

## Warming climate intensifies flash droughts worldwide

The Hindu Bureau

Sudden, severe dry spells known as flash droughts are rising in intensity around the world, with a notable exception in mountainous Central Asia, where flash drought extent is shrinking, according to new research. Heat and changes to precipitation patterns caused by a warming climate are driving these trends, the study

found. The new study is the first to apply a systematic, quantitative approach to the global incidence of flash drought, mapping hotspots and regions of rapid increases in recent decades.

### Tracking measures

Many parts of the world have witnessed flash droughts for a longer time, with faster onset speed. The study defined and

tracked three critical measures of drought severity: speed of onset, duration and geographic extent. It analyzed 40 years of NASA's MERRA-2 climate data, from 1980 to 2019, drawn from weather observations, satellite imagery and modeled root-zone soil moisture, with the aim of improving prediction and disaster preparedness. The study is published in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*.

search Letters.

South America, particularly southern Brazil and the Amazon is experiencing strong intensification in all three dimensions of flash drought, aligning with deforestation patterns in the region, high temperatures and less rain. Congo, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho, and Madagascar are also hotspots. High temperatures were found

to be more important than declining precipitation in the African watersheds.

Land cover is also important to flash drought vulnerability. Savanna and grasslands are more susceptible to flash droughts than other ecotypes, particularly in humid and semi-humid climates, the study found.

In Central Asian watersheds, centered on high mountains, including the

Himalaya Karakoram, Tianshan and Hindu Kush, flash drought extent shrank over the study period, bucking the worldwide trend. Climate-driven changes in precipitation, melting snowpack and a shift from snow to rain in the mountains have kept soils moist. These changes can cause an increase in flash floods, which have been observed in the region.

## SNAPSHOTS



### Antiviral neutralises many coronaviruses in mice

An experimental antiviral drug has broad antiviral potency and can combat an array of epidemic and zoonotic coronaviruses in mice, including SARS-CoV-2 and MERS-CoV. Testing the drug obeldesivir against a range of coronaviruses in culture, the scientists found it could inhibit MERS-CoV, various alphacoronaviruses that cause the common cold, and the Omicron BA.1 subvariant. It also dampened viral replication and mitigated lung injury in mice infected with the Omicron variant, MERS-CoV, or SARS-CoV

# BHU's Covaxin safety study riddled with major limitations

If the most glaring limitation of the study is the lack of a control group, the absence of data on background rates of adverse events that have been assessed in the vaccinated participants makes it difficult to link the adverse events to vaccination

R. Prasad

An observational study carried out by researchers from the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, to assess the safety of Covaxin, particularly the long-term adverse events of special interest (AESIs) one year after vaccination, in adolescents and adults has been criticised by ICMR for the poor study design. However, till date, neither ICMR nor Bharat Biotech has published any Covaxin safety data after the drug regulator approved its roll-out in January 2021 in a "clinical trial mode" and wanted the vaccine recipients to be followed up for safety.

Though the researchers acknowledge all the limitations of the study, which is published in the journal *Drug Safety*, many of the limitations are so critical that they defeat the very purpose of the study. "Ideally, this paper should have been rejected at the peer-review stage. Simply mentioning the limitations, some of them critical to arrive at any useful conclusion, defeats the whole purpose of undertaking the study," Dr. Vipin M. Vashishtha, director and pediatrician, Mangla Hospital and Research Center, Bijnor, says in an email to *The Hindu*. Dr. Gautam Menon, Dean (Research) & Professor, Departments of Physics and Biology, Ashoka University shares the same view. Given the limitations of the study one can "certainly say that the study can't be used to draw the conclusions it does," Dr. Menon

### Covaxin safety study sparks controversy

The observational study assesses the adverse events of special interest (AESIs) in adolescents and adults one year after vaccination



- The drug regulator approved the rollout of Covaxin in January 2021 in a "clinical trial mode" and the vaccine recipients were to be followed up for safety. But till date, ICMR or Bharat Biotech has not published any data on Covaxin safety in the population

- The BHU study was carried out between January 2022 and August 2023. Covaxin safety was first assessed 14 days after vaccination

- The study has listed numerous limitations. Many are major limitations that defeat the very purpose of undertaking the study

- The most glaring limitations are the lack of a control group and the absence of data on background rates of adverse events of special interest

- Another major limitation is the failure to test the participants for SARS-CoV-2 infection/COVID-19 disease and associate all the adverse events solely to vaccination

- Some of the AESIs in question may be due to SARS-CoV-2 infection and not the vaccination

- Also, participants were contacted over the telephone one year after vaccination. This method, which relies on recall over a long period rather than any independent quantitative measure, can be inaccurate

says in an email. If the most glaring limitation of the study is the lack of a control group, the absence of data on background rates of adverse events of special interest (AESI) that have been assessed in the vaccinated participants makes it difficult to even find an association between the adverse events and the vaccine. However, Dr. Kishor Patwardhan from BHU and co-author of the paper in a tweet justifies the absence of a control group by saying that "in a longitudinal observational study, a traditional control group might not be feasible or necessary. Instead, researchers use the variability within the cohort over time to draw comparisons and identify associations".

"The lack of a control arm is a serious limitation of the study and negates any useful inference and interpretation of the stu-

dy's findings. Further, they didn't try to show a real upsurge in the rates of these common ailments in the vaccinated population as the background rates are not mentioned," says Dr. Vashishtha. Dismissing Dr. Patwardhan's argument that a control group may not be necessary for a longitudinal observational study, Dr. Menon says: "If the question, as here, is the possibility of adverse effects following vaccination, it is a question about causality. To answer these, it is important to remove as many confounders as possible, such as the possibility that some fraction of participants were infected by the virus prior to or after vaccination. If, in a normal non-COVID year, an equally substantial fraction of people were afflicted by upper respiratory tract infections, that would certainly be relevant to ask if

the vaccine was [indeed] responsible for the AESIs picked up by this survey." Objecting to Dr. Patwardhan's claim made in a tweet that the "goal [of the longitudinal study] is often to observe natural progressions and associations rather than to establish direct causal relationships with the use of a control group", Dr. Menon points out that the paper clearly states that "serious adverse events may occur in 1% of BBV152 [Covaxin] recipients", which is a statement of specific causality. The only robust way of linking the administration of the vaccine to a specific set of adverse effects is to have an appropriate control group, stresses Dr. Menon. Dr. Vashishtha too says that it is difficult to conclude natural progression without comparing it with the control arm.

The second critical limi-

tation of the study is the failure to test the participants for SARS-CoV-2 infection/COVID-19 disease and associating all the adverse events solely to vaccination. Since the study lasted from January 2022 to August 2023, the chances that the participants were truly uninfected and all adverse events seen were only due to vaccination are slim. "Serological studies in Uttar Pradesh after the Delta wave point to over 80% of the population having been infected. Some of the AESIs in question could have been a consequence of an initial SARS-CoV-2 infection and not the vaccination," says Dr. Menon. Worse is when the researchers claim some of the deaths to be "possibly" associated with Covaxin even when infection/disease was not ruled out through testing or taking into account pre-existing conditions/diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. The researchers have followed the WHO classification for AEFI categories, and one of WHO's AEFI categories is coincidental reaction/event. "These deaths possibly belong to this category," says Dr. Vashishtha.

"The same group of investigators had studied the Covishield vaccine using an almost similar methodology. They found that Covishield had led to AESIs in 14%, whereas Covaxin led to AESIs in one-third of the participants of the trial. This defies logic. Globally, inactivated vaccines are considered safer than Adenovirus vector-based vaccines," adds Dr. Vashishtha.



### Crows demonstrate keen counting skills

Crows can control the number of vocalisations they produce, "counting" up to four in response to visual and auditory cues. The birds are capable of using a non-symbolic approximate number system, showing a level of vocal control that mirrors the early counting skills of human toddlers. The crows could produce specific numbers of vocalisations deliberately in response to specific cues. They used a non-symbolic approximate number system, planning the number of vocalisations before starting.



### Genome of the extinct little bush moa reconstructed

Using ancient DNA recovered from a fossil bone, scientists have reconstructed a complete genome of the little bush moa, an extinct species of flightless bird that once roamed the forested islands of New Zealand. The work allowed the scientists to determine the bird's likely population size, and even suggests that the moa's eyes could detect ultraviolet light. The moas made their homes in the island's dense forests and grasslands as recently as 700 years ago.

## Why mango is the king of fruits in India



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

The mango season across India is on, and along with it the usual debate about which is the best mango variety to have. We in Telangana claim that the 'Banganapalli' and 'Benishan' are matchless and nothing else can come even close. My wife and her family from Gujarat say that the best is Ratnagiri or Alphonso. And friends in UP swear by the Daseri.

Mango trees are planted, and produced and the fruit is enjoyed by people in India, followed by China, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Mexico. However, India leads the rest, accounting for 54.2% of the total mangoes produced world-

wide. Not only do we consume the most mangoes, but we also export them. Last year, we exported 28,000 MT of mangoes and earned about 48 million dollars!

### 'Own special tastes'

Dr K.T. Achaya, in his "A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food" (OUP,1998), points out that mango is native to India, grown in the northeastern hills and Myanmar, and was exported to neighbouring countries. Nowadays, mango trees are planted in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha and West Bengal, with fruits from each state having their own special tastes.

India has, at the last count, over 1,000 varieties of mangoes, thanks to the ease with which grafting of mango plants occurs. The Indian Council of Agricul-



One mango fruit offers more Vitamins A, B, C, E and K, and metal compounds and more antioxidants than the other fruits. G.N. RAO

tural Research has three outstanding centres involved in mango research. In addition, the National Research Centre on Plant Biotechnology in New Delhi has been analysing the genome of the mango plant to understand its basic biology. The paper from there by Dr Nagendra Singh and colleagues, tit-

led in the *Indian Journal of the History of Science* discusses this aspect.

More recently, R. C. Jena and P. K. Chand have detailed the DNA marker-assisted diversity analysis of the Indian mango population (*Scientific Reports*, 2021), suggesting regional variations in the genetics and the resultant size, co-

lour and taste.

Why is mango called the king of fruits? Across the country, apart from the seasonal mango, we find several other seasonal fruits are available and eaten. Some of these are grapes, guava, jackfruit, papaya, and orange. Some like bananas grow year-round. Yet, mango is termed the king of fruits.

The reason is that mango not only offers superb taste, but is also the healthiest of fruits, since one mango fruit offers more Vitamins A, B, C, E and K, and metal compounds (Mg, Cu, K), and more antioxidants than the other fruits. While some of these health benefits are available in several other fruits, mango leads the rest since it has the highest levels of vitamins, minerals, and fibre content. Hence the kingdom.

The website of Cleveland Clinic in the U.S. has

an interesting article titled: "Mangolicious: the top six health benefits of mango", which are, first, it improves your gut health; the high fibre content helps fight constipation and bloating. Second, mangoes help control hunger, which could help you stick to your healthy eating goals.

Third, the vitamins and antioxidants in mango boost healthy hair and skin. Fourth, the soluble fibres in it help lower cholesterol. Fifth, eating mangoes controls blood pressure, and sixth, the antioxidant mangiferin, present in mangoes, helps prevent some types of cancer. The group at the University of Hyderabad also shows that mangiferin reduces ulcers.

Given all these benefits – taste, variety, availability, and health benefits – let us all go ahead and enjoy eating our favourite mangoes!



## Question Corner

### Colour blue

Is there any blue pigment with enhanced colour properties, reduced cost and lower cobalt content than cobalt blue?

The Egyptians and Babylonians used lapis lazuli 6,000 years ago. In 1802, a French chemist synthesised cobalt blue. In 2009 scientists discovered YInMn Blue, otherwise known as Oregon Blue. But most of these pigments have limitations. In 2020, researchers reported a new class of 'cool' blue colourants that are inexpensive and more environmentally friendly. For the last 200 years, cobalt blue has been a dominant commercial blue pigment because of its

colour intensity, ease of synthesis and versatility. However, 33% of the colourant by mass is carcinogenic, making cobalt blue relatively expensive and environmentally harmful to produce. The Oregon State University researchers were inspired by the crystalline structure of a light-blue mineral called hibonite. The team substituted aluminum ions in hibonite with cobalt, nickel or titanium ions. The resulting series of pigments showed a range of intense blue colours, some with reddish hues.

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

## How will Iran President's death impact the region?

Will there be changes in Iran's foreign policy? In the domestic arena, will the status quo prevail?

Stanly Johny

### The story so far:

The death of Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's President, and eight others, including Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian, in a helicopter crash on May 19, has sent shockwaves across the region. The timing of the accident was significant. Tensions remain high in West Asia, particularly after Iran launched its first direct attack on Israel in April. The war in Gaza rages on with Iran backing Hamas and other anti-Israel non-state militants in the region. At home, the regime has seen growing protests in recent years. And now, Iran has to elect a new President amid this uncertainty.

### How important was Raisi?

In Iran's semi-representative theocratic system, the role of the elected president is limited compared to that of the Supreme Leader, who is appointed by a clerical body. The President's primary responsibility is to run the day-to-day affairs of the government, while critical policies and long-term strategies are set by the Supreme Leader (read 'the establishment'). But the President and his government have a say on how to implement these policies.

In the past, Iran has seen friction between the establishment and the Presidents as they tried to champion their agenda. But in Raisi, who was elected President in 2021, the establishment

found a staunch ally who hardly strayed from the line set by the Supreme Leader. Raisi oversaw a marked shift from the Hassan Rouhani years when Iran pursued dialogue with the West and reached a nuclear deal in 2015 (which was sabotaged by the U.S. in 2018). During Raisi's tenure, Iran sought

closer strategic and economic cooperation with Russia and China, doubled down on its support for the so-called 'axis of resistance' (non-state actors such as Hamas, Houthis and Hezbollah) and expanded the country's nuclear programme. Tehran also adopted a more aggressive policy towards Israel, which saw the April 14 drone and missile attack.

### Will his death alter Iran's policies?

The President's death is unlikely to bring in any serious change to Iran's foreign policy. But it is highly likely that the regime's focus would shift to the transition at home. Even before Raisi's death was formally announced, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told Iranians that governance would not be disrupted. The message from the Supreme Leader is that the system reigns supreme, not individuals, and the status quo prevails. Iran has lost several high profile officials in recent years, from Qassem Soleimani, the charismatic Quds Force General, to Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, the country's top nuclear scientist. But the loss of key figures does not affect the national project.

However, Raisi's death poses two succession challenges to Iran's leaders. One, it has to quickly elect the next President. The second challenge is to identify a potential successor to Mr. Khamenei. In the past, different influential clerics were seen as his prospective successors, such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. Rafsanjani died in 2017 and Shahroudi in 2018. In recent years, Raisi, a hardline cleric, an elected President and a former judicial chief, was seen as a potential successor. His death leaves a huge void in the corridors of power in Tehran.

### What does Raisi's death mean for India?

India has built a good relationship with Iran since the revolution of 1979. Even though trade ties have taken a beating in recent years, owing to American sanctions on Iran, both sides stayed invested in the overall bilateral partnership. One good example of this partnership is the Chabahar port project where India has made investments worth millions. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had attended Raisi's inauguration in August 2021. In January, Mr. Jaishankar travelled again to Tehran to meet its leaders at a time when Houthis, the Iran-backed Yemeni Shia militants, were carrying out attacks against vessels in the Red Sea. India had refused to join a U.S.-led coalition to attack the Houthis.

Earlier this month, India signed a long-term agreement to further develop and operate one of the two terminals of the Chabahar port, formalising a deal that has been in the works for years. On May 20, a day after the accident, Mr. Jaishankar said India and Iran reached the Chabahar agreement "because of the interest and initiative" of President Raisi and Foreign Minister Abdollahian. India was careful not to take a direct position in the West Asian crisis. When tensions broke out between Iran and Israel, India expressed deep concerns but stopped short of condemning any party. The fact that India sent Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar to Tehran to offer condolences shows that retaining the current momentum in ties remains a priority for New Delhi.

## Why was Singapore flight turbulence severe?

How does turbulence or changes in air on the flight path affect an aircraft? Is there evidence that turbulence is increasing because of climate change? What are airlines doing to manage in-flight turbulence? What should be the takeaway from the injuries on board the Singapore flight?

Murali N. Krishnaswamy

### The story so far:

On May 20-21, a Singapore Airlines flight, SQ321, with 211 passengers and 18 crew, from London's Heathrow Airport to Singapore encountered severe turbulence while over the Andaman Sea/Bay of Bengal near the Irrawaddy Basin, Myanmar. A passenger passed away and several others suffered injuries of varying degrees. The crew decided to divert the Boeing 777-312ER to Bangkok, Thailand. The United States National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is to assist Singapore's investigation – also because the aircraft is a Boeing jet.

### What do we know about the incident?

Granular flight data shows the aircraft dropping rapidly before the crew began ("controlled") descent from 37,000 feet to 31,000 feet. It also shows the aircraft had had an altitude deviation prior to this.

### There has been much focus on 'turbulence'.

#### What have experts told *The Hindu*?

Turbulence occurs "by the relative movement of disturbed air through which an aircraft is flying". It could be thermal or mechanical and can happen "either within or when it is clear of cloud". Its severity depends on the "rate at which the speed or the direction of airflow/or both changes".

According to Professor Guy Gratton, Associate Professor of Aviation and the Environment at Cranfield University, U.K., turbulence is basically what happens when there is friction between airflow or wind flowing in different directions. When it involves aviation, there are two main

'The movement of the air may be random and unpredictable, forcing the aircraft up or down, suddenly and unexpectedly'

forms, which are Clear Air Turbulence (CAT), which happens around jet streams, and the other being inside or around cumulonimbus clouds. These clouds have very strong upwards air currents in the middle and downwards air current around the outside, he explains, which can result in quite serious turbulence. The faster an aircraft is, the more severe the response to the turbulence.

Prof. Richard Dale, Senior Lecturer in Aviation and Tourism at the University of West London, says turbulence consists of changes in the movement of air which the aircraft is moving through over a short distance. For example, there might be updrafts that are quickly followed by downdrafts, but also changes in the horizontal movement of the air. The movement of the air, to some degree, is random and unpredictable, although the location where turbulence will be encountered is more certain. These changes cause the lift produced by the aircraft wing to change for a short time, forcing the aircraft up or down, suddenly and unexpectedly. According to A.D. Ravishankar, former Director, Aviation Meteorology, India Meteorological Department, CAT is turbulence suffered by an aircraft above 18,000 feet.

Dr. Paul Williams, Professor of Atmospheric Science, University of Reading, U.K., says that turbulence fatalities on commercial flights are, fortunately, very rare. Turbulence on flights can be caused by storms, mountains, and strong air currents called jet streams. In this last case, it is called clear air turbulence, and can be difficult to avoid because it does not show up on the weather radar in the flight deck. He adds that a detailed analysis of the meteorological circumstances and the type of turbulence that affected the Singapore Airlines flight will take some time. He also says, "we recently discovered that severe clear air turbulence in the North Atlantic has increased by 55% since 1979. Our latest future projections indicate a doubling or trebling of severe turbulence in the jet streams in the coming decades, if the climate continues to change as we expect."

