangered or Vulnerable, there should

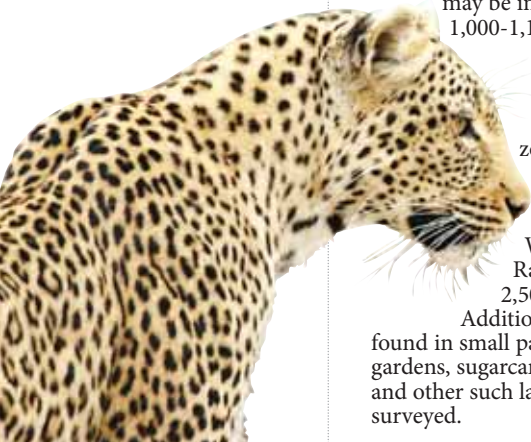
not be any hesitation to remove problem animals from such areas, if the attack on human beings persists. In no case, density should be allowed to exceed 25 adult leopards per 100 sq. km., as serious conflict is unavoidable in such high-concentration sites.

The human death rate in India due to leopard attacks was 400-410 people/year during the first decade of the 20th century (The Indian Forester Jan 1907). It declined drastically after the Independence of the country. Annually, about 95 to 100 human beings were killed by leopards during the first decade of the 21st century. Subsequently, human casualties increased consistently during the last decade due to the leopard's recovery and its dispersion in new areas, including villages and towns. In Uttarakhand, 565 human - beings were killed at an average rate of 22 human deaths/year by leopards since the creation of the state.

During the last few years, the average human death rate was 18 human deaths/year in Maharashtra. Annual death rate was 13 human deaths/year in Gujarat during the last five years. The scale of human deaths in Madhya Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, West Bengal, Himachal, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Karnataka is also close to the same range. Thus, annually, over a hundred people are killed and thousands injured by leopard attacks. If population management policy is not placed into operation, the human death rate due to leopard attacks may reach to the level that prevailed a hundred years ago. Since human-leopard conflicts are scaling up with the increase of the leopard population in many states, the management of dispersing leopards in villages and cities and increasing human-leopard conflicts are major management challenges.

The frequency of occurrence of leopard attacks on humans over a specific period should be mapped for the identification of conflict hot spots. The management should establish a Rapid Response Task Team with equipment and infrastructure to attend to cases without delay. A Rapid Response Team with the necessary equipment should be placed into operation in high man-leopard conflict sites. Tranquilizer gun, flashlights (to each member); first-aid Kits (one large kit to each team); mobile phones (to each member); reflector jackets (to each member); baffle shields and batons (to each member); public announcement system (one to each team); pamphlets and posters on 'Do's and Don'ts During Conflict Situations' (one set to each team) along with equipment as mentioned for RRT should be provided. Police Force should be integrated with the Task Force in high-conflict situations.

(Dr H S Singh is a Member of the National Board for Wild Life, Gandhinagar; views are personal)



REFLECTIONS

CHANDIGARH | 19 MAY 2024

Oh, those poor IPL billionaires

GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

MONEY talks — and obscene amounts of money spout, well, very impolite and rude talk. KL Rahul, India cricketer, may be hero to a billion, but to his IPL team owner, he's a minion, even if — and perhaps especially because — he makes ₹17 crore from them annually; he must perform to justify his large salary.

Rahul captains Lucknow Super Giants (LSG), who suffered three defeats in a row and are teetering on the edge. After a particularly humiliating defeat, by 10 wickets, to Sunrisers Hyderabad, team owner Sanjiv Goenka, visibly enraged, was seen having some very stern words with Rahul. A businessman being angry following a night of ignominy — in business parlance, a zero sale day — is not unheard of. It was a zero sale day for LSG, who subsided to 165/4 in 20 overs and then conceded 166 in merely 9.4. Rahul's contribution was an extremely unpurposeful 29 off 31 balls.

The man is capable of smashing 50 off just 14 balls — indeed, he did just that six years ago; how could he, then, be so tortoise-like in a T20 game? Then again, you could well ask: 'How could Bradman be out for 0 in his last innings?'

In the answer to these questions lies the beauty of sport — unpredictability, unrepeatability is sport's essence. T20 cricket — Cricket Lite, in which professionals play the way amateurs do — is often likened with WWE entertainment. But the comparison

has no basis, for even Cricket Lite is sport while WWE is scripted antics with great athleticism — impressive, but unreal, false.

The brevity of a T20 contest makes it very, very competitive — contests often turn into last-over or penultimate-over shootouts. In T20s, Afghanistan can upset West Indies, Zimbabwe can trump Pakistan and Australia, Ireland can dump England — even amateurs from Hong Kong can beat Bangladesh! Such results would be unthinkable in five-day cricket.

