

Roman Baths may harbour novel antimicrobial natural products

The Hindu Bureau

The world-famous Roman Baths are home to a diverse range of microorganisms which could be critical in the global fight against antimicrobial resistance, a new study suggests. The investigation of extreme ecological niches, such as hot springs, has gained recent interest due to their unique ecosystems, increasing the chance for novel antimicrobial natural product

discovery. The study, published in the journal *The Microbe*, is the first to provide a detailed examination of the bacterial and archaeal communities found within the waters of the popular tourist attraction in the city of Bath (U.K.). Scientists collected samples of water, sediment and biofilm from locations within the Roman Baths complex including the King's Spring (where the waters reach around 45 degree C) and the Great Bath,

where the temperatures are closer to 30 degree C. The samples were then analysed using cutting edge sequencing technology and traditional culturing techniques were employed to isolate bacteria with antibiotic activity. Around 300 distinct types of bacteria were isolated across the Roman Baths site with different examples being more prominent within the varying water temperatures. Further tests showed 15 of

these isolates – including examples of *Proteobacteria* and *Firmicutes* – showed varying levels of inhibition against human pathogens including *E.coli*, *Staphylococcus Aureus* and *Shigella flexneri*. “From initial isolation experiments, 297 isolates were purified, of which 15 showed broad spectrum activity against human pathogens, though interestingly these were not from target genera in

the *Actinobacteria*. From these data, there is clear potential for novel antimicrobial natural products discovery from the Roman Baths, as has been demonstrated from other thermal hot springs globally,” the authors write. The research comes at a time when the need for new sources of antibiotics is at unprecedented levels, with resistance of bacteria to currently used medication estimated to be responsible for more than 1.25

million deaths globally each year. The researchers say a significant amount of additional investigation is required before the microorganisms found in the Roman Baths can be applied in the fight against disease and infection globally. However, they add that this initial study has shown there is clear potential for novel antimicrobial natural products contained within its hot springs to be explored further for that purpose.

SNAPSHOTS



Why some cuckoo birds have higher rates of speciation

Cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests of other birds, have higher speciation rates when they lay their eggs in a broader range of host bird species' nests. This higher speciation rate is driven by host rejection and cuckoo selection for mimetic nestling traits. In some species, cuckoo chicks kick the host young from the nest, whereas in others, cuckoo birds are reared alongside the host young. This variation places a high selective pressure on hosts to develop defenses and the emergence of counter adaptations in cuckoos.



A history of Zika virus raises risk of symptomatic dengue

People who have already been exposed to the Zika virus are more vulnerable to symptomatic infections with some types of dengue virus later on, according to a comprehensive study in Nicaragua during an unusual dengue outbreak in 2022. The results, which involved more than 3,400 participants, support the idea that the interplay between Zika and dengue can influence the risk of severe dengue infections in vulnerable populations – a finding with implications for the safe rollout of vaccination campaigns.



Capturing data on brain activity through skull 'window'

Researchers have engineered a custom-made skull “window” that allowed them to visualise the brain's activity with ultrasound imaging in one living volunteer outside of the operating room. The window captured useful data on brain activity as the volunteer performed tasks such as playing games and playing the guitar. The technology could offer clinicians and neuroscientists a less invasive way to study the brain with high resolution during active tasks.

Cities warming due to effect of urbanisation, climate change

The rate of warming in cities is nearly twice that of the rest of the country, with local-scale urbanisation alone causing additional warming of about 60%

V. Vinoj
S.S. Sethi

Recently, for two consecutive days, Delhi reported daytime temperatures above 50 degrees C, the highest ever recorded in the city. There is a reason why cities are experiencing higher temperatures than non-urban and rural areas. The ongoing climate change and rapid urbanisation are now defining the Anthropocene, with the cities experiencing both thereby making the urban population vulnerable to the compounding impact. India's urban landscape (especially population) is projected to double by 2050, adding more than 450 million residents. This rise outnumbers the present total population of the United States and the European Union, signaling a huge historical shift. Given the breakneck urbanisation, our cities must be prepared for future challenges.

The altered thermodynamic, and aerodynamic properties of the cities tend to trap more heat, making cities warmer than their rural and suburban counterparts, a phenomenon well-known as the urban heat island (UHI) effect. In addition, climate change is causing a significant increase in record-breaking temperatures and frequent prolonged heat waves. Therefore, the overall warming in any city tends to be complex with both urbanisation and global warming playing a pivotal role. This alters the resultant micro-climate of the cities with an influence on heat, rainfall distribution and even air pollution



dispersion with implications for public health. In a study published recently, we seek to separate the warming caused by local scale urbanisation and regional scale climate change in the context of 141 major cities in India and quantify their relative contributions. This kind of segregation is scientifically quite complex. One strategy is to determine the contributions of various factors to warming over time. These factors include information on concrete structures, roads, industries, parks, water bodies, residential activities, air conditioning, vehicular activities, and so on. Such detailed analysis requires enormous time, effort and

investment, even for just one city and has to be incorporated into models or combined with extremely high-resolution satellite images for further analysis. A much simpler approach was followed using high-resolution night-time land surface temperature from MODIS, a sensor aboard Aqua satellite in NASA's A-train constellation. Under the assumption that the observed changes in warming (2003 to 2020) over the rural areas are driven primarily by regional climate change, the warming over the urban built-up areas for each city was compared to its rural counterpart at every one sq. km area. Thus, after the removal of regional warming sig-

natures from the urban areas, the signal related to urbanisation was estimated for 141 major and minor cities providing first-time information on global warming-free urbanisation signatures. Overall, the rate of warming in cities is near twice that of the rest of the country, with local-scale urbanisation alone causing additional warming of about 60%. While all cities showed an increase in night-time land surface temperature, with an average increase of 0.53 degree C per decade, a large divide among cities was seen. The tier-II cities in the eastern part of the country have stronger urbanisation-driven warm-

ing, surprisingly not seen even for the larger metros and mega cities. This may be indicating a window of opportunity. India is aggressively acting to reduce emissions and shift to non-fossil fuel based energy sources as clearly stated in the updated nationally determined contribution (NDC) working towards climate justice. State level heat action plans and implementation of early warning and forecasting systems for heat-waves show India's commitment to saving lives by reducing heat related mortality.

Based on the predominant contribution to warming, the study emphasises that urban heat management must follow a differential approach for each city. Cities with a large urbanisation contribution may benefit from local scale interventions – use of sustainable materials like cool roofs and cool/permeable pavements, green infrastructures, creation of maintenance of lakes and parks, urban forests, and comprehensive emission reduction strategies. While other cities may require more regional scale efforts – national or regional level emission reduction, large-scale afforestation/ plantation, rejuvenation of surrounding water bodies – for effective warming mitigation with both having implications for extreme urban rainfall, floods, air pollution, etc.

(V. Vinoj is Associate Professor, School of Earth, Ocean and Climate Sciences, IIT Bhubaneswar, and S.S. Sethi is PhD scholar at the School of Earth, Ocean and Climate Sciences, IIT Bhubaneswar)

H5N1 remains infectious on milking equipment

R. Prasad

Even as the Atlanta-based CDC has cautioned people to avoid drinking raw milk, especially in the States where H5N1 has been reported in cattle herds, there has been increased demand for raw milk. From the day H5N1 (bird flu) was confirmed in cattle in mid-March this year to mid-May, the sales of raw milk has increased 21-65% compared with the same period last year. However, no human case of H5N1 infection in people who consume raw milk has been reported so far in the U.S. despite the increase in raw milk consumption.

“The asymptomatic avian influenza surveillance programme in the U.K. has found that human infection can be very asymptomatic,” says Dr. Vinod Scaria, a senior consultant at Vishwanath Cancer Care Foundation told *The Hindu*. Two people in the U.K. who had worked on an infected poultry farm in England and tested positive for H5N1 did not show any symptoms and were detected only because of the asymptomatic surveillance programme. “Testing of people, including those who consume raw milk that may be infected with H5N1 has been very low in the U.S.,” says Dr. Scaria. According to the CDC, there has been “no sign of unusual influenza activity in people, including in syndromic surveillance”.

On May 30, the CDC reported a third case of H5N1 infection in a farm worker in Michigan who had direct exposure to infected cows. Eight days earlier, CDC reported the second case of H5N1 infection in a farm worker in the U.S., and the first in the State of Michigan. The first human case in the U.S. was also in a farm worker in Texas. Similar to the first two cases, the latest case of H5N1 infection had eye discomfort with watery discharge. But unlike the earlier two cases, the case reported on May 30 had “more typical symptoms of acute respiratory illness associated with influenza virus infection,



Caution: Influenza virus is stable in unpasteurised milk. REUTERS

including A(H5N1) viruses”. In the second case reported on May 22, two specimens were collected – upper respiratory tract and eye specimens. While the nasal specimen tested negative at both the State health department and the CDC, the eye specimen sent to the CDC for testing was positive for H5N1. The route of transmission has not been ascertained, though it is likely to

be airborne. Meanwhile, researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory carried out a study to assess the risk that H5N1-containing milk poses to animals and humans and fed droplets of raw milk from infected dairy cattle to five mice. The mice showed signs of illness one day after they were fed raw milk containing the virus. The researchers found high virus titers in the respiratory organs of the mice and moderate virus titers in several other organs. Since the mice were only fed raw milk, the infection in the nasal passages, trachea and lungs, suggests that infection may have occurred through the pharynx, the researchers note in a Letter published in *The New England Journal of Medi-*

cine. The H5N1 virus was also found in the mammary glands of two mice even though these mice were not lactating. In another study posted as a preprint (which is yet to be peer-reviewed), researchers found H5N1 virus in unpasteurised milk remains infectious on milking equipment for over one hour. The researchers then used H1N1 as a surrogate for the H5N1 virus found in cattle to study the viral persistence in raw milk. They found the H1N1 virus in unpasteurised milk persisted for at least three hours on rubber and at least one hour on stainless steel. “These results indicate that influenza virus is very stable in unpasteurised milk and that deposited H5N1 on milking equipment could remain infectious for long periods of time,” they write.

release, the researchers analysed a small sample of the mask's red paint. Using sophisticated equipment they found that the sample contained proteins, so proteomic analysis was done, which revealed six proteins from human blood in the red paint, including serum albumin and immunoglobulin G. Other proteins, such as ovalbumin, came from egg whites. Because the proteins were degraded, the researchers could not identify the exact species of bird's egg used to make the paint, but likely is the Muscovy duck.



Question Corner

Blood proteins

Besides the red pigment, what material was used in the red paint by people of Peru's Sicán culture?

Thirty years ago, archeologists excavated the tomb of an elite 40-50-year-old man from the Sicán culture of Peru, a society that predated the Incas. The man's seated, upside-down skeleton was painted bright red. Researchers analysed the paint and found that it contains human blood and bird egg proteins in addition to a red pigment. The study began when researchers wondered what the Sicán people had used in the paint mix as a binding material. As per a

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

What grade of coal does India produce?

Why does it need imported coal? What is the status of the country's transition away from the fossil fuel?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

A recent report by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, a venture backed by billionaire hedge fund manager and philanthropist, George Soros, furnished new documents to allege that in 2014, the Adani Group claimed 'low grade' coal, imported from Indonesia, to be 'high-quality' coal, inflated its value and sold it to Tamil Nadu's power generation company, TANGEDCO (Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Company).

What is 'high grade' and 'low grade' coal?

High and low quality are relative terms and only meaningful in the context of where the coal is used and how they are processed. The Gross Calorific Value (GCV), or the amount of heat or energy that can be generated from burning the coal, determines the gradation of coal. Coal being a fossil fuel is a mixture of carbon, ash, moisture and a host of other impurities. The higher the available carbon in a unit of coal, the greater is its quality or 'grade.' There are 17 grades of coal by this metric from grade 1, or top quality coal, with a kilo of it yielding higher than 7,000 kcal, and the lowest producing anywhere

between 2,200-2,500 kcal, as per a classification by the Coal Ministry. However, the calorific value is not a useful metric on its own. The most important uses of coal are in running thermal power plants or powering a blast furnace to produce steel and both require different kinds of coal. 'Coking' coal is the kind needed to produce coke – an essential component of steel making – and thus requires minimal ash content. Non-coking coal, despite its ash content, can be used to generate enough useful heat to run a boiler and turbine.

There are two ways to get clean coal. Coal plants can have 'washing plants' on site to process the coal and reduce its ash and moisture content. The other method is coal gasification

What are the characteristics of Indian coal?

Indian coal has historically been evaluated as being high in ash content and low in calorific value compared to imported coal. The average GCV of domestic thermal coal ranges from 3,500-4,000 kcal/kg compared to imported thermal coals of +6,000 kcal/kg of GCV. Also the average ash content of Indian coals is more than 40% compared to imported coal which has less than 10% ash content. The consequence of this is that high-ash coal when burnt results in higher particulate matter, nitrogen and sulphur dioxide. Given this, the government, since 1954, has controlled the price of coal in a way that power companies were disincentivised to use high-grade coking coal for power generation.

Thus in the pursuit of balancing India's needs for coal production, power plants and pollution, the government has recommended the use of imported coal with lower ash and moisture content. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) in 2012 recommended, and which still stands, that about 10-15% blending of imported coal can usually be safely used in Indian power boilers, which are designed for low quality Indian coal.

What is clean coal?

Broadly, we get clean coal when the carbon content has been increased by reducing its ash content. Coal plants have 'washing plants' on site which can process the coal in ways that reduce ash and moisture content. They employ huge blowers or a 'bath' to remove fine, coarse ash. However, deploying such equipment is expensive and adds to the cost of power. The other method to clean coal – again requiring significant investment – is coal gasification. Here, the need to directly burn coal is bypassed by converting it into gas. By relying on an integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) system, steam and hot pressurised air or oxygen combine with coal in a reaction that forces carbon molecules apart. The resulting syngas, a mixture of carbon monoxide, hydrogen, CO₂ and water vapour, is then cleaned and burned in a gas turbine to make electricity. Since IGCC power plants create two forms of energy (steam from the gasification process apart from syngas as fuel), they increase efficiency of the coal used.

What is the future of coal in India?

Official data says that India in 2023-24 produced 997 million tonnes of coal, an 11% growth over the previous year. Most of this was produced by the state-owned Coal India Ltd and its subsidiaries.

As of March 2024, India produced 261 tonnes of coal, of which 58 million tonnes was coking coal. Despite stated commitments to transition India's electricity sector away from fossil fuel, coal is the mainstay of India's energy economy. Change, however, is in the air as for the first time this year, renewable energy accounted for 71.5% of the record 13.6 GW power generation capacity added by India in the first quarter of this year, while coal's share (including lignite) of total power capacity dropped below 50% for the first time since the 1960s.

Is a future Palestine state possible?

What are the hurdles to a two-state solution? With Palestinian territories under Israeli occupation since 1967, how will a Jewish and Arab state be demarcated? Why does Israel want to hold on to the status quo of occupation? Will war lead to peace in the region or is it a far-fetched idea?

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack in Israel and the latter's continuing war on Gaza have brought the Palestine question back to the fore of West Asia. As the war has destroyed much of Gaza and killed 36,000 of its people, the world has also seen more countries voicing strong support for a future Palestine state. Recently, three European countries, Spain, Ireland and Norway, recognised the Palestine state. Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, say there wouldn't be lasting peace in the region unless the Palestine question is resolved. An internationally recognised solution to the crisis is what's called the two-state solution.

What's the two-state solution?

The short answer is simple: divide historical Palestine, the land between the Jordan River on the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the west, into an Arab state and a Jewish state. But the long answer is complicated. Israel, a Jewish state, was created in Palestine in 1948. But a Palestine state is not yet a reality. Palestinian territories have been under Israeli occupation since 1967. So, a two-state solution today means the creation of a legitimate, sovereign Palestine state, which enjoys the full rights like any other nation state under the UN Charter.

What are the origins?

The roots of the two-state solution go back to the 1930s when the British ruled over Palestine. In 1936, the British government appointed a commission headed by Lord William Robert Peel (known as the Peel Commission) to investigate the causes of Arab-Jewish clashes in Palestine. A



No peace in sight: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at the signing of the Oslo accords in Washington, in 1993. AP

There are several structural factors that make the two-state solution complicated

year later, the commission proposed a partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. At that time, Jews accounted for some 28% of Palestine's population. According to the Peel Commission proposal, the West Bank, Gaza and Negev desert would make up the Arab state, while much of Palestine's coast and the fertile Galilee region would be part of the Jewish state. Arabs rejected the proposal.

After the Second World War, the UN Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) put forward another partition plan. It proposed that Palestine be divided into three territories – a Jewish state, an Arab state and an international territory (Jerusalem). Jews, who made up roughly 32% of Palestine's population, were to have 56% of the Palestine land as per the UNSCOP plan. The partition plan was adopted in the UN General Assembly (Resolution 181). Arabs rejected the plan (India voted against it), while the Zionist leadership of Israeli settlers in Palestine accepted it. And on May 14, 1948, Zionists unilaterally declared the state of Israel. This triggered the first Arab-Israeli war. And by the time an armistice agreement was achieved in 1949, Israel had captured some 22% more territories than what the UN had proposed.

How did it get international legitimacy?

In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria (Israel continues to control all territories except the Sinai which it returned to Egypt after the 1978 Camp David Accords). Palestine nationalism emerged stronger in the 1960s, under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The PLO initially demanded the "liberation" of the whole of Palestine, but later recognised the two-state solution based on the 1967 border. Israel initially rejected any Palestinian claim to the land and continued to term the PLO as a "terrorist" organisation. But in the Camp David Accords, which followed the 1973 Yom Kippur War in which Egypt and Syria surprised Israel with an attack, it agreed to the Framework for Peace in the Middle East agreement. As part of the Framework, Israel agreed to establish an autonomous self-governing Palestinian authority in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and implement the UN Resolution 242, which has demanded Israel pull back from all the territories it captured in 1967. The Framework laid the foundation for the Oslo Accords, which, signed in 1993 and 1995, formalised the two-state solution. As part of the Oslo process, a Palestinian National Authority, a self-governing body, was formed in the West Bank and Gaza

and the PLO was internationally recognised as a representative body of the Palestinians. The promise of Oslo was the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state which would live next to the Israeli state in peace. However, this promise has never been materialised.

What are the hurdles to achieving the two-state solution?

The first setback for the Oslo process was the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister who signed the accords, in November 1995 by a Jewish extremist. Rabin's Labour party was defeated in the subsequent elections and the right-wing Likud, under Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership, came to power. The rise of Hamas, the Islamist militant group that opposed the Oslo Accords saying the PLO made huge concessions to the Israelis, also contributed to the derailment of the peace process. After the collapse of the Oslo process in the 1990s, there were multiple diplomatic efforts to revive the two-state plan, but none of these made progress towards achieving the goal.

Multiple reasons could be identified for this failure. But there are specific structural factors that make the two-state solution unachievable, at least for now. One is the boundary. Israel doesn't have a clearly demarcated border. It is essentially an expansionist state. In 1948, it captured more territories than it was promised by the UN. In 1967, it expanded further by taking the whole of historical Palestine under its control. From the 1970s, Israel has been building illegal Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories. While Palestinians say their future state should be based on the 1967 border, Israel is not willing to make any commitments.

Two, the status of settlers. Roughly 7,00,000 Jewish settlers are now living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. If Israel is to withdraw to the 1967 border, they will have to pull back the settlers. The settlers are now a powerful political class in Israeli society and no Prime Minister can pull them back without facing political consequences. Three, the status of Jerusalem. Palestinians say East Jerusalem, which hosts Al Aqsa, Islam's third holiest mosque, should be the capital of their future Palestinian state, while Israel says the whole of Jerusalem, which hosts the Western Wall, the holiest place in Judaism, is Israel's "eternal capital". Four, the right of refugees to return to their homes. Some 7,00,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in 1948 when the state of Israel was declared. According to international law, they have a right to return to their homes. Israel says it won't allow the Palestinian refugees to return.