### Will passenger injuries lead to litigation?

As visuals from the Singapore incident show, there has been serious injury to some passengers. Injuries occur from passengers not wearing their seat belts resulting in them being violently thrown from their seats, the overhead bins opening causing items to fall, the cabin ceiling and panels coming off and hot beverages causing burn injuries. A Singapore Airlines spokesperson has told *The Hindu* that it has adopted a more cautious approach to managing turbulence in-flight.

Turbulence injuries have resulted in the realisation that winning a turbulence claim needs skill and knowledge of the factors that caused the incident. Aviation attorneys work with aviation and weather experts to plot the aircraft's route, obtain satellite images of the weather at the time and location of the encounter, and to quickly secure airline data to help prove the claim. They even look at whether the crew knew there was bad weather ahead but decided not to deviate to save time, fuel, and airline money. In the U.S., for instance, aviation attorneys review government data and reports, Federal Aviation Administration and NTSB findings, and the airline's procedures to obtain full and fair compensation. *Magan vs Lufthansa German Airlines* is one case where a passenger was injured and won a "substantial verdict pursuant to the Montreal Convention".

### What about technology in flight planning?

Bill Duncan, aviation forecast operations leader at The Weather Company (a weather forecasting and information technology company) has told *The Hindu* that there is a process behind a dispatcher or pilot planning a route, which includes meteorologists looking at flight planning guidance charts. There is also an accounting for year-round turbulence impacted by climate change. Extreme weather events have risen in severity since 2000. According to Mr. Duncan, there is no doubt that there is warming going on, which can impact and divide the jet stream. "As the jet stream buckles a bit because it is not as strong as it was in the past, you have all this energy associated with the jet stream up 30,000 feet or so, which is allowing colder air to spill south". So the world is seeing major weather events happening more often.

Aviation meteorologists use model data, weather pattern recognition, and experience to help identify these areas of potential turbulence. Pilots get reports out ahead of their route on reported turbulence, and dispatchers are in contact with local meteorologists who actively watch routes and issue Flight Planning Guidance Charts (FPGs) and Significant Meteorological Information (SIGMETs). These SIGMETs are the information that the dispatcher can relay to the pilot about hazardous weather. With improvements in technology and science, there are better numerical weather prediction models. The Weather Company, for instance, has a Global high-Resolution Atmospheric Forecasting model which simulates the physics of the atmosphere to predict the weather and also uses artificial intelligence (AI) methods that build on weather forecasts to predict turbulence and other aviation hazards. Mr. Duncan adds that machine learning algorithms and AI are being used to find the links between historical weather and observations of turbulence. Separately, over 20 airlines now participate in the International Air Transport Association's 'Turbulence Aware Platform'.



Troubled landing: The Singapore Airline flight SQ321 on May 21. REUTERS

## Why COVID vaccine safety needs scrutiny

Why has the Indian Council for Medical Research, which was involved in developing Covaxin, the indigenous COVID vaccine together with Bharat Biotech, criticised a BHU study? What are the key findings? Why should examining vaccine safety be a priority?

Ramya Kannan

### The story so far:

The Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) issued a letter to the researchers of Banaras Hindu University last week, countering their study on the side effects of India's indigenous vaccine for COVID – Covaxin. In a rejoinder sent a couple of days after the publication of the research paper in a peer-reviewed journal, ICMR head Rajiv Bahl claimed that his institution had been incorrectly and misleadingly acknowledged in the paper. He pointed out what he called 'critical flaws' in the 'poorly-designed study'. Notably, the ICMR was involved in developing Covaxin along with Bharat Biotech.

### What did the BHU study conclude?

Adolescent girls and those with co-morbidities were at a higher risk of adverse events after receiving Bharat Biotech's BBV152 (Covaxin) vaccine against COVID-19, BHU researchers said. Nearly a third of the participants reported adverse events of special interest (AESI). The one-year observational, follow-up study titled 'Long-term safety analysis of the BBV152 coronavirus vaccine [Covaxin] in adolescents and adults: Findings from a one-year

'We were hoping and expecting that ICMR would build upon BHU study on vaccine side-effects'

prospective study in North India', also said that serious adverse events occurred in 1% of BBV152 recipients, and that extended surveillance is warranted following the vaccine administration.

Viral upper respiratory tract infections were reported in 47.9% adolescents and 42.6% adults, as per the study. New onset skin and subcutaneous disorders, general disorders, and nervous system disorders were the common AESIs in adolescents. General disorders, musculoskeletal disorders, and nervous system disorders were the common AESIs in adults. Menstrual abnormalities were noticed in 4.6% of female participants. Ocular abnormalities and hypothyroidism were observed in 2.7% and 0.6% of the participants, respectively. Among the serious AESIs (1%), stroke and Guillain-Barre syndrome were identified in 0.3% and 0.1% of the participants, respectively.

In response to this, Bharat Biotech, the vaccine manufacturer which worked with the ICMR's own National Institute of Virology to develop the vaccine candidate, said for such a study in safety to be effective and informative, and for it to avoid investigator bias, some data points were also required. This included the AESI safety profile of the subjects prior to their participation in the study; a comparison of the safety profile of non-vaccinated subjects during the course of the study; a comparison of the safety profile of subjects who received other vaccines during the course of the study etc.

### What did ICMR object to?

In his letter, Dr. Bahl said ICMR was not associated with the study and had not provided any financial or technical support. He alleged that the authors had acknowledged ICMR for research support without prior approval or intimation to the institution, calling this "inappropriate and unacceptable."

With reference to the study itself, he claimed there were critical flaws: the study had no control arm of unvaccinated individuals for comparison with the vaccinated group, and therefore, the reported events in the study cannot be linked or attributed to COVID-19 vaccination; it did not provide background rates of patterns observed in the general population,

and thereby made it impossible to study the observed events in the post vaccination period. Further, Dr. Bahl claimed there was no baseline information of study participants; the study tool was inconsistent with the AESI as defined in the reference paper, and the method of data collection (participants were contacted over the telephone, and their responses recorded without any clinical confirmation).

He further asked the researchers to remove the acknowledgement to ICMR and publish an erratum. His letter also called to retract the paper, with a remark: "This paper implicitly makes conclusions about vaccine safety that are not supported by evidence." The BHU recorded that it had received the communique addressed to its researchers. The researchers have communicated their responses to the ICMR.

### What was the fallout?

Most researchers were shocked by the response of the ICMR, terming it as "academic censorship." Multiple accounts of doctors and researchers on social media also pointed out that the ICMR developed the vaccine along with the company, and not declaring its vested interest was also a serious lapse in research terms. Among those who formulated an official response, foremost was the Universal Health Organisation (UHO), a group of researchers, doctors, and public health experts, who echoed the research ecosystem's shock at the belated denial. The UHO wrote an open letter to the ICMR stating the study filled a key gap in terms of field data, analysing the safety of Covaxin.

"While we were hoping and expecting that the ICMR would build upon this study, address its shortcomings, and elevate the standards of vaccine safety, we are aghast to come across letters sent by ICMR asking for the retraction of the paper, and threatening the authors of the study," it said. On the point of not having a control group, the letter said, it was indeed a shortcoming but had been admitted in the study itself. Besides, this actually points to the fact that it was the ICMR that has access to the data with the control group – the original phase 3 trials of Covaxin. Neither the ICMR nor the company had published the long-term safety trials, it charged. While using telephonic interviews was not ideal, it has been used by ICMR in the past, even in papers on COVID vaccines. To call for the retraction of the BHU paper on these lines was unbecoming of a scientific institution of ICMR's stature, the letter added.



Safety concerns: A nurse about to administer the Covaxin vaccine. FILE PHOTO

# PROFILES

## A party in decline

### African National Congress

Nelson Mandela's party, which has been in power in South Africa for three decades after the transition from Apartheid, faces its biggest electoral test amid rampant poverty, widening inequality and intra-party factionalism

#### Srinivasan Ramani

Even as elections in India are drawing to a close, the citizens of yet another BRICS country and emerging economy are going to the polls on May 29. The largest country in GDP (nominal) terms in Africa, South Africa has been ruled for three decades by the party that was most associated with the anti-Apartheid struggle – the African National Congress (ANC).

Identified with leaders such as Nobel prize winning Nelson Mandela, who went on to become the first President of racially-integrated South Africa, the ANC has maintained its dominance as the party of governance in the country, so much so that political observers have termed the ANC's rule in South Africa one of a dominant party presiding over a "party-state".

The ANC today is helmed by President Cyril Ramaphosa, a businessman with a long association with the party, who served as chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly after the first democratic elections in South Africa following the end of Apartheid in 1994. Mr. Ramaphosa emerged as ANC president after a strongly contested leadership race against Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was supported by then president and widely derided to be a corrupt leader, Jacob Zuma. After the election, Mr. Zuma resigned following pressure from the party and Mr. Ramaphosa was elected unopposed as the President of South Africa by the National Assembly in February 2018.

Mr. Ramaphosa was seen by many as someone who could bring in change after Mr. Zuma's controversial years. But his government, elected in May 2019 after winning 57.5% of the votes in the general election, had to tackle many economic challenges – the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, the inherited weaknesses in the economy and the many failures of state-owned enterprises.

As a party leader, he also had to confront a leadership that included heavyweights who were associated with Mr. Zuma. In July 2021, when Mr. Zuma refused to comply with a

summons order from a Constitutional Court that was set up to inquire into allegations of "state capture" and "fraud" in the public sector during his tenure, he was sentenced to 15 months of imprisonment. Mr. Zuma went on to announce that he would be voting for the newly formed party, the uMkhonto we Sizwe (named after the armed organisation affiliated to the ANC during the anti-Apartheid struggle) in the 2024 elections despite being a lifelong member of the ANC.

Earlier, factional troubles in the ANC had also resulted in the formation of new parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) by former ANC Youth League leaders. The EFF, which won 10.8% of the vote in the 2019 elections, retains an ideological view that is closer to some of the radical sections of the ANC and believes in measures such as nationalisation of mines, banks and other industries and appeals to unemployed youth who are not seen as ANC supporters.

While the ANC is expected to retain its presence as the single largest party in the coming elections, its performance could be dented by concerns among South Africans about persisting poverty and rising inequality. The World Bank said in 2020 that 37.9% of the population is living at international poverty levels of \$3.2 per person a day with 25% (13.8 million people) experiencing food poverty. The country's Gini coefficient was 0.63 in its last measured value in 2014, showing widespread inequality.

#### Dampening enthusiasm

These concerns have already dampened voting enthusiasm among the ANC's core Black voters. Voter turnout in South Africa among eligible voters fell from 85.53% in 1994 to 47.28% in 2019 after a steady decline election after election, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Dissatisfaction with the ANC's performance has also led to disillusionment with democratic institutions itself with Afrobarometer in 2021 recording that only 40% of South Africans preferred democracy over non-democratic options.



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

The chief rival to the ANC in the South African party system remains the centrist Democratic Alliance, which has emphasised its opposition to what it calls the "state capture" of the ANC and its cadres and the reduction of the South African democratic system into a dominant one-party state. But it is largely seen as a party that represents the interests of the white minority and has been unable to expand its reach. Controversial views espoused by the DA's leaders on the legacy of colonialism have only increased the suspicion among Black voters.

The core support base of the ANC, despite misgivings among its voters, remain those who have experienced racism during the Apartheid era and

were aware of the ANC's efforts during the struggle and many who still perceive the ANC as the only party capable of addressing the problems faced by the Black community in particular.

Formed in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress to press for rights of Black South Africans, it was renamed to its current appellation in 1923 and mostly functioned as an organisation devoted to getting legislation passed in favour of the community. But by the 1940s, with the influx of younger left-wing activists committed to mass mobilisation movements, trade union activity and resistance tactics, the ANC, under the leadership of Alfred Xuma, had become a major movement. In the

1950s, the ANC intensified its mass campaigns, which included strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience movements, and by 1955, it was a key signatory to the "Freedom Charter" that became vital to the anti-Apartheid struggle.

#### Tripartite Alliance

Other signatories included parties and organisations such as the South African Communist Party (SACP), the South African Indian Congress and trade unions. The SACP, along with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), remains aligned with the ANC as part of the Tripartite Alliance, which was forged in 1990 after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison.

Organisations aligned with the ANC such as the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK or Spear of the Nation) launched an armed struggle against Apartheid in the 1960s after the ANC itself was banned and its leadership went underground. Leaders like Mandela were arrested and remained in jail for nearly three decades. Negotiations by the Apartheid regime with the ANC to end the system and transit into multi-racial democracy began in the 1980s. After the release of Mandela and the lifting of the ban on the ANC in the early 1990s, an interim Constitution was ratified. The ANC clinched a thumping victory in the 1994 elections and Mandela became President.

Mandela's government was widely popular and allowed for a peaceful transition of power. But with the party retaining a structure which is largely hierarchical that reverted to a culture of patronage on assuming power, degeneration set in over the years. Ineffective governance, economic woes and allegations of chronic corruption led to a sharp decline in the ANC's popularity, especially during the Zuma regime, with the party winning 57.5% of the vote in the 2019 elections.

With Mr. Ramaphosa being seen as unable to stem the decline and relying only on incremental steps to bring change in the party, the ANC may have to rely upon other parties in South Africa's proportional representation system to continue to stay in power.

#### THE GIST

Formed in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress to press for rights of Black South Africans, it was renamed to its current appellation in 1923

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## The fight goes on

### Prabir Purkayastha

The NewsClick founder was released from jail after the Supreme Court stated that his arrest under UAPA was 'invalid in the eyes of law'

#### Sreeparna Chakrabarty

"The more things change the more they remain the same" – this adage by 19th century French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr possibly holds best for Prabir Purkayastha, founder of online news portal NewsClick.

Incarcerated twice, half a century apart, during two very different time periods in India's political history, Mr. Purkayastha has had a long career as a public intellectual. He has been an advocate for self-reliance, an activist in the literacy and free software movements and an expert in the power and telecom sectors, besides being a journalist.

His two prison sojourns – first under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) during Emergency in 1975 and then in 2023 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) have brought his life and work into spotlight. "Prabir has been a lifelong activist. I have been making the argument in public on several occasions. I have been saying why was he jailed is because he is a good citizen," says Sudhanva Deshpande, a theatre personality and a close associate of Mr. Purkayastha.

Born in 1949, Mr. Purkayastha has trained as an



engineer at the universities of Calcutta and Allahabad and joined Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, as a research scholar in the School of Computers and System Sciences in 1975. It was in JNU, after Emergency was imposed by the Indira Gandhi government, where he was arrested, on September 25, in place of D.P. Tripathi in a case of mistaken identity.

According to the book *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point*, by historian Gyan Prakash, Mr. Purkayastha had gone to JNU to carry out a strike called by the Students' Federation of India, the students wing of the CPI (M), to protest the university's action when a team of plainclothes policemen picked him up.

Cut to 2023: this time, Mr. Purkayastha was arrested by the Delhi Police Special Cell on October 3 under the UAPA. He was accused of using Chinese funding to promote "anti-

national propaganda" through digital media.

Multiple journalist collectives had termed "chilling" the raids at the homes of 46 journalists, editors, writers and professionals connected to NewsClick, and seizure of their electronic devices, culminating in the arrest of its founder.

#### Scientific temper

The Supreme Court, however, on May 15 ordered his release from custody, saying it felt "no hesitation" to declare the arrest and remand of the 74-year-old journalist under the UAPA by the Delhi Police as "invalid in the eyes of law". But what lies behind this man with these controversial prison innings is someone who colleagues and friends describe as a person committed to rationalism, scientific temper and justice for the country's most oppressed people.

"He is really funny. He has a fantastic sense of humour. I have hardly had a conversation with him

without rolling up in laughter," Mr. Deshpande says.

Adds CPI(M) Politburo member Brinda Karat, who has known Mr. Purkayastha since his student days: "He has courage. That courage he has shown many times both in his political and personal life. That courage is also due to his clarity on the ideology he believes in".

Most of his friends also emphasise his commitment to enabling the use of technology by the masses.

His commitment to science can be seen in the numerous organisations he has established or is part of whose objective is to promote scientific temper among people. He is co-convenor of the Just Net Coalition, a global coalition on internet governance, data privacy and digital independence. He is a founder member of the Delhi Science Forum and the All India People's Science Network. He is also president of Free Software Movement of India, set up in 2010.

Mr. Purkayastha had also filed a number of Public Interest Litigations (PILs) to safeguard India's interests in the telecom sector.

The title of his autobiography, *Keeping up the Good Fight—From the Emergency to the Present Day*, seems to be the best way to describe his life's journey.

## Man on a mission

### Karim Khan

The ICC chief prosecutor says the leaders of Hamas and the Israeli government have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity

#### Aaratrika Bhaumik

When Karim A.A. Khan was sworn in as the chief public prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in June 2021, he famously said the Court should be judged by its act – "the proof of the pudding should be in the eating". By announcing his decision on May 20 to apply for arrest warrants against both the leadership of Hamas and Israel, Mr. Khan seems to have taken an indelible step towards demanding accountability for the Israel-Hamas war.

In an unprecedented event in the history of the World Court, often ridiculed for its glacial slowness, the prosecutor said there are reasonable grounds to believe that three of Hamas's most senior leaders – Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif and Ismail Haniyeh – along with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In an international law career spanning decades, the British litigator of Pakistani origin has crafted a reputation as a gifted orator and a formidable prosecutor. Mr. Khan has partly credited his early interest in international human rights to his experience of doing voluntary work with the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, a persecuted sect of Islam, of which he is a member. Before his stint at the ICC, Mr. Khan was a special adviser to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and served for both the defence and the prosecution at several international courts. He was involved in investigating war crimes committed in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Lebanon, and also led the UN team investigating crimes committed by the Islamic State terrorist group.



ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The 54-year-old has faced controversies throughout a career that included stints defending Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and Charles Taylor, the former President of Liberia who was convicted of war crimes in Sierra Leone. In 2016, the ICC dropped crimes against humanity charges against his client

Kenya's President William Ruto after what was described as a "troubling incidence of witness interference and intolerable political meddling". A key witness in the case had been killed two years ago.

The prosecutor was originally not on the shortlist for the ICC role but was later included following discreet lobbying by British bureaucrats and Kenyan officials. The Kenyan government's campaign for Mr. Khan's candidacy was attributed to his trenchant defence of its Premier.

#### Pursuing accountability

Mr. Khan seems to be a man on a mission to establish the ICC's legitimacy in pursuing accountability from heads of state without fear or favour. Responding swiftly to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, he sought arrest warrants against Russian President Vladimir Putin and senior Kremlin official Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova last year over their

alleged role in the deportation of Ukrainian children.

The decision to seek warrants against Israel's leadership with staunch opposition from the U.S. and other Western states is a resounding rebuff to criticism that the Court is biased against African nations where so many of its cases have been focused. While U.S. President Joe Biden has called the move "outrageous", a dozen Republican senators in April this year, penned a chilling letter "warning" Mr. Khan of consequences after reports began to circulate that such a decision was imminent. But the ICC prosecutor remains undeterred telling CNN that the decision is "not a witch hunt" but in accordance with what is expected from an independent Court.