The corporate world's salary-performance paradigm — imperative, even — can't work in sport. Team owners must realise this. Sport is business, but playing sport isn't engaging in business — in it, your competitor is physically trying to prevent you from doing what you've set out to do; this doesn't happen in business.

In 2008, during the first IPL, another Rahul — former India captain, no less! — was publicly harangued by his IPL team's owner, who happened to be an enthusiastic inexpert of cricket, Vijay Mallya. Rahul Dravid's team, Royal Challengers Bangalore, hadn't been doing well. After a bad evening, Mallya was photographed with his arm around Dravid's shoulders, explaining, perhaps, some intricacies of the sport to his team's captain. Dravid bore a shell-shocked expression, almost as if he'd seen a ghost.

After sacking the team CEO, Mallya said: "At the end of the day, people need to understand that the IPL has a corporate side to it, and a very definitive corporate side. It is not at all cricket in the traditional sense." That's correct, but what Mallya failed to understand is that because it's not traditional cricket, he must not expect the certitude of traditional results from it — the better team will not always win a T20 contest.

On the Goenka haranguing — 'robust discussion', in the words of coach Lance Klusener — of KL Rahul, Virender Sehwag offered wise counsel: businessmen must let cricketers

be. "These are all businessmen. They only understand profit and loss," Sehwag said. "But here (IPL), there is no loss, so what's bothering them? You are earning ₹400-crore profit. I mean, this is a business where you (team owners) have to do nothing at all. You have guys to take care of that. And irrespective of what happens, you are earning profit!"

In early 2009, this writer tried to persuade Mallya that T20 cricket is akin to a lottery — the margin of victory or defeat is wafer-thin, and it often boils down to luck. Mallya, though, wasn't willing to be convinced. With big money comes big ego, too — having spent hundreds of crores in buying a franchise and creating a team, who wishes to accept that it's a game of chance?

Cricketers, though, know full well that Test cricket is the toughest format of the sport. It's Test performances they really value. Sourav Ganguly, former captain, said last November: "If you play more T20 cricket, you will remain mediocre. I always say 'play T20s, make money from T20s', but if you want to be a player, you have to play four-day, five-day cricket."

Dale Steyn, South African pace great, said after IPL 2008: "The IPL was only four overs a game and it was like a paid holiday. You only had to work if you felt like it, which is probably why we finished second last."

But if you're making a few crores for bowling four overs in a few games, you would be an idiot if you admit it. Steyn later did say he had been an idiot: "I was trying to be funny and ended up being stupid — I was an idiot."

The IPL's real value lies in the fact that rubbing shoulders with the world's best cricketers gives even greenhorns courage and conviction; and it has given money and fame to cricketers who would have otherwise remained anonymous, playing in empty stadiums all their life. But it must never be forgotten — by both Rahul and others — that the one who makes you fabulously rich will also own a part of you and won't be shy to show that.

Difficult to digest how things fall apart



RAAJA BHASIN

MY parents were of the generation that survived Partition. Much of my mother's family had been killed and my father came away with a gunshot wound to his leg. This was the moment that was to substantially define the rest of their lives. Years of work, hopes and plans were gone; as were their homes and many of their friends and family. For the moment, there was nothing or next to nothing to fall back upon. Slowly, like thousands of others, they made new lives in places and situations that could not have been imagined even a few weeks earlier. Expectedly, some of that trauma was to spill over in various ways through the rest of their lives and to the generations that followed.

After Partition, my parents chose to become teachers. There were motives for this, but let's leave that for another time. My father taught physics and my mother, Hindi. I was no good at either — though, funnily enough, for the brief period that I studied Sanskrit, I was rather good at it and there was a time that I hoped to read originals in that language. While physics lay abandoned at the first available opportunity, Hindi, expectedly, continued. Perhaps, as some sort of atonement for my abject failure as the school's only student of 'Higher Hindi', one used and mostly spoke in the language.

Then, one went to college and stayed in the hostel. There, most of us lived as little islands. The Punjabis from Punjab stuck together. The Punjabis from elsewhere, also stuck together. The Himachalis and the Haryanvis made friends with both and then retreated into themselves. There were no 'whites' in our college and the foreigners were Iranians, Nepalese, Afghans, Mauritian and Fijians. Some liked each other and some did not. So, here, we had our stereotypes that were ready and raring to go.