While these are the structural factors that make the two-state solution complicated, on the ground, Israel's rightwing leadership shows no willingness to make any concessions. Israel wants to continue the status quo – the status quo of occupation. The Palestinians want to break that status quo.

Why is there a fresh row on Mullaperiyar?

What are the stated positions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu on the dam in Idukki district? Why is Kerala seeking fresh terms of reference? How has Tamil Nadu responded? Which State uses the water from the dam? How old is the construction?

K.S. Sudhi

The story so far:

The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) cancelled its May 28 meeting, which was supposed to consider Kerala's request for a new Terms of Reference (ToR) for conducting an Environment Impact Assessment for a new dam at Mullaperiyar in Idukki district. The meeting was cancelled at the eleventh hour without assigning any reasons. The top officials of the Irrigation Design and Research Board of Kerala, who reached New Delhi for the meeting, were informed that the meeting had been deferred.

Why was the meeting called?

Any development related to the masonry gravity dam at Mullaperiyar, which is located in the Idukki district of Kerala and owned and operated by the neighbouring State of Tamil Nadu, is keenly contested by both States at all legal and governmental levels. The Kerala Government's latest move to get a new ToR as part of the groundwork for constructing a new dam in place of the 128-year-old structure too invited a sharp response from Tamil Nadu.

Kerala decided to move the EAC for a new



New flows: The Mullaperiyar dam at Thekkady in Kerala, in 2022. FILE PHOTO

Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been engaged in a pitched legal battle over the dam since 1996

ToR for the new dam as the earlier one issued on November 14, 2018, with a lifespan of five years, had expired last year. The State needed a new ToR for preparing the EIA to estimate the possible environmental impacts of the construction of a new dam.

What is Tamil Nadu's objection?

Kerala's move irked Tamil Nadu, which depends on the water released from the dam to irrigate its arid Theni, Madurai, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram districts. Chief Minister M. K. Stalin shot off a letter to Bhupender Yadav, the Union Minister of the MoEF, seeking to issue directions to the officials of the Ministry and the Member Secretary of the EAC to drop the agenda of ToR from the meeting.

Tamil Nadu objected to the EAC agenda by arguing that the decision to consider Kerala's proposal amounted to a violation of an earlier order of the Supreme Court. Mr. Stalin stuck to the consistent position of Tamil Nadu that the existing dam was repeatedly found to be safe by various expert committees and the top court had passed orders to this effect on two occasions. Tamil Nadu went on to argue that the Supreme Court had specified in 2018 that its permission was required for any such studies. It also concluded that Kerala's decision to take up an EIA study for a new dam and the decision of the EAC to consider the request for permission would amount to contempt of the Supreme Court. The State government also dropped hints that it would initiate legal action, including filing contempt of court petitions if the orders of the top court were not adhered to on the issue.

What is Kerala's position?

The State argues that Kerala needs an extensive EIA considering the changed environmental scenario, especially the back-to-back floods in 2018 and 2019 as part of its preparatory works. A new data set covering various environmental aspects was needed, it argues. A new ToR and EIA are the prerequisites for such an exercise, according to Kerala officials.

The Kerala government, which has almost finalised the design of the new dam, refuses to buy the contentions of Tamil Nadu and argues

that the apex court had earlier dismissed the Interlocutory Application (IA) of Tamil Nadu objecting to the earlier ToR for an EIA and the clearance issued by the National Board for Wild Life (NBWL) for conducting the EIA. Kerala officials argued that Tamil Nadu was misleading the Union government regarding the Supreme Court order on ToR. The IA filed by Tamil Nadu in 2015 requesting to issue directions to restrain Kerala from conducting EIA studies and withdrawing the NBWL order was dismissed by the Supreme Court as infructuous in an order issued on April 13, 2016, Kerala argues.

Why does it want new terms of reference?

According to Kerala officials, Kerala needs extensive data to prepare a Detailed Project Report (DPR) as part of its efforts to build a new dam and to engage Tamil Nadu in a discussion regarding the new dam. Kerala decided to seek a new ToR since changes were introduced in the dam design. The earlier design and the DPR prepared in 2011 had undergone major changes, they argue. The earlier estimated cost of the dam was around ₹800 crore, which in any case, would go up. An EIA is required as the proposed site of the dam is situated in Periyar Tiger Reserve, a notified Protected Area, where prior environmental clearances have to be obtained. The Periyar Tiger Reserve is both a tiger and elephant reserve, and the clearance of the NBWL is also required. Since the forest land has to be used for constructing the new dam, which is a non-forestry activity, and the felling of trees is required, the permission of the Union Ministry as well as the apex court has to be obtained. The EIA of such activities will have to be documented while approaching various agencies for statutory clearance, they argue.

Is there a scope for consensus?

Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been engaged in a pitched legal battle since 1996. While the first phase of the legal contentions between the two States veered around the safety aspects of the existing dam, the second phase, which began in 1998 saw several Public Interest Litigations and writ petitions filed by both States challenging the legal validity of various acts of both the States. More legal battles may come up before the top court with this move of the Kerala government.

Kerala, which has been preparing the ground for a new dam, would require the consent of Tamil Nadu to construct a new dam as directed by the top court in one of its orders in 2014.

PROFILES

Bringing the Left to the centre

Keir Starmer

The man who could be the next British Prime Minister has toned down many of his early leftist promises and has brought the Labour party to the centre, focusing on economic stability, workers rights and climate justice

Ioan Sony Cherian

“I changed Labour. I will fight for you and change Britain,” Keir Starmer, chief of the Labour party, wrote on X on May 28, as part of his campaign for the U.K. elections, scheduled to be held on July 4.

Whether Mr. Starmer will fulfil the promise remains to be seen. However, the Opposition leader has certainly changed the identity of Labour from former leader Jeremy Corbyn’s time. Mr. Starmer, who became an MP in 2015, ran for leadership of Labour in 2020 after Mr. Corbyn, a leftist, resigned following the party’s defeat in the 2019 election. Mr. Starmer stood for the leadership race with an agenda of 10 key pledges, which he stated was ‘based on the moral case for socialism’. Some of the key pledges include an increase of income tax for 5% of top earners, restricting the U.K.’s arms sales, nationalising the rail, mail, energy and water sectors, a new Green Deal, strengthening workers rights, etc. But since his election as party leader, Mr. Starmer has abandoned most of these promises.

Mr. Starmer’s recurring defence has been that Brexit, the COVID pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war and the disastrous policies of the Tory government had completely destroyed the nation’s economic progress. What is of utmost priority, at the present moment, is economic and financial stability. This is reflected in Labour’s election manifesto as well.

In the manifesto, Labour pledges to nationalise just the railways. It also walked back on the promise of raising taxes of the top rich as it’s a ‘different situation’ now that the U.K. has its highest tax burden since the Second World War. Mr. Starmer has also put on hold a €28 billion climate investment promise which he made in 2022.

Additionally, he has been accused of carrying out a systemic phasing out of the more left-wing candidates of the party. This internal divide has come out in full force recently as decisions are being taken about the candidates to be fielded by the party for the coming election. A couple of

incumbent leftwing MPs have been banned from standing for elections. Diane Abbott, the first Black woman MP in the U.K. said Labour was carrying out a “cull of leftwingers”.

Another common link being drawn between the banned MPs has been their call for a permanent and immediate ceasefire in Israel’s war on Gaza. Mr. Starmer has, contrarily, thrown his weight behind Israel, upholding its “right to defend itself”. At one point, when asked whether cutting off water and power supplies into Gaza would be an appropriate response, he replied: “I think that Israel does have that right”. It is only recently, after Israel’s Rafah onslaught began, that Mr. Starmer called for a ceasefire ‘that lasts’.

Some say the shift from the initial pledges to status quo has been an act of betrayal by Mr. Starmer, a tool used to gain votes from both sides of the party for leadership. Others say it’s part of his pragmatic and solution-oriented outlook on politics.

Idealist to realist

Mr. Starmer was born into a working class family in 1962. He has repeatedly drawn attention to this fact to emphasise his commitment to the working people and trade unions. He grew up in poverty, being one among four siblings with an ailing mother. His father used to work as a toolmaker in his village in Surrey. Following his schooling, Mr. Starmer went on to study law, and became the first person in his family to graduate college.

Mr. Starmer’s record as a human rights lawyer had earned him a good deal of ire from both the progressive and conservative factions of society before he had even entered politics.

The Opposition leader has always centred human rights in his practice. In his early days, he would travel across Caribbean countries defending convicts against the death penalty, a punishment he says “horrifies him”. He was also involved in the famous *Mlibel* case wherein he defended two environmentalists who were taken to court by McDonald’s on charges of libel for stating that the company was damaging the environment.

He was deeply committed to



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

bringing out large-scale change, often feeling frustrated at the lack of systemic changes through individual cases.

His shift towards a ‘realist’ started in 2003, when he was appointed the human rights adviser to the Policing Board in Northern Ireland. From 2008 to 2013, he had been the Director of Public Prosecutions and Head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). He would later reflect on his time in these institutions as key to his political approach.

“I came better to understand how you can change by being inside and

getting the trust of people”, he said.

As Director of the CPS, Mr. Starmer tried to stay true to his human rights-based approach. For example, certain high profile sexual abuse cases led him to change the CPS’s guidelines on sexual assault cases wherein prosecutors were asked to start from a position of believing the victim. He also brought to book several MPs over false accounting charges. However, he was decried for his disproportionate response towards student protesters in 2010 wherein he advocated for rapid sentencing. He has also faced public scrutiny for refusing to prosecute

police officers in cases such as that of Jean Charles de Menendez, a Brazilian immigrant who was killed by police who mistook him for a terror suspect, and Ian Tomlinson, who was killed by policemen during a protest against the 2009 G-20 summit.

However, as Director of the CPS, his role in the Julian Assange extradition trial must be one of his least known cases. Mr. Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, is now detained in the high-security Belmarsh prison in London and is involved in a prolonged legal battle against his extradition to the U.S. Mr. Starmer had tried to fast-track Mr. Assange’s extradition to the U.S. – he took various trips to the U.S. with respect to the case, and persuaded the Swedish authorities to keep their case of extradition open.

A ‘New Deal’

Some experts state that Mr. Starmer has no ideology. Some others have compared him to Tony Blair because of his apathy towards ideology and his drive to revamp the Labour party, especially after the Corbyn years.

However, unlike Tony Blair, Mr. Starmer has called for the party to take up the cause of the workers and the trade unions, upheld nationalisation of public industries and talked about putting more money into businesses. He is fully committed to Labour’s “New Deal for Working People”, which calls for expanding collective bargaining and granting workers’ basic rights, such as sick pay, parental leave and protection against unfair dismissal. He does not support giving markets a free rein but believes in shaping the market for economic growth through policy. He also believes in climate justice and setting up of green industries. Thus, with all opinion polls and trends predicting a win for Labour, Mr. Starmer has firmly placed the party in a centrist position. His vision has been coined by some as Starmerism, wherein economic stability, workers rights and climate justice hold precedence.

However, with a stagnant economy, a health system in shambles, collapsing public services, and high national debt, it is to be seen whether Starmerism can hold ground.

THE GIST

Keir Starmer rose to the leadership of British Labour, after leftist Jeremy Corbyn resigned, with 10 key pledges, which he stated was ‘based on the moral case for socialism’

Since his election as party leader, Starmer has abandoned most of these promises, but he says he remains committed to the cause of workers and upholds nationalisation of public industries

Starmer says his immediate focus is on economic stability and that he doesn’t support giving markets a free rein but believes in shaping the market for economic growth through policy

Living with nostalgia

Payal Kapadia

The filmmaker whose *All We Imagine as Light* won the Grand Prix at Cannes says she doesn’t shy away from politics and keeps the slogan ‘personal is political’ alive in her movies

Vighnesh P. Venkitesh

Payal Kapadia, the 38-year-old whose movie *All We Imagine as Light* won the Grand Prix – the second most prestigious award at Cannes – sees herself as a melancholic person, and this melancholy sets the tone for her movies.

Ms. Kapadia, hailing from Mumbai but having spent more time outside the city, says she got a sense of flux every time she visited the place. *All We Imagine as Light* is about Mumbai and the people who go to work there – people who are in a perpetual state of flux. Ms. Kapadia started working on the movie with a short film in her mind, but as she delved in to this flux, made up of different layers of relationships, *All We Imagine as Light* was born.

Ms. Kapadia, an alumna of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), was very much part of the student protests that echoed across Indian universities in recent years and found herself living in an uncertain present.

Her first feature film, *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, embodies the personal vulnerabilities and uncertainties young Indian adults went through during this time. The roots of *A Night of Knowing Nothing* lie in the protests she were part



ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

of at her institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairperson. The 139-day-long protests in 2015 saw Ms. Kapadia and her cinematographer Ranabir Das recording the incidents happening around them.

Ms. Kapadia says she and her team did not have a clear agenda on what their film was supposed to be going into production. She describes the movie as a found-footage film.

“If we look at films being made in our country, you will always find someone in the crew who went to a public institute,” Ms. Kapadia told *The Hindu*. “As I was part of the strike in 2015, the student protests became very important for me in order to protect public institutes... designed to give everyone equal opportunity; *A Night of Knowing Nothing* was a homage to these spaces.”

Ms. Kapadia highlights a feeling of nostalgia that was part of her movies. Not

the nostalgia for the past as it was often understood, but “a nostalgia for the present”. And this nostalgia for the present is visible not just in her feature films but also in her short films such as *And What Is the Summer Saying* and *Afternoon Clouds*.

Melancholy and joy

“Perhaps I am a very melancholic person”, Ms. Kapadia said. “In *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, the nostalgia was for the present, when the students were standing up for themselves,” she said. But there’s joy within the melancholy. “In the new film, too, I could not escape from melancholy, but there is also joy.”

Ms. Kapadia has said there is no shying away from politics and she keeps the feminist slogan ‘personal is political’ alive in her movies, while managing to combine it with aesthetics. But she draws a distinction between political films and propaganda films.

“Every film has its politics, the politics between the rich and the poor, the politics of the relationship between men and women, etc... it may or may not be the intention of the filmmaker, but it will show up. Propaganda films are not as naive. They know clearly what they are doing and they manipulate the truth to put forth an argument whose intention is to change the perspective of the viewer toward a certain political discourse. For me, the difference lies in the intention of the filmmaker,” Ms. Kapadia said.

She also manages to bring in the element of love to the fore. In *And What is the Summer Saying*, the narrator describes how his father taught him about bees, which are lonely creatures and die once they mate, which was their only purpose. Later, the narrator describes how he found his father beginning to think more like bees, who must die when in love.

Still basking in the glory and glitter of Cannes, Ms. Kapadia has shown the way forward for the Indian movie industry, which had to wait for 30 years for a competitive representation at Cannes. And, while she says she has not figured out what is next, Ms. Kapadia still has a long way to go. She hopes ‘things will be bit easier’ for her from now on.

The Beijing loyalist

John Lee Ka-chiu

Hong Kong’s Chief Executive believes the controversial National Security Law has ‘restored peace’ and was necessary to guard against ‘undercurrents that try to create troubles’ in the city

Saumya Kalia

Diplomacy for a semi-autonomous city is tricky business. Do you woo investors, dispel democratic anxieties, or crack down on dissent? If you are John Lee Ka-chiu, you do it all, and you do it without mincing words. Last year, during the “Hello Hong Kong” campaign, the city’s Chief Executive was seen gesturing his arms open, welcoming foreign visitors to a “world city like no other”. On the sidelines, he doggedly pursued “street rats”. Mr. Lee issued a bounty of HK\$1 million against eight pro-democracy activists living abroad. They were wanted under the Beijing-imposed national security law.

The eight Mr. Lee referred to are part of the “Hong Kong 47” – the 47 activists, academics, and politicians jailed or forced into exile since 2021. On May 30, a Hong Kong court found 14 activists guilty of attempting to “paralyse Hong Kong’s government” and to “topple the city’s leader”. The landmark prosecution is carried out under Mr. Lee’s leadership that began in 2022.

Hong Kong’s fifth Chief Executive has had humble beginnings. He was born into a middle-class family in Guangzhou and grew up in public housing, expe-



riencing “first-hand hardships faced by the grassroots community”, Mr. Lee said in a campaign speech. He attended the prestigious Wah Yan College run by Jesuit priests. His classmates and teachers described him as “obedient” and “result-oriented”, one who kept a low profile, according to a *South China Morning Post* report. In 1977, when Hong Kong was still a British colony, Mr. Lee, then 20 years, joined the police force. He was “known as an anglophile during the colonial rule”, Reuters reported earlier.

A policing background separates Mr. Lee from his predecessors, who rose from civil service or had ties to the business community. The 66-year-old spent more than four decades tackling security challenges. He started as a probationary inspector; moving up the ranks to become a deputy commissioner in 2010, a secretary for security in 2017, and by 2021, he was chosen the

chief secretary for administration – the second most powerful job in Hong Kong.

Mr. Lee’s “sense of justice” began when he was robbed as a school student, which to him was a lesson in being a law-abiding citizen, according to the *Global Times*. The learning stuck.

When pro-democracy activists protested the controversial (and now withdrawn) extradition Bill in 2019, Mr. Lee defended his former police colleagues, who fired tear gas canisters, water cannons and rubber bullets at protesters. The protesters were “radicals” sowing “terror”, stopped only by the “courageous” police force, he said.

Rewriting rule of law

The Basic Law, the city’s mini constitution, guarantees civil liberties, free speech, and independent judiciary in the former British Colony. The National Security Law rewrites

the rule of law, and gives the government more power to crush dissent, critics fear. The U.S. has placed Mr. Lee on a sanctions list for undermining Hong Kong’s autonomy.

In 2022, Mr. Lee was the unopposed choice to be Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, handpicked by an election committee comprising Beijing loyalists. The appointment was a “reward for loyalty”, said Joseph Cheng, a retired Hong Kong academic.

Hong Kong’s Chief Executives traditionally juggle opposing forces – balancing Hong Kong’s desire for autonomy alongside China’s vision for the city. Mr. Lee’s governance bends towards the latter; national security would take priority “above all else”, he had said. Mr. Lee’s 2022 manifesto vowed to bolster security legislation, introduce a “national identity” education and enact a “fake news” law. The National Security Law has “restored peace” and was necessary to guard against “undercurrents that try to create troubles”, he said.

This tough line earned him praise from the higher-ups. Last December, China’s President Xi Jinping said Mr. Lee’s work has “consolidated the general trend turning Hong Kong from chaos to order”, and that Hong Kong “now sits on a path to prosperity”.

REFLECTIONS

CHANAKYA



Exit polls have spoken; electors will on Tuesday

When the contest is looked at in terms of votes, its closeness and intensity becomes evident. That is really the detail that parties and groupings ending up on the losing side on June 4 need to look at

When conducted by agencies that understand the science and, backed by organisations willing to bear the significant expense involved, exit polls tend to get it right.

It's become fashionable to diss them, but, both in 2014 and 2019, most of the major exit polls were directionally right, even if they were inaccurate about the magnitude of the National Democratic Alliance's win. Both times, they underestimated the wave in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

This time, the five polls Chanakya considers to be credible, predict a victory for the BJP, with a range of 305-327, with the NDA winning 355-401, and the Opposition INDIA grouping managing only 125-166 seats, in which the Congress's share is 60-76.

Why is polling complex? In a first-past-the-post system, it is entirely possible for a party or a grouping to

do much better than it did in an earlier election in terms of number of votes secured, and still end up with fewer seats than it did. This is what happened to the BJP, for instance, in Uttar Pradesh in 2019 — its vote share went up by almost 7.5 percentage points, to nearly 50%, but for nine fewer seats. That makes the job of the pollster difficult.

Also, in a first-past-the-post system, the margins do not matter at all (only winning does); and so, while a pollster may be influenced by data that shows a very tight contest (the ranges become more fluid as a result), the reality, as reflected in the seats won, may be different.