Well aware of the political ramifications, Mr. Khan has disclosed a list of distinguished experts, two of them former judges, who have backed his claims. While acknowledging that "disinformation has been rife", the experts have unanimously agreed that the prosecutor's work has been fair and rigorous. Although it remains to be seen whether the evidence will withstand scrutiny in a courtroom, the English barrister is here to challenge the long-standing scepticism against the efficacy of international law.

## REFLECTIONS

## { THE BIG PICTURE }

## Why India-UK relations are set for robust growth

There is a once-in-a-generation buzz about the future of the bilateral partnership. The onus is on the respective governments to realise the promise, which will require some heavy lifting, newfound initiatives, and realistic expectations on both sides

After decades of underwhelming relations, ties between India and the United Kingdom (UK) are poised to enter a new phase. For 20 years, successive British governments have unsuccessfully pursued a closer relationship with India. Britain's close partnership with Pakistan during the Afghan War, former first secretary of state George Osborne's proclamation of a "golden era" of Sino-British relations, and the protracted Brexit process, made New Delhi sceptical. Only in the aftermath of the 2020 border clashes with China did India see the UK and other European countries as potential partners. Significant credit must go to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his successors who sought to change India's perception of Britain: Working to reduce economic exposure to China, naming and shaming Pakistan on financing of terrorism, announcing a significant "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific, and relaxing visa restrictions on Indian students and workers. Such initia-

tives were welcomed by New Delhi, generating a once-in-a-generation buzz about the future of the bilateral partnership.

In 2021, the two countries embarked on the 2030 Roadmap for India-UK Future Relations, which envisages deepening cooperation across a range of governmental activities, including trade, people-to-people ties, defence, climate and health in a manner that could finally allow the bilateral relationship to deliver on its promise. Implementation, however, will be key.

The most vocal opinion one hears from New Delhi is that — alone among western powers — the UK still calibrates its relations with India to its ties with Pakistan. Whether this is a result of the perceived political influence of British Pakistanis or the UK national security establishment's efforts to maintain close ties with the Pakistani military, Indian observers are quick to note that a trust deficit characterises the bilateral relationship.

A significant British Indian immigrant community is often seen as an asset binding the two sides together. At the same time, Sikh separatists advocating for a separate homeland have cast a long shadow on UK-India relations. The still-shattered windows of the Indian High Commission in London are a constant reminder of the violence that minority elements of the diasporic community can inflict on this relationship.

The probable emergence of a Labour government in the UK after the July 4 general election will be awkward given the past efforts of the Overseas Friends of the BJP to

stump for the Conservatives. Although Labour has signalled that it, too, values closer ties with India, more questions will be asked about human rights, democratic backsliding, and Kashmir. In the face of these challenges, strong people-to-people links, and stable commercial ties will probably ensure a relatively steady relationship. Nonetheless there are steps that both countries can take.

First, bolstering Britain's presence across the Indo-Pacific is a step in the right direction. Since the much-heralded Integrated Review in 2021, Britain has intensified its engagements across the region — ramping up its diplomatic and military cooperation. Accordingly, it has embarked on the AUKUS partnership, became a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan in 2023. The challenge lies in maintaining this level of focused attention.

Second, defence engagement has been one of the strongest pillars of India's interactions with its closest partners — from Russia and Israel to France and the United States (US). Britain should learn from and emulate the US experience. The defence-military partnership between India and the US did not happen overnight. With its large State-owned defence sector, India has traditionally found it easier to work with France and Russia — where governments have much greater influence over defence companies — than with private American firms which zealously guard their commercial interests. The first attempt to



Walter Ladwig



Anit Mukherjee



With new governments in place, 2025 presents a unique opportunity to elevate UK-India ties

SHUTTERSTOCK

bridge that gap, the government-led US-India Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) failed to push forward the co-development of specific technologies identified by joint working groups because of the significant economic and technological gap between the US and India. Newer initiatives such as the India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) facilitates organic partnerships between private Indian and US defence companies, as well as incubators, accelerators, universities, and funders, with a larger focus on defence innovation and co-production. Since defence industrial cooperation has been a challenge for India and the UK as well, they should explore a similar model.

Third, the UK may not enjoy the luxury of walking away from Pakistan. Nevertheless,

if British officials truly believe their relationship with Islamabad is not comparable with the partnership with Delhi, that must be continually demonstrated via action, not just words. Ultimately, India will judge Britain on its behaviour in the next India-Pakistan crisis.

Finally, New Delhi must value the potential for cooperation between the two countries. Gloomy assessments about Britain's defence posture have led India to significantly reduce its defence attaché posts in London. Although part of an overall rebalancing of India's defence relations, the UK was seen as a country where it could dramatically shrink its defence diplomatic footprint. Such an assessment ignores Britain's capabilities in jet engines, undersea systems and emerging technologies like quantum-

computing and cyber which are highly valued by the Indian military. Both countries, therefore, need to think more creatively about leveraging each other's comparative advantages for mutual benefit.

With new governments in place, 2025 presents a unique opportunity to elevate UK-India ties. The groundwork has been laid, but realising the promise of partnership will require some heavy lifting, newfound initiatives, and realistic expectations on both sides.

Walter Ladwig and Anit Mukherjee are senior lecturers at King's College London. The piece is based on their contribution to a policy report on UK-India relations, published by UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE). The views expressed are personal

## { SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## What questions to ask in an interview with a PM

Samir Shah, now chairman of the BBC but once upon a time my first boss at London Weekend Television, taught me most of what I know about asking questions on television. Perhaps the most important lesson is to remember you're doing so on behalf of the audience. That's why your questions need to be pertinent, and you need to persist till you get an answer or it's patently clear you're being resisted.

So what do I want to hear when I listen to interviews of a Prime Minister (PM)? After all, if the questions are asked on my behalf, what would my questions be?

First, I want to know what the PM considers his achievements. But I also want to find out how he responds to challenges, exposes, errors he's made and tried

to cover up. And I want the discussion to be conversational, not a one-sided monologue. So, yes, interruptions are not just to be expected but, at times, necessary.

Second, an interview with a PM must not be a platform to attack his critics but, rather, an occasion where he's made to respond to their valid criticisms. The verb "made" is important. Left to himself, any PM would evade or avoid. It's the interviewer's job to ensure he doesn't and is pressed to answer.

Third, for the duration of the interview, the interviewer and the PM are equals. Only then can the interview hold him to account. So, the interviewer cannot call him "Sir". To do so would place him on a pedestal. Also, the interviewer can't be timid and deferential. He has to

convince the audience he can ask tough questions.

Fourth, the answers to the questions asked must address the subjects raised. A little bit of waffling is understandable, but the PM cannot be permitted to go off on a complete tangent, speaking about issues that weren't put to him and answering a question altogether different to what was asked. If that happens, a polite but forceful interruption is necessary. And if the PM continues to deflect, maybe more than once.

Fifth, the interviewer needs a strategy. He's not just asking questions for the sake of asking them. There has to be a clear purpose. Here's an example of a question that must never be asked: "For sure you'll win this time, but will you also win in 2029?"

Now, depending on the character and personality of the concerned PM, there are certain ways of responding that an interviewer must be capable of. For instance, if a PM claims everything he does he does for the country and is, therefore, loudly beating a patriotic drum, point out that is true of all PMs. This doesn't make him special.

Or, if the interviewer questions the PM about something we all know he said or did but has now chosen to inexplicably

deny, the interviewer must be in a position to quote from the particular occasion, specifying the date, location and content. And, let's be clear, this would be akin to challenging the PM. But that's a legitimate part of what an interviewer must be prepared to do.

Sometimes there are obvious questions that must be raised because they pertain to the particular PM being interviewed. They can't be overlooked. For example, if the PM believes he's a vehicle of God the interviewer must ask him, with a certain scepticism, how he knows this and if it is a rational thing to say? Or, if a comic, who makes a living imitating the PM, is not allowed to contest against him, the interviewer must ask if he approves and persists even if it irritates or annoys the PM. And, of course, the interviewer must ask him why he always refers to himself in the third person. Is he being grand?

Finally, I'm confident a fair-minded and honourable PM would agree with what I've written. Remember, he wants to use the interview to impress the audience. Not put them off. That's something else Samir told me.

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

## { ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## State needs to address the plight of domestic workers

At a time when we are lamenting the decline of women in the labour force, it is hard to understand why more effort is not being made to make it easier for women to stay in the workforce. Hopefully, the new government will work on reversing the neglect of the domestic workers sector, predominantly comprising women. Many rely on them to manage homes, look after children and handle chores, enabling them to work or pursue other activities. The lack of a legal architecture for protecting those who work in our homes has created conditions of suffering, and even the educated class seems to overlook the value of domestic work.

A study by Jagori, an NGO, reveals the grim realities faced by domestic workers. Jayashree Velankar, director of Jagori, said, "They have no legal protection and though Delhi attempted a draft Bill earlier, nothing came of it. The definition of domestic work remains vague and occupational hazards are not legally compensated. For example, if a maid were to fall off a stool while cleaning, she has no recourse to legal redress. Fearful of losing her job, she will keep quiet." When domestic workers face abuse, unreasonable work hours, deprivation of sleep or food, or denial of access to toilets, they often leave rather than complain, fearing accusations of theft or being shut off from opportunities in the locality. An 18-year-old domestic worker in Delhi said, "My employers don't let me leave early. I am scared to walk home as men make lewd remarks at me." A 64-year-old in another city said, "They eat in front of us but don't offer us food. They prefer throwing it away rather than giving it to the domestic help."

For the past 15 years, Jagori has worked with women domestic workers (WDWs) in Delhi's resettlement and low-income colonies to organise them, build identities, and advocate for fair, violence-free working and living conditions. The absence of legislation for

WDWs and their exclusion from labour codes means private homes are not defined as "workplaces," making domestic work dependent on negotiations with employers.

There is no universal definition of occupational safety and health for domestic workers, and there is uncertainty regarding the responsibilities of employers in providing safe workplaces. This affects their income, working conditions, and health. A significant percentage of WDWs (30%) reported that their work exacerbated medical conditions, leading to pain, weakness, and difficulty performing tasks. While health issues are not solely attributable to domestic work, there is an overlap between these and the tasks performed. Fatigue, joint pain, acidity, dizziness, allergies, etc, were among the health hazards identified.

The study highlights the need for comprehensive national legislation for domestic workers, priority registration of WDWs and their employers, defining occupational safety and health for domestic workers, and including them in the Code on Social Security. Additional recommendations include ratifying ILO Convention 189 on decent work and Convention 190 on violence-free work environments, recognising WDWs as "workers", and including them in tax-funded public health programmes.

Jushya Kumar, lead researcher for the Jagori study said, "The lack of recognition of private homes as workplaces means that there is a complete lack of employer accountability, so it is critical to find ways to foster accountability. In the absence of any legislation, there needs to be at least a stronger demand for State-funded, longitudinal studies for in-depth analysis of occupational health and safety of domestic workers. It is crucial to challenge terms such as maid and house help and affirm their identity as working women engaged in paid domestic work by correctly referring to them as domestic workers."

The views expressed are personal

## The West steps up for Kyiv. Will it be enough?

Washington has acted to offer Ukraine new help. Additional military support for Ukraine was a matter of debate for months in the United States (US) Congress. In the end, Speaker of the House of Representatives Mike Johnson put the matter to a vote, the proposal passed by a margin of 311 to 112, and new American weapons and money are now on their way to Ukraine. The agreed upon plan also provides security spending for Israel and Taiwan, but it's the nearly \$61 billion for Ukraine that will make the biggest near-term difference.

This money will help Ukraine pay for Patriot air defence munitions, artillery ammunition, drones, counter-drone weapons, and missiles that can be fired from fighter planes. It's the first cash for Ukraine that Congress has authorised since December 2022 and the largest single aid package that Kyiv will have received since the outbreak of war. Some of the weapons systems and ammunition are already reaching the frontlines. The US has helped in other ways too. Even before the aid was approved, the Pentagon had quietly shipped a new long-range missile system to Ukraine, which its troops quickly used against a Russian airfield in Crimea and Russian troops in the Donbas region.

Less talked about is an element of the new package that helps Ukraine and hurts Russia financially. The so-called Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, embedded in the larger aid package, allows the Biden administration to seize Russian State assets frozen in the US and use

them to help Ukraine. Before greenlighting it, Biden wants to be sure that Washington's European and other G7 allies are on board with this plan. If they agree the move is legal under international law, this could mean another \$5 billion in help for Ukraine that's drawn directly from Russian central bank assets. The EU, meanwhile, is already reserving windfall profits generated from Russian central bank assets frozen in Europe that could give Ukraine another three billion euros per year.

Ukraine needed this help. Sixteen months of Congressional inaction has left its exhausted forces short of the artillery and air defence ammunition needed to halt Russia's recent advances along the frontlines and its drone and missile strikes against Ukrainian cities. That shortfall has allowed Russian forces to grab more than 135 square miles of Ukrainian territory over the past four months, including the strategically valuable city of Avdiivka in February. Fears that Russia was preparing a major push for more Ukrainian land this summer raised the spectre, in Kyiv and in Washington, that a big breakthrough could leave Ukraine on the verge of military defeat by the end of this year. This latest surge of US material support makes that much less likely. And if Ukraine can build new fortifications along the frontline and secure the air defence systems it needs to protect its cities and energy infrastructure, despite a shortage of these supplies created by the war in West Asia, it can stabilise their defensive position through 2025.

But while Washington's bid to close



While Washington's bid to close the ammunition gap between Ukraine and Russia can restore the on-the-ground stalemate established late last year, it won't move Ukraine back on offence

the ammunition gap between Ukraine and Russia can restore the on-the-ground stalemate established late last year, it won't move Ukraine back on offence. That's because Kyiv has another battlefield problem that its allies can do little to address: Ukraine's shortage of soldiers. A new law, which President Volodymyr Zelensky signed reluctantly earlier the year, has lowered the age of military mobilisation from 27 to 25. It also reduces the number of exemptions from service and extends the amount of time soldiers can be ordered to serve. That will help if the new troops can be effectively trained and quickly deployed. But it won't, by itself, change the game in Ukraine's favour.

In addition, this is likely the last package Ukraine can expect from Washington until the November presidential election. If Donald Trump wins that election, Kyiv could find itself completely cut off from future help. Even if Biden wins, US public

willingness to provide future \$60 billion aid packages will be limited. In the meantime, Russia has many more young men it can throw into the battlefield "meat grinder".

The US aid package provides a lifeline that can keep the Ukrainians in the fight through the end of 2024. That will give Ukraine's friends in Europe more time to produce and deliver more weapons and ammunition. It can also deal President Zelensky a stronger hand at the bargaining table that finally ends the war.

But it's unlikely to help Ukraine avoid an eventual partition, one that cedes Russia some illegally taken Ukrainian land in exchange for the European future that most Ukrainians still want. That's a painful reality after two-plus years of brutal war.

Ian Bremmer is the founder and board president of Eurasia Group Foundation. The views expressed are personal

## { SUNDAY LETTERS }

## More than rote learning needed

This is with reference to "Rites of passage: From children to young adults" by Ameeta Mulla Wattal (May 19). Students should be encouraged to understand concepts instead of just rote memorisation. We must support their self-discovery and real-world skill development to navigate adulthood.

Drishti Sama

## Follow the example set by Seshan

This is with reference to "What if TN Seshan were leading the EC today?" by Karan Thapar (May 19). It is the need of the hour to follow in the footsteps of the late TN Seshan for restoring the confidence of citizens in institutions that are deemed as pillars of democracy.

Sandeep Arora

## Turnout data controversy was avoidable

This is with reference to "Thanda' election: Notes from Hindi heartland" by David N Gellner and others (May 19). The Election Commission's reluctance to publish voter turnout data further obscures the picture of how many people stepped out to vote in this election.

Shrikant Ravi

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# Two markers: caste and inequality

THERE ARE things that we see but do not notice. There are things that we read but they do not register. There are things that make us flinch but we shrug them off. That is the reality of existence (we call it living) of Indians, a substantial number poor, fighting prejudice and discrimination, fiercely competitive, and driven by conflicting aspirations.

Drive down near midnight on Kolkata's Central Avenue: few will notice the number of people sleeping on the roadside or ask why these people do not have a shelter at night? Drive through any junction of roads in Delhi: the number of children who beg or sell flowers or towels or pirated books will not trigger the obvious question, why are these children not in school? Drive through the parched, dry lands in many parts of India, there is no sign of water, nothing seems to grow on the land, yet thousands of people live on the land, and few will wonder what is their source of livelihood?

Congress' manifesto LS 2024 acknowledged that, over the years, especially in the last three decades, India's economy has grown. The growth manifested itself in the burgeoning middle class, abundance of consumer goods, a mobile phone in every hand, good interstate roads, and the spanking malls, cinemas and pubs that have become the 'town squares' of urban India. However, the picture of 'shining India', cannot hide the ugly truths that are at once a reminder of our failures and an opportunity to correct our course.

ECONOMY MIRRORS

SOCIETY

UNDP drew the poverty line at earnings per person per month of Rs 1286 (urban) and Rs 1089 (rural), and estimated the number of poor persons in India at 22.8 crore. If anything, it is a gross underestimate. According to the World Inequality Lab, the bottom 50 per cent of the people (71 crore) own 3 per cent of the national wealth and earn 13 per cent of the national income. The government's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCSE) estimates the household consumption per month of the bottom 50 percent as Rs 3094 (rural) and Rs 2001 (urban). It does not require great mathematical skills to estimate the consumption expenditure of the bottom 20 per cent of the people. They practically own nothing, earn little and, as a household, consume barely enough to exist on this earth. On the Global Hunger Index, India's rank is 111 out of 125 countries.

Of the poor, according to the HCSE, the OBC are near the average level and the SC and ST are the poorest. It is no surprise that the economic hierarchy mirrors the social hierarchy that has been entrenched in the country for thousands of years, and the social hierarchy is based on caste. The very poor and the very oppressed do hard scabrous manual work at the bare minimum wage. 15.4 crore persons are active, registered workers under MGNREGA. They are given work, on average, for 50 days a year.

Meanwhile, at the other end, the top 10 per cent of the population earn 57.7 per cent of the national income. The

share of just 9223 individuals is 2.1 per cent and the share of just 92,234 individuals is 4.3 per cent. Carrying a price tag per car of between Rs 3.22 crore and Rs 8.89 crore, 103 Labhorginis were sold in India in 2023. The rich showed their gratitude when, apart from corporates, 362 individuals bought the infamous electoral bonds worth Rs 757 crore and 'donated' the sum to political parties. All political parties are beholden to their donors.

Have *achche din* arrived? Has India or have Indians become *Atmanirbhar*? India's trade deficit with China alone (yes, the country whose troops have occupied Indian territory and barred patrolling by Indian troops) was USD 100 billion in 2023-24. Is this the dawn of *Amrit Kaal*? For how long will the people be deceived and lied to?