It was an unusual ice-breaker that got one into a conversation with the Nepalese and then, with the Iranians. Sitting in the mess, eating the standard fare of *rajmah-chawal*, one of the Nepalese boys remarked that of the 'city-Indians', I was the only one who spoke in Hindi and all others, even while conversing among themselves, talked in English. "So," he asked, "have you come to this college to learn English?" For that moment, I was stumped. Maybe mine was a mere 'street version' of Hindi, but that was the language I knew before I learnt English.

Across the steel bowls of *rajmah-chawal*, the Iranians, sitting opposite, became animated and said that they only knew Farsi before they came to India and were now quite fluent in English — and had even learnt some phrases in Punjabi. For reasons, after that last bit, they went into peals of

laughter. Two of the Iranians, Hassan and Ismael, had adjoining rooms opposite mine and over the next few months, we became fairly friendly. Both of them were somewhat older than the rest of us. From what one vaguely remembers after all these years, one of them may have been married. Apart from the teenage banter with someone even slightly older, in our conversations, one gathered that both were ambitious and quite idealistic. They wanted not only a good life for themselves, but also a good country back home.

This was the time when the revolution in Iran was on the cusp. Here, in Chandigarh of the late 1970s, the best of friends Hassan and Ismael fell out. One supported the revolution and the other was a communist. Now, one watched them ignore each other as they passed in the corridor.

Once the best of friends, the two Iranians in a Chandigarh college fell out over political developments back home

Apart from the rare times that they ate in the mess with the rest of us, the Iranians had their own place going. They had taken a house on rent and ran a kitchen too. The political situation in their country led to a spillover and their one-time joint mess also split into two. Now, as the numbers were also not enough to sustain both kitchens, they started looking for support elsewhere.

I and a couple of others were invited for a meal. And what a meal it was. Perfectly done mutton with *naan* and if that was not enough, there was a slab of butter to slather the *naan*. This was followed by a rich rice pudding full of pistachios and almonds. In a couple of days, we received an invitation to the other mess.

Living in a hostel, the stomach got the better of conscience and off we trooped to another fine meal. The menu and the quality of food in both was similar and, in a word, 'excellent'. Food apart, the atmosphere in both was tense and what conversation there was, remained guarded. One mess had huge portraits of their leaders and the other, had theirs.

Then came the crux. An invitation came to join one mess. Hot on the heels of that, came another invite to join the other, and now the rival, mess. The matter was settled quite easily — given our limited allowance, we could not afford either. Back to good old *rajmah-chawal* we went.

It seems to be one of those quirks of human nature that, often enough, when the closest of friends become estranged, they become the bitterest of enemies. We later heard that both Hassan and Ismael, one-time friends, were dead — one fighting for the revolution, the other against.

What Surjit Patar means to me



RAJESH SHARMA

to respond to the farmers' movement. He was diving into agitated waters and had to reach the hard rock of clear understanding. This was not possible without bringing an epic poet's many-sided, far-seeing vision to bear on the situation. The writings that followed showed the movement as a moment of civilisational crisis.

Indeed, Patar would not stoop to paint on a canvas less than epic. His poetry is elemental and cosmic even when it is meant to light a lamp to show a neglected little corner of someone's small, circumscribed world. After all, as he often said, his inspiration came from the greatest. And he not only lived tradition, but also reanimated it with his own breath. The poet in him cannot be isolated from the vast-minded reader; the transcreating translator, the introspective man, the literary critic, the thinker and the heart-warming conversationalist that he also was.

Folk songs, in a changed form, supplied the fuel that propelled some of his political poems. His early engagements with Sartre and Camus and with myth made him wonder, at the end of his rendering of Racine's 'Phaedra', if our very choices are fated.

Poet in him can't be isolated from the vast-minded reader, the transcreating translator, the thinker, the heart-warming conversationalist

He pondered all his life on the mysteries of the creative process. A poem arrived in a kind of inner quivering, he would say. This reminds you of the initiatory *spandan*, as Shaktivism terms it, of creation. The name and the form appear and dissolve on the seeming surface of an endless flux, he wrote in a poem. The deepest insights of Buddhism blossomed effortlessly in his consciousness.

Yes, he was a gifted poet: among his finest poems are those he wrote as a university student. But he ceaselessly worked on his gift. In this, his talent had the luck to be cradled by several fervent, luminous minds in Patiala and Jalandhar. Sohan Singh Mishra once told him to read a lot of books and not waste time in coffee houses in the company of mediocre versifiers.