In 2019, the BJP itself won 303 seats, with an overall vote share of 37.3%. Its median victory margin was 19.71% of the votes polled in a constituency. But in 83 constituencies, its victory margin was lower than 10% of the votes polled; in 41, it was lower than 5%, and in 28, 3%. Those quibbling about the inaccuracy of exit polls in 2019, need only look at these numbers — it would take a huge sample to capture a margin as fine as 3%, 5%, or even 10%. Then there is the sophistication of the algorithm used to convert vote shares into seat shares, factoring in unique regional factors.

Chanakya isn't denying the existence of bias in some pollsters; nor is he ruling out the stupidity of others (indeed, anyone looking for motives would do well to first rule out stupidity); but it's important to understand that in an exercise of this nature, the odds are that pollsters will be wrong, usu-

ally numerically, but sometimes also directionally.

For instance, in 2019, if all the constituencies where the margin of victory of the BJP was less than 10% had gone the other way, the party, and the larger NDA alliance itself, would have fallen well short of the majority mark in the Lok Sabha. Even if only the constituencies where the margin of victory of the BJP was less than 5% had gone the other way, the party would have still been short of the majority mark (and would have needed the help of its allies).

Chanakya is belabouring this point simply because everyone (including Chanakya, sometimes) likes to describe the BJP as the national political hegemon on the basis of its legislative supremacy. It's only when the contest is looked at in terms of votes that its closeness and intensity become evident — and that is really the detail that parties and groupings ending up on the losing side on June 4 need to look at. Chanakya also seems to have acquired the really disquieting habit of referring to himself in the third person (wonder where that came from!).

The fact that the majority of contests in this election are one-to-one is likely to have made the job of the pollsters simpler, though. Ahead of the election announcement in March, it seemed unlikely that the INDIA bloc would be able to field common candidates, but that's what they have done. There are 737 INDIA candidates in the fray, of which 150 are facing each other for the 75 seats in West Bengal, Kerala, and Punjab. That leaves 587 candidates across 468 con-



The BJP leveraged its traditional promises of welfare and Hindutva, with a healthy dose of the polarising rhetoric it touts out whenever it believes the contest is getting close

stituencies (465 if one leaves out the one contest that has been decided, another where there is no INDIA candidate and a third where the INDIA candidate's nomination was rejected). That would mean there are almost 350 constituencies where the contest is NDA vs INDIA. This is a defining characteristic of this election and one that doesn't get enough attention. To be sure, the consolidation of votes could benefit either side.

What does get attention is the so-called presidential nature of these elections. It's interesting that the BJP, which has moved sharply away from presidential-style contests in the states (quick, can you name all their chief ministers?) where they have tra-

ditionally been more common, continues to treat the national elections as one. But there's nothing revolutionary in this — under both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the Congress favoured presidential-style contests. And both 1984 and 1991 were also presidential-style elections in which the presidential candidate was not on the ballot.

The contest was definitely presidential in 2014 and 2019, but this time, the Opposition has sought to make it local, presenting the argument that there is no reason why people should want to vote differently in state and Lok Sabha elections. Interestingly, that's an argument that the BJP also makes (from a different direction) — and this is evi-

dent from Modi becoming its campaigner-in-chief during state elections.

The Opposition's desire to localise the elections does not mean there were no national issues. The BJP leveraged its traditional promises of welfare and Hindutva, with a healthy dose of the polarising rhetoric it touts out whenever it believes the contest is getting close. The Opposition pushed its own model of social justice and secularism. Both played on fears — if the BJP's was that the majority was under threat, then the Opposition's was the Constitution and the very idea of India was.

The exit polls suggest that more people bought into the narrative of the BJP — but we will know for sure only on June 4.

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



Brotherhood of lapsed spies turned chroniclers

Perhaps even John le Carre would have considered it too improbable to be credible. It's like suggesting the chiefs of CIA and KGB have agreed to collaborate. But, hard as it is to believe, something similar has happened in South Asia yet passed unnoticed or, at least, unremarked upon. The former heads of India and Pakistan's rival spy agencies — R&AW in our case and ISI in theirs — have become buddies and collaborated on books they've jointly written. On Monday, Amarjit Singh Dulat and General Asad Durrani launched their latest called *Covert: The Psychology of War and Peace*. Their first was aptly named *The Spy Chronicles!*

How did this relationship start? On a boat on the Chao Phraya river in Bangkok,

it seems. They were guests at a Track II dialogue on terror. Dulat was called upon to speak but being new to such events was nervous and reluctant. Durrani was thoughtful and supportive. As Dulat adds, "the chemistry" worked and they soon became friends.

Covert reveals their similarities and their differences. As a child Durrani "always loved to be alone". Even the adult "didn't want to be part of a crowd". The young Dulat had few friends, "mostly the servants' children". As he puts it, he "learned to be on your own and fend for yourself".

The future ISI chief was a star performer at school. "I was always amongst the first four or five in almost every subject." Dulat was the opposite. He was "a very average student". But the future

R&AW head shone at sports. He played "every game in school". Durrani, being a loner, "was very fond of cycling" and "there was no place in a city like Lahore that was too far".

Not surprisingly, the individual in Durrani determined the sort of person he became. "I was different, a non-conformist", he says. "My spirit has always been a little rebellious." Dulat more readily accepted parental or educational discipline. He grew up believing "there are things that are right and there are things that are wrong". I guess this gave him a clear moral direction.

Durrani joined the military and adds: "I don't think I ever regretted it". Dulat began as a policeman but admits this was because "I couldn't make it to the better services". But it was accident or fortuitous good fortune that led them to their respective intelligence agencies.

"I landed there by accident," Durrani reveals with a laugh. "I have admitted that." Dulat joined the Intelligence Bureau "without knowing what intelligence really was". Yet both men rose to the top and are today acknowledged by their countrymen as outstanding former chiefs of ISI and R&AW respectively. So, I wonder if either believes in fate? Certainly, James Bond would never have rashly challenged superstitions. Do they?

Dulat says he admires Durrani's "candour ... the fact he always calls a spade a spade". He's outspoken and doesn't hesitate to criticise the Pakistan army. But it seems Durrani also admires the Indian system. That could be more difficult to do. Let me leave you with this quotation and ask you to consider if my conclusion is right. "In India people rise from the ranks through merit and take over IB or R&AW. In our case, a person can be appointed to such posts at the pleasure of the chief executive of the country or the army. So we do not always follow the criteria of who could make a good ISI chief."

Covert doesn't reveal the inner workings — leave aside secrets — of R&AW and ISI. Nor did *The Spy Chronicles*. Instead, it "explores the inner lives and motivations of spy chiefs ... (it's) inherently psychological". Its focus is on the two principals. What sort of men are they? What makes them tick? But it also illustrates the fascinating way they have navigated the pursuit of India-Pakistan peace without the least hint of disloyalty to their countries. And more often than not their views tend to coincide. Spies, it seems, seldom differ.

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

Forget those vaccine fears, time to move on

Should the study by Banaras Hindu University (BHU) researchers on the adverse effects of Covaxin cause concern? The researchers reported the findings of a one-year follow-up of Covaxin recipients in *Drug Safety*, a peer-reviewed medical journal. The study covered 635 adolescents and 291 adults who received the vaccine between January 2022 and August 2023. They were interviewed telephonically about specific adverse events after a year of vaccination. Participants reported conditions like alopecia, acne, refractory errors, general weakness, headache and menstrual problems. Serious events including stroke and Guillain-Barre syndrome were reported by a small number of participants.

There are some methodological issues. Asking telephonically about onset of symptoms and their persistence, after a year of the vaccine, is inherently a weak design. The authors admit the limitations due to the lack of background rates of these disorders and the possibility of recall bias. Higher rates are expected in such studies because of ascertainment bias as subjects are more likely to report a side-effect knowing that they are part of this study. However, they can also forget some minor illnesses after such a long period. A shorter contact period, personal interviews, and use of objective examination of events could have reduced these biases.

The only appropriate way to interpret these numbers is to compare with the rates for non-vaccinated populations with similar characteristics. That data we do not have, and are unlikely to have as most people are likely to have been vaccinated with some vaccine and those not vaccinated would clearly have different characteristics than those vaccinated. However, that the most common symptoms were minor conditions suggests this is possibly a normal occurrence in this population. Adolescents reported far higher adverse events. This could be due to these disorders themselves being commoner in this age group (menstrual) or more likely to be worried over and reported (hair fall or acne).

The study was conducted after the second wave; by then, almost everyone in India would have been infected by SARS CoV-2. This has implications for interpretation. How does a prior infection modify your response to the vaccine? If an adverse event is seen, then is it due to the earlier infection or due to the vaccine? It is impossible to tell. This is even more important for longer-term side effects. Attributing causality becomes weaker over time as factors other than vaccination play a role. For example, this study reports that post-jab typhoid cases had a higher risk of such symptoms. The possibility of an association being causal is stronger if a biological plausibility explains the association. Without knowing

how Covaxin could impact menstruation, it is difficult to attribute this to the vaccine. What merits closer scrutiny is that a total of nine adults and one adolescent developed serious adverse events of special interest (AESIs). This is because these are objective measures. However, without a comparison group or background rates, it is not possible to know if these events were linked to vaccination, given the period of study and the study subjects were not "normal" either.

There is no cause for worry now as two to three years have passed since vaccination. This doesn't mean the authors were wrong to publish now. They had every right to conduct the study and if the journal, after peer review, published it, that is fine too. Long-term safety data must be available as a part of post-marketing surveillance.

Is it wrong for the media to report it? No. But it should be done responsibly. Sensationalism over the issue could have been avoided. Even a balanced report can lead to alarm and anxiety among the public. We are always wiser in hindsight. However, the study does not raise any issue that warrants a review. It is time to move on.

Anand Krishnan is a professor at the Centre for Community Medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal



Anand Krishnan

In Pune crash, a mirror to our class hypocrisies

On May 19, 2024, a 17-year-old juvenile in Pune, allegedly drunk, rammed his father's Porsche at breakneck speed into two young techies, killing them instantly. He was arrested, but the entire system, including two doctors at Sassoon government hospital and allegedly the local MLA, did its best to protect him at the behest of his influential family.

The condemnable incident rightly created national outrage. But I wonder if public indignation would have been more muted if the car was not a Porsche but a Maruti Alto, and the accused's father was not rich and powerful but just a middle-class pensioner with some contacts in the system?

I ask this question, not to even remotely condone the criminality of the Pune incident, but to question our attitudes towards the wealthy and influential, and our own standard of ethics. Are the self-avowed messiahs of the poor any different in their behaviour? Are furious critics scrupulously honest where their own interests are concerned? Do we resent the wealthy, especially in a highly unequal society? Or do most people, especially in the middle class, simultaneously both envy and aspire to be like them, irrespective of the means?

When Mayawati, the Dalit chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, celebrated her 47th birthday in January 2003, a huge *pandal* was made in fine glass to resemble the sets of the film, *Mughul-e-Azam*, and the venue was decorated with 60 quintals of flowers. The cake was the size of a room.

Over one lakh *laddoos* were ordered, and all the thousands who attended went back with a return gift. None of this led her enthusiastic supporters to ask where *Behenji* got the money from. The display of pomp was seen as an inevitable extension of power, and she was neither the first nor the last politician to follow this convention.

In early March, the lavish pre-wedding celebrations of Mukesh and Nita Ambani's son, Anant, in Jamnagar, Gujarat, held the media entranced. While some thought such a display of wealth was vulgar in a poor country, the reaction of most was that if the Ambanis have the money, why shouldn't they spend it?

Indians are not against wealth. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is one of the most ubiquitous deities in Hindu homes. The aarti or invocation to her has these ethically neutral lines: "Jis ghar mein tum rahti, thahen sab sadguna aata; sab sambhav ho jaata, man nahin ghabrata" (In the home you inhabit, all virtues come automatically; all becomes feasible, the mind is free of worry). Artha, or the pursuit of material well-being, is sanctioned as one of the four highest *purusharthas* or goals of the Hindu worldview, along with *dharma*, *kama* and *moksha*.

Where honesty is involved, Indians are harmonious schizophrenics: Highly outraged when the high and mighty are guilty, and effortlessly expedient when their own morals are involved. How many of us, if faced with a driving fine of ₹2,000, will not, if we can, slip a ₹500 note to the policeman to avoid it?



The condemnable incident in Pune rightly created national outrage

Moreover, which parents in our country, rich or poor, will not try and save their child from penal action? Our otherwise philosophically sophisticated moral relativism is noteworthy for the exemptions it grants to "correct" behaviour. A man can do no wrong if he acts to protect his *svadharma*, conduct that is right for his *sva's jati* or status; he cannot be held guilty for transgressions in the interests of *kuladharm*, conduct that is right for one's family; and anything he does is justified in a state of emergency, *apaddharma*.

I am aware there are honourable exceptions to such antiquated thinking. But essentially, let us admit we are different. When Prime Minister Tony Blair's 16-year-old son, Euan, was arrested in 2000 for being drunk, the

police did not hush up the case; Blair cut short his holiday in Portugal to publicly say that his son should not be treated any differently from any other young offender; and both he and his wife, Cherie, were at the police station when Euan was reprimanded.

What happened in Pune deserves stringent legal action. But it also provides us a mirror to examine our own value systems and introspect on what we would do in similar circumstances.

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). Just Like That is a weekly column where Varma shares nuggets from the world of history, culture, literature, and personal reminiscences. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY LETTERS

An uncertain future for Ukraine

This is with reference to "The West steps up for Kyiv. Will it be enough?" by Ian Bremmer (May 26). Aid from the US and EU is unlikely to help Ukraine avoid a partition. This would involve some illegally acquired land being ceded to Russia. It would also risk further destabilising the region surrounding Ukraine.

Sanjana Yadav

Questions to ask a prime minister

This is with reference to "What questions to ask in an interview with a PM" by Karan Thapar (May 26). In an interview with the Prime Minister, an interviewer should inquire about the future plans of the government, and how challenges would be tackled.

Subramanian Ganpathy

Address the plight of domestic workers

This is with reference to "State needs to address the plight of domestic workers" by Lalita Panicker (May 26). It is unfortunate that the efforts of domestic workers and homemakers have not been recognised by the State.

Sandeep Arora

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

Pro-changers challenge the no-changers

I ENDED last week's column with the words "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." Counting of votes is two days away, and we will know whether the plurality (or majority) of the people desire change or are happy to maintain the status quo.

COMFORT IN STATUS QUO

There are certainly many people who desire change but I think there are also many people who do not want change. I suppose it is because the no-changers fear change may make their lives worse; or because the unknown is more frightening than the known; or because they fear that change in one aspect will affect other aspects of life — for example, breaking custom may invite the community's wrath. There is a certain comfort in the *status quo*.

The last thirty years of India have been marked by certain periods where the motive force was *change*. During certain other periods, it was *protecting the status quo*. At other times, it was *atavism*, which the dictionary defines as a 'tendency of reversion'. (Atavists are those who long for what they see as a lost and glorious past.)

India, I believe, needs and deserves change. Ten years ago, there was a clamour for change, and the change of government took place from UPA to NDA. I think India is at such a moment again. There is much that has happened in the last 10 years that must be reversed or remedial action taken...

medial action taken. Let me give you a few examples:

THE SUFFERERS

Demonetization in 2016 was a Himalayan mistake. The huge hole in liquidity caused an upheaval in the lives of individuals as well as in the working of hundreds of thousands of micro and small units. Many units did not recover and shut down.

The subsequent **unplanned lockdowns** during the pandemic years (2020 and 2021) made the situation worse. **Absence of a financial package and credit** aggravated the situation for micro and small units. More units shut down and, as a result of the twin blows, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. Changing the dire situation requires a bold plan that will include debt waiver, massive credit, government purchases, export incentives and tax concessions. I have not heard of any plan in this behalf from the no-changers.

The silent blows to reservation have scuttled the Constitutional promises to SC, ST and OBC.

Leaving 30 lakh jobs in the government and government sector vacant was criminal neglect and an example of the anti-reservation attitude. While swearing by the 50 per cent cap on reservation, the status quoists quietly slipped in a 10 per cent quota for economically weaker sections (EWS), over and above the 50 per cent, but *excluded the EWS among the SC, ST and OBC, why?* The policy of reservation has been severely undermined by the net reduction

of jobs in public sector enterprises, privatisation without conditions on reservation, preference to the private sector over the government in education and healthcare, cancellation of public examinations citing leaks of question papers, non-promotion, and contractualisation and casualisation of jobs. Change will come only at the instance of those who challenge the status quo.

REVERSING THE DAMAGE

The **weaponisation of laws** deserves to be reversed. How will a Parliament dominated by no-changers reverse the draconian new Bills or Amendment Bills that were passed in the last 10 years? Who will rein in the investigation agencies and bring them under the oversight of Parliament/Legislature committees? Who will restore the meaning and content of Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the Constitution and re-establish the rule of law? Who will end 'bulldozer justice' and 'pre-trial incarceration'? Who will remove fear of the law among the people and replace it by respect for the law? Who will make 'due process' an immutable principle of criminal law and incorporate in the law the principle that 'bail is the rule, jail is the exception'? These changes can be made only by a band of intrepid lawmakers who are committed to the fundamental values and principles of the Constitution crafted by Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Liberalization, an open economy, competition and world trade have brought great improvement to the Indian economy

but will continue to be relevant only if the **economic policies are re-set**. The growth rate has flagged, as it was bound to happen, because of creeping controls, disguised licensing, growing monopolies, protectionism, and fear of bilateral and multi-lateral trade agreements. The bias toward capital at the cost of labour (we have a PLI but not an ELI) has suppressed employment and wages — one of the causes of growing inequality. According to World Inequality Lab, India's inequality is at its highest level since 1922.

Many people are deceived by the rise in *median* income. Remember, below the median are 50 per cent of the Indian people (71 crore) and within that are the bottom 20 per cent (28 crore) who are even poorer. Will the status quoists speak for the bottom 20 per cent? Look at another data point: the adult population of India (15-64 years) is 92 crore but only 60 crore are in the labour force. The most liberal estimates of the labour force *participation rates* (LFPR) are 74 per cent (men) and 49 per cent (women). Combine unsatisfactory LFPR, high unemployment rates and an ageing population, the inevitable conclusion is we are fast losing the advantages of demography. Who will dare to challenge the current economic policies and re-set them? Not the status quoists.

Disruption alone will bring change. Disruption, and change, will bring many benefits *and* some losses that can be corrected. The cardinal lesson of 1991 is **who dares wins**. The status quoists — no changers — have not learned and will not learn that lesson.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter: @tavleen_singh



An ugly campaign ends

TWO THINGS happened after the campaign ended last week. Narendra Modi flew to Kanyakumari to meditate, with TV cameras recording every moment of this latest spiritual excursion. In painful length detail was shown the Prime Minister's chopper hovering over the rock where Vivekananda meditated, as were Modi's salutations to Surya the next morning and the stillness of his visage as his meditation began. He must be very good at meditating if he can do it with so many cameras trained on his every move. On the morning of the Surya worship came the dramatic news that Donald Trump is now a convicted felon, but our Prime Minister's spiritual journey took precedence on news channels I watched.

The second thing that happened in this interregnum between voting and results was that the man who was prime minister before Modi came forward to denounce him publicly. Dr Manmohan Singh was quoted on the front page of this newspaper as saying, "No Prime Minister in the past has uttered such hateful, unparliamentary and coarse terms meant to target either a specific section of the society or the opposition..." He added that it was now our duty to save our "beloved nation" from these forces of discord.

Speaking for me, personally, the good doctor's words had more resonance than Modi's meditation. This is because the coarsened discourse and the hostilities in this campaign have been very worrying. It has often seemed more like a fight between enemies than democratic opponents. There is no question that the level of discourse has plunged to a very low point. But can Modi be entirely blamed? I have vivid memories of the last Lok Sabha election when Rahul Gandhi called the Prime Minister a thief. Remember how many times he repeated 'chowkidar chor hai'? Remember how many times he repeated that Modi had stolen money from the Rafale deal and put it in 'the pocket of Anil Ambani'? Coarsening of political dialogue goes further back to another election when his Mummy called Modi a salesman of death (*maut ka saudagar*)?