THE TWO MARKERS

Unless political parties acknowledge that the two markers of Indian polity and economy are *caste* and *inequality*, we cannot strike at the root of poverty, discrimination and oppression. Congress' manifesto drew attention to the dark side of the BJP's narrative of 'development' and made a few simple promises to key stakeholders:

To the SC, ST & OBC

■ To conduct a nation-wide socio-economic and caste census and collect the data that will strengthen the agenda for affirmative action.

■ To lift the 50 per cent cap on reservations for SC, ST and OBC.

■ To fill all the backlog vacancies in posts reserved for SC, ST and OBC within one year.

To the Youth

■ To pass a Right to Apprenticeship Act, guarantee a one-year apprenticeship and a stipend of Rs 100,000 a year, and provide jobs.

■ To fill the nearly 30 lakh vacancies in the central government.

■ To waive outstanding education loans and unpaid interest.

To Women

■ To launch the *Mahalakshmi* scheme and provide Rs 100,000 a year to the poorest families.

■ To raise the minimum wage for MGNREGA work to Rs 400 per day.

■ To reserve 50 per cent of central government jobs for women.

PIVOT TO THE POOR

The guiding principle of the new government that will be elected in June 2024 must be 'pivot to the poor and the excluded'. Congress' manifesto acknowledged this obligation; hence it became the 'talking point' throughout the country. The BJP spent most of its lung power and money power denouncing the Congress' manifesto or, rather, the imaginary version.

As the election rolled through the seven phases, the battle was joined between those determined to protect the status quo and those determined to disrupt the status quo. Keep your fingers crossed until June 4.

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Fifth COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH  
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## Modi's dog whistles have hurt his campaign

SOMETHING THAT has been said often during this endless election campaign is that Narendra Modi's biggest asset is Rahul Gandhi. What is said less is that in this Lok Sabha campaign the opposite could also be true. When our Imperial Dynasty's heir first talked of how he had opened a shop of love in a bazaar of hatred, I dismissed it as a line that sounded as if it had been borrowed from a B-grade Bollywood film. But in recent days, as the Prime Minister's dog whistles against Muslims have become louder and more absurd, I have found myself thinking hard about how I would have voted (I did yesterday) if I were Muslim. I did not need to think too hard. I would have voted for any candidate who could defeat the BJP. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he does not need Muslims to vote for him.

The question that puzzles me is why a politician as skilled as Modi has not noticed how much this has helped the man he sneeringly describes as a prince. He deliberately uses the Urdu word *Shahzada* instead of the Hindi word *Rajkumar*, so it becomes another dog whistle. He has also said many outrageous, untrue things stooping lower than expected of a man who is Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy. He described the Congress Party manifesto as being one that the Muslim League would have produced. It is not. He said Hindu wealth would be stolen by a Congress government and distributed among 'infiltrators' who had "too many children". And for no valid reason has said in more than one interview that he would dedicate his life to prevent reservations based on religion. These assertions are based on so little evidence that it is not just Muslims he has alienated but millions of Hindus who do not believe that ethnic and communal tensions will help India.

The odd thing is that in whipping up this hysteria he has distracted from the real case he can make against Rahul Gandhi. This is that his economic ideas are terrifying. As my friend, Sadanand Dhume, wrote last week, they would turn India into "Venezuela on the Ganges". In a recent speech Rahul said he was born in "the system" and knew it well. He reminded us (unnecessary reminder) that he was born and had lived most of his life in the Prime Minister's house. It was this that had taught him that "the system" is against the poor and those of low caste. He does not explain why if he knew all this, he did not persuade Granny, Daddy or Mummy to change the system.

What he outlined instead were plans for what he will do if he gets a chance to become India's leader. He will change "the system" by redistributing wealth and by reserving jobs at the highest levels of government and even in government contracts for those who come from deprived castes. It brought back for me memories of another prime minister with similar ideas. Vishwanath Pratap Singh wanted even doctors to be chosen based on their caste. Remember?

Then when he developed kidney problems, he spent long summer months in London, at taxpayers' expense, because he said that not only were doctors better but the water for his dialysis was cleaner. It was a shocking admission and never got the attention it deserved. It is to Modi's credit that he has pointed out, after Rahul's recent diatribe against "the system" that caste cannot be the basis for handing out government contracts because this would mean that bridges would be designed by those without the skills to build a bridge.

As someone who has spoken out clearly against reservations, his words had a special resonance for me. At the risk of facing fresh demands for my arrest, I shall repeat that we need less reservations, not more. What we need urgently are many more institutions that teach skills. Unemployment has emerged in this election, as it has in most elections, as the most troubling issue for young people but the real problem is not unemployment but unemployability.

Millions of our graduates are sadly people who do not find jobs, except in government through caste reservations, because their education has been so third rate that it would not be considered an education anywhere else in the world. If there is a vital problem that Modi has not addressed in this past decade, it is this. Hopefully, if he wins a third term, he will put this at the top of the agenda he has already laid out for his first hundred days. In my ever-humble opinion, a third term was a certainty when the election campaign began. If Rahul Gandhi says today that he can put down in writing that Narendra Modi will not become India's next prime minister it is because his "shop of love in the bazaar of hatred" has a definite appeal for Muslim voters.

Let me repeat that if I were Muslim I would not be voting for the BJP. Modi has said often that his idea of secularism is that his welfare schemes do not distinguish beneficiaries by their religion. Clearly there is much for him to learn about real secularism and how much it has benefited India. May I suggest a few conversations with the Khan Market gang whom he so reviles.

## Graduate degrees, skills don't mean job stability

Dalitality

SURAJ YENGDE

Twitter: @Surajyengde



MY COUSIN Ravi Paikrao, a talented young man from Pusa, Maharashtra, was a topper in primary and high school. He was an inspiration for all parents in the family. His name would also be used to shame those who were not doing well enough. Ravi was also humble and would not flaunt it in our face. After high school, he pursued an engineering degree. Since he had bigger plans, he went to New Delhi to prepare for the civil services exam. Years later, calling it a "false universe", Ravi returned to Hingoli, a backward district in Maharashtra.

In Hingoli, he tried his hand at marketing, a job that paid him a commission-based salary. However, that didn't work out well in the long-term. Since he was fast approaching his mid-30s, his parents got him married. A responsible family man, Ravi went to Pune to work as a network engineer.

Despite an annual salary of over Rs 3 lakh, he only takes home Rs 15,000 per month. The rest goes into his provident fund and other charges. Ravi said a recruitment company that placed him as a contractual employee with his current firm takes a slice of his salary as commission.

Motivated by the PM's promises in 2014, Ravi voted for Narendra Modi. He recalls the speech where Modi promised to end the contract labour system. But multiple states moved to amend the rules under the Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970 in 2018, allowing contracting across industries. This was rationalised as a move to generate employment and provide steady growth to India's economy by allowing firms to hire or fire labourers as they saw fit. After the termination of their contract, workers are not entitled to notice pay. The government was desperate to improve the rate of unemployment.

This government does not understand the relationship between basic poverty and unemployment. If unemployment keeps spiralling you down into poverty, the contract labour system keeps workers engaged in professions that reproduce poverty and

not out of it.

Ravi's salary is the same as that of graduates and despite being an engineer, he cannot take his wife out for leisure or on vacations. He cannot do more than merely pay rent and put the food on the table. He worries about not being able to help his parents financially in their old age. Living paycheck to paycheck, his job is not a guarantee for self-sufficiency. He blames underdevelopment in Marathwada region. Every graduate from his district and Nanded usually wants to go to Mumbai or Pune but resources in these distant places are saturated.

A student leader from Hyderabad university, Sreerag, whom I had mentored, got a scholarship and went to study in London. He returned home after completing his degree but messages me every month to enquire about job opportunities. He has a job with a political consultancy, earning around Rs 60,000 per month. However, the uncertainty of working in a field such as his has made him vulnerable. He cannot buy a house or join the stream of regular work life.

He was awarded a supportive Government of Kerala scholarship to study abroad, but the money wasn't enough. So he had to take out a loan that he is struggling to repay. Sreerag's experience is mirrored by others like him, who have to keep looking for jobs despite their flashy degrees from abroad. He is now considering leaving India for employment opportunities.

His graduate degree and skills have failed to provide him with stability. As a taxpayer, his talents have not been fully utilised to ensure his stay in India. He wants to contribute to the nation, but cannot. Frustrated, he is taking a step that will keep him away from his family. He has experience working abroad, which qualifies him for a good job, but the contractual uncertainty has made him worry about his future.

Ravi or Sreerag do not see a change taking place any time soon. India ranked 164 in ILO data of regular employees in the workforce. Less than 25% of them are seen as regular employees. Ravi, who never missed voting, did not cast his vote this year. He was sick and 100 km away from the voting booth. Sreerag is working on a project, hoping to get his client into the government.

Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality, has returned to Harvard University

history HEADLINE

SHUBHRA GUPTA



WHILE SHOOTING *Manthan* on location in the tiny Gujarat village Sanganva, Shyam Benegal directed his cast to wear the same clothes for the 40-45 days duration. "You see, people in that very dry area went for days without bathing because they had so little water, so I told Naseer (Naseeruddin Shah), Smita (Patil), Girish (Karnad), Amrith (Puri), and the others to not change," says Benegal. "If they stank, they would stink jointly!"

There's something poetically apt about a film shot in blistering heat being showcased at this 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival (May 14-25), which has come as close to an Indian summer as can be, with a record number of Indian films showcased in different sections. Shah, whose first Cannes foray this was, did the mandatory red carpet walk, along with his wife, Ratna Pathak. But what was truly special was the long standing ovation after the screening. "I was very moved," he tells me.

The Benegal classic was India's first crowd-funded film: each farmer of Gujarat's Kheda district contributed Rs 2, and the opening credit read, "Produced by 500,000 farmers". *Manthan*, Benegal's third film (fourth if you count *Charandas Chhor*), after the ground-breaking *Ankur* and *Nishant*, is a lightly-fictionalised account of India's most successful co-operative movement which revolutionised the collection and production of milk.

The feature was commissioned by Verghese Kurien, the pioneer who set up Amul, the nodal agency which connected dairy farmers directly with consumers: so massive was the impact of this radical move, with its illustrious linkages going back to Sardar Patel and his close associate Tribhuvandas Patel, that it facilitated what became known as Operation Flood and the 'White Revolution', fulfilling India's founding fathers' dream of making potable milk easily available in every home.

The 1976 film, written by Benegal and Vijay Tendulkar, came after two documentaries on the same subject. "Kurien felt that the story of Amul and the tremendous work done on the ground by the farmers' co-operative needed a feature film to spread the good word, and that's how *Manthan* was made," says Benegal, 89. It won National

## How Kurien's idea led to the making of Manthan



A still from Shyam Benegal's *Manthan*. Film Heritage Foundation

Awards for the Best Feature Film, and Best Screenplay (for Vijay Tendulkar) in 1977, and was India's Oscar submission that year.

The film acquired a post-release life, and its landmark nation-building status, by becoming a visual handbook to popularise the idea behind the milk co-operative movement, by far the most successful in the country. With last week's screening in the Classics Section of the festival, in a sparkling restored version, *Manthan* got the grand revival it deserved. The restored print in 4K is a beauty, the vibrant colours of Gujarat gleam, and everything — the faces, the landscape — is crystal clear.

Benegal tells me over the phone from Mumbai how "absolutely delighted" he was at *Manthan*'s second coming. "This restored version looks like the film I wanted to shoot," he said.

The film's cinematographer Govind Nihalani, Benegal's constant collaborator, is equally satisfied. "The negative was in a terrible condition when we got it in 2014 from Shyam Babu asking if we could do something with it," says Shivendra Dungarpur, who has restored the 35 mm print beset by green mould and fading flicker problems.

He explains that the print was grainy and not complete, and there was no sound negative. "We had to do a lot of searching and matching to synch everything. It has been one and a half years of a crazy journey, and we are very proud of what we have managed. The film was shot in different stock, and Govind was very unhappy when he saw the original print; now both of them

(Benegal and Nihalani) are ecstatic."

Dungarpur, whose Film Heritage Foundation works tirelessly to discover and preserve forgotten prints of old classics, may safely be dubbed as India's Cannes darling. *Manthan* was his third outing on the Croisette the third year running (*Thamp* and *Ishanou* were screened respectively 2022 and 2023 in the Classics section; his first foray was with *Kalpana* in 2012).

Health reasons prevented Benegal from being in Cannes. But present at the screening, radiating a quiet pride, was Pateik Babbar, the late Smita Patil's son, as well as her sisters Anita and Manya. As was Nirmala Kurien, Kurien's daughter, who has very clear memories of "watching the film's first cut" as a little girl.

"My father was such a stickler for discipline, so he couldn't understand the lax ways of these film folks," laughs the Chennai-based Nirmala, 66. She remembers a "shy, unassuming, dusky" young woman in "torn jeans" standing quietly by herself on the day of that first cut, and then discovering what a powerhouse performer Smita Patil was, unforgettable as the feisty village woman Bindu, who persuades the other womenfolk to become part of the collective. Nirmala was resplendent in her silk sari at the Cannes premiere, "basking in the reflected glory of my father, who really was the man who saw tomorrow", she says.

For someone who claims he doesn't remember much — the film was made nearly 50 years back — Benegal has great memories of the shoot. The cast stayed in the only circuit house, "whitewashed the walls, cleaned up the place, and created toilet blocks (the villagers went into the fields in the morning)". The cooks they had brought along from Bombay didn't last long, so "it all was a bit rough, but I loved it," laughs Benegal. "Amrith Puri would wake up at 5.30 and make everyone do PT. So we stayed in good health. And everyone became part of the village. And now I can sit back as an old man, and say we did that."

Over the next weekend (June 1 and 2), the Film Heritage Foundation and the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd are getting together to release the film in 50 cities in 100 PVR Inox cinemas. Mark your calendar.

She SAID

SUKHMANI MALIK



AT ABOUT 15 years old, lying bare-stomached with a scope pressed down on my abdomen, and multiple cysts in my ovaries on display on a screen in front of me, I had two things: a diagnosis and a major worry confirmed. The diagnosis was polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). The worry? That I, like my aunts (who were made fun of for their hairy backs and necks) and my women classmates, was going to be ugly.

As someone who grew up until that point with "pretty privilege" (and can still swing it, provided my hairy neck is covered by hair or made hairless with bi-weekly salon appointments), being condemned to a fate of sympathetic tut-tuts and taunting snickers, felt like a nightmare come to life.

## Let's talk body hair — and my health

While the doctor rambled about how it was my fault and showed concern for no other symptom than infertility, in my head sirens were sounding out danger. The question of how this affects me, not how I am perceived, took years to crop up for me.

At this point, most who keep up with the news know of Prachi Nigam, who was at the centre of a trolling campaign because of her facial hair. She is also the UP state board Class 10 topper this year, but that, we made sure, was not the point. The obviously gendered and beauty-obsessed comments that stirred the controversy aside, what fascinated me was the response from many who showed "concern" for her health.

The Internet was quick to diagnose her with hirsutism (the growth of excessive male-pattern hair in women after puberty) and PCOS, because god forbid a woman, nay a child, simply have facial hair. One com-

ment read, "It's distasteful to mock this young girl... over her facial hair which may be due to hormonal imbalance."

It is interesting that one of the most visible public conversations we have seen in India — where one in five women and people assigned female at birth have the condition — was triggered by "excess hair" on somebody who found herself in the lime-light. And went no further than "don't troll her for it, she can't help it".

A 2022 National Centre for Biotechnology Information study noted that 64% of Indians/Indian-origin people with PCOS across the world suffer one or more comorbidities. Anxiety and depression top the list. The *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* noted how those with PCOS are twice as likely to be hospitalised for heart disease, diabetes, mental-health conditions, reproductive dis-

orders and cancer of the uterine lining.

PCOS is known in the medical community as a "mystery". Originally thought of as a cosmetic and reproductive condition, with time, it has come to be understood as a chronic health condition. In a world where women and gender non-conforming people fear stepping into a doctor's office for fear of not being believed, or worse, shamed, why does the conversation start or stop at beauty? None of us are strangers to the overwhelming pressures women face to look appealing. Beauty is essential when your career prospects, romantic prospects and value as a person are measured against how "attractive" you are.

Slowed down by constant fatigue, body aches, irregular and gut-wrenchingly painful periods, and several mental health diagnoses, today, I wonder why my quality of life and health were never the point. Not

for me, but also not for my parents (who I had to drag to the doctor's office for a diagnosis), not my doctor (not beyond concerns of infertility), and not for anybody who noticed the hirsutism and decided to inquire.

A 2019 *New York Times* essay reads, "When I was younger, I wanted to be beautiful so badly that I could taste it... What I wanted was to be undeniable, to be all clean lines, to not be debatable." This is what the obsession with beauty for a lot of people (much more so, women) boils down to. To not be debatable. So that you can move beyond the beauty and not have your experience be a subject of "debate".

Sadly, I am not sure if anybody would be bothered with PCOS or many who exhibit symptoms of it if we were to brew a magic potion to cure hirsutism. Who would care about Nigam's health if her photo reflected a clean-shaven neck and a glowing face?

# Opinion

SUNDAY, MAY 26, 2024



Bryson DeChambeau tees off on the eighth hole during the final round of the PGA Championship golf tournament at Valhalla Golf Club

USA TODAY SPORTS

## Power shift

Schauffele's Major win, DeChambeau's surge and more

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

IN KIPLING'S WORDS, "...that night we stormed Valhalla, a million years ago." Bryson DeChambeau certainly fit the part of a rampaging Norse God as he laid siege to the Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville at the 2024 PGA Championship. With his trademark booming drives, penchant for playing for the crowd, and gutsy play, the LIV Golf Tour player fought tooth and nail on the final day. They weren't in the same group — DeChambeau playing two holes ahead of Xander Schauffele — but each player knew they were up against each other in the final moments of the tournament: the roars echoed around the golf course as DeChambeau dropped another brilliant birdie on the 72nd hole to shoot 64 and tie Schauffele at 20-under. Under the gun — Schauffele, who's been in the mix so many times in Major Tournaments — delivered an incredible birdie of his own on the last to edge past DeChambeau by a stroke and win his first Major. While these two players provided the fireworks, the final day was replete with excitement with the likes of Viktor Hovland, Shane Lowry, and Collin Morikawa making runs at Schauffele's lead. It was precisely the kind of nail-biting finish we haven't seen in professional golf for a while now.

"It's hard to believe we miss Patrick Reed, but you know, that's the way it is..." quipped Padraig Harrington last week. It was a backhanded compliment: Reed was possibly the most unpopular player on the PGA Tour before he left to join the LIV Golf Tour. But Harrington was referring to the stacked field at the PGA Championship — considered to be the most competitive all year on the PGA Tour — that included a number of players from LIV. The Irishman didn't make the cut at the PGA Championship but stuck around to watch the action on the weekend. Speaking to the Golf Channel on the sidelines of the KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship Harrington was articulating a widespread sentiment — at least amongst fans — that the internecine rivalry in pro golf has made pro golf less fun to watch. "Like, Bryson was box office last week. He really, really helped that tournament, helped push Xander's win on. It was fantastic, interesting, exciting watching," Harrington added. Going by the rousing support for DeChambeau at the event, it was clear that the Louisville fans were firmly behind the LIV player: an indication that fans care very little about the LIV Golf vs PGA Tour issue. The LIV Golf players, at least the likes of DeChambeau, Jon Rahm, Louis Oosthuizen, Sergio Garcia, Phil Mickelson, Joaquin Niemann, and Dustin Johnson, are extremely popular, and to not have them in the field at PGA Tour events is a no-brainer for everyone (PGA Tour included). DeChambeau won over even

more fans at the PGA Championship: after watching Schauffele drain the birdie on the final hole, DeChambeau, who was back on the range, headed straight back to the 18th green and was one of the first to congratulate the champion. Classy stuff.

