

# SCIENCE

## Extinct humans occupied the Tibetan plateau 1,60,000 years ago

The Hindu Bureau

Bone remains found in a Tibetan cave 3,280 metres above sea level indicate an ancient group of humans survived here for many millennia, according to a new study published in the journal *Nature*.

The Denisovans are an extinct species of ancient human that lived at the same time and in the same places as Neanderthals and Homo sapiens. Only a

handful of Denisovan remains have ever been discovered by archaeologists. Little is known about the group, including when they became extinct, but evidence exists to suggest they interbred with both Neanderthals and Homo sapiens.

The scientists identified one rib bone as belonging to a new Denisovan individual. The layer where the rib was found was dated to

between 48,000 and 32,000 years ago, implying that this Denisovan individual lived at a time when modern humans were dispersing across the Eurasian continent. The results indicate that Denisovans lived through two cold periods, but also during a warmer interglacial period between the Middle and Late Pleistocene eras.

The research team studied more than 2,500 bones from the Baishiya

Karst Cave on the high-altitude Tibetan Plateau, one of the only two places where Denisovans are known to have lived.

Their new analysis has identified a new Denisovan fossil and shed light on the species' ability to survive in fluctuating climatic conditions – including the ice age – on the Tibetan plateau from around 200,000 to 40,000 years ago.

Bone remains from Baishiya Karst Cave were

broken into numerous fragments preventing identification. The team used a novel scientific method that exploits differences in bone collagen between animals to determine which species the bone remains came from.

The research team determined that most of the bones were from blue sheep, known as the bharal, as well as wild yaks, equids, the extinct woolly rhino, and the spotted hye-

na. The researchers also identified bone fragments from small mammals, such as marmots, and birds.

The team was able to identify that Denisovans hunted, butchered and ate a range of animal species.

Detailed analysis of the fragmented bone surfaces shows the Denisovans removed meat and bone marrow from the bones, but also indicate the humans used them as raw material to produce tools.

### SNAPSHOTS



#### Biodegradable biomass-based aerogel for radiative cooling

An aerogel made from gelatin and DNA surpasses 100% solar reflectance, yielding exceptional radiative cooling. It is also biodegradable. The design is capable of cooling ambient temperatures by 16 degree Celsius under high solar irradiance. Combining DNA and gelatin into an ordered layered aerogel structure produced a passive radiative cooling material that achieves an average visible light reflectance of 104.0% through unique fluorescence and phosphorescence behaviours.

## Hepatitis A vaccination will be cost-effective in Kerala: study

Cost-effectiveness evidence supports the inclusion of hepatitis A vaccination into the vaccination programme for children aged one year and individuals aged 15 years in Kerala

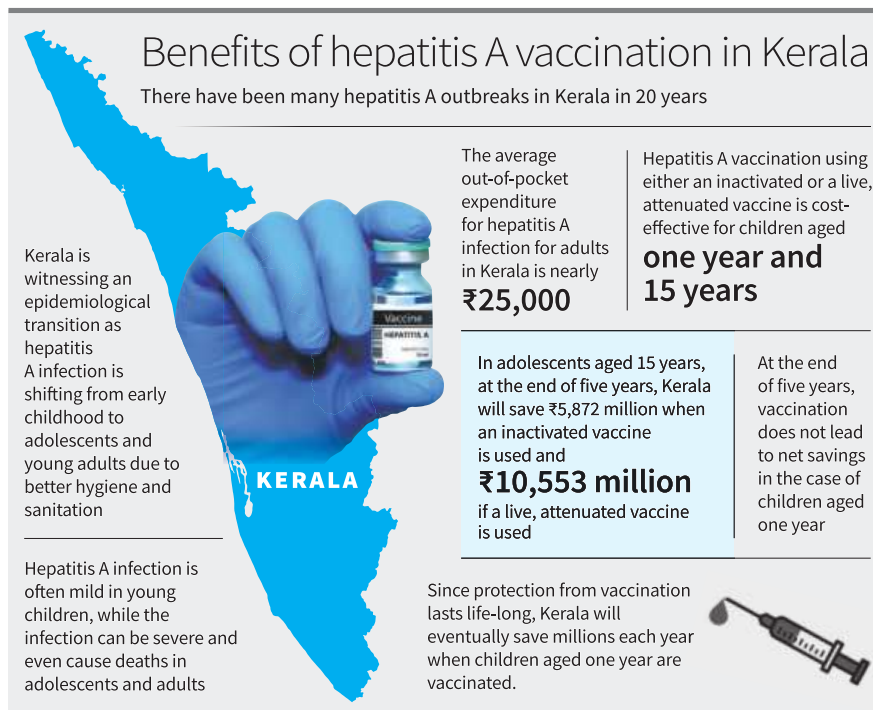
R. Prasad

With better sanitation and hygiene, hepatitis A infection in Kerala has been witnessing an epidemiological transition – the infection is shifting from early childhood to adolescents and young adults. The infection is mild in children younger than six years and in almost 70% of the cases, hepatitis A infection is asymptomatic in this age group. However, in older children, the infection is very often symptomatic and in rare cases can cause liver injury and even death.