When our most important political leaders start hurling abuse at each other the worst thing that happens is that they forget that they should be talking about policies. We should be hearing about what they would like to do for India. We should be hearing about their vision for our future. Instead, what we got in this election were unending promises of freebies. No country became prosperous or developed by giving people handouts of money and free foodgrain. No country got rid of poverty by serving dollops of charity to those who promised to continue living below the poverty line. Rahul Gandhi has promised that he will cut every poor family in the country and offer Rs 8,500 a month to the woman of the family. When he finishes calculating the number of deserving women it could be time for the next general election.

The Prime Minister's campaign has been equally depressing. Before he went off to meditate on Vivekananda's rock, he declared in an interview that he had been sent by God to save India. No politician is sent by God. They are elected by the people and if there are those who believe they are messengers of God they should confine themselves to temples and meditation. It is dangerous for messiahs to enter politics. Dangerous not just for them but for those who vote for them.

In this race to lower the level of discourse his opponents were not far behind. Along with promises of free jobs and pocket money came the constant refrain that it would be dangerous to vote Modi back to power because he would end democracy and the Constitution. Indian voters may be poor and semi-literate but most of them are not fooled by alarmist theories or messiahs. They know that their votes should go to those who will bring some prosperity into their wretched lives. This is why the Ram Temple has been less important than unemployment. This is the one issue that has vitalised voters across India. And there is no point in denying that in these past ten years of 'acche din' this problem has been mostly ignored.

Another thing that should scare us, and those we voted for, is that India is among the few countries left in the world who has not been able to provide her citizens with their most basic need: clean water. In the last days of the campaign people were in the streets of Delhi trying desperately to buy water from tankers because on the hottest days of this summer their sources of water totally dried up. In Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, there were similar scenes.

If after seventy-five years of independence the average Indian needs to struggle for something as basic as clean drinking water, it is not just our politicians who should be ashamed but our policymakers, and political parties. As for us in the media, we cannot escape blame. Only when there is a crisis do we notice that the average Indian has been denied access to his most basic needs. What puzzles me as much is why the hundreds of reporters covering this election never noticed how filthy the conditions are in which most Indians live. For me the enduring memory of this election is images of waste plastic along new highways and dumps of rotting garbage across rural India.

inside TRACK

COOMIKAPOOR



CHEMISTRY VS ARITHMETIC

THE YEAR 2024 has broken the mould of parliamentary elections in more ways than one. Some pointers to the idiosyncrasies in this long-drawn-out and difficult-to-decipher poll.

1. Till a month-and-a-half ago, the TINA (there is no alternative) factor in favour of Narendra Modi was overwhelming. The PM's larger-than-life image completely dominated the poll scape. So what allowed a slight mood shift to raise niggling doubts that this was not quite the one-horse race we all assumed?

2. The BJP shot itself in the foot partly due to overconfidence. Voters were suddenly conscious that if Modiji was winning hands down anyway, they could vent their frustration against incumbent BJP candidates on localised issues. Particularly damaging for the party was the assertion of overzealous BJP MPs, that Modiji needed 400 seats so that the Constitution could be amended. A slick Congress campaign manoeuvre, spread through WhatsApp and word of mouth, falsely implied that changing the Constitution could end reservation for the SCs and OBCs enshrined in Ambedkar's sacred document. The rumour gained such wide traction that the BJP was forced to rush in for damage control.

3. With taciturn voters and no visible wave on the ground other than, as one commentator succinctly put it, a heat wave, some poll watchers suddenly began totting up poll figures in terms of the arithmetic of seats, rather than the magic of the Modi chemistry. In 2019, the BJP, on its own, won 31 seats more than the 272 halfway mark. Towards the fag end of this campaign, people began speculating whether the ruling party could in fact falter at the finishing line in reaching the 272 target. The assumption was based on the speculation that the BJP will get fewer seats in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Bihar than last time and that it could, additionally, incur setbacks in Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. If, perchance, the BJP loses more than 31 seats, it will fail to reach a majority on its own. The ruling party, however, is confident that what it loses compared to the last time in some states will be adequately compensated by gains in others like Odisha, Telangana, Andhra and West Bengal (even if Hindutva poster boy K Annamalai's optimistic pre-

dictions for Tamil Nadu are likely to be a damp squib). Most BJP loyalists are confident of winning over 300 seats and claim that the growing number of doubting Thomases will have egg on their faces come June 4. Certainly, the BJP's hired in-house psephologist looks supremely confident.

4. Which is why Modi's last-minute, almost frenetic campaign appeared nervous and unnecessary. He often diverted his campaign to an undignified and divisive level of discourse. Fearmongering about Muslim birth rates, snatching of mangalsutras, talk of *mujras* and stolen faucets, and ill-chosen words against respected rivals hardly seemed helpful to his campaign. The party faithful maintain that there is nothing uncharacteristic about Modi's campaign tone this year and that scanning past election campaign records will reveal a similar story of Modi leaving no stone unturned when he lashes out at rivals. But seasoned poll watchers feel the stridency of his 2024 tone has reached new depths.

5. One of the BJP's great strengths has been its shrewdness in stitching alliances that boost its poll prospects. The reverse seems to be unfolding this time. Old allies like Shiv Sena (UBT) and Akali Dal have departed with bitterness. New partners like Shinde Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP are fighting to establish legitimacy. The scandal-hit Deve Gowda family, and a much-discredited Nitish Kumar could be liabilities rather than assets. Formerly friendly neutral parties led by Naveen Patnaik and Jagan Mohan Reddy have been unnecessarily alienated.

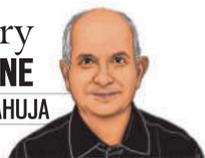
6. Some see hitches in the usually streamlined, coordinated BJP poll machinery. Election *prabhars* hastily selected, some with too much on their plate, appeared adrift at times. After the *faux pas* about changing the Constitution statements, an edict was issued to all to not speak unnecessarily to the media. Several powerful state leaders avoided giving interviews, unlike the past. No one wanted to be accused of stealing the limelight.

7. The outcome will eventually boil down to Modi's magical chemistry with the people versus the arithmetic of possibly shedding seats due to anti-incumbency. Some wistful Opposition leaders believe that even a third element may come to play, who could outmanoeuvre best in a tight corner. The advantage lies with the BJP, which has a reputation for its smooth ability to stitch together a winning combination, even when the chips are down.

8. Whatever the final outcome, 2024 will go down as a watershed moment of sorts. It could possibly change forever the discourse on the functioning of our democracy, reservation, autonomy of constitutional bodies, expanding welfarism and increasing institutionalising of populist measures.

History HEADLINE

SHARATHAHUJA



JAMSETJI NUSSERWANJI Tata, the founder of Tata Group, spent nearly 15 years in the 1860s away from India to strengthen the family business. His visits to England, in connection with the cotton trade and the idea to set up cotton mills, led to a reality check about India: lack of industrialisation, and the complete absence of scientific and industrial research supported equally by governments and philanthropists.

Realising that India's higher education had deficiencies, Tata decided to resolve it by establishing a centre for scientific research. In his convocation speech in 1889, Lord Reay, the Chancellor of University and Governor of Bombay, pleaded the need for a meaningful scheme for a 'teaching university' in India. His speech helped strengthen Tata's resolve. This year, thanks to Tata, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru has turned 115 years old.

As the first step, he annually funded select young Indian men to study and train in England. A successful businessman with interests in manufacturing cotton, building hotels, cargo shipping, etc., both in India and abroad, Tata acquired large parcels of land in the 1890s in Mumbai, Matheran, Panchgani and Ooty. Years later, the valuation of these properties formed the base for the endowment while he proposed IISc.

In 1898, Tata offered to donate his landed properties, worth Rs 30 lakh then and yielding an annual income of Rs 1.25 lakh, for the proposed university on two conditions: a Trust should be created by legislation to hold more property in perpetuity and the administration be a five-member body (three nominated by the university and two by the Tata family).

BJ Padshah, Tata's close confidant, was entrusted with establishing the teaching university. Padshah toured scientific and medical research institutions in England, Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, etc., between 1896-1898, during which he interacted with eminent academics. He recommended that the teaching university be modelled on the lines of US-based Johns Hopkins University, a postgraduate institution supported by endowment and set amidst a bustling industrial district.

Towards the end of 1898, Tata proposed a provincial committee. Justice E T Candy, Vice-Chancellor, Bombay University, was the chairman and Padshah the secretary, while Tata opted to be a mere member. The committee chose the university's title as

What brought IISc to Bangalore 115 years ago



Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, the Maharaja of Mysore, and his mother, Maharani Kempa Sannidhana Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, played pivotal roles in bringing IISc to Bangalore. Office of Communications, IISc, Bangalore

'The Imperial University of India'. It would have scientific and technical, medical, philosophical and educational departments, laboratories, museums and a library.

On a voyage from Japan and Chicago, Tata had a chance interaction with Swami Vivekananda, who was travelling to attend the Parliament of the World's Religions. Their conversation included the need for growth of ascetic spirit in India.

In 1899, when Lord George Curzon assumed charge as the Viceroy of India, the university proposal was tabled before him. He expressed reservations on whether the university would find enough students and be able to train them for employment. Another hurdle emerged when the government disapproved of the condition of the "family settlement" from the endowment. Later, Tata, through the provincial committee, dissociated the same in the revised scheme submitted on September 23, 1899.

With the scheme stuck despite Tata's desire to obtain approval at the earliest, the provincial committee first invited Professor William Ramsay, a British chemist, and later Professor Orme Masson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Melbourne, and Colonel J Clibborn, Director, Engineering School, Roorkee, for their recommendations.

The Masson-Clibborn Report proposed the name 'Indian Institute of Science' and picked Roorkee as its location. The Ramsay Report picked Bangalore for its favourable climate, large mineral deposits in Mysore

and hydroelectric power from Cauvery Falls.

However, it was the Mysore royal family — Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, the then minor Maharaja of Mysore, and his mother Maharani Kempa Sannidhana Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, the Queen Regent — and Dewan K Seshadri Iyer who played pivotal roles in bringing IISc to Bangalore. The royal family offered 371 acres and Rs 5 lakh towards the construction, besides an annual subsidy of Rs 50,000.

Several delays in approvals by the British Raj continued to mar the process of establishment of the university. Fresh trouble arrived in the form of a dispute between the Tatas and the government over the valuation of the Bombay properties. GR Lowndes, legal member of the Viceroy's Council, gave his valuations. Meanwhile, Tata died in Germany following a brief illness in May 1904. His sons Ratanji and Dorabji Tata got involved in fulfilling their father's dream.

Lowndes' recommendations were finally accepted by the government in February 1905 and the vesting order of the establishment of IISc was issued on May 27, 1909. Since inception, it took 13 years for the institute to reach fruition. English chemist Morris Travers was appointed as IISc's first director. IISc began with two departments: General and Applied Chemistry, and Electrical Technology. The first batch of 24 students was admitted in 1912.

In 1933, Nobel laureate Sir C V Raman took over as IISc's first Indian director and established its Physics department. Nuclear physicist Homi Bhabha conceived the idea of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research while working in this department at IISc. Physicist and astronomer Vikram Sarabhai, who established ISRO, also worked under Raman in this department.

Research on local industrial problems involving sandalwood oil and lac were in focus in IISc's nascent years. Bangalore's water supply and sewage system was the outcome of research conducted by Prof Gilbert Flower of the Department of Biochemistry. Origins of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, National Aerospace Laboratories, Central Power and Research Institute, Central Food and Technological Research Institute and Karnataka Soaps and Detergents Limited can be easily traced back to IISc.

Sharath Ahuja was the technical officer with the Archives and Publications Cell of IISc (As told to Anjali Marar)

On the LOOSE

LEHER KALA

leherkala@gmail.com



PRAISING PAYAL Kapadia for winning the Grand Prix in the competition category at Cannes for her film *All We Imagine as Light*, Oscar winner Resul Pookutty made some scathing observations about the lack of support small filmmakers receive, specifically those from the renowned Film and Television Institute of India (FTII).

In a Facebook post, Pookutty cuttingly noted, "The mainstream Indian film industry has nothing to do with this glory." He said Kapadia's win was special because she was one among many ordinary students who benefitted from the liberal spirit of FTII that nurtures creativity and celebrates original ideas.

The real and reel impact of FTII

"When you study at an IIM, IIT or AIIMS, you become Managers, Engineers and doctors. But when you sign up to study at FTII, you become a struggler," asserted Pookutty, pointing to how careers in film and television have become dangerously fraught with government censorship. He pleaded, "Whichever dispensation comes to the helm of affairs, please do not interfere with FTII's atmosphere."

Pookutty's lament rings true at so many levels. Firstly, some of us are wired to dreamily absorb the world and present our own unique version of it via art, film or writing. Indeed, there exists a vast gulf of randomness between the creation of a great film, bringing it in front of worldwide audiences and, finally, making money off it. It's unfortunate that this arduous profession doesn't guarantee financial stabil-

ity but does that mean nobody pursues it? It's the stuff of legend that the development of *Mughal-e-Azam* began in 1944, got shelved during Partition, after which the financier departed. With great trepidation, the producer finally released it in 1960, to staggering success. Many others persevere but fall by the wayside. Filmmakers have a tough enough job; it's not a big ask that the establishment not make it harder for the Kapadias of India to succeed.

To jog dormant memories, in 2015, students of FTII went on strike for 139 days to protest the appointment of an unqualified individual as Chairman, by the NDA government. At one point, bureaucrats with no background in film studies were deciding which movies would be screened at FTII. The student agitation for intellectual freedom on campus was based on the sim-

ple premise that great cinema can never emerge from institutions controlled by politics of the Left, Right or centre.

All We Imagine as Light, a film about friendship between three very different women, doesn't boast of stars or big budgets. That it received a standing eight-minute ovation demonstrates that a good story well told, whether it is about someone in Mumbai, Rio or on Mars, will find an audience. But, to create art that resonates internationally, requires going beyond the glitz and glamour that Bollywood does so well. In ways too complicated to dissect, exposure to world cinema at FTII and the grand tradition of evening soirees debating contemporary issues shaped Kapadia's outlook, or at the very least gave her the confidence to tell a fresh story.

Despite Pookutty's evident distaste for

masala potboilers awash in song and dance, the stark distinctions between mainstream Hindi movies and arthouse cinema have become increasingly blurred. Even a decade ago, in public perception, the FTII style of filmmaking revolved around dreary activism and depressing truths. Exhausted by life's challenges, Indian viewers were clear — their precious rupees were to be spent on escaping reality. So candy floss romances and slapstick comedy ruled the screens. With progress, has come discernment. Smaller films like *12th Fail* and *Laapataa Ladies* are as inspiring and fun as mainstream hits like *3 Idiots* and *Dangal* that carry strong social messaging as well. To walk in someone else's shoes and forget ourselves, albeit briefly, is a joy. Let filmmakers be, to do their thing.

The writer is director, *Hutkay Films*

Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 2, 2024



Indian cricket team players during a training session for the T20 World Cup in New York

If only hype could win tournaments...

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

INDIA'S BIG GUNS should be well-rested from the exertions in the IPL when they start their campaign in the T20 World Cup. Especially with none of the chosen 15 featuring in the final a week ago, and the team that finished rock bottom contributing the highest number of players to the squad. The players will have to cultivate their own confidence, as none of them will have the knowledge of winning a big prize in the previous few weeks at the back of their minds.

As always, India will be among the favourites for the top prize — but that has been the case for more than a decade, during which time they have failed to add to their trophy cabinet. If hype could win tournaments, no other team would have a chance.

The competition begins in the unknown cricketing territory of the United States, but barring a cricketing disaster, India's fate will be decided in the Caribbean. The game against Pakistan in New York may contribute towards generating eyeballs and media interest in a cricket-agnostic land, but it's unlikely to have much bearing on the prospects of either team going ahead in the event. Even during the barren last decade or so, making the business end of big tournaments hasn't been an issue for India, it's what they do once they get there. After the 2007 50-over World Cup, ironically also in the West Indies, where both India and Pakistan went out early, the format of every ICC tournament ensures India's involvement for as long as possible. But when it gets to the pointy end, with the stakes at their highest, that's where India have been known to falter. Last year, after playing like a dream at the 50-over World Cup at home, the hopes of billions came crashing down on coronation day.

Hype over substance

The IPL is considered the best, toughest, most competitive domestic T20 league in the world, much like the English Premier League is said to be the No.1 equivalent in club football. But it has been almost 60 years since England lifted a major cup, while India's only T20 world title predates the IPL.

It may be because these domestic tournaments nurture a mythology (even hagiography) of their own, with objectivity becoming a casualty. Look back at how the recent IPL season became almost an MS Dhoni farewell tour — even though it's not yet certain that it was his final tournament — and Virat Kohli was portrayed as someone bigger than his franchise. If Dhoni had not already retired from international cricket, there would have been a clamour for having him in the India squad based on the sixes and fours he hit during his limited time at the crease in the IPL, regardless of the fact that there were several players who won matches in his position in the tournament.

The obsession with Kohli's strike rate almost became a tournament in

itself, his spat with critics dominating the narrative to such an extent that the focus fell on the evolution of his batsmanship rather than what suits his team best.

Many observers from overseas have been awed by the richness of Indian talent and the strength in depth. One has said that India is the biggest favourite for the T20 World Cup, judging by the players who have been left out of the squad. In fact, India's chances are being played up more abroad while the frequent disappointments on the big stage have prompted hopes to be a bit mellow at home.

That's because the modern way of batting in T20 cricket is not something that the Indian seniors have largely followed, even in the IPL. As Rohit Sharma and Kohli will be batting in the top order inside the Powerplay — they could even be opening — the fearless brand that regularly results in scores well in excess of 200 may be difficult to get. India may need the firepower provided by Shivam Dube in the middle order to get to above-par scores, but that may have to come at the expense of Yashasvi Jaiswal. Already, Rinku Singh and Shubman Gill have no place in the touring party. If the pitches in the Caribbean turn out to be low, slow, and aiding spin, totals of 160-170 could be competitive. But that would put the onus on the bowlers, and apart from Jasprit Bumrah and Kuldeep Yadav, India's bowling resources don't elicit envy. The selectors have provided a spin-heavy attack but Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel are similar players and Yuzvendra Chahal is not useful with the bat.

The Impact Player rule in the IPL has reduced the incentive for players to develop a second facet of their game that could be useful in the World Cup, where it's still 11 vs 11. Also, many times, players who are in the national squad were substituted out or used as Impact Subs, so they didn't have to field for 20 overs. They won't have that luxury in the United States and West Indies.

Other contenders

Taking a look at the other teams, Australia and England may have the advantage of playing all their matches in the West Indies, in contrast to India and Pakistan who will have to come down after playing their group matches in the States. West Indies have underwhelmed as a team of late but may find some inspiration as hosts. Their main players are all proficient in the format as they play in leagues all round the world, making them a dangerous proposition, even if Sunil Narine, the Most Valuable Player in the IPL, won't be at hand. Several players of these teams are coming off stellar IPL seasons, so will be in rhythm and full of confidence. So, India start another campaign in search of the elusive silverware. The broadcasters have started doing their thing, raising expectations and appealing to the public's patriotic instincts in their promotional campaigns, as nothing pulls at the heartstrings more than the Indian cricket team.

But as Amon Goeth said in Schindler's List: "This is really cruel, Oskar. You are giving them hope. You shouldn't do that. *That's* cruel!"

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



India, I believe, needs and deserves change. Ten years ago, there was a clamour for change, and the change of government took place from UPA to NDA. I think India is at such a moment again. There is much that has happened in the last 10 years that must be reversed or remedial action taken...

I ENDED LAST week's column with the words "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." Counting of votes is two days away, and we will know whether the plurality (or majority) of the people desire change or are happy to maintain the status quo.