It's no small testament to the quality of his game this season that when Scottie Scheffler finishes out of the top five then it almost feels like a failure. Scheffler finished tied-eighth, which, given the astonishing nature of his off-course problems, was very creditable. What happened to the top-ranked player in the world as he was driving to the Valhalla GC to tee it up on the second day of the PGA Championship was somewhat surreal. And it all began with the tragic death of a tournament worker in a pedestrian accident early that morning. Scheffler reached the golf club early with the intention of getting a workout before his tee time. There was a road closure due to the accident that led to Mills' death. What happened next is somewhat varied, depending on who you ask, but here are the verifiable facts. Scheffler's car was flagged down by an officer: something that he says he missed. Whether that was on account of the darkness or some other misunderstanding, it led to the officer arresting Scheffler and bundling him into a police car after which he was taken to a police station where his mugshot was taken and he was put in a cell. Images of Scheffler warming up in that cell have since gone viral — he was able to get released and make it back to the course before his tee time. The world number one later described it to the press as "a big misunderstanding." Whatever the details may be, at the time of writing, Scheffler is still charged with the second-degree assault of a police officer, third-degree criminal mischief, reckless driving, and disregarding signals from officers directing traffic. Cut to the chase, the fact that Scheffler managed to get his game together and finish in the Top 10 speaks volumes about the man's mental strength.

The police mugshot picture reminded me of the only other time I've seen another golfer in one was when Tiger Woods was arrested in 2017 for Driving Under Influence (that was later reduced to a reckless driving charge). Seven years back Woods' life unravelled in dramatic fashion. A series of misfortunes — personal, professional, and physical — laid the big cat low for years. Somehow, and in a way only he can, Woods has managed to put it all back together: back to cordial terms with his ex-wife, being a model dad, winning a Major, and getting back to playing competitive golf, albeit sporadically, again. Woods leads the player representation on the 'influential policy board' of the PGA Tour that's negotiating an agreement with the LIV Golf Tour. He needs to bring his tremendous heft, and will, to bear upon both sides to come up with a win-win situation for everyone. Especially the fans.

*Golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game*

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The guiding principle of the new government that will be elected in June 2024 must be 'pivot to the poor and the excluded'. Congress' manifesto acknowledged this obligation; hence it became the 'talking point' throughout the country. The BJP spent most of its lung power and money power denouncing the Congress' manifesto or, rather, the imaginary version

THESE ARE THINGS that we see but do not notice. There are things that we read but they do not register. There are things that make us flinch but we shrug them off. That is the reality of existence (we call it living) of Indians, a substantial number poor, fighting prejudice and discrimination, fiercely competitive, and driven by conflicting aspirations.

Drive down near midnight on Kolkata's Central Avenue: few will notice the number of people sleeping on the roadside or ask why these people do not have a shelter at night? Drive through any junction of roads in Delhi: the number of children who beg or sell flowers or towels or pirated books will not trigger the obvious question, why are these children not in school? Drive through the parched, dry lands in many parts of India, there is no sign of water, nothing seems to grow on the land, yet thousands of people live on the land, and few will wonder what is their source of livelihood?

Congress' manifesto LS 2024 acknowledged that, over the years, especially in the last three decades, India's economy has grown. The growth manifested itself in the burgeoning middle class, abundance of consumer goods, a mobile phone in every hand, good inter-state roads, and the spanking malls, cinemas and pubs that have become the 'town squares' of urban India. However, the picture of 'shining India', cannot hide the ugly truths that are at once a reminder of our failures and an opportunity to correct our course.

Economy mirrors society

UNDP drew the poverty line at earnings per person per month of ₹1286 (urban) and ₹1089 (rural), and estimated the number of poor persons in India at 22.8 crore. If anything, it is a gross underestimate. According to the World Inequality Lab, the bottom 50% of the people (71 crore) own 3% of the national wealth and earn 13% of the national income. The gov-



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during an all-women election meeting for Lok Sabha polls in New Delhi

PTI

## Two markers: Caste and inequality

ernment's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCSE) estimates the household consumption per month of the bottom 50% as ₹3094 (rural) and ₹2001 (urban). It does not require great mathematical skills to estimate the consumption expenditure of the bottom 20% of the people. They practically own nothing, earn little and, as a household, consume barely enough to exist on this earth. On the Global Hunger Index, India's rank is 111 out of 125 countries.

Of the poor, according to the HCSE, the OBC are near the average level and the SC and ST are the poorest. It is no surprise that the economic hierarchy mirrors the social hierarchy that has been entrenched in the country for thousands of years, and the social hierarchy is based on caste. The very poor and the very oppressed do hard scabrous manual work at the bare minimum wage. 15.4 crore persons are active, registered workers under MGNREGA. They are given work, on average, for 50 days a year.

Meanwhile, at the other end, the top 10% of the population earn 57.7% of the national income. The share of just 9223 individuals is 2.1% and the share of just 92,234 individuals is 4.3%. Carrying a price tag per car of between ₹3.22 crore and ₹8.89 crore, 103 Lab-horginis were sold in India in 2023. The rich showed their gratitude when, apart from corporates, 362 individuals bought the infamous electoral bonds worth

₹757 crore and 'donated' the sum to political parties. All political parties are beholden to their donors.

Have *achche din* arrived? Has India or have Indians become *Atmanirbhar*? India's trade deficit with China alone (yes, the country whose troops have occupied Indian territory and barred patrolling by Indian troops) was \$100 billion in 2023-24. Is this the dawn of *Amrit Kaal*? For how long will the people be deceived and lied to?

The two markers

Unless political parties acknowledge that the two markers of Indian polity and economy are *caste* and *inequality*, we cannot strike at the root of poverty, discrimination and oppression. Congress' manifesto drew attention to the dark side of the BJP's narrative of 'development' and made a few simple promises to key stakeholders:

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stipend of ₹100,000 a year, and provide jobs.

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Pivot to the poor

The guiding principle of the new government that will be elected in June 2024 must be 'pivot to the poor and the excluded'. Congress' manifesto acknowledged this obligation; hence it became the 'talking point' throughout the country. The BJP spent most of its lung power and money power denouncing the Congress' manifesto or, rather, the imaginary version.

As the election rolled through the seven phases, the battle was joined between those determined to protect the status quo and those determined to disrupt the status quo. Keep your fingers crossed until June 4.



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FIFTH COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH

### Modi's dog whistles have hurt his campaign

SOMETHING THAT has been said often during this endless election campaign is that Narendra Modi's biggest asset is Rahul Gandhi. What is said less is that in this Lok Sabha campaign the opposite could also be true. When our Imperial Dynasty's heir first talked of how he had opened a shop of love in a bazaar of hatred, I dismissed it as a line that sounded as if it had been borrowed from a B-grade Bollywood film. But in recent days, as the Prime Minister's dog whistles against Muslims have become louder and more absurd, I have found myself thinking hard about how I would have voted (I did yesterday) if I were Muslim. I did not need to think too hard. I would have voted for any candidate who could defeat the BJP. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he does not

need Muslims to vote for him.

The question that puzzles me is why a politician as skilled as Modi has not noticed how much this has helped the man he sneeringly describes as a prince. He deliberately uses the Urdu word *Shahzada* instead of the Hindi word *Rajkumar*, so it becomes another dog whistle. He has also said many outrageous, untrue things stooping lower than expected of a man who is Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy. He described the Congress Party manifesto as being one that the Muslim League would have produced. It is not. He said Hindu wealth would be stolen by a Congress government and distributed among "infiltrators" who had "too many children". And for no valid reason has said in more than one interview that he would dedicate his life to prevent reservations based on religion. These assertions are based on so little evidence that it is not just Muslims he has alienated but millions of Hindus who do not believe that ethnic and communal tensions will help India.

The odd thing is that in whipping up this hysteria he has distracted from the real case he can make against Rahul Gandhi. This is that his economic ideas are terrifying. As my friend, Sadanand Dhume, wrote last week, they would turn India into "Venezuela on the Ganges". In a recent speech Rahul said he was born in "the system" and knew it well. He reminded us (unnecessary reminder)

that he was born and had lived most of his life in the Prime Minister's house. It was this that had taught him that "the system" is against the poor and those of low caste. He does not explain why if he knew all this, he did not persuade Granny, Daddy or Mummy to change the system.

What he outlined instead were plans for what he will do if he gets a chance to become India's leader. He will change "the system" by redistributing wealth and by reserving jobs at the highest levels of government and even in government contracts for those who come from deprived castes. It brought back for me memories of another prime minister with similar ideas. Vishwanath Pratap Singh wanted even doctors to be chosen based on their caste. Remember?

Then when he developed kidney problems, he spent long summer months in London, at taxpayers' expense, because he said that not only were doctors better but the water for his dialysis was cleaner. It was a shocking admission and never got the attention it deserved. It is to Modi's credit that he has pointed out, after Rahul's recent diatribe against "the system" that caste cannot be the basis for handing out government contracts because this would mean that bridges would be designed by those without the skills to build a bridge.

As someone who has spoken out clearly against reservations, his words had a special resonance for me. At the risk of facing fresh demands for my

arrest, I shall repeat that we need less reservations, not more. What we need urgently are many more institutions that teach skills. Unemployment has emerged in this election, as it has in most elections, as the most troubling issue for young people but the real problem is not unemployment but unemployability.

Millions of our graduates are sadly people who do not find jobs, except in government through caste reservations, because their education has been so third rate that it would not be considered an education anywhere else in the world. If there is a vital problem that Modi has not addressed in this past decade, it is this. Hopefully, if he wins a third term, he will put this at the top of the agenda he has already laid out for his first hundred days. In my ever-humble opinion, a third term was a certainty when the election campaign began. If Rahul Gandhi says today that he can put down in writing that Narendra Modi will not become India's next prime minister it is because his "shop of love in the bazaar of hatred" has a definite appeal for Muslim voters.

Let me repeat that if I were Muslim I would not be voting for the BJP. Modi has said often that his idea of secularism is that his welfare schemes do not distinguish beneficiaries by their religion. Clearly there is much for him to learn about real secularism and how much it has benefited India. May I suggest a few conversations with the Khan Market gang whom he so reviles.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE





I am the mother no longer willing to sacrifice sons to wars of men and gods of war

Suheir Hamad

## SIGNAL & NOISE FROM THE POLL THEATRE AND THE ECONOMY

In 1948, Claude Shannon, the father of information theory, built upon the work of Ralph Hartley and presented to the world the Shannon-Hartley theorem. The theorem illuminated the signal to noise ratio—the power of the desired signal and the level of undesired background noise. The math riveting the theorem helped enhance telecommunications.

There is, as yet, no formula to sift and decode signal from noise in the political economy. And the effect is vividly manifest in large democracies. Public discourse—on politics and the state of the economy—is haunted by contextual interpretations of signal and noise. Indeed, the phenomenon is vividly manifest globally as #Elections2024 plays out.

Consider the interplay of noise and signal in the context of the ongoing elections. The transition in the narrative from no-questions to doubts is stark. A hundred days back, the cognocenti had virtually called the elections. The opinion polls conducted between December and April placed the BJP-led NDA's tally between 306 and 411 seats. It was deemed a no-contest. Cut to the sixth phase of polling held on Saturday, and the conversations are about hits and misses.

The debate last week was about the quantum of losses the BJP-led alliance may incur from the peak of 2019—in Maharashtra, Bihar, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. This week, there are questions on potential gains from Odisha and Bengal—triggered by renewed campaigning by Naveen Patnaik and an aggressive campaign by Mamata Banerjee following the Calcutta High Court verdict on the inclusion of Muslims in OBC reservations in Bengal. Add the murmurs about perceived setbacks in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi. An interesting entrant in the hot debate is the outcome in Andhra Pradesh, which is deemed the new black box in this election.

There is a renewed interest in the accuracy of exit polls and hyperventilation about fake exit polls in circulation. The believers cite 2014 and 2019, while the doubters cite 2004. The 2004 exit polls predicted between 230 and 275 seats for the NDA, whereas in the final results the alliance lost out to the UPA. In conversations at morning walks, living rooms and companies, virtual Excel sheets are created and distributed. The base template of much of the speculation is a Molotov cocktail of information and opinion, rumours and memes available on social media. Noise or signal is based on the experiential and the anecdotal, and is entirely interpretative.

Any and every piece of information is fair weapon in the polarised discourse of believers and doubters. Last week, Yogendra Yadav, formerly of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and now a part of the INDI Alliance, predicted that BJP won't win a majority. This week, Prashant Kishor, member of the BJP's 2014 team, surfaced with a 300-plus seats prediction. Mind you, neither has claimed to have conducted a survey.

To paraphrase Harold Macmillan, events and utterances in the heat and dust of campaign are fuelling the rise and fall of puts and calls in the stock markets. The fact that foreign institutional investors sold over ₹27,000 crore worth of stocks has assumed both economic and political connotations. Speculation about the outcome of elections has roiled markets. Following predictions and assurances by the finance minister, home minister and prime minister, indices have yo-yoed from pessimism to record highs, with total value of Indian stocks touching \$5 trillion.

Perceptions matter in any electoral battle and scepticism has haunted reports on the well-being of Indians. The 2024 elections is verily a contest of who did better for the poor. The Congress claims it unveiled rights, the BJP has repeatedly cited the January 2024 report by Niti Aayog which stated that 248 million people have been lifted out of multi-dimensional poverty since 2013-14. The study put the poverty headcount ratio at 11.28 percent.

The opposition countered the claim, asking for the rationale of free rations to 817 million people. In February 2024, an SBI report cited data from the NSSO's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey and argued that headline poverty in India is likely at 4.5-5 percent, which is lower than the levels in many advanced economies. The report met with much scepticism and trolling.

Such is the noise level that even established practices acquire new countenance. Last Monday, a segment of the WhatsApp universe agitated about the transfer of funds by the RBI to the government. Two days later, the RBI announced it was transferring ₹2,10,874 crore as surplus to the government for the accounting year 2023-24. The timing of the announcement acquired a political countenance. Lost in the noise was the fact that this is an annual exercise formalised following the recommendation of the Jalan Committee in 2019.

The din of high-decibel rhetoric tends to drown out facts with political fiction. This is not unique to India. The US GDP has defied predictions; its stock indices are at historic highs and unemployment at a historic low. Yet, a Guardian/Harris poll published this week shows that three in five Americans think the US economy is in recession, and 49 percent believe the S&P 500 is down and unemployment at a 50-year high.

The challenge in the oldest and the largest democracy is similar. That, though, is not a consolation, but a cautionary tale for politicians. Evidently, the narrative depends on the quality of communication.

## MIGHTY MODI TAKES ON PEACEABLE PATNAIK



POWER & POLITICS

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POLITICS is a power game that's played without rules or morals. It's also the art of converting friends into foes. In the name of seeking a mandate to rule, politics can become a tool to destroy the opponent's image. Nothing else can explain the ongoing verbal war between the BJP and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha. In a replay of the Kalinga war of 321 BC, on one side is the mighty Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his trained generals looking to expand their empire, no matter the cost. On the other side is gentleman-politician Naveen Patnaik and his silent sentinels who are battling quietly to retain his father's fiefdom.

The longest-surviving chief minister in India at the moment, the 77-year-old Patnaik is asking for a sixth term to govern Odisha. A measured man of frugal needs, Patnaik has turned out to be that rare politician whom even his sworn enemies would hate to hate. But now he has been drawn into his worst-ever electoral battle where identities have been weaponised, forgotten promises have been resurrected and ugly words exchanged. While he embarks upon his adamant aim of retaining power, his pertinacious opponents have launched a powerful campaign to oust him from office. And they have not chosen his work, but his physical seclusion and choice of personal aide, to attract voters. The BJP has concluded that Patnaik has lost his usual political luminescence and invincibility.

With the Congress almost vanishing from the state, it is the BJP which smells

a possible victory by personally targeting the CM. In doing so, it has abandoned a trusted coalitionist who endorsed crucial NDA legislations in parliament. Strategically, the BJP has shifted the focus from performance to perception. Its objective is to paint the CM as a leader whose administrative skills are waning and who is surrounded by persons who don't have Odia roots.

It is for the first time that an officer-turned-politician has acquired centre-stage. V Karthikeyan Pandian, a former IAS officer who has served the CM as his man for all seasons, has been catapulted as the biggest threat to Odia identity and its cultural heritage. Married to an Odia IAS officer, Pandian is credited by his party for pulling the state out from backwardness to its current status as one of the fastest growing states. Since caste and regional aspirations play a decisive role in electoral outcomes, the BJP expects rich dividends by attacking the soldier than the general himself, using the old adage that you can sway a thousand men by appealing to their prejudices rather than appealing to one man's logic.

Surprisingly, it was Modi who fired the first shot despite often having praised Patnaik, including barely a couple of weeks ago. But politics, sadly, is a matter of convenience. It doesn't relish the idea of compromise or accommodation, especially when it comes to attaching new territories through mergers and acquisitions. For the BJP, Odisha seems to be a new market that the party feels it can acquire as its most powerful brand, Naveen Patnaik, is facing a massive anti-incumbency wave. The BJP is expecting not only to win at least 15 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, but

also for the first ever saffron government in the state.

So once the preliminary talks for even a symbolic alliance failed, the BJP opened its artillery from all directions. The strategy was three-fold. To begin with, minimising the Cult of Naveen Patnaik and invoke the threat of Odia cultural dilution under his rule. A look at the tenor of speeches made by BJP leaders and the response from the BJD during the campaign reveals the ugliness.

● Modi: "I want to challenge Naveen babu as he has been the CM for such a long time. Ask Naveen babu to name the districts of Odisha and their capitals without seeing them on paper. If the CM cannot name the districts of the state, will he know your pain?"

● Patnaik: "Do you remember the promises he made in the 2014 and 2019 elections? Odisha's natural wealth is coal, and you take coal from Odisha, but you have forgotten to increase the royalty in the last 10 years. The PM is remembering Odisha only at election time. You have allotted ₹1,000 crore for the development of Sanskrit, but nothing for the Odia language. You have forgotten about Odia music too. There are so many brave sons in Odisha, a few of whom the PM named during his campaigning. Don't any of them deserve the Bharat Ratna? You have given away the Bharat Ratna to so many people, but you again forgot about the great son of Odisha, Biju Patnaik."

● Home Minister Amit Shah: "This assembly election is an election of Odisha's pride. Can a Tamil rule Odisha? Can a Tamil babu run Odisha? I assure you, if you form a BJP government, a young CM from Odisha, a CM

who speaks Odia, will rule here." ● Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma: "I believe a high court judge should speak to Naveen babu alone to see if he is happy and okay. I mentioned a high court judge because they would be neutral. Once, a judge should speak to Naveen babu alone for 10 minutes."