Kerala has recorded hepatitis A outbreaks with great regularity in the past two decades. There has been at least one outbreak with many deaths each year since 2017, including 2024.

Since a single infection of hepatitis A leads to life-long immunity, children infected when young are immune to hepatitis A virus as adults. However, due to better sanitation and hygiene, very often children in Kerala do not get infected with hepatitis A thus making them vulnerable to severe infections and even serious health problems when infected as adults. Vaccination is one way to reduce outbreaks and help reduce out-of-pocket expenditure.

A paper published recently in the journal PLOS ONE has found that hepatitis A vaccination of children in Kerala aged one year and adolescents aged



15 years using either a live, attenuated vaccine or an inactivated vaccine is cost-effective. While one dose is sufficient in the case of a live, attenuated hepatitis A vaccine, the inactivated vaccine requires two doses for full immunisation. Besides other factors, the cost-effective analysis took into account the cost of the vaccine, the number of doses needed for full immunisation, coverage needed, and the total number of individuals to be vaccinated in the two age groups – 460,000 children aged one year and 502,600 adolescents aged 15 years.

“Rs.9,330 million and ₹4,649 million would be required for vaccinating 15-year-old individuals using inactivated and live attenuated vaccination, respectively. In the case of children aged one year, ₹7,730

million and Rs. 3,394 million would be required for vaccinating them using inactivated and live attenuated vaccination, respectively. The inactivated vaccine will cost more than live attenuated for both children aged one year and adolescents aged 15 years [as two doses are needed in the case of inactivated vaccine],” Dr. Montarat Tharvorncharoensap from the Mahidol University Health Technology Assessment Graduate Program, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand and the corresponding author says in an email to *The Hindu*.

Researchers from two ICMR institutions – the Chennai-based National Institute of Epidemiology (NIE) and the Pune-based National Institute of Virology (NIV) – were involved in the study and are coauth-

ors of the paper. Compared with ₹15,202 million spent for treatment at the end of five years when vaccination is not introduced for adolescents aged 15 years, the study found that at the end of five years, Kerala will end up saving ₹5,872 million when an inactivated vaccine is used and ₹10,553 million if a live, attenuated vaccine is used.

In the case of children aged one year, the study found that ₹1,402 million will be spent on treatment at the end of five years when vaccination is not introduced. At the end of five years, the total cost of vaccinating with a live, attenuated vaccine will be ₹1,992 million, while it will be ₹6,328 million when an inactivated vaccine is used. While at the end of five years, the State will end up

saving millions when either of the vaccines is used in the case of adolescents, in the case of children aged one year, the expenses towards treatment do not exceed the cost of vaccination. So at the end of five years, vaccination does not lead to net savings in the case of children aged one year. “We have calculated it only for five years. But since hepatitis A vaccination will continue to protect children beyond five years, the State will eventually end up saving millions each year in the case of children aged one year,” says the first author Dr. Yogesh Krishnarao Gurav from the Health Technology Assessment Group at NIV Pune.

The higher cost savings in the case of adolescents even at the end of five years compared with one-year-old children is because adolescents, like adults, are more prone to infection, while in early childhood the infection is not severe, says Dr. Tharvorncharoensap.

While one dose of the live, attenuated vaccine is sufficient to provide full protection, two doses are needed in the case of the inactivated vaccine.

“The cost of an inactivated vaccine, which requires two doses, is almost double that of the live, attenuated vaccine. Therefore, live attenuated seemed to have a better cost-effectiveness profile. However, it should be noted that both vaccines are cost-saving, which means that the cost of vaccines is less than the benefits,” she says.



#### Activated T cells persist for years in Long COVID patients

Patients with Long COVID symptoms can display signs of abnormal immune cell activation in many organs and tissues, as well as leftover SARS-CoV-2 RNA in the gut, for two years after infection, according to a study. Compared with pre-pandemic controls, the recovered patients showed strong signs of activated T cells in the brain stem, spinal cord, heart and lung tissues, and many other sites in the body. Furthermore, this T cell activation correlated with Long COVID symptoms.



#### Replanted mangroves store 75% as much carbon

Replanted mangroves can capture 75% of the carbon stocks that their naturally established counterparts store after 20 years, according to models of data from 684 planted mangrove clusters. The findings support mangrove ecosystem rehabilitation as a supplement for policy-driven efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas pollution and global warming. The findings could help nations that want to invest in the ‘blue economy’ to adapt to climate change.