Comfort in status quo

There are certainly many people who desire change but I think there are also many people who do not want change. I suppose it is because the no-changers fear change may make their lives worse; or because the unknown is more frightening than the known; or because they fear that change in one aspect will affect other aspects of life — for example, breaking custom may invite the community's wrath. There is a certain comfort in the status quo.

The last thirty years of India have been marked by certain periods where the motive force was *change*. During certain other periods, it was *protecting the status quo*. At other times, it was *ativism*, which the dictionary defines as a "tendency of reversion". (Ativists are those who long for what they see as a lost and glorious past.)

India, I believe, needs and deserves change. Ten years ago, there was a clamour for change, and the change of government took place from UPA to NDA. I think India is at such a moment again. There is much that has happened in the last 10 years that must be reversed or remedial action taken. Let me give you a few examples:

The sufferers

Demonetisation in 2016 was a Himalayan mistake. The huge hole in liquidity caused an upheaval in the lives of individuals as well as in the working of hundreds of thousands of micro and small units. Many units did not recover



Polling for the Lok Sabha elections concluded on Saturday, votes to be counted on June 4

Pro-changers challenge the no-changers

and shut down.

The subsequent **unplanned lockdowns** during the pandemic years (2020 and 2021) made the situation worse. **Absence of a financial package and credit** aggravated the situation for micro and small units. More units shut down, as a result of the twin blows, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. Changing the dire situation requires a bold plan that will include debt waiver, massive credit, government purchases, export incentives and tax concessions. I have not heard of any plan in this behalf from the no-changers.

The silent blows to reservation have scuttled the Constitutional promises to SC, ST and OBC.

Leaving 30 lakh jobs in the government and government sector vacant was criminal neglect and an example of the anti-reservation attitude. While swearing by the 50% cap on reservation, the status quoists quietly slipped in a 10% quota for economically weaker sections (EWS), over and above the 50%, but **excluded the EWS among the SC, ST and OBC, why?** The policy of reservation has been severely undermined by the net reduction of jobs in public sector enterprises, privatisation without conditions on reservation, preference to the private sector over the government in education and healthcare, cancellation of public examinations citing leaks of question papers, non-promotion, and contractualisation and casualisation of jobs. Change will come only at the instance of those who challenge the

status quo.

Reversing the damage

The **weaponisation of laws** deserves to be reversed. How will a Parliament dominated by no-changers reverse the draconian new Bills or Amendment Bills that were passed in the last 10 years? Who will rein in the investigation agencies and bring them under the oversight of Parliament/Legislature committees? Who will restore the meaning and content of Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the Constitution and re-establish the rule of law? Who will end "bulldozer justice" and "pre-trial incarceration"? Who will remove fear of the law among the people and replace it by respect for the law? Who will make "due process" an immutable principle of criminal law and incorporate in the law the principle that "bail is the rule, jail is the exception"? These changes can be made only by a band of intrepid law-makers who are committed to the fundamental values and principles of the Constitution crafted by Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Liberalisation, an open economy, competition and world trade have brought great improvement to the Indian economy but will continue to be relevant only if the **economic policies are re-set**. The growth rate has flagged, as it was bound to happen, because of creeping controls, disguised licensing, growing monopolies, protectionism, and fear of bilateral and multi-lateral trade agreements. The bias toward cap-

ital at the cost of labour (we have a PII but not an ELI) has suppressed employment and wages — one of the causes of growing inequality. According to World Inequality Lab, India's inequality is at its highest level since 1922.

Many people are deceived by the rise in **median** income. Remember, below the median are 50% of the Indian people (71 crore) and within that are the bottom 20% (28 crore) who are even poorer. Will the status quoists speak for the bottom 20 per cent? Look at another data point: the adult population of India (15-64 years) is 92 crore but only 60 crore are in the labour force. The most liberal estimates of the labour force **participation rates** (LFPR) are 74% (men) and 49% (women). Combine unsatisfactory LFPR, high unemployment rates and an ageing population, the inevitable conclusion is we are fast losing the advantages of demography. Who will dare to challenge the current economic policies and re-set them? Not the status quoists.

Disruption alone will bring change. Disruption, and change, will bring many benefits **and** some losses that can be corrected. The cardinal lesson of 1991 is **who dares wins**. The status quoists — no-changers — have not learned and will not learn that lesson.

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Chemistry vs arithmetic

THE YEAR 2024 has broken the mould of parliamentary elections in more ways than one. Some pointers to the idiosyncrasies in this long-drawn-out and difficult-to-decipher poll.

1. Till a-month-and-a-half ago, the TINA (there is no alternative) factor in favour of Narendra Modi was overwhelming. The PM's larger-than-life image completely dominated the poll scape. So what allowed a slight mood shift to raise niggling doubts that this was not quite the one-horse race we all assumed?

2. The BJP shot itself in the foot partly due to overconfidence. Voters were suddenly conscious that if Modiji was winning hands down anyway, they could vent their frustration against incumbent BJP candidates on localised issues. Particularly damaging for the party was the assertion of overzealous BJP MPs, that Modiji needed 400 seats so that the Constitution could be amended. A slick Congress campaign manoeuvre, spread through WhatsApp and word of mouth, falsely implied

that changing the Constitution could end reservation for the SCs and OBCs enshrined in Ambedkar's sacred document. The rumour gained such wide traction that the BJP was forced to rush in for damage control.

3. With taciturn voters and no visible wave on the ground other than, as one commentator succinctly put it, a heat wave, some poll watchers suddenly began totting up poll figures in terms of the arithmetic of seats, rather than the magic of the Modi chemistry. In 2019, the BJP, on its own, won 31 seats more than the 272 halfway mark. Towards the fag end of this campaign, people began speculating whether the ruling party could in fact falter at the finishing line in reaching the 272 target. The assumption was based on the speculation that the BJP will get fewer seats in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Bihar than last time and that it could, additionally, incur setbacks in Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. If, perchance, the BJP loses more than 31 seats, it will fail to reach a majority on its own. The ruling party, however, is confident that what it loses compared to the last time in some states will be adequately compensated by gains in others like Odisha, Telangana, Andhra and West Bengal (even if Hindutva poster boy K Anna's optimistic predictions for Tamil Nadu are likely to be a damp squib). Most BJP loyalists are confident of winning over 300 seats

and claim that the growing number of doubting Thomases will have egg on their faces come June 4. Certainly, the BJP's hired in-house psephologist looks supremely confident.

4. Which is why Modi's last-minute, almost frenetic campaign appeared nervous and unnecessary. He often diverted his campaign to an undignified and divisive level of discourse. Fearmongering about Muslim birth rates, snatching of **mangalsutras**, talk of **mujras** and stolen faucets, and ill-chosen words against respected rivals hardly seemed helpful to his campaign. The party faithful maintain that there is nothing uncharacteristic about Modi's campaign tone this year and that scanning past election campaign records will reveal a similar story of Modi leaving no stone unturned when he lashes out at rivals. But seasoned poll watchers feel the stridency of his 2024 tone has reached new depths.

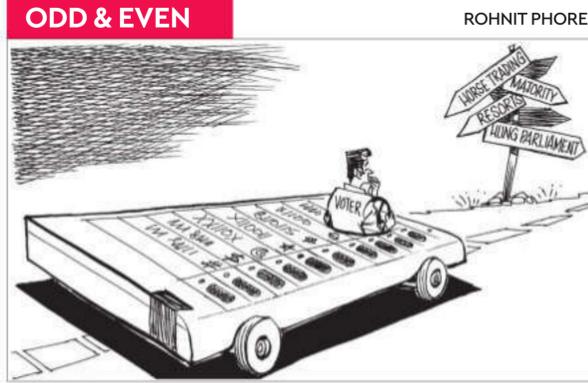
5. One of the BJP's great strengths has been its shrewdness in stitching alliances that boost its poll prospects. The reverse seems to be unfolding this time. Old allies like Shiv Sena (UBT) and Akali Dal have departed with bitterness. New partners like Shinde Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP are fighting to establish legitimacy. The scandal-hit Deve Gowda family, and a much-discredited Nitish Kumar could be liabilities rather than assets. Formerly friendly neutral parties led by Naveen

Patnaik and Jagan Mohan Reddy have been unnecessarily alienated.

6. Some see hitches in the usually streamlined, coordinated BJP poll machinery. Election **prabharis** hastily selected, some with too much on their plate, appeared adrift at times. After the **faux pas** about changing the Constitution statements, an edict was issued to all to not speak unnecessarily to the media. Several powerful state leaders avoided giving interviews, unlike the past. No one wanted to be accused of stealing the limelight.

7. The outcome will eventually boil down to Modi's magical chemistry with the people versus the arithmetic of possibly shedding seats due to anti-incumbency. Some wistful Opposition leaders believe that even a third element may come to play, who could outmanoeuvre best in a tight corner. The advantage lies with the BJP, which has a reputation for its smooth ability to stitch together a winning combination, even when the chips are down.

8. Whatever the final outcome, 2024 will go down as a watershed moment of sorts. It could possibly change forever the discourse on the functioning of our democracy, reservation, autonomy of constitutional bodies, expanding welfarism and increasing institutionalising of populist measures.





The longer I live, the less I trust ideas, the more I trust emotions

Louis Malle

AN AGENDA FOR NEW PARLIAMENT TO PROPEL PROSPERITY

In the summer of 1991, India's forex reserves were barely enough to cover seven days of imports. India pledged 46.1 tonnes of its gold reserves with the Bank of England to raise \$405 million to avoid default. The exposé—authored by this columnist and published in this very newspaper on July 8, 1991—informed the world at large about the precarious state of the economy and compelled the liberalisation of the economy.

On Friday, the Reserve Bank of India shifted 100 tonnes of gold from the UK, from the Bank of England, to its own vaults. India's journey from penury to the promise of prosperity, chronicled in my book *Accidental India*, has been propelled by a series of crises. Today, India has over 822 tonnes of gold. It has \$646 billion in foreign exchange reserves. It is the fastest growing economy ranked fifth on the global table. It is easy to be swayed by rah-rah ragas. It is instructive to remember the lessons of the 1991 crisis.

This week will witness a newly elected parliament and a new government. They carry the onus of steering the nation through tumultuous times, disruptions in geopolitics and geo-economics. The promised trust with destiny calls for an agenda which has a buy-in across party lines. Indeed, it would be ideal if President Droupadi Murmu, in the opening address to the new parliament, calls for a special session for the MPs to forge an all-party consensus on critical national goals.

Here are a few suggestions to instil resilience and sustainability. **Maximum governance:** It is often said India's governments have too many people doing things which don't quite matter and too few people doing that which matters. Essentially, the architecture of governance needs a review—what can be manned, what can be offshored for self-regulation and what can be automated or digitised. It is not so much the size of government, but simplicity of processes which defines efficiency. Can India hope for a select committee of Union ministers and chief ministers assisted by an expert group deliver a new design of governance?



THE THIRD EYE

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

Moolah mobilisation: Cost of capital has implications for growth. The world is witness to new industrial policies and fiscal expansionism. As the new coinage goes, the world is flat for high interest rates. India must fuel its growth by inducting efficient resource management. It needs to weed out waste. To raise resources it must encash/monetise assets by offering them to investors—this includes idle land, enterprises and shareholdings. The government's holding in 28 PSUs that went public since 2004 is over 80 percent and valued at over ₹21 lakh crore. Trimming holdings to 51 percent could deliver as much as ₹10 lakh crore. The aspiration to be the third largest economy rests on finding resources to invest in human and physical infrastructure.

Measurement matters: Elections reveal that politics fumble for answers on critical questions. Shouldn't a nation servicing the frontiers of global digitisation have a data template—on jobs created, incomes earned? Can a triangulation of data—bank credit, private equity, UPI payments and GST collections—yield a summary of the gig and formal economies? Can government expenditure yield a synopsis on employment that is intelligible and not gobbledygook? Why must statistics on GDP or poverty be shadowed by doubts? Peter Drucker said what gets measured can be managed and improved. If India aspires to do better, it must improve its measurement systems.

Track the welfare trail: Elections are effectively a contest between schemes. India's welfare model is at an inflection point of cost and benefits. The central government spends over ₹5 lakh crore on social schemes. What's the quantum of state government transfers? Given the intensity of disruptions, income support and welfare measures will expand. It is time the Centre and the states reassessed merits, added up the costs and examined outcomes in an annual report on welfare.

Align jobs and curriculum: India's job market is a study of paradoxes. There are 3 million vacant government posts and the joblessness debate. There is also another market reality—the gap between what employers want and what aspirants are equipped for: Accelerated adoption of technology will widen the gap. Primary education is broken; higher education is located in the past. India needs to map the skills of its workforce and what the market needs. The realignment of curriculum with market needs a public-private partnership between academia, industry and government. India needs an active labour policy which enables skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling.

Flailing judicial system: Delivery of justice is a cornerstone of the Constitution. The National Judicial Data Grid shows that the delivery of justice is flailing across levels. India's has over 5.1 crore cases pending in its courts, of which over 80 thousand are in the Supreme Court and 61.9 lakh in high courts. Year after year, judges have bemoaned the fact that the government is the biggest litigant. Will India modernise in time for a Viksit Bharat?

Finally, the MPs have five years to address the critical issue of electoral reforms. The list is long. The campaign was littered with allegations of corruption. While they mull on it, they may want to examine whether the economy can afford long, multi-phased elections. Does it have to be in the summer? The answers will illuminate the future.

As Voltaire said, "We never live; we are always in the expectation of living."

CURSED BY MONEY, TOXIC TALK & INTOXICANTS



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com
Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

RELIGION is the opium of the people, Karl Marx wrote in 1843. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions, he added. That was at a time opium was highly valued for its medicinal purposes. What would he say now to opium and its modern variants being used as an electoral tool to keep the tyrannised creatures in control? For that, he would have to come to India, where he believed the ruin and devastation caused by British colonial rule was a terrible but necessary price for "the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia".

What he would observe instead is total electoral inflation in India, where wooing the voters with intoxicants of various kinds has become the most effective way of ensuring victory. A fortnight ago, the Election Commission claimed that various government agencies had seized over ₹9,000 crore in the form of cash, precious stones, drugs and liquor between March and the fifth phase of the general election. Over 53 crore litres of liquor was caught before it reached the targeted tipplers. The agencies recovered an average of ₹100 crore per day in the form of black money, which was supposed to have been effaced because of demonetisation. By the end of the seventh phase, the amount seized is likely to cross a monumental ₹10,000 crore, as against just ₹3,500 crore during 2019 and barely ₹1,000 crore during 2014. It would be the

highest since the first Lok Sabha election in 1951-52.

If democracy is the greatest festival of them all, then political parties are also the biggest celebrants. EC data shows the cash recovered from all the states is just ₹850 crore. But the value of drugs seized is a whopping ₹4,000 crore. Liquor worth over ₹800 crore was also seized by the law enforcement agencies. It means almost ₹60 out of every ₹100 confiscated by the EC was meant for bribing, drugging and intoxicating voters. If the official norm of the investigating institutions is to be believed, then cash and other goods worth ₹80,000 crore escaped the agencies' eagle eyes. Statistics do tell many stories. And the devil definitely lies in the details provided by the EC. What are mere numbers for the EC tell many stories about the economic, social and cultural identity of the states.

Here are some examples.

■ The four southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have the maximum shekhalim power: Of the total cash of ₹850 crore seized by the EC, these states contributed over ₹377 crore. Telangana, with ₹114.56-crore seizures, tops the list of all states. Even in terms of sequestering precious metals, the South stands taller than the rest. These states contributed ₹441 crore worth of precious metals including gold, out of a total value of ₹1,260 crore that was confiscated by various agencies during the elections. But the promoters of politics went a step forward to intoxicate prospective voters. They were caught with liquor worth ₹337 crore from these states. Tamil Nadu's political touts were

detailed peddling drugs worth ₹330 crore. The total value of the intoxicants recovered from all over the country was ₹3,958.85 crore.

■ Gujarat, Punjab and Bihar reveal an astonishing story. Gujarat and Bihar are officially dry states in which the sale of liquor and other drugs is totally prohibited. In Gujarat, the agencies impounded just ₹8.61 crore in cash. However, the value of the liquor seized was almost ₹30 crore. And the market value of the drugs seized was about ₹1,200 crore, almost 30 percent of the total market price of the drugs (worth ₹4,000 crore) that was impounded all over the country. Gujarat was also the one of the top five states from where precious metals worth ₹128.50 crore

were recovered. But Bihar turned out to be poor in terms of cash because EC sleuths found just ₹14 crore. But its liquor mafia was caught with consignments worth ₹48 crore.

The recovery of a huge amount of drugs and liquor from Punjab also bolstered the perception that the state is in the grip of a powerful drug

mafia which also participated in the elections. The EC and other agencies seized drugs whose market value was over ₹650 crore. But it got just ₹15.50 crore in cash from agri-rich Punjab's political market.

■ Maharashtra and Delhi set the benchmark politically and financially. And the EC and other authorities knew it well as they kept an eye on the movement of money and material from these two states soon after the election schedule was announced. Since then, they have captured precious metals worth over ₹300 crore, which is 25 percent of

the total value of the gold and other expensive metals seized from other parts of the country. Surprisingly, the maximum recovery of expensive metals—worth ₹195 crore—was done from Delhi, followed by ₹188 crore from Maharashtra. An amount of ₹90.79 crore in cash was retained from Delhi's middlemen and over ₹75 crore from Maharashtra. Revenue intelligence organisations and the EC monitored the jewellers very closely as the demand for gold and other jewellery items grew immensely. Even the value of banned drugs recovered from Delhi was over ₹350 crore.

■ West Bengal, Assam, Odisha and Jharkhand presented a slightly different story. While an enormous amount of cash was recovered from politicians before the elections, the EC couldn't track the huge pile of cash illegally stashed during the elections. It found just ₹31 crore in West Bengal, ₹17 crore from Odisha, ₹45.53 crore from Jharkhand, and a mere ₹6.75 crore from Assam. However, liquor worth ₹90 crore was confiscated in West Bengal, ₹35 crore from Odisha and drugs worth ₹56 crore from Jharkhand. West Bengal was also among the top 10 states from where precious metals worth ₹60 crore were seized.

■ Ironically, all the other north Indian states such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and J&K seem to be saintly because they accounted for less than 10 percent of the total unaccounted cash and expensive metals impounded. While in Himachal they got ₹50 lakh, it was less than a crore in most of the small states in the Northeast. Even in Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 Lok Sabha members, the investigative agencies could track only ₹35 crore in cash.

For voters, the choice is between moolah, toxic talk and intoxicants. It is now up to them to show more maturity than those who are seeking their favour. Democratic verdicts are now influenced more by the boodle than by the book. And black megabucks are back as the flavour of the election season.



SOURAV ROY

REDEFINING BRAHMACHARYA FOR A NEW AGE



OPINION

ANURADHA GOYAL
Author and founder of IndiTalks.com
Follow her on X @anuradha_goyal

IT is easy to tempt anyone on diet to have a samosa or a piece of cake at a birthday party, but it is impossible to make a person on fast eat anything that their fast does not allow. This is how culture works.

Applying old frameworks to new-age problems and situations can sometimes provide us simple solutions. This is especially true for the problems that come from innate human nature, that remain unchanged in this ever-changing world. Every time I see people struggling to lose weight or build a healthy habit by following influencers or reading online, I am reminded of concepts like brahmacharya that were meant to help us achieve focused results.

Yes, *brahmacharya* is more than just celibacy. It is a self-restraining technique that enables focus when undertaking demanding tasks like pilgrimages, or when dedicating the initial years of your life to study. You minimise sensory indulgences to lead a minimalistic, disciplined life. You get a glimpse of this in pilgrims at

Sabarimala and Pandharpur.

Can we re-define or re-interpret the rules of *brahmacharya* for our times? In an age where almost everything is available anytime to anyone and anywhere, the new rules of *brahmacharya* should include letting go of new-age luxuries for a while, maybe periodically.