● Patnaik to Sarma: "The per capita deficit (debt) of his state is double that of Odisha. He should really look into the matter in his own state. The people of Odisha are laughing at them... BJP CMs and central ministers are coming to Odisha and promising to make it number one in the country. I think they should first concentrate on their own states."

● Pandian: "My karmabhoomi is Odisha, while janmabhoomi may be Tamil Nadu, which I didn't choose. I am an Indian first."

Though the public discourse is personality-driven, the religious undercurrents of the campaign are quite visible as well. BJD leaders feel that the BJP is unnerved by Patnaik's soft Hindutva. While the BJP and the PM were engaged in reviving forgotten Hindu temples all over India along with the construction of the Ram temple, Patnaik evolved his own unique plans to gain the support of hardcore Hindu voters. During the past five years, the Odisha government has spent over ₹4,000 crore on renovation, reconstruction and restoration of ancient shrines dotting the state.

His masterstroke was visible when, on January 17, Patnaik dedicated to the state the ₹800-crore Shree Jagannath Heritage Corridor around the temple in Puri. It was done a week before the Ram temple was inaugurated in Ayodhya. Since then, the BJP has drafted its most powerful CMs, Union ministers and other opinion makers to turn the tide against the Odia leader who sacrificed his party's Rajya Sabha seat so that Modi could induct former IAS officer Ashwini Vaishnaw into the Union cabinet. But the BJP wants complete power in the state, and is no longer satisfied with being a marginal player. As Napoleon Bonaparte once commented: "In politics stupidity is not a handicap."



THE THIRD EYE

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## THE COSTS OF DIGITAL OVERCONSUMPTION



OPINION

GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN

Former bureaucrat and author, most recently of *The Spell of the Rain Tree*

RECENTLY, while checking my phone storage, I realised that I have 20,000-odd photos and clips lurking in various corners. I declutter occasionally, mostly when prompted to free up space. It got me thinking on the number of photos and clips I have consumed over time.

The rise of social media and the ease of sharing digital images have been phenomenal. A recent analysis revealed that there are nearly 5 billion social media users around the world. This growth is inextricably linked to the explosion in visual media, with the short video format being extremely popular. The ease of content creation, availability of subscribers and followers, and the possibility of monetising and receiving 'gifts' are like going down a rabbit hole where there's something for everyone. A picture is said to be worth a thousand words. This potential is being harvested by social media platforms.

On the surface, it seems like a win-win situation. There is no apparent cost for

onboarding or using social media. The platform gains by penetrative marketing and personalised ads. The user gets a soapbox to become an influencer, stay entertained and informed, or make money. Images increase engagement.

Photos and videos work exceedingly well as they transcend language barriers. Researchers are working on AI tools which will generate synthetic images from text prompts. Visual perception is a primary function of the brain and an important ingredient of cognition. Visual processing is also faster than reading a sentence. Users are thus inextricably drawn into the attention economy, which harnesses the potential of distraction. Attention is the currency remitted for using social media. We are oblivious to the opportunity cost involved.

There is, of course, the other side of the coin. The ease of generating and sharing photos and videos, drone photography, AR filters and apps that generate 3D images have enhanced user experience. A large number of people describe themselves as visual learners and benefit from advances in this technology. The precision of images could supplement the nuances of language. The use of videographic evidence in solving crimes is growing.

The human race has always realised the effectiveness of visual representation. Early writing used sequences of pictograms. Their popular use continues in road signs and danger symbols. The emergence of emojis and animated gifs, which are popular in social media, add a lightness and maybe layers of meaning to text messages.

However, the disturbing trend of morphed images and deepfakes is an emerging challenge. Digital images have enabled impersonations and identity theft. The irony is that many deepfakes are AI-generated and many a time only AI can identify them. As the saying goes, set a thief to catch a thief. Deepfakes are potential tools of misinformation and disinformation, which has been flagged at the World Economic Forum as a major global risk in the coming years. They have the power to be disruptive and foment trouble in conflict zones. Even so



The opportunity, environmental and social costs of our digital consumption are missing in public discourse. Digital minimalism is a way forward

cial media algorithms can be compromised by deepfakes through 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour' and trigger disinformation. Also, the invasion of privacy and circulation of sleaze videos of unsuspecting victims is on the rise. Is it not possible for social media platforms to block such content? Concerted steps to tackle this menace are needed involving all stakeholders including regulators and tech companies.

Most users see the generation, sharing and storage of photos and videos as an in-built feature of the smart phone. There is no need to invest in cumbersome

some devices like in the past. Further, there are apps that can organise your album and curate your memories. The dynamics of cloud storage is not something a layman really comprehends. The cloud server is a network of computers capable of humungous computational power. It needs, among other things, electricity and air conditioning, and it generates a greater carbon footprint than the airline industry. The environmental cost of our digital engagement is never debated in the public domain. We are even not aware of the process involved when we delete media from smartphones. We are lulled into a false sense of ease.

It is clear that there is an opportunity cost, an environmental cost and a social cost involved in compulsive digital engagement. We never ask ourselves whether anyone in the future is going to even glance at the hundreds of photos and selfies that we click. Content fatigue is bound to set in. To make informed choices and reduce mindless digital consumption is therefore essential at this point in time. There is value in digital minimalism. Certain measures have been imposed to keep mobile photography off bounds in some religious places, museums, forests and concert arenas. This is a welcome step. There is an irreverence in the approach of those who would forgo the synaesthesia of the moment to record a scene. There is a need for awareness regarding the effects of overconsumption of digital media. For it could well go the way of plastics—from being touted as the next big thing to being reviled.

### QUOTE CORNER



The law that protects civilians in war was developed more than 100 years ago and it applies in every country regardless of the reasons for a conflict. I will never accept that one child's life has less value than another's. I do not accept that any conflict should be beyond the reach of the law, nor that any perpetrator should be above it.

Amal Clooney, barrister, recommending charges against Palestinian and Israeli leaders to the International Criminal Court as part of an expert panel

I wanted to make a film about women who leave their homes to go to work somewhere else.

Payal Kapadia, whose *All We Imagine As Light* got an 8-minute ovation at Cannes

I'm the king of a lost world! I'm the king and I will destroy you... I did this because I wanted to sing.

Javier Milei, president of Argentina, 53, at a book release party described as a 'pagan mass' and held in a 8,000-capacity arena in Buenos Aires

### MAILBAG

Steel frame

Ref: *Other ways to remake the steel frame* (May 25). My father was a third-generation bureaucrat. Bhagwan Sahay, chief secretary of UP during 1947-49, narrated an incident that made my father one of the most trusted officers of the then CM, G B Pant. A few months after August 15, 1947, an editor-owner of a Hindi newspaper in Mainpuri district started aggressively criticising the CM. Pant told my father, then the director of information, to prosecute the editor. My father's response was, "This will be tantamount to harassment, not an honourable thing for the government to do."

Power plan

Ref: *Rise and fall of renewable energy industry in TN* (May 25). With increased power shortage this scorching summer and high tariffs hitting consumers, TNIE's timely publication of K Venkatchalam's

article deserves appreciation. It is time for Tamil Nadu to switch to the proven Gujarat model by formulating a comprehensive policy for non-conventional energy producers. The DMK lost power in 2011 mainly because of power shortages.

Transparency needed

Ref: *No SC directive on voter turnout data to poll body* (May 25). The EC is getting more confounded. Even the Supreme Court appears confused. The controversy was avoidable, caused largely by the opposition's adamant stance. The EC is also to blame, for it should not only be transparent but appear to be so. Here it fails. The veracity of poll processes should be thrown open for anyone's verification.

Police praise

The Kerala police team that netted the accused in the case of abducting a minor girl in Kanhangad deserves praise. They toiled for nine days to catch him by examining CCTV footage, making a sketch

and finally arresting him in a remote place in Andhra Pradesh. It proves that if the police are allowed to work without interference, they can do wonders.

Empower ICJ

Ref: *ICJ orders Israel to halt Rafah offensive* (May 25). The International Court of Justice was set up to settle international issues. Aggrieved countries should abide by its ruling. Thousands have already lost their lives in Ukraine and Gaza due to the adamant attitude of leaders. The ICJ should be empowered to arrest, prosecute and punish erring world leaders such as Putin and Netanyahu.

Deposit base

Ref: *Banks should improve corporate loans, keep deposit base healthy* (May 25). It's true that corporate loans are high-return, but they are high-risk too. For this reason, the RBI fixes the credit exposure cap to corporate loans at 20-25 percent. A sound base from retail deposits is evergreen for bal-

anced banking. Hence, it is important not to confine growth to corporate loans alone.

Cash seizures

The phenomenal cash seizures at election time are a slur on our democratic process. It is obvious that money plays a massive role in electoral prospects. These cash hauls end with the arrest of innocent victims; the real perpetrators escape. The EC is neither equipped to apprehend the culprits, nor does it have the potential to reform the system. It needs a change in mindset of political parties.

Outstanding development

We remember the days when we used to hold on to rails and stand in buses and trains. India has developed so much in the aviation sector that the practice of standing has commenced in airlines too. India's largest airline, IndiGo, is the pioneer in this amazing development.

## REFLECTIONS

## Between despair &amp; hope

TOUCHSTONES  
IRA PANDE

If one were to believe our newspapers or the bilge that is sent out on WhatsApp groups, it is easy to be persuaded that doomsday is upon us. Perhaps, it is a sign of the times that makes us so negative and humourless, or perhaps, it is that we wish to join the herd. It seems almost sinful to be happy and satisfied in a world that has shrunk into small groups, provinces and regions that are eternally at daggers drawn. Yet, look around you and point me to a country (other than little Bhutan) where natural surroundings are preserved, people are polite, caring and gentle, communities live in harmony and simplicity of life is a quality that is actively promoted.

Long ago, before Ravish Kumar became the self-appointed keeper of this nation's conscience, he used to bring to us moving human stories, many of which have stayed with me. His coverage of Varanasi as he did a programme on the constituency that Modi had chosen in 2014, focused not on the campaign but on the forgotten history of Banaras. So he took us to Lamahi, the village that Premchand grew up in and where his memory is preserved in a modest museum. This remarkable institution has a self-appointed caretaker (a Mishraji, if I remember correctly), who guided Ravish through it. The episode ended with Mishraji saying that he felt he had graduated from being a reader of Premchand's fiction to becoming a character from that world. Nothing, in essence, had changed herein for almost a century. The village and its people were still battling with the same social problems that Premchand describes so hauntingly.

There are two other episodes that I remember as vividly: one on the first Gandhi Ashram (now a crumbling ruin) set up somewhere in Meerut and the other on the condition of the poor patients who flock to Delhi's AIIMS for treatment. As they await their turn, several poor patients and their families lie on the pavement outside since they cannot afford to stay anywhere else. Here again, a Dr Dash took us with Ravish to the cancer section and explained how no one, no matter how poor, was ever turned away for lack of money.

The purpose of this long recall is that there is still hope if only we are able to see it. However, since it is sexier to peddle stories of poverty, misery and social injustice, we have forgotten to register that India is multiple times the size of the small developed countries that have enviable records of social welfare.

Let me now take you to some of the stories that come to us from there. The National Health Service (NHS) in UK is now in a state of terminal decline. Its doctors and nurses have gone on strike and in any case, it is so overloaded that even an urgent X-ray requires a long wait. Private healthcare is out of the reach of most, so unlike in India, where the neighbourhood 'dactar' provides immediate care (say nothing of the steroids being pumped into uneducated veins). We seem no worse off. It is almost the same in

the US, where unless you are covered by expensive insurance, you can wait eternally for a kidney transplant or heart surgery. It is no wonder that medical tourism is now a widespread way to access quality medical attention in Indian hospitals. Go to any well-regarded private hospital in India and you will meet people from all over the world, accompanied by touts and translators, who take them to our best doctors and at a fraction of the cost abroad.

Come now to the shameful international reportage of our communal tensions. If we were to blindly believe all we hear and read, everyone in India is a bigoted bully. Yet, honestly speaking, is the Islamophobia in the US any better? Add to that now anti-Semitism, with university campuses across the US erupting in huge student protests, brutally handled by the police and university authorities. Let us not even speak of the rampant racism still practised all over the white world. I concede that comparisons are odious and that we have a shameful record on communal politics, yet how long shall we tolerate different rules applied to developing countries, simply because the big boys' clubs cannot make place for new entrants?

My simple point is that we have all come a long way since 1947 and yes, some terrible mistakes and decisions were taken in those years but, by and large, when I look around the world and try to see one country that has a flawless record in upholding social justice, equality, brotherhood and love, I'm afraid I fail each time. As I said earlier, apart from Bhutan (that practises a form of benign monarchy), I can't think of another country that I would like to live in. Dynastic politics, feudal values, a deep commitment to one's faith, along with some religious intolerance towards those of another faith — these are the warp and weft of India. Trying to eradicate all evil forever will never happen, not at least in my lifetime.

So the next time you open a toxic post or sign a public petition, don't think you've played your part as a responsible citizen. We still have a long journey ahead.

We've come a long way since 1947 and yes, some terrible mistakes have been made. But if we were to blindly believe international reportage, everyone in India is a bigoted bully

## When Nehru visited Hisar, and NDA

LT GEN RAJ KADYAN (RETD)

DURING our trip to the United Kingdom to meet our son last year, we also visited the grandson's school at Harrow. While showing us around, he pointed to the room where Jawaharlal Nehru had stayed as a student. It stirred some memories.

In 1951, the Prime Minister visited Hisar. My brother, commanding the military police unit, piloted the VIP cavalcade to various meeting venues. At the end, after the departing convoy was on the main road, he halted on the side and saluted as the PM's car passed. Within yards, the car screeched to a halt and reversed. Pandit Nehru came out, shook hands with my brother and said, "Thank you, young man, for all your help." My brother remembered that humane gesture all his life.

Prime Minister Nehru was instrumental in selecting Khadakvasla (Pune) as the new site for the National Defence Academy and reviewed the first passing-out parade there in June 1955. He visited NDA again on May 14, 1961. The visit concluded with lunch in the cadets' mess. As per protocol, a visiting dignitary was seated between the Commandant and the Academy Cadet Captain (ACC). I was the ACC.

During the period, our only access to the world was through newspapers. Given our

tight schedule, we only read the sports page. As a result, our horizon was limited.

Since the PM would have had a discussion with the Commandant during pre-lunch hours, it was expected that he would spend more time interacting with me. The prospect was intimidating. No one had tutored me on what I should say or discuss. Such freedom was part of our grooming.

After receiving him in the foyer, I guided the PM to his seat on the centre table on a raised platform. Frail and slightly stooped, he had a handsome peach red complexion. He must have realised the nervous apprehension of a teenager sitting to his right. The hallmark of a great person lies in his descending to the level of the other in conversation. This the PM did, starting with asking where I hailed from.

When I mentioned my village in Rohtak district, he enquired whether we had electricity, roads, running water, etc. I told him of the stone-soled road with once-a-day bus service to the town and that we drew drinking water from the well. More than half the houses were mud structures. There was no electricity and I studied in the dim light of a kerosene lamp. Maybe it was to put me at ease, he evinced keen interest in whatever I told him. On electricity, he said we would be getting it soon; and we did, the very next year.

He asked me about our life in the Acad-

my. Here I was on firm ground.

Emboldened by his easy manner, I ventured into asking, "Sir, why is India a poor country?" He smiled, giving no indication of my naiveté. Then he gave a detailed explanation of how we started at near zero at Independence. I suddenly felt the person sitting beside me was not only the PM of the world's largest democracy with a strong global presence, but was also a patient teacher, a gentle elder.

"Sir, won't the Bhakra Nangal Dam improve our irrigation?" I was in Class 8 when the dam was inaugurated in 1954.

"Yes, of course it will," he replied, predicting that Punjab would soon be India's food basket. He went on to elaborate the country's efforts at industrialisation and scientific progress. In fact, starting a world-class defence academy itself was a great achievement, he mentioned.

When lunch finished, I guided him to the table where the visitors' book was kept. While getting down the approximately 12-inch step, he placed his hand on my shoulder for support. I was suddenly emotional and saw a father figure in him.

We were in North Kashmir when on May 27, 1964 — 60 years ago — news broadcaster Melville deMellow announced the death of PM Nehru. 'What' and not 'who' after Nehru was the common concern of most Indians.

## Striking feats that define Sunil Chhetri

JAYDEEP BASU

THE journey that began on June 12, 2005, in the high-altitude city of Quetta will finally come to an end in the plains of Kolkata on June 6 — an odyssey six days short of 19 years. In between, Sunil Chhetri, the poster boy of Indian football, has set many a record that would be hard to surpass. For the national team, he has played 150 matches, scored 94 goals, and worn the captain's armband in a staggering 87 outings.

This set of cold statistics would have been enough for Chhetri to go down as one of the finest in the nearly 150-year history of Indian football. But it is only a minuscule part of Chhetri's characteristics, almost negligible to those who have followed his career closely. What the diminutive striker has delivered to the national team for close to two decades can sweep away all figures and even the greatest names of the game in India would find it difficult to match.

To put it straight, no one in Indian football has ever managed to score so many crucial goals for the country in so many important make-or-break matches. Even legends like Chuni Goswami, PK Banerjee or Tulsidas Balamani's exceptionally brilliant career graphs don't boast of such a scenario.

Time and again, Chhetri, almost single-handedly, has taken the pain of elevating the otherwise modest Indian football to the next level, no matter how long it could survive there. Think of the two Asian Cup final rounds India made in 2011 and 2019 — neither feat would have been achieved without Chhetri's masterstrokes in decisive encounters.

In the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup final, India needed to beat Tajikistan to qualify for the Asian Cup final rounds after 24 long years. The ground conditions at Delhi's Ambedkar Stadium were far from encouraging — the steady drizzle at regular intervals turned the pitch slushy and impossible for good football. But, on that fateful night of August 13, 2008, Chhetri rose to the occasion to net a hat-trick that resulted in a 4-1 demolition of Tajikistan and a place in the 2011 Asian Cup in Doha, a truly significant occurrence in Indian football.

A decade on, Chhetri didn't lose his sharpness. Without his superb strikes against Myanmar and Kyrgyzstan, India would not have qualified for the 2019 Asian Cup. His two goals in the qualifiers in 2017 changed the complexion of the matches. India qualified from Group A with two matches to spare. Out of India's 11 goals across six matches, the captain scored four in five games.

The goal against Myanmar in Yangon was historic, as it was India's first victory against the neighbours in an away tie since 1953. He later told this writer, "It was in the 90th minute and the match was still goalless. When Udanta (Singh) passed the ball to the goalmouth, I was far behind. Believe me, I simply burst my lungs out and ran. The Myanmar defenders were ahead of me, but I told myself I would have to get it and I managed to get it."