## AI comes to the rescue of elephants



**SPEAKING OF SCIENCE**  
D. Balasubramanian

The elephant population in India stands at 25,000 to 30,000, earning the species an “endangered” status. Their range today is estimated to be only 3.5% of what it was earlier, being restricted to the Himalayan foothills, the northeast, some forests of central India, and hilly forests of Western and Eastern Ghats.

Of particular concern is the fragmentation of their habitat: small, forested areas providing sustenance for elephants, interspersed with human-developed landscapes. Fragmentation can also lead to restricted breeding choices. This creates genetic bottlenecks and, in the long

term, a reduction in the fitness of the herds.

Frequent movement of elephants between their habitable zones brings them into contact with roads and railway lines. The range of a female elephant covers about 500 sq. km, and traveling over so much distance in the age of fragmented habitats makes a road or railway crossing very likely.

Fortunately, not all elephant tracks pose these hazards. The elephants of Bandipur, Mudumalai and Wayanad go on a seasonal summer migration. They head for the Kabini Dam backwaters for both water and green grass. Studies have identified that 18 elephant routes exist between Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Wildlife corridors are a solution – these managed lands allow for migration with minimal human contact. One good example is the Motichur-Chilla corri-



**Elephant corridors:** Studies have identified that 18 elephant routes exist between Tamil Nadu and Kerala. ANI

ridor in Uttarakhand, which allows the flow of elephant genes between the Corbett and the Rajaji National Parks. However, there is always the risk of conflict with humans, with elephants occasionally feasting on crops, or crossing roads and railway tracks.

**Train speed**  
In a Canadian study attempting to mitigate animal-train collisions, train-

triggered warning systems comprising flashing lights and bell sounds were installed at various locations along the tracks. These signals, activated 30 seconds before train arrival, were aimed at conditioning animals to associate the warnings with approaching trains.

Cameras recorded animal responses to trains with and without warning signals, on both straight

and curved tracks. Large animals, such as elks (from the deer family) and grizzly bears left the tracks about 10 seconds before the train arrived when there was no warning system, and about 17 seconds before the train arrived when warning bells and lights were deployed (*Transportation Research*, vol 87, 2020).

The response to an approaching train is less in curved sections of the track, probably due to reduced visibility. In such places, sound is used by animals. However, the ability to hear an approaching train is significantly influenced by factors such as high train speed.

**AI methods**  
When should an engine driver reduce speed when passing through forests that are elephant habitats? The Indian Railways has a vast network of optical fiber cables. These sup-

port telecommunications and carry data, and importantly transmit signals for train control. In a recently introduced system called Gajraj, geophonic sensors on these OFC lines are tuned to pick up the vibrations of the deep and resonant footsteps of passing elephants.

This AI-based intrusion detection system analyses data from the sensors, extracting relevant features such as frequency components and duration of vibration. If elephant-specific vibrations are detected, an alert is promptly sent to locomotive drivers in the area, and train speeds are reduced. The system is now operational in the Alipurduar area of north West Bengal, which has been the site of several tragic accidents in the past.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)



### Question Corner

#### Baby brain

**Is pregnancy-related brain impairment also seen in fish?**

New research reveals that pregnancy-related brain impairment is present in live-bearing fish, but instead of affecting learning and memory as expected from similar research on mammals, it appears to have a stronger impact on decision-making and sensory reception. There have been many studies into the detrimental impact of pregnancy on mammalian brains, sometimes called “baby brain” or “momnesia” in humans, revealing how the disruption of neurological processes like

neurogenesis, or the creation of new neurons, can affect learning and memory. While most fish reproduce by laying eggs, some species are live-bearing, or viviparous, and carry their offspring internally before producing live young. Researchers found that while both pregnant and virgin fish were equally successful in cognitive tasks, pregnancy was found to compromise the fish's ability in decision-making and to interpret scent in the water.

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

## How to manage 'brain-eating amoeba' cases

What are the symptoms of the rare and fatal disease of primary amoebic meningoencephalitis?

A.S. Iyanth

### The story so far:

There have been four cases, including three deaths, of the rare, but fatal primary amoebic meningoencephalitis (PAM) in Kerala in the last two months. A 14-year-old boy from Thikkodi in Kozhikode district tested positive for the infection on July 5. He is undergoing medical treatment now and his condition is reported to be stable.

### Where have the fatalities occurred?

There have been three deaths so far – E.P. Mridul, 12, from Ferok in Kozhikode district, died at a private hospital in Kozhikode city on July 3. V. Dakshina, 13, of Kannur, succumbed to it at a private hospital in the city on June 12. Fadva, 5, of Munniyur in Malappuram, died at the Government Medical College Hospital, Kozhikode, on May 20.