We have seen social media addicts often talking about detox breaks. This in spirit happens only when we are in a no-network zones—which is a shrinking space, as not many places are without network anymore. In practice, many people just stop posting and actively consuming online content for few days. Some unplanned breaks are forced when you are not well enough to even pick up the phone. But planned breaks are few and far between. It seems a periodic break will gradually become a part of our personal calendars as we realise the need to relate to the physical world. The challenge will be to keep it in sync with the other people's calendars. Would we see special interest groups such as Saturday Digital Detox or Early Morning Detox, like we see reading or trekking groups meeting weekly—probably yes, eventually.

Eating out is one of the biggest hits on our health as well as savings. It prevents you from saving that precious money in the initial years of career and later contributes substantially to your healthcare costs. Our weekly vratas or fasts can take a new form of not eating out at least once or twice a week. Imagine someone saying, I am on a no-order fast today and must cook, or I cannot eat anything salty on a Tuesday fast.

Our new-age obsessive compulsive behaviours include looking constantly at our mobile, even when we are meeting people. It is not unusual to see four people at a restaurant table looking at their phones, probably even messaging each other. Sometimes, I feel that this generation would soon need special courses in the art of real-life, unaided, gadget-free conversations. I know some families follow no-phone dinner routines, but this needs to be mainstreamed.



Brahmacharya is more than just celibacy. It's about minimising sensory indulgences to lead a minimalistic, disciplined life. Today, this could include letting go of new-age luxuries like obsessive use of social media for a while or in some places. Such detox plans are likely to become regular

Award for the most addictive behaviour would easily go to those who compulsively forward WhatsApp messages. Every family and society group has some people whose full-time obsession is forwarding every message from each group to every other group, as if it's their responsibility. No requests, conversation and threat warnings can stop them. Little do they realise how easy it is for people to use their addiction to their advantage. I hope they take at least a weekly break from forwarding messages, or maybe restrict it to hourly

windows. I know it's wishful thinking.

Mindless buying just because we can afford or get tempted easily with promotions on our screens is another new-age trend that we need long breaks from. I have seen people buying impulsively and looking for people to gift or give away those things. The receiver, in turn, looks for the next person to dump it on.

Enough has been said about the environmental impact of fast fashion or fashion in general. But we are surrounded by people, especially women, who have piles of saris or dresses waiting for years to be worn. Once they have been clicked in a sari, it moves to no-wear slot in the wardrobe. How can you wear something again that has been posted on social media? If this was something restricted to small elite on the top of the pyramid, we could ignore it. It is the whole of middle class that's going through such social-media-induced shopping sprees. In the process, they also end up buying cheap synthetic clothes that impact health in multiple ways. I so wish that at least people followed the dictum of not buying anything new during inauspicious periods like a shradha paksha or amavasya. Even if you do not believe in astrology or astrology, this would give some compulsory break to the compulsive behaviour. There is a huge opportunity for creators to talk about repeating clothes multiple times or creatively repurposing them.

Apps to manage habits must become a habit themselves. Practically, culture works better than a data-driven approach where the innate human nature tends to cheat.

QUOTE CORNER

My intuition would be it's going to be quite opposite [than the usual belief] and going to be much worse for math people than word people. What people have told me is they think within 3-5 years AI models will be able to solve all the US Maths Olympiad problems. That would shift things quite a bit.

Peter Thiel, American entrepreneur who co-founded PayPal and was the first outside investor in Facebook, on the future impact of AI



They killed children. The Israeli government says it is a mistake! I hope Benjamin Netanyahu burns and his generals burn with him.

Thomas Gould, Irish MP, in a speech in the country's parliament

Most of my crew, they all knew [the celebrities]. They were like, 'That director came, that actor is here!' I was so bad at this and I was like, 'Who?'

Kani Kusruti, who played one of the lead roles in Payal Kapadia's film, *All We Imagine As Light*, which won the Cannes Grand Prix

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Economy focus

Ref: *GDP growth impresses, but rural demand remains a worry* (Jun 1). There is no point in the GDP growing at 8-plus percent when food inflation and unemployment rates are high. Unless the next government brings these rates down, PhD holders will continue applying for simple railway jobs.

M S Raghavendra Rao, Bengaluru

Election dates

Ref: *25 on poll duty among 74 heatstroke deaths* (Jun 1). It is seriously hot and uncomfortably humid across much of India in May, especially in the North. In the West and South, the hottest times are April and the beginning of May. We have lost so many precious lives to heatstrokes this year. To avoid such incidents and increase voter turnout, the Election Commission must think of conducting general elections in June-August across India.

P Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai

Command clarity

The prime minister cannot go completely incommunicado, especially as he is the nuclear commander. In 2014, when Narendra Modi went to America, he designated Rajnath Singh in his place. However, he has not designated anyone since then. People are dying due to the heatwave, while the PM is sitting in meditation. Maybe he wants to spread Hindu sentiments during the last phase of the election.

Swalih Pajeer, Mangaluru

LPG prices

The decision to reduce LPG prices for commercial use will never be passed on to general consumers by the commercial establishments. Instead, if the price of LPG cylinders used by the public is reduced even by a small margin, it will reach the common people.

N Ganesh, Chennai

Exit pass

As a septuagenarian, I have had the opportunity to come across many exit polls. In my experience, they don't reveal the real intention of the electorate and

most of the numbers never match the final tally. Given this, the decision of the Congress not to participate in such speculative exit poll debates which will only be a slugfest for rating points is laudable. Their call to participate in debates from June 4 onwards, after the results are out, sounds justifiable.

Tharcius S Fernando, Chennai

Communal amity

Our nation is grappling with a series of natural disasters—a heatwave in Rajasthan, cyclone in Bengal, heavy rains in Kerala, and an earthquake in Lakshadweep. These events pose significant challenges, underscoring the importance of community unity and support. Whether through providing shelter, distributing essential supplies, or offering compassionate listening, every act of kindness plays a crucial role.

Amir, Mulleria

Movie minutiae

It's not that the world did not know about Mahatma Gandhi before the 1982 movie. His leadership, sacrifices, principles of non-violence, truth and vegetari-

anism are well known all over the world. The movie elucidated many minute details on the Mahatma that can be useful. They include the Mahatma gifting his upper garment to a poor woman without proper clothing to relate with the suffering of the poor.

P V Srinivas Sreelekha, Secunderabad

Ally allegation

AAP has accused the Karnataka government of a Rs 3,000-crore scam. It's really strange that the poll ally of the Congress is accusing it of corruption. Is the alliance only to win seats and defeat Modi? AAP seems to be taking the electorate for granted.

R Sriramprasad, email

Re-release classics

Older movies were often educative and moralistic, highlighting the value of relationships. It is necessary to show those films to the present generation. Our I&B ministry can set the ball rolling in this regard. We have seen such re-released films being received with huge responses.

K Jayanthi, email

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Trump's conviction

Ex-President remains defiant amid legal troubles

DONALD Trump has become the first US President to be convicted of felony after a grand jury in New York found him guilty — on as many as 34 counts — of falsifying business records to conceal a hush money payment to a porn star ahead of the 2016 presidential election. True to form, the 2024 presidential aspirant has described the trial as 'rigged' and 'disgraceful'. Trump has alleged that the Joe Biden administration is trying to settle a political score. Likening himself to none other than Mother Teresa, he has hinted that even the great nun would not have been able to escape conviction in the presumably sham trial. With his trademark dramatic flourish, he has vowed to fight till the end because 'our country has gone to hell'.

The conviction will not prevent Trump from contesting the November election. The sentencing is scheduled for July 11, four days before the Republican National Convention where he is scheduled to be formally nominated as the party's presidential candidate against Biden. Trump, who has a knack for playing the victim card, is expected to ensure that his campaign revolves around his court cases. Ever since the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, which Biden won, Trump has been raising a hue and cry over one 'conspiracy' after another to keep him out of the White House. He is facing three other criminal trials, including two related to his alleged attempts to overturn his poll defeat. Trump is accused of having incited his supporters, who went on to storm the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The deplorable incident not only shamed American democracy but also drew international opprobrium.

Nevertheless, Trump remains as defiant and unapologetic as ever. Even as his legal troubles are set to mount, he will keep pleading his innocence. It's up to the American voters to figure out whether he is more sinned against than sinning.

Healthcare relief

Policyholders to get cashless claims in 3 hours

THE Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has taken a much-needed step to smoothen the health insurance landscape by mandating a three-hour limit for settling cashless health claims. This significant directive is aimed at enhancing the efficiency and customer-centricity of health insurance services in India. By stipulating that insurers should decide on cashless authorisation within an hour and settle claims within three hours of discharge, the regulatory authority is setting a new benchmark for responsiveness and reliability in the sector.

Health insurance claims pose major challenges to customers. Lengthy processing often results in financial strain as patients and their families must raise funds immediately to pay hospital bills. Delays in cashless claims can lead to additional charges, prolonged hospital stays and potential disruptions in treatment. The rigmarole exacerbates the patients' stress. Further, erratic service and a lack of transparency contribute to deep distrust in the system, deterring many from purchasing health insurance policies altogether. The new directive also includes a provision for a no-claim bonus and mandates a wider range of products to be offered by insurers, catering to the needs of all kinds of patients.

These reforms are aimed at boosting customer confidence and, subsequently, increasing insurance penetration in a country where health insurance coverage remains relatively low, with a significant section of the population reliant on government schemes. The lack of awareness about health insurance is another stumbling block. By streamlining the claims process and suggesting a discount on the premium amount for claim-free years, the IRDAI has taken on these challenges head-on. It must now ensure that the health insurance companies align their operations with the new guidelines by the July 31 deadline.

ON THIS DAY... 100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JUNE 1, 1924

The reforms panel

AS might have been expected, the announcement of the Government of India's decision to appoint a Committee to enquire into the working of the reforms has fallen flat upon the country. The public feels that at a time when it has been crying itself hoarse for the bread of liberty, what the Government has offered it is nothing better or more substantial than a stone. It need not go beyond the very restricted scope of reference to the Committee to see how lamentably it falls short of the requirements of the case. The Committee is only "to enquire into the difficulties arising from or defects in the working of the Government of India Act and the rules, thereunder," and "to investigate the feasibility of securing remedies for such difficulties or defects consistently with the structure, policy and purpose of the Act." And as if this not halting and unsatisfactory enough, it is further provided that "the action recommended to be taken should be under the Act or by such amendments of the Act as appear necessary to rectify any administrative imperfections." If the Government had deliberately resolved to further attenuate the very slender chances of the success of the inquiry, it could not have differently worded its announcement. The wording is even worse than that of that part of Sir William Vincent's speech in the Assembly which dealt with this subject and certainly than that of Lord Olivier's speech in the House of Lords. In both these cases, it was assumed that those holding the inquiry would be at liberty to say whether for the purpose of further progress it was necessary to amend the Act with a view to making a fundamental change in the Constitution.

Heed the cry from Khadoor Sahib

Don't push us to the brink, Punjab seems to be telling the man who will soon sit on the Delhi throne

JYOTI MALHOTRA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

YOU don't need to travel to Khadoor Sahib to get a sense of why independent candidate Amritpal Singh, currently lodged in a jail in faraway Dibrugarh on charges under the National Security Act, may have the *hawa*, or the electoral wind, in his favour and could even swing the election. Just beyond the Sector 51 traffic lights, on the border between Chandigarh and Mohali, a group of elderly Sikhs has set up camp for the last year and a half, seeking to draw attention to the fact that 22 Sikh prisoners have been in jail for decades.

One of the men, Angrez Singh, is doling out cups of sweetened, hot milk to those who have ventured this far this hot afternoon. A group of Sikh farmers has ventured this far from Karnal. It doesn't take long for the conversation to travel from the Centre's — read BJP's — discrimination with Punjab as manifesting in the 'bandi Singhs' (or Sikh prisoners) episode to the 'unfairness' of Amritpal's incarceration. Across the road, posters of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Shabeg Singh, Deep Sidhu, Amritpal and Beant Singh (Indira Gandhi's assassin) are plastered across empty tents and on standalane hoardings. One poster has Bhindranwale flanked by Hardeep Singh Nijjar and Jaswant Singh Khairla on one half, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, his wife and a couple of children on the other. "Dhanyavaad, Canada," it says in Gurmukhi. Thank you, Canada.



GROUND REALITY: The melodrama around Khadoor Sahib has actually hidden in plain sight a civil disobedience movement-in-the-making. TRIBUNE PHOTO

For one, strange second, as your iPhone crashes in the heat and time stands still, you wonder if you are in 1984 (when Operation Blue Star took place), 1988 (Operation Black Thunder) or 2024. This is Punjab's rogues' gallery and according to some reports, one of them may even be in your next Parliament.

But hold on to that hot iPhone and steady yourself. Not only is the camp mostly empty, the few elderly but hugely eloquent men whiling away the afternoon have old age on their side. We are here because we just want our rights, they say. Let the 'bandi Singhs' go home, they have been in jail far too long. Even Kumbhakarna woke up after a few months, but this government refuses to wake up. Amritpal is a much misunderstood man, all he wanted was to improve Sikh society — he got the boys off drugs and wiped the tears from the eyes of their mothers. He doesn't

For all of Punjab's rebellious spirit that chafes at authority, the citizenry is willing to protest peacefully at a significant cost to itself.

want Khalistan. In any case, there are those in India who want Hindu Rashtra.

The cry in the afternoon heat dissipates quickly. Even the unspoken truth that Khadoor Sahib, Faridkot and Sangrur — from where Amritpal, Indira Gandhi assassin's son Sarabjit Singh Khalsa and SAD (Amritsar) chief Simranjit Singh Mann, respectively, are contesting — cannot take on the contours of a new Republic of Khalistan,

simply because all three candidates agreed to protect the Constitution when they decided to stand for elections. The lesson of the terrible Eighties is that all three men today — especially Mann, who has fought several elections since he first won in 1989 — understand that they can use the rights of free speech, expression and protest that the Constitution guarantees them to persuade their audiences. The beauty of the democratic process allows them to push the limits of that process and begin their journey back towards the centre, when they can push no more. Clearly, all three are far smarter than their mentor and role model Bhindranwale, who preferred to break rather than bend.

Mann, in any case, barely won the Sangrur seat in a bypoll after it fell vacant in 2022 — when Bhagwant Mann became chief minister of Punjab — by a margin of 5,000-odd votes.

That's why mainstream politics is alive and well in Punjab. Even if Khadoor Sahib is wrested by a would-be secessionist called Amritpal — and all the world's press will flock to the constituency to paint Punjab with an indiscriminate, insensitive and unintelligent brush — the fact remains that Punjab's 2.14 crore voters have already chosen moderation. The fight between AAP, Congress, BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal is real because the issues are real. An agricultural crisis that won't go away. The comatose industrial climate. A deepening environmental emergency. Ageing populations and emptying villages.

The melodrama around Khadoor Sahib has actually hidden in plain sight a civil disobedience movement-in-the-making. For all of Punjab's rebellious spirit that chafes at authority, the citizenry is willing to protest peacefully at a significant cost to itself. The farmers' blockade of Delhi in 2020-21 is a classic case in point — as many as 750 farmers are believed to have died in that one year before the Modi government agreed to take the farm laws back. In recent weeks, as the election campaign has taken giddy turns, Punjab's farmers have shown black flags to BJP candidates over their unhappiness at the Centre's refusal to bend on issues like MSP, and stubbornly refused to let them enter their villages. Punjabis have persisted with the demand that the borders at Attari-Wagah and Hussainiwala be reopened for trade and better relations with Pakistan.

And yet, it may be time to heed the cry from Khadoor Sahib. Talk to us. Let's do things differently, Punjab seems to be saying, to the man who will soon sit on the throne in Delhi. Don't push us to the brink, we don't like it here.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Voting is not the end of our work. It's only the beginning. — Noam Chomsky

A lost watch and a stroke of genius

V VISWANATHAN

WHEN I recently suggested to Venkatraman, my 71-year-old brother-in-law, to wear a smartwatch so that he could keep track of the number of steps walked in a day, monitor his sleep pattern and health parameters, he not only politely turned down my suggestion but also smiled wryly and said: 'No way. I took a vow not to wear a watch almost 40 years ago, and that vow is still valid — analog or digital doesn't matter.'

He added: 'You will be surprised to know that India's last Governor-General, C Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), indirectly played a role in my decision.'

Intrigued, I asked him: 'Would you mind unwinding that watch story?' He took a deep breath and then spoke of an incident that happened in Rajaji's life. 'Rajaji and his friends were once travelling by train. On the way, the wristwatch of one of his friends slipped and fell out of the window. While his friends were all tensed up, Rajaji remained cool, looking through the window and counting numbers 1, 2, 3 and so on.'

'At the next station, Rajaji called the station master and told him about the number of telegraph posts he had counted since the watch fell down. The watch was returned to its owner within a few days. Rajaji's friends acknowledged his stroke of genius and mental alertness,' Venkatraman said. After a pause, he carried on: 'But that's only the first part of the story.'

'Tell me about the sequel,' I requested eagerly. He continued: 'Renowned Tamil orator Thinkachi Ko Swaminathan narrated this Rajaji story on All India Radio (AIR). I just got married, and my business partner gifted me a costly Citizen wristwatch that he had brought from the US. Wearing the watch with pride, I travelled by train from Chennai to Coimbatore. On the way, it slid off my wrist and fell out of the train just after crossing a station. Remembering the AIR story, I, too, counted the telegraph posts, ala Rajaji.'

Venkatraman got down at the next station, took a bus to the previous one, and walked along the railway track. 'I was searching for my Citizen watch like a man possessed,' he recalled. Suddenly, a railway gangman appeared on the scene and shouted at him: 'Stay away. A train is fast approaching.' He jumped off the track, only to find an express train whizzing past him and missing him by a whisker. On that very day, having miraculously survived, he took a vow never to wear a wristwatch. My brother-in-law said he realised that Rajaji had railway personnel at his command, while he was just an ordinary 'Citizen'.

As his amazing, thrilling story ended, I glanced at my smartwatch. No wonder it showed that my blood pressure had risen by a few notches!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Protect vulnerable people

Apropos of the editorial 'Heatwave havoc'; north Indian states like Punjab and Haryana and the Capital have been reeling under very high temperatures. The loss of lives due to the searing heat is a matter of concern. This should prompt the government to take steps to protect the most vulnerable sections of the population amid the heatwave. While most people can look out for themselves and take precautionary measures, like not venturing out of home in the middle of the day and keeping themselves hydrated by consuming plenty of water, the authorities concerned must ensure the wellbeing of poor people who live in shanties and eke out a living by seeking alms. Municipal authorities need to ensure an adequate supply of drinking water in areas facing an acute shortage. Religious bodies, NGOs and social workers must all come forward to help those worst affected by the heatwave.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Residents bear brunt of heatwave

Refer to the editorial 'Heatwave havoc'; the record-breaking temperatures in north India and the tragic death of a 40-year-old man in Delhi due to heatstroke underscore the need for urgent action. Inadequate water supply and long power cuts amid the scorching heat make the lives of residents hellish. Proactive measures, such as promoting green infrastructure, water conservation and heat-resilient designs, need to be implemented to mitigate the dire situation. Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure is crucial for coping with heatwaves. It is time for the government to take steps to prevent further loss of life.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA

Adaptive measures a must

With reference to the editorial 'Heatwave havoc'; the NCR, Rajasthan, Punjab, Chandigarh and Haryana are experiencing unprecedented levels of heat. Thanks to the ongoing heatwave, it has become hard for labourers to work outdoors. The need of

the hour is for the powers that be to implement adaptive measures. Citizens should be made aware of preventive measures to protect themselves from the scorching heat. The authorities concerned must emphasise the importance of staying hydrated and consuming a balanced diet. Since the heatwave is symptomatic of climatic shifts affecting urban India, it is imperative that the public is enlightened about the ill-effects of global warming.