Equally stunning was his strike against Kyrgyzstan in Bengaluru that set the pace for India's qualification. Chhetri began the decisive run a few



Sunil Chhetri will retire as India's all-time top scorer and most-capped player. PTI

No other Indian has scored so many crucial goals in so many make-or-break matches

yards inside his own area, dodged past three defenders, passed the ball for Jeje Lalpekhlua, and ran into the box. As Jeje sent an inch-perfect pass for Chhetri, he struck home with a coolness that left the Kyrgyzstan goalkeeper completely frozen in his spot.

Chhetri later rated it as the number-one goal in his international career. He said: "While I did score the goal, what I remember was the pass by Jeje... It was an important goal because we needed the three points to stay firmly in the qualifying race."

The list could be stretched further. But the fact remains that none of Chhetri's predecessors could strike with such unfailing regularity, not even mercurial forwards like IM Vijayan or Bhaichung Bhutia. Sceptics have often talked about the lack of international silverware in Chhetri's trophy cabinet, have questioned the quality of opposition, and ridiculed the general standard of Indian football. They have ignored the fact that football has undergone a sea change in the Asian continent in terms of both quality and competition and Chhetri faced a much smarter and more organised defence than before.

Jamail Singh had several stitches on his head and yet scored a goal in the 1962 Asian Games final — it's an age-old popular story of Indian football. Few remember the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup semi-final against Myanmar in Hyderabad under heavy rain; running on the pitch was difficult, let alone controlling the ball. It was an amazing night as an injured Chhetri, with his head heavily bandaged, leapt high in the 82nd minute to head home the winner.

It stunned his teammates, the crowd, and even the India coach Bob Houghton, who later said he didn't see a braver goal in his career. The English coach was spot-on. Indian football has rarely seen a braver soul than Sunil Chhetri.

## Need to amend legislation to ensure professional liability

CONSUMER RIGHTS  
PUSPAHA GIRIMAJI

WHILE exempting lawyers from any professional liability for deficient services under the Consumer Protection (CP) Act, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court has opened a Pandora's box by recommending to the Chief Justice of India that a 1995 judgment of the apex court that held a contrary view vis-à-vis medical professionals be re-considered!

Whatever may be the response of the Chief Justice, this will certainly spur not just medical professionals but many others to re-open the issue and this does not augur well for consumer protection and justice. And unless the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs acts quickly and makes the

necessary changes in the law, consumers may well lose their right under the CP Act to hold professionals, including doctors, radiographers, pharmacists, chartered accountants, engineers and architects, liable for their deficient services.

The judgment of the Supreme Court in the Bar of Indian Lawyers vs DK Gandhi case, delivered on May 14, holding that legal professionals are not accountable to consumers under the CP Act, certainly comes as a very big disappointment to consumers. Of course, the consumers' right to sue their lawyers under the CP Act was more or less extinguished way back in 2009, when the Supreme Court stayed the order of the apex consumer court in DK Gandhi vs M Mathias case delivered in 2007, in favour of the consumer. If in the last decade-and-a-half — when the appeals against this order were pending before the Supreme Court — consumers had harboured any hope of a favourable judgment, that hope has now been dashed. But even now, the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, along with DK Gandhi, the complainant in the case, should file a review petition before the Supreme Court.

But what is more alarming is the view

expressed in the judgment that the Supreme Court should re-open a much hailed judgment of the apex court in the Indian Medical Association vs VP Shantha case delivered in 1995, holding that consumers can seek compensation from medical professionals for negligence under the Consumer Protection Act.

Not many consumers today are aware of the situation that existed before the consumer protection law came into force in 1986. Be it a case of a doctor operating on the wrong leg, or leaving behind a pair of scissors in the abdomen post-surgery, or administering wrong medication to a patient or conducting needless hysterectomy or C-Section, the victims or their rela-

The apex court ruling that legal professionals are not accountable to consumers comes as a big disappointment

tives in most cases suffered in silence because they could not afford to go to a civil court and fight a long legal battle to seek compensation. The Consumer Protection Act of 1986 for the first time gave them the right to seek damages for medical negligence and soon, cases began to be filed against doctors and hospitals.

The reaction from the medical professionals was quick, adverse and, sometimes, even violent. They rose as one in protest and exerted considerable pressure on the government to keep them out of the purview of the CP Act. The consumer activists had to fight hard to ensure that the government did not give in to the wishes of the doctors.

What finally settled the matter in favour of consumers was the extremely clear and lucid judgment of the Supreme Court in 1995 in the VP Shantha case. After carefully examining the provisions of the CP Act, the three-judge Bench held that the services rendered to a patient by a medical practitioner by way of consultation, diagnosis and treatment, both medicinal and surgical, would fall within the ambit of 'service' as defined in the Act. The fact that medical practitioners belonged to the medical profession and were subject to the

disciplinary control of the Medical Council of India/State Medical Council constituted under the Indian Medical Council Act would not exclude the services rendered by them from the ambit of the Act.

The present judgment of the Supreme Court, pertaining to lawyers, on the other hand, says that the legislature never intended to include professionals within the purview of the CP Act. Even if it did, the legal profession is 'sui generis' or unique in nature and cannot be equated with other professions and brought under the ambit of the CP Act. It also points out that a 'profession' cannot be equated with 'business or trade'. Nor can the services provided by professionals be treated at par with the services provided by businessmen or traders, so as to bring them under the purview of the CP Act.

This judgment is sure to re-open the debate on the jurisdiction of the consumer commissions constituted under the CP Act and consumers should now get ready to protect their interests. As a first step, they must write to the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs to bring in the necessary amendments to the CP Act to secure their right to seek compensation for negligent services rendered by professionals.



"Until you dig a hole,  
you plant a tree, you  
water it and make it  
survive, you haven't  
done a thing. You are  
just talking"  
— Swami Vivekananda



As we navigate life's twists and turns, we can draw inspiration from the timeless wisdom from nature to embrace the changes that come our way, always making room for new growth and opportunities, write **BKP SINHA** and **ARVIND KUMAR JHA**

# GENESIS OF GROWTH FROM BUD TO BRANCH

As you stand beneath the towering majesty of a tree, your gaze is naturally drawn upwards, captivated by the intricate network of branches that crisscross the sky. Each branch, unique in pattern and structure, defines the tree's character and beauty. Yet, behind this awe-inspiring spectacle lies a more fascinating tale of growth and transformation. The narrative unfolds with the emergence of a bud from the tree's trunk. Given the right balance of sunlight, water, and nutrients, this bud slowly grows and develops into a mature branch. The genesis of a bud, or bud set, is initiated in regions of the plant rich in meristematic cells. These cells, found at the tips of stems and roots, have the unique ability to divide and differentiate into various types of plant cells, leading to the formation of new organs such as leaves, flowers, and branches. When these meristematic cells, or apical buds, are exposed to sunlight, they initiate new growth.

This is where the plant hormones auxin and cytokinin come into play. Auxin, originating from the shoot apex, inhibits the outgrowth of axillary buds, allowing the apical bud to grow faster and taller. This phenomenon, known as apical dominance, ensures that the central stem of the plant grows more strongly than the side stems. Cytokinin, on the other hand, which is stimulated by the removal of the shoot apex, promotes the outgrowth of axillary buds by providing them with more nutrients.

This tug-of-war between auxin and cytokinin is crucial for the plant's growth strategy. It allows the plant to adapt to its environment, growing taller to reach for sunlight or spreading out its branches to occupy more space. As the bud grows, the meristematic cells divide and differentiate, giving rise to different types of cells that constitute the branch. Some cells form the outer layer, transforming into bark cells, while others form the wood, turning into the xylem and phloem. As the cells continue to divide and differentiate, the bud gradually elongates, evolving into a twig.

Over time, the twig undergoes lignification, a process involving the deposition of lignin, a complex organic polymer that provides rigidity to the plant's cell walls. This process gradually transforms the flexible, green twig into a hard, brown branch. Lignin is a key component of the plant's defense mechanism. It forms a physical barrier in the cell walls that protects the plant against pathogens and pests.

This barrier also makes the plant resistant to decay, thereby increasing its lifespan. Moreover, lignin is essential for the plant's water transport system. It makes the plant's vascular tissues waterproof, preventing the leakage of water and nutrients, and facilitating their upward movement from the roots to the leaves. This waterproofing property also prevents the absorption of excess water, protecting the plant from waterlogging and associated diseases.

The anatomy of a branch reveals a marvel of plant architecture. At its very base lies the branch collar, a swollen area where the branch attaches to the main trunk. This specialized structure houses tissues that are instrumental in wound healing and act as a protective shield against the invasion of pathogens.

Progressing from the branch collar, we come across the branch junction. This crucial juncture signifies the point where the branch diverges from the trunk, paving the way for the branch's outward expansion. From this point, the branch unfurls, giving rise to lateral shoots known as secondary branches or twigs.

These offshoots, in turn,



**BKP SINHA**



**ARVIND K JHA**

“OVER TIME, THE TWIG UNDERGOES LIGNIFICATION, A PROCESS INVOLVING THE DEPOSITION OF LIGNIN, A COMPLEX ORGANIC POLYMER THAT PROVIDES RIGIDITY TO THE PLANT'S CELL WALLS. THIS PROCESS GRADUALLY TRANSFORMS THE FLEXIBLE, GREEN TWIG INTO A HARD, BROWN BRANCH. LIGNIN IS A KEY COMPONENT OF THE PLANT'S DEFENSE MECHANISM. IT FORMS A PHYSICAL BARRIER IN THE CELL WALLS THAT PROTECTS THE PLANT AGAINST PATHOGENS AND PESTS”



branch out into finer limbs, culminating in the production of leaves, flowers, or fruits. Branching patterns in trees are an intriguing aspect of plant biology, reflecting both the genetic makeup of the species and the environmental conditions in which they grow. One such pattern is 'alternate branching', seen in certain species. In this arrangement, branches are staggered along the main stem, reducing overlap and creating spaces between branches. This results in a more open canopy structure, which is not only an architectural marvel but also a strategic adaptation. The open structure allows sunlight to penetrate evenly, reaching the lower branches and the forest floor. This not only benefits the tree itself by ensuring all parts receive adequate sunlight for photosynthesis but also nurtures the understory plants with filtered light. However, this strategy is not without its challenges.

The staggered arrangement of branches creates a less rigid framework, which, while potentially allowing for more movement during wind events, might also increase the tree's susceptibility to structural damage in severe storms.

On the other hand, some species showcase 'opposite branching', with pairs of branches sprouting in symmetrical opposition. Trees with opposite branching patterns often experience higher levels of shading within their canopies due to the symmetrical arrangement of branches. This leads to a denser and overlapping canopy structure, akin to a natural umbrella that provides shade and conserves moisture. The increased density results in shading between opposite branches, limiting the penetration of sunlight to lower branches and the interior of the canopy. However, this denser structure often provides increased mechanical stability against wind or storms. Branches inherently exhibit negative geotropism, meaning they grow in the opposite direction of gravity, reaching upwards and outwards for sunlight. This strategic adaptation enables them to maximise their exposure to sunlight and secure their place in the fierce competition for resources. In dense forests, where sunlight is scarce, trees adopt a different strategy known as 'self-shading avoidance'. They grow more vertically to minimize the shading of their lower leaves and reach toward the scant light available in the canopy. Wind, the invisible sculptor, also plays a significant role in shaping tree growth. In windy environments, trees often adopt narrower branching angles, resulting in a more streamlined shape that reduces wind resistance.

These branches, often perceived as mere offshoots, are in fact, the vital lifelines of trees. Much like arteries in the human body, branches serve as crucial conduits within the arboreal world, playing an indispensable role in the survival and well-being of the tree. They perform the critical function of transporting water and nutrients from the roots to the leaves, while also carrying back the sugars produced during photosynthesis from the leaves to the rest of the tree. They also provide habitat and support for a diverse range of organisms. Birds build nests on them, insects and lichen find refuge on the bark and leaves, and mammals use branches for shelter and as a pathway for movement. This biodiversity creates a mini-ecosystem within the branches themselves, contributing significantly to the overall health of the tree and the complex web of life that surrounds it.

Many trees have flowers and fruit on their branches, which are essential for reproduction. Flowers attract pollinators, and fruits, containing seeds, are eaten by animals who then disperse the seeds in their droppings, aiding in the spread of the tree species. Some seeds are even equipped with wings or fluff, enabling them to be carried by the wind, thus allowing plants to disperse



their offspring over a wide area. In some remarkable instances, branches themselves become the genesis of new life. This is observed in the process of vegetative propagation, where fragments of branches can give birth to entirely new trees. This form of asexual reproduction results in a new tree that is genetically identical to the parent tree. Trees, in their wisdom, are active architects of their growth. They strategically shed lower branches that are no longer efficient at photosynthesis. This calculated act of self-pruning allows trees to channel their energy and resources toward the higher branches, which are better positioned to capture more sunlight. But how does the tree accomplish this? When a branch becomes unproductive, the tree gradually severs its supply of water and nutrients. The branch then loses its bark and becomes frail and susceptible to fungi. Eventually, the branch falls off, leaving behind a stump that is sealed by resins or gums. This seal protects the tree from harmful pathogens that could infect the wounded area and jeopardize its health. As the fallen branch decomposes, it bestows its accumulated nutrients back into the soil, a final act of nourishment for the tree that once gave it life. This process enriches the surrounding ecosystem, fostering new life and affirming that in every ending, there is a new beginning. This ongoing cycle of growth and retreat mirrors life's profound truth: Change is the only constant. It serves as a reminder that life isn't merely about relentless growth, but also about the wisdom of knowing when to let go. Much like a tree that sheds an unproductive branch to conserve energy for new growth, we too should find the courage to let go of what no longer serves us. As we navigate life's twists and turns, we can draw inspiration from this timeless wisdom from nature to embrace the changes that come our way, always making room for new growth and opportunities.

(Former Principal Chief Conservators of Forests, UP and Maharashtra)

# A SYMPHONY OF DREAMS, LOSS AND A NATION'S AWAKENING

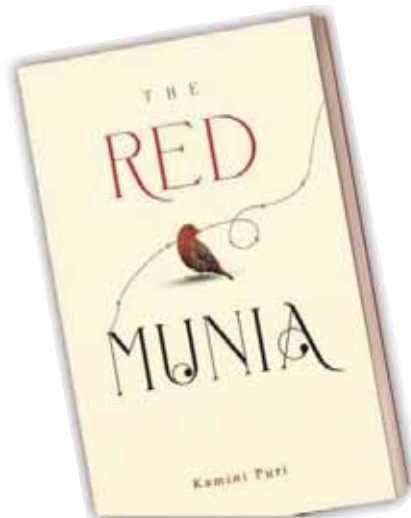


**KAMINI PURI'S** words breathe life into the pages of *The Red Munia* as she intricately interweaves the personal and the political, offering readers an exploration of love, loss and the human spirit amidst India's transformative history, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**

**T**he *Red Munia* by renowned author Kamini Puri delves into the history of India, beautifully exploring the themes of family, love, Indian history and loss amidst a transforming nation. Puri's novel is a compelling journey of self-discovery set against the vibrant landscapes of India. The story is as much about the characters as it is about the cultural and natural beauty that surrounds them. The novel reflects contemporary reality, illustrating how "Politics is something we are unknowingly growing up on without even understanding the meaning of it." The novel's charm lies in its rich descriptions and the deep emotional resonance of its characters as they navigate the complexities of love, identity, and freedom. In the prologue, Puri introduces the red munia bird, an enchanting creature with deep red wings speckled with brown and white. This bird, despite its beauty is often captured and caged, symbolising India's own history of being subjugated for its riches and splendour. The red munia's plight mirrors the nation's suffering under British rule establishing a resonant and evocative framework for the story. Laila, the vibrant heart of the novel, takes readers on a voyage from her

childhood in Kapurthala, Punjab. Her determination is well-portrayed by Puri, showcasing her dreams and emotional connection with her sister. As Laila grows up, she leaves her sheltered life in Kapurthala to pursue journalism in Bombay. Her quest for independence and self-expression leads her to London, where she dreams of meeting the Queen of England. In London, she meets Jai, whose carefree attitude and understanding of love transform her perspective on life. Their romance faces numerous challenges, reflecting the complexities of cultural integration and personal ambitions. The first chapter, 'Childhood Bliss,' introduces readers to the blissful world of Laila in 1942 Kapurthala, Punjab. Laila, her sister Dia, and their friend Maya live a life filled with joy and adventure epitomised by their games, horse riding and the warmth of family traditions. The vivid descriptions of their home, particularly the beloved divan in the verandah, evoke a sense of nostalgia and comfort. Laila's narration brings to life the household dynamics, with Papaji's morning rituals and Biji's attachment to old furniture adding layers of authenticity to the family portrait. The playful interactions between Laila and Dia, their mimicry of Papaji's shaving routine and their

**THE RED MUNIA**  
 Author: Kamini Puri  
 Publisher: StoryMirror Infotech  
 Price: ₹349



uncontrollable laughter highlight the innocence and joy of childhood. However, beneath this idyllic surface, there are hints of the larger political context. Laila's awareness of her father's concerns about the anarchic state of India adds a layer of depth to her character, foreshadowing her eventual journey toward personal and political awakening. At 18, Laila leaves her hometown to pursue journalism in Bombay (Mumbai), a decision that marks the beginning of her journey toward self-discovery. The portrayal of Bombay in the 1940s is vivid and immersive, showcasing the city's bustling streets, diverse culture, and vibrant atmosphere. The chapter 'Bombay Dreams' is particularly special for every reader as it captures Laila living in the city of dreams to pursue her ambitions. Through Laila's experiences, Puri masterfully captures the essence of the city, highlighting its role as a melting pot of dreams and aspirations. One of the novel's most compelling aspects is Laila's relationship with her family. Despite her physical distance from them, Laila's emotional connection to her family, particularly with her sister Dia, is heartwarming, as it serves as a source of strength and support for both sisters as they navigate life's challenges.

Central to the novel is the theme of grief, portrayed with raw honesty and sensitivity. The protagonist's struggles to come to terms with loss, both personal and collective, is depicted with heartbreaking realism. Puri explores different facets of grief - anger, denial and eventual acceptance — with nuance, making it a deeply relatable and poignant read. In the chapter 'Unforgettable Meeting,' where Laila interviews Jawaharlal Nehru, her achievement is significant, yet she misses the sharing that comes from a soulful relationship. This moment describes the emotional depth of the book, as she has no one to share her accomplishment with apart from her father, highlighting the emptiness she feels despite her success. The novel also shines in its portrayal of the impact of historical events on individual lives. Through the protagonist's journey, Puri illuminates how larger political events, such as India's struggle for Independence and the assassination of Gandhi, reverberate in the lives of ordinary people, shaping their choices and beliefs. Character development is another strong suit of the novel. The protagonist's growth and transformation are beautifully rendered, making them fully realised and empathetic characters.

The novel is more than just a personal journey, as it explores the complexities of finding your voice and chasing your dreams amidst societal constraints. Laila's burning ambition to become a journalist is juxtaposed against the expectations placed upon young women of her times. This internal conflict is further amplified as she grapples with the cultural shifts and social changes sweeping across India. The titular red munia bird emerges as a powerful symbol. Is it a representation of the freedom and resilience that Laila aspires to? Or perhaps, a reminder of the beauty and fragility of her homeland? The ambiguity adds depth to the story, inviting readers to contemplate the symbolism throughout the narrative. Arguably, *The Red Munia* is a beautifully written novel that offers a compelling portrait of pre-Independence India. Through its vivid imagery, well-developed characters and touching storytelling, Kamini Puri creates a narrative that is both appealing and thought-provoking. It is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of hope and determination, making it a must-read for anyone interested in journeys of self-discovery and the rich history and culture of India.