### What is PAM?

Primary amoebic meningoencephalitis or PAM is caused by *Naegleria fowleri*, an amoeba that thrives in warm freshwater lakes, ponds and rivers. It can also survive in poorly maintained swimming pools in rare cases. As it can infect the brain and destroy the tissues there, this one-celled organism is also called 'brain-eating amoeba'. These infections,

though rare, are fatal and 97% of the patients don't survive. The infection happens when people go for a swim in lakes, ponds or rivers, during the summer. Experts say that it could occur if the atmospheric temperature is high and water levels are low. The amoeba enters the body through the nose and reaches the brain. It destroys brain tissues and causes their swelling. In recent cases, children have been found to be more vulnerable to it. The infection does not spread from people to people. Swallowing water containing the amoeba does not lead to it either.

Primary amoebic meningoencephalitis is caused by *Naegleria fowleri*, an amoeba that thrives in freshwater lakes, ponds and rivers. These infections, though rare, are fatal and 97% of the patients don't survive. The infection happens when people go for a swim in lakes, ponds or rivers, during the summer. Experts say that it could occur if the atmospheric temperature is high and water levels are low. The amoeba enters the body through the nose and reaches the brain. It destroys brain tissues and causes their swelling. In recent cases, children have been found to be more vulnerable to it. The infection does not spread from people to people. Swallowing water containing the amoeba does not lead to it either.

### What are the symptoms of PAM?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the U.S., headache, fever, nausea, and vomiting are its early symptoms. The disease, however, can progress rapidly. Stiff neck, confusion, lack of attention to people and surroundings, loss of balance, and hallucinations are the later symptoms. It usually leads to coma and death after five days, says the CDC. Most people die within one to 18 days.

Experts point out that warming of the atmosphere and stagnant and unhygienic water resources could be some of the conditions leading to the infection. This type of amoeba is found to be more active in warm water.

### How is it diagnosed and treated?

The infection can be diagnosed through PCR tests of the cerebrospinal fluid. However, as PAM is a rare condition, detection can sometimes be hard. In Kozhikode, doctors at the Government Medical College Hospital suspected its possibility in the five-year-old girl from Malappuram after she exhibited symptoms similar to that of bacterial meningitis, whose instances have come down in recent times, mainly due to vaccination. There are no standard treatment methods available and the doctors are following the guidelines of the CDC for now. According to sources, the State Health department has procured miltefosine, a broad-spectrum anti-microbial drug, from Germany for the treatment of infected persons. Paediatricians say that Azithromycin and Amphotericin B, some of the other medicines suggested, are available.

### Has it been reported in Kerala before?

First detected in the Alappuzha municipality in 2016, it was reported in Malappuram in 2019 and 2020, Kozhikode in 2020, Thrissur in 2022, and again in Alappuzha in 2023. Health Minister Veena George convened a meeting on July 1 to take stock of the situation and it was decided to formulate special guidelines for the treatment.

Health officials have said that there is a chance of the amoeba entering the brain through the holes in a layer that separates the nose and the brain or through possible holes in the ear drum. So, children having infections in their ear have been advised against taking baths in ponds or in stagnated water resources. Diving too should be avoided. Those running water theme parks and swimming pools have been asked to chlorinate the water there at regular intervals. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan convened another meeting on July 5 and issued directions to keep water resources clean. Children have been asked to use swimming nose clips to prevent the infection.

### What can be done to reduce the risk?

Holding the nose or wearing a nose clip while jumping or diving into fresh water are some of the steps suggested to avoid the infection. The head should be kept high while entering warm water. Steer clear from digging in shallow waters, say experts. Distilled or boiled water should be used for clearing nasal passages.

## Can the uber-rich worldwide be taxed better?

What has French economist Gabriel Zucman suggested in a report? Is imposing an annual 2% tax on ultra-high-net-worth individuals feasible? How much could a minimum tax on dollar billionaires potentially raise? What is the template that may be used for taxing billionaires?

Suresh Seshadri

### The story so far:

French economist Gabriel Zucman has in a recent report commissioned by Brazil's G-20 presidency recommended an annual 2% tax on individuals holding wealth exceeding \$1 billion. Finance Ministers of the G-20 group are set to meet in Rio de Janeiro on July 25-26, and the proposal is expected to be discussed at the meeting.

### What exactly is the proposal?

Mr. Zucman, an economist who has extensively researched the accumulation, distribution and taxation of global income and wealth, has proposed the adoption of an internationally coordinated minimum tax standard for ensuring effective taxation of ultra-high-net-worth individuals. This he argues would be the basic requirement to safeguard global tax progressivity. At the minimum, he recommends that individuals possessing more than \$1 billion in total wealth (assets, equity shares in both listed and unlisted companies, other ownership structures that enable participating in companies' ownership, etc.) would be required to pay a minimum amount of tax annually that would be equal to 2% of their wealth.