ARPITA ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Kejriwal's bail plea not sincere

Refer to the front-page news report 'Set-back for Kejri, SC refuses to list plea for bail extension'; the Supreme Court Registry is right in refusing to list the Delhi CM's plea seeking a seven-day extension of his interim bail. Clearly, the medical grounds being cited by Kejriwal are not genuine. He could have easily got the necessary medical tests done by now. Further, he has not faced any health issue while holding road shows in Punjab amid the scorching heat. Where do the sudden concerns over his health come from? Besides, it has been just days since his aide allegedly thrashed party MP Swati Maliwal at the CM's residence, and the CCTV footage of the incident has reportedly been erased. This raises more questions about what Kejriwal has been up to.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

No mercy for teen driver

The article 'Juvenile justice must balance punishment with rehabilitation' was a thought-provoking read. It is a pity that the 17-year-old boy who fatally struck two bike-riding young engineers with his Porsche car in Pune while allegedly driving under the influence of alcohol was granted bail (later cancelled) within hours of the incident. The conditions for bail, like writing a 300-word essay and studying traffic rules, were way too lenient. Even his blood sample was tampered with so that it could not be proven that he was drunk at the time of the mishap. The teenager and all those involved in the cover-up deserve severe punishment.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM



Explore the artistic brilliance and cultural legacy of Sonal Mansingh through the fascinating world of classical dance with GYANESHWAR DAYAL

THE LIVING LEGEND OF SONAL MANSINGH

In the realm of Indian classical dance, few names carry as much weight and reverence as that of Sonal Mansingh. Her life's journey is not just a tale of individual accomplishment but a testament to the power of art in transcending boundaries and enriching lives.

Sonal Mansingh's relationship with dance began at an early age. Raised in a family that valued both tradition and modernity, she was exposed to various forms of art and culture from childhood. Her initial training in Bharatanatyam began under the tutelage of renowned Guru Shri Chandralekha. However, it was her encounter with the legendary Odissi guru, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, that shaped her destiny. Under his guidance, Sonal delved deep into the intricate nuances of Odissi, a classical dance form from the eastern state of Odisha, India. She mastered the art with such finesse that she became one of its foremost exponents, earning acclaim both nationally and internationally. Sonal Mansingh's journey has not been without its share of challenges. As a woman navigating the patriarchal landscape of Indian society, she faced skepticism and resistance from traditional quarters. Yet, with unwavering determination and resilience, she shattered stereotypes and carved a niche for herself in a male-dominated field. Her artistic integrity and commitment to her craft have been unwavering, even in the face of adversity. Through her performances, workshops, and lectures, she has tirelessly worked towards preserving and promoting India's rich cultural heritage, inspiring generations of artists to follow in her footsteps. As a cultural icon, Sonal Mansingh's legacy transcends boundaries of time and geography. She has not only enriched the world of dance with her unparalleled talent but has also left an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of millions

SONAL MANSINGH'S JOURNEY HAS NOT BEEN WITHOUT ITS SHARE OF CHALLENGES. AS A WOMAN NAVIGATING THE PATRIARCHAL LANDSCAPE OF INDIAN SOCIETY, SHE FACED SKEPTICISM AND RESISTANCE FROM TRADITIONAL QUARTERS. YET, WITH UNWAVERING DETERMINATION AND RESILIENCE, SHE SHATTERED STEREOTYPES AND CARVED A NICHE FOR HERSELF IN A MALE-DOMINATED FIELD. HER ARTISTIC INTEGRITY AND COMMITMENT TO HER CRAFT HAVE BEEN UNWAVERING, EVEN IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

around the world. Her life's journey is a testament to the transformative power of art and its ability to bridge divides, foster dialogue, and celebrate the beauty of human expression. In an ever-changing world, where the allure of tradition often clashes with the forces of modernity, Sonal Mansingh stands as a beacon of a vibrant tradition, innovation, and timeless grace, reminding us of the enduring relevance of our cultural roots. As she continues to inspire and enchant audiences with her artistry, her legacy remains etched in the annals of Indian classical dance, a shining testament to the enduring power of the human spirit. Sonal Mansingh's dance themes often encompass a rich tapestry of mythological narratives, cultural traditions, and social issues. Through her performances, she weaves together stories from Indian history and legends, ancient and contemporary texts exploring the tales of gods and goddesses with intricate choreography and expressive movements. Her interpretations of classical dance are imbued with deep spiritual and philosophical elements, reflecting her profound understanding of Indian culture and traditions. Additionally, she often addresses contemporary social issues through her choreography, using dance as a medium for commentary and reflection. Whether addressing themes of gender equality, environmental consciousness, or the human experience, Mansingh infuses her performances with relevance and meaning, engaging audiences on both artistic and intellectual levels. Overall, Sonal Mansingh's dance themes transcend mere entertainment, serving as a platform for storytelling, cultural preservation,

and social advocacy. Through her artistry, she continues to captivate and inspire audiences around the world, leaving a lasting impression with each graceful movement. Sonal Mansingh, a prominent figure in the world of Indian classical dance, also had a notable involvement in politics. While she is primarily celebrated for her contributions to dance, her engagement in political discourse arose when she was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament, in 2018. Her nomination was a recognition of her achievements and contributions to Indian culture and arts, acknowledging the importance of promoting and preserving India's rich cultural heritage within the political sphere. As a member of the Rajya Sabha, Mansingh has used the platform to advocate for the arts, cultural preservation, and the promotion of Indian dance forms. She actively participated in debates and discussions concerning cultural policies, education, sociology of culture and the role of the arts in society. Mansingh's foray into politics highlighted the intersection of culture, arts, and governance in India. Her journey serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing and supporting cultural icons within the political landscape, ensuring that the nation's rich artistic heritage continues to thrive and flourish. Sonal Mansingh, a luminary in the realm of Indian classical dance, has left an indelible mark through her illustrious career. Honored with the Padma Bhushan in 1992, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2003, she has been lauded for her exceptional contributions to the performing arts.

As the founder of the Centre for Indian Classical Dances (CICD) in New Delhi, Mansingh established a bastion for the promotion and preservation of various classical dance forms, nurturing young talent and disseminating awareness of India's rich cultural heritage. Her mesmerizing performances have graced prestigious stages worldwide, serving as a cultural ambassador and fostering appreciation for Indian art and heritage. Appointed as a UNESCO Artist for Peace in 2003, Mansingh's efforts in promoting intercultural dialogue through dance have been globally recognized. Beyond tradition, her artistic vision fearlessly explores new themes, narratives, and choreographic styles, breathing fresh life into age-old traditions and inspiring generations of artists. Sonal Mansingh's life is a tapestry of devotion to Indian classical dance, and a commitment to preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage. Born in 1944 in Bombay, she began her dance training at a young age, later becoming a trailblazer in the field. With a career spanning over six decades, Mansingh has dazzled audiences worldwide with her performances, lectures & interviews earning numerous accolades and honors along the way. Beyond her contributions to dance, Mansingh has been a cultural ambassador for India, spreading awareness of its rich artistic traditions.

“As in life, so in dance, character is essential”

SONAL MANSINGH talks about her art, life and life philosophy that went into making the person she is. She opened up to THE PIONEER. Excerpts

What are some memorable performances or collaborations that have shaped your artistic journey? Well, memorable performances and collaborations are different. From the very beginning in 1961, when I gave my maiden solo performance, to this day, every performance has been memorable for one reason or another. Whether it was in Venezuela or China, Mongolia or Mandi, in a big opera house of a megapolis or on a small-town stage, each one was memorable. Choosing the best among them all is rather difficult. However, the performance in Delhi after my car accident in Germany in 1975 stands out. Many dancers told me they were inspired by it, saying that at times they didn't see me but saw sparks. The performance for the Dalai Lama in McLeod Ganj in 1994 was also significant for its content, which moved him to tears. Performing in front of Mount Kailash was a once-in-a-lifetime divine experience.

Tell us something about your collaborations. Regarding collaborations, I haven't had many. My performances in Bharatnatyam, Odissi, or Chhau are



collaborations with musicians, my guide and Guru Shri Jeevan Pani Ji, researchers, gurus, yoga gurus, and anyone from whom I learned something. Life itself is a great collaboration. Learning is an effort unto itself. Things keep happening, and one must become aware of them. Life is a jigsaw puzzle from which one picks little nuggets of wisdom.

What values are essential in classical dance?

As in life, so in dance, character is essential. Character building starts in mother's womb or even from previous births (poorva janma) and karma samskara. It then grows with upbringing, nurturing, travel, and learning. Due diligence is essential. Even slight lethargy or negativity can creep in if you leave the door of consciousness ajar, so one must always be aware. What must be

done should be done in a timely manner, and every detail must be worked out. Humility is important. Remember, reevaluate, reassess, and move on (manan chintan). Reading is essential, especially in times of dependence on social media: read, discuss, understand, and carve your own path.

How do you approach interpreting classical dance forms to suit contemporary audiences?

I always did what I wanted to do, and this tendency was further encouraged by my Bharatnatyam guru, U.S. Krishna Rao. We are different from Western classical dancers, where brochures are distributed at the beginning, and ballerinas dance with 50 other dancers. Audience should read the brochure before the performance begins because



later there are no commentaries or announcements. That stuck with me. You cannot give a rundown of every performance you give. Every sanchari (to convey a story or series of events through body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions) must be spontaneous. If it is pre-decided, it doesn't stay spontaneous. But I leave it to each dancer, as it depends on her training, way of thinking, and approach to dance.

Tell us something about the themes and content of your choreographic works.

I have always chosen themes of women empowerment, such as Devi, Draupadi, Panchkanya, river pollution (Krishna-Kaliya) atmospheric pollution, and thought pollution. I always say the three Vs-vichar (thought), vaani (speech), and vyavhaar

(behavior)-need to be cleansed from time to time to ward off negativity. Today, people are stressed, tired, and emotionally burdened. Our dances address these issues and uplift emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

What advice do you have for aspiring classical dancers regarding training and technique?

Many things have changed over the years, but some things remain the same. Ekagrachitta (एकाग्रचित्त), or focus and commitment, is one such tenet all students must observe. When you go to a Guru to learn, you must be well-prepared for the next class. You must have respect for the teacher, the traditions, the place you perform, the iconography, the messages contained in the Puranas, the temples, their

architecture, and so on.

What do you have to say about the mythology of the Puranas from where you draw your themes?

I would say mythology is the wrong word. Mythology comes from 'mythos' (in Greek) which is akin to fairy tales. Our stories are not fairy tales; they are actual events that took place long ago. They have messages and inspirations that transcend time. We must honor, respect, and work according to these stories.

What are some of the challenges you've faced in your career, and how have you overcome them?

Life is a journey full of challenges, and these challenges shape who you are and how you deal with them. They help you grow, evolve, and become a

better person. I took two vows with my grandfather: I will never commercialize dance, so I give all the money from my performances to my institute, Shri Kamakhya Kalapeeth (Centre for Indian Classical Dances). I have lived in rented accommodations and will continue to do so, after my term as Member of Parliament is over.

Could you share a particularly rewarding or transformative experience you've had?

There are not just one but many. If one allows oneself to be like a lotus and opens up to Sun, every moment is transformative and rewarding. One needs to open up to accept beauty with one's eyes, ears, mind, and heart-Satyam Shivam Sundaram. There is a beautiful prayer, "Asatoma Sadgamaya" (Lead me from ignorance to truth), "Tamasoma Jyotir Gamaya" (Lead me from darkness to light), "Mriyorma Amritam Gamaya" (Lead me from time-bound consciousness to the timeless state of Being). May we all have that rewarding journey. Through my dance, learning, and friends, I have lived a fulfilling and rewarding life. The human avatar is very rare; let's make the most of it.

The Niazi brothers have not only preserved the traditional essence of Qawwali but have also managed to infuse it with contemporary relevance, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

KEEPERS OF QAWWALI'S SOUL IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD



NIAZI BROTHERS ENTHRAL AT JASHN-E-QAWWALI CONCERT

Wishes & Blessings, a Delhi-based NGO committed to aiding those in need, organised the third edition of the fundraising concert, Jashn-E-Qawwali at Kamani Auditorium, Delhi. The event showcased mesmerizing performances by the internationally acclaimed Qawwali group, Niazi Brothers. Their soulful melodies captivated the audience, who swayed to power-packed performances ranging from traditional Qawwali tunes to popular Bollywood hits and original compositions by the Niazi Brothers. Standout renditions included timeless classics such as 'Kun Faya Kun,' 'Chaap Tilak,' 'Bhar De Jholi,' and 'Dama Dam Mast Qalandar'. The event attracted a wide audience, including beneficiaries of various Sahas (an upskilling programme for women), the street-to-school initiative, and the community kitchen. "We are extremely overwhelmed by the turnout and the resounding success of Jashn-E-Qawwali," said Dr Geetanjali Chopra, Founder and President of Wishes & Blessings, adding that,

"This marks the third edition of the fundraiser, with the previous two being immensely successful. The funds raised this year will directly contribute to our WB Rasoi programme, addressing the fundamental need for food among those in need. We are grateful to Niazi Brothers for their continued support and to everyone who attended and contributed for the cause." The funds raised will support the expansion of WB Rasoi, a new initiative aimed at providing nutritious meals to individuals in need. The NGO recently launched its first WB Rasoi in NOIDA, NCR. Shahid Niazi of the Niazi Brothers shared, "It was an honour to perform for such a noble cause. When we needed help, they were there for us. This was our time to give back. We are proud to be associated with Wishes & Blessings NGO for the past three years and look forward to contributing more in the future." The triumphant culmination of Jashn-E-Qawwali underscores Wishes & Blessings' commitment to making a meaningful difference in marginalised communities and lives and exemplifies music's power in fostering social change.



Immersed in the mysticism of Sufi music, the Niazi Brothers stand as luminaries in the realm of Qawwali, weaving a tapestry of tradition and innovation. Sufi music, with its ethereal melodies and profound lyrics, transcends the boundaries of time and culture, reaching deep into the human soul. Rooted in the mystical traditions of Sufism, this genre resonates with listeners by invoking a sense of spiritual awakening and emotional connection. The timeless appeal of Sufi music lies in its ability to convey universal themes of love, devotion, and the quest for divine union, making it a poignant and enduring form of artistic expression that continues to captivate audiences across generations.

A JOURNEY THROUGH SUFI MUSIC

The Niazi Brothers, hailing from Pakistan, are renowned for their powerful and evocative performances

that capture the very essence of Qawwali. The group's roots can be traced back to the renowned Patiala Gharana, known for its distinctive style and musical prowess. Growing up in a family where music was as essential as air, the brothers were immersed in the world of Qawwali from a young age, learning the intricacies and subtleties of the genre from their forebears. Their father, Ustad Allah Rakha, was a renowned Qawwali singer who instilled in them a deep respect for the traditional forms and the spiritual messages conveyed through their music. This early education laid a strong foundation, allowing the Niazi Brothers to develop a profound understanding of both the technical and emotional aspects of Qawwali. However, the Niazi Brothers' rise to prominence was not an overnight success but a journey of relentless dedication and passion. Their performances are characterised by a deep emotional connection, powerful vocals, and a mastery of the harmonium and tabla, all of which are central to the Qawwali experience. The brothers have performed on numerous prestigious stages around the world, captivating audiences with their dynamic energy and spiritual depth. Their repertoire includes classical Qawwalis that date back centuries, as well as more contemporary pieces that reflect current social and spiritual themes. This blend of old and new has helped them reach a diverse audience,

from traditionalists who appreciate the purity of their classical renditions to younger listeners who find resonance in their modern interpretations.

THE FUTURE OF QAWWALI IN A FAST-PACED WORLD

As the world hurtles forward with technological advancements and shifting cultural landscapes, the future of Qawwali faces both challenges and opportunities. The Niazi Brothers are acutely aware of this dynamic and have been proactive in adapting to the changing times while preserving the core essence of their music. One significant avenue they have explored is the digital realm. Through social media platforms, streaming services, and online concerts, the Niazi Brothers have reached a global audience that transcends geographical boundaries. These platforms have allowed them to share their music with fans who might never have had the opportunity to experience a live Qawwali performance, thereby expanding the genre's reach and relevance. Moreover, collaborations with artists from different musical backgrounds have also played a crucial role in keeping Qawwali vibrant and relevant. By blending traditional Qawwali with contemporary music styles, the Niazi Brothers have created a unique fusion that appeals to a broader audience. This fusion not only keeps the tradition alive but also introduces its profound

spiritual and emotional depth to new listeners.

PRESERVING TRADITION WHILE EMBRACING INNOVATION

The Niazi Brothers' approach to the future of Qawwali is a delicate balance of preservation and innovation. They remain deeply committed to the traditional aspects of Qawwali, understanding that its true power lies in its authenticity and spiritual roots. At the same time, they are not afraid to experiment and incorporate new elements that resonate with today's audiences. Education and mentorship also form a significant part of their vision for the future. By teaching young musicians the art of Qawwali, the Niazi Brothers are ensuring that this ancient tradition is passed down to future generations. They conduct workshops and training sessions, sharing their knowledge and passion with aspiring Qawwals, thus creating a new generation of musicians who can carry the torch forward. The journey of the Niazi Brothers is a testament to the enduring power of Qawwali. Through their dedication, talent, and willingness to innovate, they have kept this ancient form of spiritual music alive and thriving. As the world continues to change at a rapid pace, the Niazi Brothers stand as guardians of a rich musical heritage, ensuring that the soul-stirring strains of Qawwali continue to resonate across the globe for generations to come.



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

Theatre of Enchantment

Gulzar's captivating adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* took centrestage last week with director Salim Arif's masterful vision bringing this timeless comedy to life, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

Delhi was recently treated to an evening of theatrical enchantment at the prestigious Shri Ram Centre Auditorium. Amidst the city's vibrant energy, laughter and thunderous applause emerged as the renowned Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts (SRCPA) Repertory unveiled Gulzar's spellbinding adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, titled *2 BY 2*. The auditorium was transformed into a realm of lighthearted gaiety, captivating the audience with the timeless magic of a live performance. Every artist was wholeheartedly appreciated, showcasing the audience's love for exceptional work. In a world where appreciation is often fleeting, this play, masterfully directed by the renowned Mohammed Salim Arif, stood as a testament to the enduring power of art. An acclaimed visionary in the realms of film, television and theatre, Salim's directorial prowess in *2 BY 2* can only be described as a masterpiece of the highest calibre. The play is a comedic masterpiece that tickles the funny bone with its hilarious depiction of mistaken identities and coincidental mix-ups involving identical twins with identical names. Designed and directed by Salim Arif and performed by ace artists, the play is a delightful experience. The audience was particularly impressed with the fact the actors performed and delivered on a script like Gulzar's script and Arif's direction. Resemblance with the adaptation of Shakespeare's classic drama in the film *Angoor* was quite obvious but the theatrical adaptation was indeed a beautiful execution of the masterpiece.

2 BY 2, like Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, centres on two pairs of identical twins with identical names. Raj Tilak, a wealthy merchant, has identical twins named Ashok. During a journey, Raj Tilak discovers another pair of identical twins and adopts them, calling them Bahadur. An unfortunate accident separates the family, with each parent ending up with one child from each pair. One set of twins grows up married while the other remains single and mischievous. The comedy unfolds when the unmarried Ashok and Bahadur duo arrive in the city where the married Ashok and Bahadur reside. The ensuing confusion, involving their families, a jeweller, a taxi driver, and an inspector, leads to a series of hilarious misunderstandings that has the audience in stitches. The play masterfully blends humour, acting, and a classic script to create an entertaining experience. Gulzar's script, known for its poetic and situational brilliance, adds depth and flavour to the play, enthralling the audience all along. Director Salim Arif commented, "Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is a classic that centres on the notion of 'mistaken identity'. In Gulzar Saab's adaptation *2 BY 2*, the arrival of the unmarried Ashok and Bahadur in the city where the married Ashok and Bahadur reside creates a confusion that involves more than their families, to extend to a jeweller, a police inspector, and the town." The performances by the cast was exceptional, their expressions, delivery

and timing impeccable. The sets, lighting, costumes and props were meticulously crafted, adding to the play's charm. The success of *2 BY 2* is an indication to the enduring appeal of high-quality, engaging theatre. The combination of Salim Arif's direction and Gulzar Saab's writing created an unforgettable experience, proving that great work continues to receive the appreciation it deserves. *2 BY 2* is more than just a simple tale of confusion. The script, penned by the legendary Gulzar, is a masterpiece of situational comedy. Each dialogue adds a layer of humour to the chaos, keeping the audience perpetually on the edge of their seats in anticipation of what comes next. Director Salim Arif masterfully brings the script to life, ensuring the comedic timing is tight. The talented cast deserves credit for its captivating performances. From subtle inflections to dramatic gestures, every aspect of the actors' performance is a testament to their dedication to the craft. The play does not just rely on the actors. The set's design, perfect lighting, costumes and props, all contribute in transporting the audience into the world of *2 BY 2*. *2 BY 2* is indeed a celebration of theatre at its finest. As the curtains came down on the play, a thunderous applause filled the auditorium, showcasing the profound impact on the audience. The seamless blend of Gulzar's storytelling, Salim Arif's direction and the exceptional performances created an unforgettable evening of laughter and delight. With this play, the SRCPA further underlined its commitment to bringing exceptional theatre to Delhi, reminding us of power of art to unite, entertain and inspire. As one left the theatre, one was reminded of the fact that amidst life's complexities, the gift of shared joy through a live performance is an eternal treasure.