## At His Majesty's Service

Chander Lall's book offers a panoramic view of the Constitution, the history of India's Independence movement, and the social milieu of that era in an inimitable style, writes **KUMAR CHELLAPPAN**

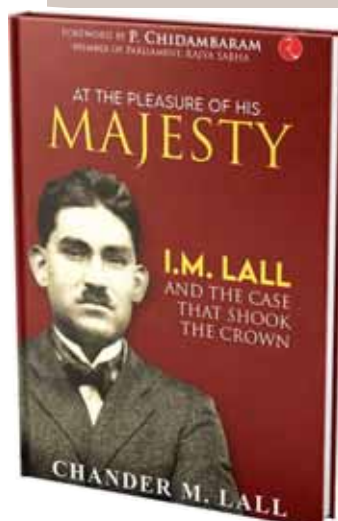
**H**aving worked with Central Government establishments for close to a decade and a half, this writer has come to the conclusion that a Government job is a safe haven for those with an IQ below par. Apart from the obvious security and regular salaries that accompany such a job, it also leads to some individuals barely doing any work worth its name. In fact, it is this sense of security that draws countless aspirants to seek a position in State/Central Government departments. Recently, I came across the case file of a driver employed with the Andaman Lakshadweep Harbour Works whose service was terminated following unauthorised absence from duty for a period of eight years. It took years for the Central Administrative Tribunal to concur with his superiors that his continuous absence from duty for such a long period was devoid of any justification and uphold their decision to terminate his services. This is just one such instance of the freedom enjoyed by Government servants who are blissfully unaware of the landmine-paved paths of the private sector. While modern-day Government employees are fortunate to enjoy complete freedom at their work places, things were not as smooth during the tenure of the British administration. Anyone, including officers of the high profile and elite Indian Civil Services, could be relieved of their responsibilities for the most innocuous of reasons. It took a daredevil ICS officer like Inder Mohan Lall to take on the British administration by the horns and tutor them on the fact that there is due procedure to be followed in taking disciplinary

action against any errant Government officer or lower staff. The Civil Service Regulations had given enough power to the then Federal Public Service Commission as well as the Government of India's Home Department under the Government of India act 1935 to "fire" anyone accused of misconduct while in service. The draconian rule did not have any provision to furnish the accused with a chargesheet, his version of the story holding no relevance. This rule was challenged by Lall, taking on His Majesty's Government from 1939 to 1948. The case culminated in Lall's victory as the Court ordered that the Government of India Act should have Article 311 which ensures that "no person who is a member of the civil service of the Union or an all India Service or a civil service of a State shall be dismissed or removed by an authority subordinate to that by which he was appointed." No such person as aforesaid shall be dismissed or removed or reduced in rank except after an enquiry in which he has been informed of the charges against him and given a reasonable opportunity of being heard in respect of those charges, the Court ordered. Lall had faced a series of charges for his decision to appoint Sundar Das, his wife's nephew, as a subordinate staff in the court where he worked as district judge of the Hoshiarpur district. This antagonised some of the junior staff members who had eyed the post for themselves. Lall had taken stringent action against many Government employees for their corrupt practices so they were waiting for an opportunity to strike back. Sundar Das came served as the right opportunity for them to take it up with the Secretary of

State. The latter appointed two commissions of enquiry, one after another, to foist cases on Lall in order to get rid of him from His Majesty's Service. The enquiries and the ensuing legal battle form the plot of his book. What author Chander M Lall has done is to chronicle the events in a reader-friendly manner. He commences with his family history that includes Lall's life as a soldier in the British Indian Army during the First World War and how he made it to the ICS from where he was removed, based on the reports submitted by the enquiry commissions. We seldom go into the details of a new legislation enacted by law making

bodies like the Parliament or legislative assemblies. However, each and every law enacted addresses a specific concern. The first time the Constitution was amended was to address certain difficulties arising out of rulings by the Supreme Court. Famous cases like Golak Nath versus State of Punjab or Keshavananda Bharati versus State of Kerala were a follow up to the restrictions placed on the land ownership of individuals. Henry and William Golak Nath, two brothers, owned hundreds of acres of prime land in Jalandhar. But the Punjab Government declared that each brother could own only 30 acres of land and declared the rest as surplus land. The brothers challenged the Act and the apex court upheld the decision of the State of Punjab. Similarly, Keshavananda Bharati, the pontiff of Edneer Mutt, challenged the Kerala Government's move to take over vast stretches of land owned by the Mutt (monastery) as per the Land Reforms Act. A constitutional Bench in a split verdict upheld the Kerala Government decision but ruled that Parliament cannot amend the basic structure of the Constitution while making such legislations. The Kerala Government's action was a specific move against Hindus as it left untouched thousands of acres of plantations belonging to other communities. No surprise that the title of Fali Nariman's last book was, *You Must Know Your Constitution*. Chander Lall's *At the Pleasure of His Majesty* is an important work. It offers the readers a panoramic view of the Constitution, history about India's Independence movement, and the social milieu of that era in a truly splendid style.

**AT THE PLEASURE OF HIS MAJESTY**  
 Author: Chander M Lall  
 Publisher: RUPA  
 Price: ₹295



## TALE OF VALOUR, LOVE, AND REDEMPTION

**HARINDER SIKKA** tells Gobind's story with rare passion and candor, highlighting the protagonist's ability to uphold his promises, says **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

**H**arinder Sikka, the acclaimed author whose book *Calling Sehmat* inspired the 2018 film *Raazi* starring Alia Bhatt, explores the depths of human emotion and resilience in his latest novel, *Gobind*. This compelling story is set against the dual backdrops of Bihar's poverty and the valorous spirit of the Indian Navy. Through a rich narrative, Sikka delves into themes of love, loyalty, and redemption, offering readers a deeply personal and stirring literary experience. For Sikka, *Gobind* is more than just a story; it is a personal literary voyage that weaves together themes of love, selflessness, and unwavering determination," he explains. The novel is based on true events that transpired between the late 1970s and early 1990s, providing a rare and profound insight into the disciplined and highly motivated Armed Forces of India, particularly the Indian Navy. Through meticulous storytelling, Sikka highlights the rigorous training, passion, and dedication of naval officers, weaving in shocking incidents that occurred in St Petersburg, Russia, and India. *Gobind* centres around its titular character, a man born into abject poverty to parents who held deep faith in Guru Gobind Singh. Named after the revered saint, Gobind realises early on that it is up to him to change his family's circumstances. With no means or support beyond the values instilled by his parents, Gobind works tirelessly to gain admission to the Indian Military Academy (IMA), eventually qualifying for recruitment into

**CALLING SEHMAT**  
 Author: Harinder Sikka  
 Publisher: Penguin  
 Price: ₹499



the Indian Navy. Although Gobind achieves professional success, his personal life is marred by tragedy. The girl he loves commits suicide after her landlord father arranges her marriage to another man. This devastating loss leaves Gobind shattered, despite being celebrated in his village for his professional achievements. Yet, he rises from this personal devastation with renewed determination. Gobind's journey takes him to Russia as part of a team tasked with purchasing submarines for the Indian Navy. Despite the immense responsibility, he performs his duties with unwavering diligence. His integrity shines through when a

senior officer, compromised by a Russian honey trap, approves the quality check on a submarine. Gobind refuses to concur, standing firm in his commitment to duty and integrity. His moral fortitude is further tested when he falls in love with a Russian girl, a relationship that challenges his fundamental rights. Sikka tells Gobind's story with rare passion and candour, highlighting the protagonist's ability to uphold his promises and appeal to the higher principles of those around him. Through Gobind's journey, Sikka presents a thrilling yet deeply sensitive narrative that provokes thought while delivering a profound message. The story inspires and entertains, making it a multifaceted read. *Gobind*, published by Penguin, was recently launched and has already garnered significant attention. Harinder Sikka, who was commissioned into the Indian Navy in January 1981 and took premature retirement in 1993 as a Lieutenant Commander, brings his firsthand experience and insights into the narrative. Besides *Calling Sehmat*, Sikka has also authored *Vichhoda*, further establishing his prowess in weaving powerful stories. In *Gobind*, readers will find a powerful tale of a man who dared to challenge the world for the principles he stood for. Sikka's narrative not only tells the story of a determined naval officer but also explores the broader themes of love, selflessness, and unwavering determination, offering a deeply enriching reading.



# EXPLORING THE GARDEN OF JADE

**PAWAN SONI** embarks on a delightful journey through Chinese cuisine with innovative twists adding a new dimension to the experience



**R**eminiscing about my unforgettable dining experience at Jade under the mastery of Chef Vivek Rana, I recently revisited this iconic Chinese restaurant, now under the stewardship of Chef Ankur Gulati. The restaurant has undergone a transformation, now boasting a spacious layout flooded with natural light, offering a refreshing and open ambience. As I settled into one of the three Personal Dining Rooms (PDRs), I pondered if the meal would succeed in replicating my prior experience. Skipping drinks and soup, we dove straight into the Golden Fried

**FACT SHEET**

**Address:** Jade, 102, The Claridges, 12, Dr APJ Kalam Road, New Delhi Phone: 011-39555000

**RATINGS**

**Food:** 4.25/5 | **Service:** 4/5 | **Ambience:** 4.5/5 | **Overall:** 4.25/5



Prawns, a new addition to the menu of this classic dish. The large sized prawns were perfectly chunky, coated in a light batter of potato starch, and paired excellently with a spicy-sweet pineapple chili sauce. A variety of dim sum followed, each a masterpiece in its own right. The soupy pork and ginger, steamed lobster and scallop, lettuce wrapped prawn, truffle mushroom, and cream cheese in a carrot-shaped skin were all exquisite. The lettuce wrapped prawn stood out for its subtle flavors, although the chicken dim sum in coconut milk-based broth, while delicious, seemed more suited to Thai cuisine. The lamb chops, a departure from traditional cumin based Chinese fare, were a surprising delight. Paired with a Chinese-style sauce featuring butter, garlic, ginger, and a hint of ketchup, they offered a unique and satisfying blend of flavors. For the mains, the steamed Chilean seabass in a wine-based soy sauce was a standout, offering a light yet flavorful experience. The mushroom crab, while promising, fell short due to the use of frozen crab meat, which compromised its sweetness and freshness. The meal concluded with a serving of coconut ice cream accompanied by liquid jaggery, a sweet yet refreshing end to a memorable dining experience. However, the single scoop served for Rs 695 felt slightly lacking, and I would have appreciated a larger portion. The meal at Jade was a delightful journey through Chinese cuisine, with Chef Ankur Gulati's innovative twists adding a new dimension to the experience. The ambience, now more spacious and airy, complements the culinary offerings, making Jade a must-visit destination for aficionados of Chinese cuisine.

## Home Chefs push Food Frontiers

FOODFREAK



**I**n the dynamic world of gastronomy, a fascinating trend is unfolding: the ascent of home chefs transitioning into the professional sphere, offering a taste of home to professionals far from their roots. This trend not only reshapes the culinary landscape but also enriches the dining experience for food enthusiasts globally. Eleven years ago, recognising the talent of home chefs and bakers, I created a platform through our awards — The Big F Awards. While most awards still focus on restaurants and hotels due to their financial considerations, the role of home-based chefs is gaining recognition, with professional platforms like ChefPin becoming the Zomato of the home chef arena. ChefPin app help diners discover hidden talents by using the app that can be downloaded from Android playstore and Apple Appstore. Rocky Mohan, founder of ChefPin says, "Platforms like ChefPin are leading this culinary revolution, dedicated to discovering and showcasing talents from home kitchens. Through ChefPin's innovative approach, home chefs not only display their culinary skills but also immerse themselves in the world of professional cooking. Collaborating with seasoned chefs in renowned hotels such as Shangri-La, these aspiring cooks learn high-end cuisine intricacies, refine their techniques, and gain invaluable experience." I have personally attended many of these pop-ups at hotels, particularly Shangri-La, and have been impressed by the regional cuisines they offer. Recently, I experienced a pop-up by home chef Sai Priya, unveiling hidden Oriya cuisine dishes. Past events featured Rekha Rigo's South Indian flavours, Surabhi Bhandari's vegetarian Marwadi cuisine, including traditional gluten-free dishes, mango peel-based delicacies, and

Gul Ali's Awadhi dishes. Such pop-ups help document many unknown dishes, preserving their heritage. Abhishek Sadhoo, General Manager at Shangri-La Eros, New Delhi, highlights, "As a part of bringing the World on a Platter at Tamra, these collaborations not only allow a gourmet of multiple cuisines of home food for our guests but also enhances culinary team members to explore new regional cuisines, techniques, and ingredients, enriching their culinary knowledge and adding a new dimension to their expertise." Furthermore, these pop-up events offer hotel guests a unique dining experience, indulging in homely, traditional dishes prepared with love and care by home chefs. This break from the standard hotel menus not only enhances the hotel's appeal but also creates a buzz among food enthusiasts, attracting more guests to experience this culinary fusion. Over the years, I have witnessed many home chefs grow and achieve professional success. One such example is Abhilasha Jain, also known as *Marwadi Khana*. From preparing authentic Rajasthani cuisine at home, she now operates a small professional setup, offering deliveries, *laddoos, gujiya*, and stylish catering while maintaining a homely touch. The emergence of home chefs in the professional culinary scene, facilitated by platforms such as ChefPin, demonstrates the evolving nature of gastronomy. It breaks barriers, fosters cultural exchange, and redefines the food experience. As this trend continues, it promises to bring new levels of creativity and diversity to the world of fine dining.

— Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com

## DREAMY DARJEELING

# Serene Himalayan Hideaway

For many years, filmmakers have been captivated by the enchanting allure of DARJEELING nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. It possesses a charming blend of grandeur, cinematic appeal, and intimacy, making it ideal for both visual storytelling and as a muse for writers seeking creative inspiration.



BY **AKANKSHA DEAN**

**S**ince childhood, I dreamed of visiting Darjeeling. Nestled in the Himalayan foothills in West Bengal, India, it captivates with lush tea gardens stretching over rolling hills, set against snow-capped mountains. Perched high at 6,710 feet, towering above its neighbouring regions. I imagined myself enjoying tea amidst the mountains, enveloped by the serene beauty of nature. After a two-hour flight and a two-hour drive from steamy Delhi, I find myself in Ghoom, where staff dressed in charming smiles graciously serves me delightful tea besides breath-taking views of the Kanchenjunga, India's loftiest peak at 28,169 feet (8,586 meters) at this lavish 6.4-acre haven aka The Sterling Darjeeling, just steps from Yiga Choeling Monastery, making it a dreamy retreat for my getaway. To my surprise, Darjeeling's history wasn't always intertwined with tea.



Back in 1835, the British obtained the lofty ridge, standing tall at 7,000 feet (2,134 meters), from the rulers of Sikkim. Initially intended as a sanctuary to rejuvenate weary colonialists fatigued by the plains' sweltering heat, this haven quickly transformed into a popular destination for the elite British community from Kolkata (Calcutta), seeking respite and breath-taking views of Kanchenjunga. The infusion of tea culture didn't grace Darjeeling until the 1840s, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Campbell, a Scottish physician who introduced tea bushes from China to the region.

**PLAYING TOURIST**

Apart from being located at an amazing location with brilliant services, The Sterling Darjeeling boasting 101 rooms has easy access to a number of tourist attractions. My Privilege Suite at the Sterling has a valley view that I never get tired of rising to, while giving the warmth of a heritage hotel with the luxuries of a slicker. Embarking on a holiday at Sterling also means a delightful array of exclusive Discoveries & Experiences, both within the resort's confines and beyond, allowing you to immerse yourself in the rich tapestry of local art, culture, cuisine, history, nature, and activities. From

savouring authentic culinary delights to embarking on enlightening culture trails, Sterling is dedicated to providing guests with a multitude of avenues to enjoy a distinctive and memorable holiday experience. As I begin my day at the bustling Batasia Loop Market, I find myself mesmerized by the vibrant displays of jewellery and colourful clothing that flank the Gorkha War Memorial and Batasia Eco Garden. Immersing myself in the local culture, I embark on a nostalgic journey aboard the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, known fondly as the Toy Train, evoking precious

childhood memories that inspire me to capture the essence in my writing. Thrill-seekers can opt for a thrilling rafting adventure on the Teesta River, while history enthusiasts will be enchanted by the remarkable architecture of Zang Dhok Palri Phodang perched on Durpin Hill.

**CHILL ZONE**

Chowrasta, the lively hub situated on Nehru Road in the old town became our favourite haunt and we would go there literally every evening. This bustling area features a promenade where visitors and locals gather to shop, dine, or simply enjoy the scenery. Seizing the opportunity to observe people, I savour a cup of tea amid the vibrant atmosphere. As Bollywood tunes filled the air and families interact with vendors, I soak in the sights and sounds of the bustling streets. Amidst the fragrant pine trees, I encounter women vendors selling corn on the cob. Engaging with one, I learn about Chowrasta's significance: symbolizing an intersection, the four roads branching out from the mall lead in different directions. The days gracefully wind down at Glenary's bakery and café, where we watch the sun set beyond the panoramic windows, savouring a comforting cup of tea as we reflect on the remarkable experiences of the day. Back at the Sterling Resort, in the evenings the Holiday Activity



Centre offers a plethora of entertainment options, from engaging in table tennis and carrom to diving into board and fun group games. Upon my request, I am treated to enchanting themed nights and have the pleasure of attending events at the charming amphitheatre, adding a touch of magic to my stay.

**THE LAST LEG**

For those seeking to delve into Darjeeling's tea culture, a stay at upscale tea estates like the Glenburn Tea Estate offers an unrivalled retreat steeped in rich heritage. Beginning from its 1860 inception under the stewardship of the esteemed Prakash family,

this working tea estate seamlessly blends tradition with modern luxury. Nature envelops you here, with 1,000 acres of private forest and two rivers meandering through the estate. Choose between the Burra Bungalow and the Water Lily Bungalow, each offering four elegant suites. We enjoy our days hiking, fishing, and exploring the tea-growing process and embracing the tranquility with a book and a calming cup of tea. Crossing to Sikkim via a charming hanging bridge unveils a world of ancient forests and village life awaiting exploration. While winding our way back to the airport, we pause at Timboor on the Trail, renowned for its Nepalese cuisine amidst a garden ablaze with azaleas and petunias. Yearning for a taste of traditional Nepalese thali, I sought to revisit cherished meals from my travels among Nepalese friends. Perfect ending to my Darjeeling trip. Akanksha Dean is an independent food & travel writer, a chef and a catalyst and is the first Indian to have trained at Osteria Francescana, in Modena, Italy, rated as the world's best restaurant in the World's 50 Best Restaurants, in 2016 and 2018 and currently in the Best of The Best Category.