So, he read widely and deep. He was reading Leonard Cohen's poetry and songs when we met in March. He told the audience that Cohen sometimes revised a text a hundred times. He often invoked Greek drama, Shakespeare, French literature, Persian poetry, Sanskrit poetics, Octavio Paz, Brecht, and others. He drew no self-protective boundaries, for he was centred in himself, thanks to the light that fed his spirit: the light from the Gurus, the Bhaktas, and Wari. It gave him the courage to say that Racine's 'Phaedra' was far richer than Shiv's 'Looma'. Among the finest essays on music in Punjabi is an essay he wrote.

He worried about the future of Punjabi, but he didn't despair. He raged coolly, yet he signed off his essay on Puran Singh in words of fire. He was all too human, but transcendently so.

THE conversation that has been going on since Surjit Patar's death has focused on just a small part of him. It will take some time and much work to map his achievement and fathom its depths. No doubt he was the tallest Punjabi poet for decades, a position he used meaningfully to intervene in public discourse. His stature derived from an inimitable voice that many tried to imitate, but none could. One's voice is the soul of one's style, for it is the articulation of one's presence in the work. Patar was wholly present in his best work.

From which it follows that he must have worked as much on himself as on his work. Signs of insistent self-scrutiny appear often in his poetry when he addresses himself, as when he says:

Every poem you wrote has been sold
A deal made on your songs

Impressed by your soaring flight
They have sent this cage of gold

He carried an immense reservoir of patience, refusing to react on impulse. He took some time

Saying goodbye to the extraordinary Alice Munro



GJV PRASAD

IHAVE been writing in this column about birth anniversaries of writers, but sometimes you have to stop and talk about death and loss. The Nobel Prize winning Canadian writer Alice Munro passed away on May 13. She was 92 years old. Alice Munro was a 'Sultana of the Short Story' (we have had a few in our literatures as well), one who drew on her personal experiences and surroundings, and interviewers would often identify and ask her about the settings of her stories. Her stories, though often called "domestic stories", cover a whole range of emotions and relationships. It is almost as if she had decided when she began writing that she would find all her

material around her, in her family, in her environment. She made time to write amidst her household chores as she has said in many interviews.

Munro once said, "When the kids were little, my time was as soon as they left for school. So I worked very hard in those years. My husband and I owned a bookstore, and even when I was working there, I stayed at home until noon. I was supposed to be doing housework, and I would also do my writing then. Later on, when I wasn't working everyday in the store, I would write until everybody came home for lunch and then after they went back, probably till about two-thirty, and then I would have a quick cup of coffee and start doing the housework, trying to get it all done before late afternoon." (*The Paris Review*, 1994). Thus, the patronising headline in the *Vancouver Sun* (in 1961) that began an article about her after she had published her early stories — 'Housewife finds time to write short stories' — doesn't seem too off the mark!

She wrote during her pregnancies, she wrote whenever she could, but she wrote. Her first collection was published when she



Munro was a 'Sultana of the Short Story', one who drew on her personal experiences and surroundings

was in her mid-thirties, and contained stories written over 15 years. Her stories talk to us because they talk to her. After all, all the stories come from her life. One can say that Alice Munro wrote only one book, the book of her life. She writes about her Scottish ancestors, her parents, her relationship with them and their home, her own life. Set mostly in Ontario, Canada, in Huron county, Munro's work is like a historical and anthropological study of the place and the people, a dissection of her own life, and that of her contemporaries.

Supported by her husband, who gifted her a typewriter to encourage her writing, Alice Munro began her married life like other middle-class girls of the time, staying home while her then husband went out to work. As she writes in 'The Moons of Jupiter' (1978), the small-town life of the time was one of "wives yawning, napping, visiting, drinking coffee, and folding diapers; husbands coming home at night from the city across the water". In a damning line, she writes: "We had become a cartoon couple, more middle-aged in our twenties than we would be in middle age."

Books and writing became her life. The couple went on to open a bookshop. Her first book was published in fortuitous circumstances — she had been asked to submit some stories for an anthology that never got published, but she impressed the editor, who began to read all her published stories. The publishing house then asked her to write three more to make a book, and she made a mark immediately. 'Dance of the Happy Shades' (1968) won the Governor-General's Award, resulting in another collectible headline — 'Literary fame catches city mother unprepared'.

Alice Munro's stories are about ordinary people but her range is vast, mainly because even ordinary people live complicated lives, lives which she brings to us with such skill that you get to know each one of her characters intimately. Alice Munro gives us lives of desires and deceit. She does not hesitate to write about sexual peccadilloes. She was a complete short story writer. Always modest and insecure about her writing ability, Alice Munro felt surprised by attention even after she won the Nobel Prize in 2013.