TRAILBLAZING JOURNEY THROUGH BHARATANATYAM

Apeksha Niranjana Mundargi, a pioneer in the field of Bharatanatyam, has ushered in a new dawn for this ancient art form with her passion and innovative spirit, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In the vibrant tapestry of classical Indian dance forms, Bharatanatyam is a captivating expression of grace, rhythm and storytelling. At the forefront of this ancient art's contemporary renaissance is Apeksha Niranjana Mundargi, a celebrated dancer, choreographer, and teacher from Mumbai. With a journey that began in the culturally rich city of Kolhapur, Apeksha's unwavering passion and dedication have elevated her to the ranks of the most accomplished Bharatanatyam artists of our time. Through her exceptional talent, innovative choreography and profound understanding of the art form's rich heritage, she has captivated audiences across the globe, ushering in a new era of appreciation for this timeless dance tradition. Apeksha's journey in mastering Bharatanatyam has been one of dedication, discipline and learning. She describes how her love for the dance form is rooted in its profound ability to tell stories through rhythm, expression and grace. From a young age, she was captivated by the intricate footwork, eloquent gestures and expressive use of the eyes. Her journey, guided by her gurus, has deepened her appreciation for the rich cultural heritage and intricate techniques of Bharatanatyam. One of Apeksha's notable productions, *Nayanam*, which means eyes in Sanskrit, explores the myriad emotions conveyed through the eyes. This thematic performance highlights the eyes as windows to the soul, capable of portraying joy, love, sorrow and longing. Apeksha recounts a memorable moment during her Poland Spring Tour 2024 when a girl in the audience was moved to tears by *Nayanam*, underscoring the power of dance to push barriers.

Apeksha's training in the *Nritya-Ganga* dance style, introduced by her Guru Dr Sucheta Chapekar, has significantly influenced her interpretation and performance of Bharatanatyam. This style blends tradition with innovation, enhancing her performances while staying true to the essence of the art form. She emphasises that dance is a form of visual poetry, where the essence lies in dancing to the music rather than treating it as a mathematical exercise. Reflecting on her performance at a festival in Italy in 2022, Apeksha shared how she traversed a kilometre on the road while performing Bharatanatyam, ending at the 'Gate of Peace'. She portrayed the story of *Yamuna Gatha*, addressing the pollution and pain of the Yamuna River. This contemporary theme demonstrated the relevance and power of Bharatanatyam in addressing contemporary issues

and left a lasting impact on the international audience. Apeksha also highlighted the unique aspects of the Tanjavur school of Bharatanatyam, which prioritises fluidity and musicality. She incorporates these elements into her performances, creating a harmonious and synchronised expression. Her choreography balances traditional elements with her unique artistic expression, ensuring that the soul of Bharatanatyam remains intact while infusing it with innovation. Addressing the challenges faced by classical dancers today, Apeksha emphasises the importance of finding platforms to present her art and balance multiple roles while managing family life. She credits her supportive family and dedicated team for helping her navigate these challenges. She sees Bharatanatyam evolving in the modern era by making it more accessible and relatable. She aims to showcase stories that resonate with the audiences and connect through local music and folk stories. By incorporating elements such as the poetry of saints from Maharashtra and performing Bharatanatyam based on local folk stories and Gregorian chants, she hopes to bridge cultural divides and ensure that the art form remains relevant. For young dancers aspiring to pursue Bharatanatyam professionally, Apeksha advises prioritising dedicated practice, seeking guidance from knowledgeable gurus and embracing innovation within the framework of tradition. She encourages dancers to focus on expressing emotions authentically and maintaining physical and mental

fitness. Apeksha prepares for her performances through a holistic process that begins months in advance. This involves choreography, music creation, refining movements and mental rehearsal. She emphasises the importance of being adaptable and maintaining a calm demeanour, acknowledging that uncertainties may arise on a given day. She recalls her moment of connection with her audience during a performance in Poland, where she danced to Polish folk music. The fusion of Bharatanatyam with traditional Polish music created a unique and captivating experience, highlighting the universal language of dance. She aspires to spread the beauty and richness of Bharatanatyam worldwide, ensuring it remains accessible and appreciated by diverse audiences. Through innovative choreography and engaging performances, she continues to contribute to the global recognition of Bharatanatyam as a profound and timeless art form. Apeksha Niranjana Mundargi's journey through Bharatanatyam is a testament to the transformative power of dance. Her dedication, innovative spirit and profound connection to the art form have not only elevated her performances but also enriched the cultural landscape. As she continues to spread the beauty and richness of Bharatanatyam worldwide, Apeksha inspires us to embrace tradition while welcoming innovation to deepen our appreciation for this timeless art form. In this, Apeksha Niranjana is truly a beacon of light, illuminating the path for future generations, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Bharatanatyam continues to captivate and inspire audiences for times to come.

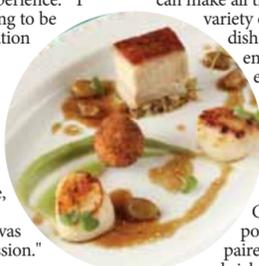


WHERE FOOD MEETS ART IN PLATING

It is not just about cooking the dish well but also plating them right is the idea is to engage all the senses for an overall dining experience, says **SHARMILA CHAND**



Sculpt, layer, paint, drizzle. Splash, a squiggle, dots, the jus, the sauce... there is an artist at work, bent, eyes fixed at his plate, in front of you at your table in the restaurant. He is undeterred till he finishes his task. Another few minutes, he finally looks up and tells you, your dish is ready. The artist is none other than the chef who has been busy meticulously plating the dish you ordered. The plate is his canvas and he is creating a visual masterpiece. It's not just about cooking the dish right but the idea is to engage all the senses for an overall dining experience. "I find the process of plating to be as crucial as the preparation of the dish itself," says Chef Amandeep Singh, Executive Sous Chef at The Westin Mumbai Garden City. For him, "Plating is an art form cherished by food connoisseurs worldwide, where every element on the plate serves as a canvas for creativity and expression." Colour and Shape Chef Amandeep's preference leans towards minimalist, neutral-coloured plates that allow the vibrant hues of the dish to shine. "The shape of the plate is equally significant; I favour plates with clean lines and ample space for artistic arrangement. Each dish has its personality, and the shape of the plate can either accentuate or detract from its essence. For instance, a circular plate complements dishes with symmetrical components, while elongated plates are ideal for showcasing linear arrangements," he says. "The colour of the dish and its ingredients wield immense influence over the plating process. Take, for example, my signature dish, Tandoori Salmon with Mango Salsa. The vibrant hues of the succulent salmon and the vibrant mango salsa pop against a pristine white plate, creating a visually captivating presentation that entices the palate even before the first bite," adds Chef Amandeep. According to Chef Sandeep Kalra, Director of Culinary, Pullman Novotel, New Delhi, Aerocity, "The colour of the plate totally depends on the colour and textures of the dish. Both have to complement each other. The colour of the plate one chooses can make a big difference in how the dish looks. If you want your food to really stand out, pick a plate colour that is different from the colours of the food. White plates are a good choice for colourful dishes because they make the colours pop. On the other hand, if you want the colours



to blend well together, choose a plate colour that goes well with the food colours. Earthy tones like beige or light brown can make green vegetables look even better. Also, consider the theme of your meal. If you're going for a modern look, white or black plates are often a good choice. Dark plates can also help keep food warm longer. Ultimately, the plate colour should match the style of your meal to create a beautiful and cohesive presentation." Simran Singh Thapar, Executive Chef, The Leela Palace Bengaluru echoes the sentiment: "Play with complementary hues and remember, a pop of colour can make all the difference. Adding a variety of textures can make your dish visually interesting and enticing. Combine crunchy elements with smooth components, as I like to do in my dish 'Truffled Russet Mille Feuille with Butternut Squash Quasar -e- Pukhtan, Golden Almonds and Charcoal touille.' A crisp potato Mille Feuille is paired with a velvety smooth and rich sauce. Layering ingredients not only adds depth but also adds a sense of complexity to your presentation. I have used green microgreens to pop up the otherwise warm hues of orange and brown. An almond charcoal touille creates a visual and texture impact on my plate."

"Creating a theme or a story with your plating can make your dish more memorable," adds chef Simran. "A theme can tie everything together and captivate your audience. On my plate, I have created a theme of classics from two cuisines pairing together to create magic -- Classic French and Classic Indian." Ingredient is the Key Chef Sandeep emphasises on the 'ingredient' as the key focus. "Using the main ingredient as the central focus and organising the rest of the ingredients in various forms of purees, gels, mousse or whole forms works the best. There is no specific style that I incorporate but looking at the ingredients I adapt to plating techniques and style that complements the textures and enhances the look of the dish. One favourite dish that I love to plate often is the grilled chicken breast with sweet potato mash and sautéed green beans. The dish features a perfectly grilled chicken breast placed slightly off-centre on the



Chef Simran Singh Thapar

plate. Alongside, a generous serving of creamy sweet potato mash, flavored with cinnamon and nutmeg, provides contrast. Crisp green beans are delicately piled next to the mash, adding a fresh touch. A sprinkle of finely chopped parsley garnishes the plate, adding a pop of green. Presented on a square, off-white plate, this dish is not just delicious but also visually appealing, designed to delight both the eye and the palate." Garnishing Lends visual Allure "When it comes to garnishes, I believe in the power of simplicity," tells Chef Amandeep. "Fresh herbs like cilantro and microgreens add a burst of colour and flavour without overwhelming the dish. A delicate sprinkle of sea salt or a drizzle of high-quality olive oil can elevate even the simplest of presentations," he says. Likewise for Chef Sandeep, it is important to give vitality to the dish with microgreens or herbs and add a touch of elegance and beauty through edible flowers. "Show off the dish and keep room for theatrics," is his mantra. Gerwin D'souza, Pastry Sous Chef, The St Regis Goa Resort feels, "Perhaps a swirl of sauce, a fine scattering of berries to enhance. At our Italian restaurant, Oliveto, we serve tiramisu in a glass to show off the varied layering. To add that extra flair, we place a spoon made of solid chocolate on it. Now that's my style of garnishing. That expression of my diners at the first look of tiramisu says it all." Chefs Are Artists Too Who says we deck up our plates just because we are going through an era of social media, ask chefs. Plating as an art satisfies the aesthetic sense of creativity within us, they say. "The artist in me likes the Free Form or keeping the plating abstract," opines Chef Anshul Dhyani, Executive Chef ITC Grand Central, adding that "Not giving a



Chef Amandeep Singh



Executive Chef Anshul Dhyani



Sandeep Kalra



Gerwin D'souza



Chef Subhankar Chitrakar

complemented by the raisins and apple puree. The dish has been plated in a free flow manner. All the ingredients are plated in a way that they all stand out and no single ingredient overshadows the other one. All the colours and textures are preserved and no ingredient loses its individuality but together bring about a complete culinary harmony." "Indeed I am an artist," says Chef Aashutosh Shende, Executive Sous Chef of Paper Moon, Taj Fort Aguada Resort Spa. "For instance in my dish Tagliolini with Pesto Sauce and Pine Nuts, I treat the white plate as my blank canvas, the green pesto sauce is my vibrant paint. The green pesto sauce offers a colour palette to create a visually stunning composition on a white plate.



Composition of the dish is the king and arrangement is the key. Swirling the pesto in an artistic flourish and strategically placing the elements for balance and contrast. I build height with rolling the pasta around a large fork and then slide it on the plate. This gives not only clean lines but also height to the dish, techniques used by both chefs and artists. I express my personality and my expressions through my plating. I am not a fan of bold or dramatic swirls and many colours on my plate; I prefer a simple bed for a wild abstract masterpiece for my Tagliolini." He has more to add: "I like to sign every dish that goes out of my kitchen and, as such, a final flourish on food plating has my signature. It could be a sprinkle of fresh herbs, in this case in particular a drizzle of balsamic reduction and a scattering of toasted pine nuts. These finishing touches showcase my creation from a meal to a work of art."

"I work in a bakery which can be at times devoid of human interaction and through my bakery items I express myself," says Chef Subhankar Chitrakar from Bakery of Taj Holiday Village Resort Spa, Goa. Citing an example of his dish, Caramel Porto, he tells, "This rich, decadent dessert - Caramel Porto - presents a fantastic opportunity every time to pique my inner artist. Considering the portion size -- if it is a single serving I prefer a small dessert plate with a rim, for four portions I choose a shallow bowl or couple glass which allows for beautiful layering. Choosing whether to keep the same colour or play a colour contrast game, I prefer a white plate to enhance the various hues of caramel. Sometimes I do use a dark plate to create a dramatic backdrop for a glistening sauce. Considering the overall mood of the diner a classic white plate offers timeless elegance and on the other hand a more colourful bowl would add a touch of casual charm. I am not afraid to add a delicate web like swirl for a touch of whimsy. Or for a bolder statement, a thicker controlled pour creates a dramatic centre piece. Go ahead and experiment with what's at hand, add a spring of fresh mint or a sprinkle of chopped nuts or a dusting cocoa powder to add pops of colour and flavour like a bold brushstroke. I am an artist and this is my soul that I bare through my Caramel Porto."

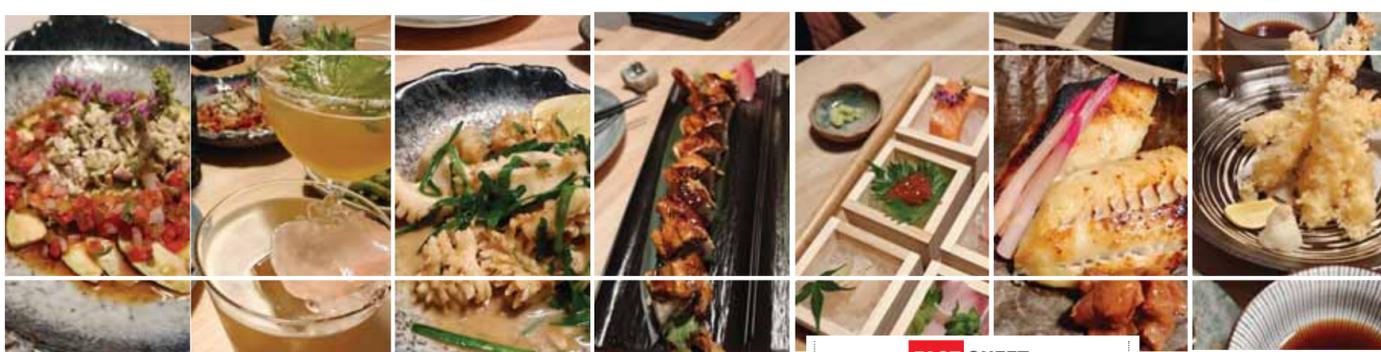
Author Intro: Sharmila Chand is an Author and Freelance Journalist who writes on Food, Travel, Lifestyle, Art and Wellness. She can be reached at chand.sharmila@gmail.com.

FOOD TRENDS

Falling in Love with Japanese cuisine

At Shin'ya, an Izakaya-inspired resto-bar at Hyatt Regency Gurugram, is drawing crowds because of the evident attention to detail and its commitment to source the best and freshest ingredients possible for a hearty Japanese meal, says **PAWAN SONI**

Japanese cuisine is winning hearts across the Indian community, and it is no surprise why. The dishes are light, nutritious, and packed with flavoUrs, thanks to ingredients like seaweed, soy, and seafood. The freshness of these ingredients is crucial, leading to high prices for premium seafood and fruits in Japan and sold in auctions. In India, particularly in the North, seafood is not as accessible due to the lack of coastline. However, logistics can ensure a steady, fresh supply. During my recent visit to Shin'ya, the new Japanese restaurant at Hyatt Regency Gurugram, I was impressed by the quality of the ingredients used. At Shin'ya, attention to detail is evident from the freshly grated wasabi to the sashimi made from yellowfin tuna, a step above the commonly used bluefin tuna. Sonale Zagade, Hyatt Regency's dynamic General Manager,



emphasised their commitment to sourcing the best ingredients, recalling her personal involvement in tasting each one before finalising. With seating for around 45 guests, this Izakaya-inspired resto-bar, with its light and minimalistic

decor, is perfect for small gatherings. On the recommendation of Shashwat Prasad, Shin'ya's mixologist, I started with a gari-infused bourbon mixed with yuzu juice and honey water. This mild drink perfectly set the tone for the

evening. The avocado carpaccio, chosen for my wife's vegetarian preference, was appreciated by both of us. The buttery avocado with caramelized onions, ponzu, and tomato salsa made a delightful start, while I enjoyed one of the lightest and crunchiest

FACT SHEET
Food: 4.5/5 | Drinks: 4.5/5 | Service: 4.5/5
Ambience: 4.0/5 | Overall: 4.5/5
Address: Shin'ya, Hyatt Regency, NH48, Sector 83, Gurugram
Phone: 9355816517
Meal for Two: INR 4000 + Taxes
Timing: 6:00 PM to 3:00 AM (Monday to Saturday), 12 Noon to 9:00 PM (Sundays)

prawn tempuras. Coated with a bit of potato starch and accompanied by a miso daikon dip, these were among the best prawn tempuras I've ever tasted. Each dish, from the selection of sashimi to sushi, was special. Apart from the Japanese fare,

Shin'ya also offers a small mix of Korean and Asian dishes. I tried the Korean-style sautéed garlic butter squids and prawn gyoza dumplings, each dish telling a unique story. Another cocktail, the Houji tea-infused tequila with agave nectar topped with fresh shiso leaf, further demonstrated the mixologist's expertise. Both food and drinks at Shin'ya are crafted to ensure guest delight. My meal concluded with the robata-grilled miso black cod. The silky pieces of fish, with slight charred edges, contrasted beautifully with the buttery flavours and pickled plum. Shin'ya stands out for its high-quality ingredients and expertly prepared classic dishes. This restaurant is definitely one to watch in 2024.

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

<https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid>

<https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid>

Want to get these Newspapers Daily at earliest

1. AllNewsPaperPaid
2. आकाशवाणी (AUDIO)
3. Contact I'd:- https://t.me/Sikendra_925bot

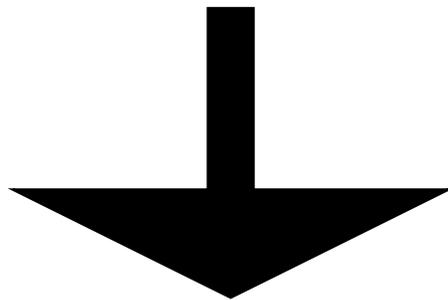
Type in Search box of Telegram

[@AllNewsPaperPaid](https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid) And you will find a Channel

Name All News Paper Paid Paper join it and receive

daily editions of these epapers at the earliest

Or you can tap on this link:



<https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid>

<https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid>

<https://t.me/AllNewsPaperPaid>