Such a minimum tax on billionaires could potentially raise \$200-\$250 billion a year globally from about 3,000 individuals, and were it to be extended to cover those with a net worth exceeding \$100 million, would add \$100-\$140 billion annually in global tax revenue.

### What is the rationale for such a tax?

As per a key finding of the Global Tax Evasion Report 2024, prepared by researchers at the EU

'In 2024, the top 0.0001% owned more than 13% of world GDP in wealth'

Tax Observatory, global billionaires benefit from very low effective tax rates, which range between 0% and 0.5% of their wealth. "When expressed as a fraction of income and considering all taxes paid at all levels of government (including corporate taxes, consumption taxes, payroll taxes, etc.), the effective tax rates of billionaires appear significantly lower than those of all other groups of the population," the researchers write.

Mr. Zucman in his report to the G-20 presidency posits that the wealth of the top 0.0001% households, expressed as a fraction of world GDP, has surged more than fourfold since the mid-1980s. "In 1987, the top 0.0001% owned the equivalent of 3% of world GDP in wealth. This wealth gradually rose to 8% of world GDP on the eve of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. It briefly fell during the crisis, and then rose fast to exceed 13% of world GDP in 2024." The average annual growth rate of this population group's wealth is 7.1% net of inflation. In contrast, over the same almost four-decade period, the average income of an adult grew annually by 1.3% net of inflation, and average wealth increased by 3.2% a year.

"As long as ultra-high-net-worth individuals keep having higher net-of-tax returns than the rest of the population, their share of global wealth will keep rising – an unsustainable path," argues Mr. Zucman. Emphasising that "progressive taxation is a key pillar of democratic societies" that helps strengthen social cohesion and trust in governments to work for the common good, the French economist stresses that it is needed to help fund public goods and services. Better tax revenues are also crucial to meet the investments required to address the climate crisis.

### Why moot such a tax now?

The French economist cites research that shows contemporary tax systems worldwide are not effectively taxing the wealthiest individuals. As a result ultra-high-net-worth individuals tend to pay less in tax relative to their income than other social groups, regardless of the specific tax design choices and enforcement practices of countries. Income taxes, which in principle constitute the main instrument of progressive taxation, fail to effectively tax ultra-high-net-worth individuals. This in turn deprives governments of substantial tax revenues and contributes to concentrating the gains of globalisation into relatively few hands, undermining the social sustainability of economic globalisation, he argues.

Also, the global social and political environment, and in some ways the regulatory

climate too, are more conducive now to successfully implement such a proposal. He specifically cites the progress made in curtailing bank secrecy over the last 15 years through increased information exchange between countries, which according to the EU Tax Observatory has led to a decline in offshore tax evasion by an estimated factor of about three in less than 10 years.

The other major enabling factor is the 'historic decision' in 2021, when more than 130 countries and territories agreed to a common minimum corporate tax of 15% for large multinational companies (MNCs). The willingness on the part of countries worldwide to tax MNCs in a manner so as to prevent them from seeking to operate out of low or zero tax jurisdictions is, in the French economist's opinion, a template that can be built upon now for taxing billionaires.

### How much support does the proposal have?

Brazil, Latin America's largest economy, is the main backer. France, Spain, Colombia, Belgium, the African Union and South Africa, which will assume the G-20 presidency next year, have also backed the idea.

Also, while U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is reported to have said the U.S. could not support a global wealth levy, Mr. Zucman has cited President Joe Biden's proposed minimum income tax targeting individuals with more than \$100 million in wealth as yet another approach to tax the uber-rich.

### What is its relevance to India?

India has seen a disproportionately sharper increase in wealth at the top of the pyramid over the nine-year period to 2023, according to a study titled 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj' by Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi. The authors of this working paper posit that "by 2022-23, top 1% income and wealth shares (22.6% and 40.1%) are at their highest historical levels and India's top 1% income share is among the very highest in the world". The authors of this study on inequality go on to suggest: "a 'super tax' on the very wealthy might be a good place to start. Not only would it serve as a tool for fighting the growing inequalities we are observing today, but it would also provide additional fiscal space for the Indian government to enhance spending on essential social expenditures (health, education, nutrition) which have historically been low compared to global standards, including other countries at similar income levels".

"A tax of just 2% on the total net wealth of the 162 wealthiest Indian families in 2022 would yield revenue to the tune of 0.5% of national income (more than twice the central government's budget expenditures on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in recent years)," they add.

## What does Karnataka Bill promise gig workers?

What are some of the key measures proposed for the welfare of gig workers in the State? With the rise of several platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Ola and others shaping the gig economy in India and impacting the labour market in a big way, why are safeguards necessary?

Shilpa Elizabeth

### The story so far:

On June 29, the Karnataka government published the draft of the Karnataka Platform-based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, making it the second Indian State to initiate such a move, the first being Rajasthan.

### What does the Bill seek to do?

The Bill seeks to regulate the social security and welfare of platform-based gig workers in the State and is expected to be placed in the monsoon session of the Assembly.

The draft defines a gig worker as "a person who performs a work or participates in a work arrangement that results in a given rate of payment, based on terms and conditions laid down in such a contract and includes all piece-rate work, and whose work is sourced through a platform, in the services specified in Schedule-1." A 2022 NITI Aayog report estimates that India will have 23.5 million gig workers by 2029-30. Around two lakh gig workers work with platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Ola, Urban Company, Porter, Dunzo, Amazon, Flipkart and so on in Bengaluru alone reportedly. The last two decades have seen the rise of several such platforms shaping the gig

Several other States are also contemplating measures to protect gig workers

economy in India and impacting the labour market in a big way.

Veering away from traditional employer-employee relationships, the aggregators do not onboard gig workers as their employees, but as 'partners' (or other similar terminologies). This essentially makes the workers independent contractors and leaves them outside the security net of labour protection laws. Although initially thought of as a great opportunity to make money while enjoying autonomy and flexibility, over the years workers started seeing reduced payments, arbitrary dismissals and other instances of exploitation in the absence of regulatory laws.

### What are some of the highlights of the Bill?

Introduced as a 'rights-based bill', the Karnataka draft Bill seeks to protect the rights of platform-based gig workers and places obligations on aggregators in relation to social security, occupational health and safety of workers. The new draft aims to introduce safeguards against unfair dismissals, bring in a two-level grievance redressal mechanism for workers, and more transparency with regards to the automated monitoring and decision-making systems deployed by platforms.

According to the draft Bill, the contract between the aggregator and the worker should contain an exhaustive list of grounds on which the contract would be terminated by the aggregator. It also stipulates that the aggregator shall not terminate a worker without giving valid reasons in writing and prior notice of 14 days.

### Why is this important?

Arbitrary terminations have been a major complaint raised by gig workers for many years now. Instances of blacklisting workers or terminating them from work without hearing out their side have been aplenty. Often, platforms enact these through automated monitoring and decision-making systems which track the work and earnings of the gig worker, record customer feedback, and make decisions accordingly. Workers point out that this system is heavily skewed in favour of the customer and makes it a game of chasing ratings and pleasing

the customer at any cost. The absence of human intervention leaves no room for grievance redressal for the latter.

### What are the other features of the draft?

Given that arbitrary deductions from payments have been another point raised by workers, the draft mandates aggregators to make payments at least every week and to inform the worker about the reasons for payment deductions if any. As per the new draft, a worker will have the right to refuse a specified number of gigs per week with 'reasonable cause' without any adverse consequences.

Taking a leaf out of the Rajasthan Bill, the new draft also seeks to establish a welfare board and a social security and welfare fund for gig workers. A welfare fee would be levied either on every transaction between the worker and the aggregator or on the overall turnover of the company. The welfare fee as well as contributions from Union and State governments would go to the fund. All gig workers must be registered and the aggregators should furnish to the government the database of gig workers. Contracts must be written in a simple language and any change should be notified to the worker at least 14 days before the proposed change. The gig worker will have the option to terminate the contract accordingly without any adverse consequences for their existing entitlements. The aggregator must also provide reasonable and safe working conditions for workers, although the draft does not delve into what constitutes as 'reasonable'.

### Have there been initiatives in other States?

Around a year back, Rajasthan introduced the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, making it the first-ever State to do so. The Bill that was introduced by the Congress government became an Act in September. In November, the BJP came to power in the State and the Act has gone into cold storage. The Haryana government is set to establish a State-level board dedicated to the social and economic security of gig workers. The Telangana government is also currently in the process of drafting a similar bill as per sources.

As far as Union government initiatives are concerned, in 2020, the Code on Social Security was introduced. It recognised those who freelance or work under short terms, and mandated employers to provide them benefits similar to those of regular employees.



On the go: Delivery men ride towards their destinations in New Delhi. PTI

# PROFILES

## Keeper of Iran's reform hopes

**Masoud Pezeshkian**

A protege of former reformist President Mohammad Khatami, the surgeon-turned-politician assumes presidency at a time when the Islamic Republic is witnessing social tensions and economic woes at home and heightened geopolitical risks abroad

**Stanly Johnny**

**F**or change in the minds of fanatics...  
For the longing for a normal life...  
For the girl who wished she was a boy,  
For women, life, freedom.

The lines are from *Baraye*, a popular Iranian ballad written by Shervin Hajipour, after the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, while in the custody of the country's infamous morality police. Amini was arrested for not wearing the *hijab*, the mandatory headscarf, "properly". When Amini's death sparked nationwide protests, *Baraye* emerged as "the anthem" of the anguished. The song won the Best Song for Social Change award at the 65th Grammy in February 2023. Shervin is now in jail in Iran, serving a three-year term.

The protests over the death of Amini have died down, but "the anthem" remains immensely popular, especially among Iran's youth. It became so popular that Masoud Pezeshkian, the reformist candidate in this year's presidential election, used the song in his campaign to draw in voters. Many saw this as Mr. Pezeshkian indirectly joining the cause of the protests, while critics of the Islamic Republic called it hypocrisy as Shervin was still in jail. Either way, Mr. Pezeshkian's unconventional methods seemed to have helped him strike a chord with Iran's voters, who had to make a stark choice: between a candidate who sings "the anthem" and a "super-revolutionary", who wants stricter enforcement of the Islamic moral code and tougher policies towards the West.

In the June 28 first round, in which less than 40% voters turned up, Mr. Pezeshkian, the only reformist candidate in the fray, won 42.5% of votes, while conservative Saeed Jalili finished second with 38.8% votes. As neither candidate crossed the 50% threshold, they faced each other in a run-off on July 5. There was a consolidation of conservative voters behind Mr. Jalili, who has also been close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei. Mr. Pezeshkian's chances were dependent on a larger turnout by Iran's liberal-minded voters, many of whom boycotted the election process in recent years in protest. The run-off saw a 50% turnout, and Mr. Pezeshkian, the 69-year-old cardiologist, won 53.6% of votes to become the Islamic Republic's ninth President. Mr. Jalilee polled at 44.3%.

**Coup, revolution and war**  
Born in 1954 to an Iranian Azerbaijan father and a Kurdish mother in Mahabad in West Azerbaijan province, Masoud Pezeshkian grew up, like other elites of today's Islamic Republic, in an Iran that was increasingly rebellious towards the Shah's royal dictatorship. A year before Mr. Pezeshkian was born, Iran's elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh was overthrown in a CIA-sponsored coup. When a revolution pulled down the Shah's monarchy in 1979, Mr. Pezeshkian was 25. Immediately after the dawn of the new republic, Iran was thrown into a war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Mr. Pezeshkian went to the frontlines, both as a fighter and as a doctor.

If he was a relatively obscure figure for the outside world until last month, in Iran's seemingly homogeneous but practically fractious politics, Mr. Pezeshkian has been a veteran. He entered Tehran's circles of power in 1999 when reformist President Mohammed Khatami appointed him as a Deputy Minister of Health. In 2001, after Mr. Khatami's re-election, the President chose him to run the Health Ministry.

Known for his combativeness and sense of humour, Mr. Pezeshkian, after his appointment, said in a meeting, "When I was a student, I would slap the university president. When I became the university president, I would slap the president. Now that I have become a minister, I will slap Clinton in the face." In November 2002, he faced impeachment in Iran's parliament, Majles, over appointments and drug shortage, but survived the motion.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hardline President who succeeded Mr. Khatami in 2005, kept Mr. Pezeshkian

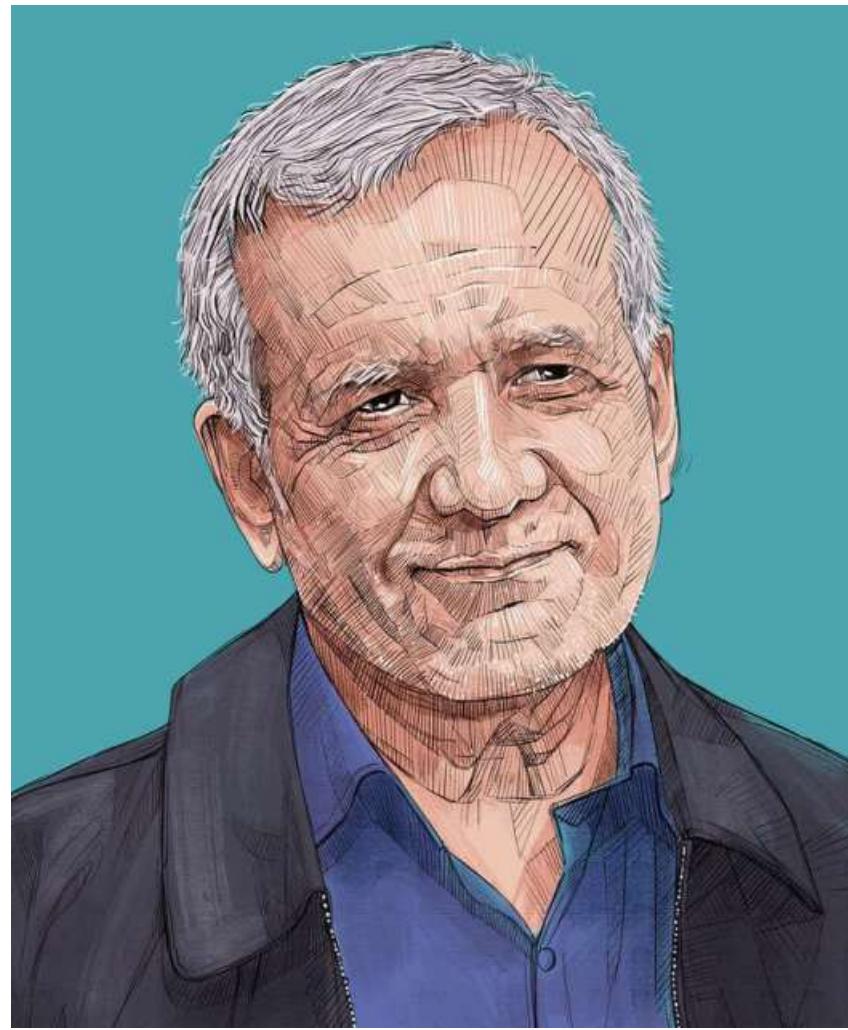


ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

out of his government. The doctor then moved to parliamentary polls. In 2008, he contested and won from Tabriz, Osku and Azarshahr constituency in East Azerbaijan to Majles – a seat he still holds. While his association with Mr. Khatami was an indication of his political beliefs, he endorsed those impressions by speaking out against the handling of protesters by the security personnel in 2009, when Iran witnessed widespread agitations over allegations that Ahmadinejad's re-election was rigged. "Do not kill people like a wild animal," Mr. Pezeshkian said, quoting Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the first Imam of Shia Islam and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. "When you can, don't intervene sharply, don't hit, don't strike," he said.

His first attempt at the presidential election was in 2013. He joined the race, but later withdrew in favour of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Hassan Rouhani, a moderate white-turbaned cleric, won that year's election. In 2021, after Mr. Rouhani's two terms, Mr. Pezeshkian registered for the presidential race again. But this time, the Guardian Council, the 12-member election supervisory body struck down his name. Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric and a close ally of the clerical establishment, became President. This year's election was necessitated by the death of Raisi in a plane crash in May. And Mr. Pezeshkian, who was barred from challenging Raisi in 2021, has now been elected his successor. During the campaign, Mr.

Pezeshkian had struck an uneasy balance between his reformist credentials and the establishment. When protests broke out after Mahsa Amini's death, he took to Twitter (now X) to call for an investigation into the circumstances behind her death. "We oppose any violent and inhumane behaviour towards anyone, notably our sisters and daughters, and we will not allow these actions to happen," he said recently, indirectly referring to the Gasht-e-Ershad, the morality police. During the presidential debate, he also backed engagement with the West. "If we manage to lift the sanctions, people will have an easier life while the continuation of sanctions means making people's lives miserable."

**'Criminal America'**  
But this does not mean that Mr. Pezeshkian is a counter-revolutionary. After Iran shot down an American drone near the Strait of Hormuz in the Gulf in 2019, which took both countries to the brink of war, Mr. Pezeshkian termed the American government "terrorist". The IRGC's action was "a strong punch to the mouths of the leaders of criminal America", he said, referring to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the powerful paramilitary force whose uniform he had worn in the past. During the campaign, he has stated that his intent is "to avoid confrontation with the Supreme Leader" and other influential actors such as the IRGC.

As Mr. Pezeshkian assumes the presidency, his hands are full. Iran, battered by western sanctions, is going through a serious economic crisis. Popular protests are a new norm. The U.S. is in an election year with Donald Trump, the former President who destroyed the 2015 nuclear deal, being the frontrunner. In West Asia, Iran's proxies are in an unending war with Israel. A reset would not be easy. His supporters want reform, but the establishment wants the status quo. Mr. Pezeshkian's challenge is to do what even his mentor, Mohammad Khatami, failed to do: bring in incremental reforms at home, steady the economy, and stabilise Iran's ties abroad.

### THE GIST

Masoud Pezeshkian entered Tehran's circles of power in 1999 when reformist President Mohammed Khatami appointed him as a Deputy Minister of Health

In 2008, he contested and won from Tabriz, Osku and Azarshahr constituency in East Azerbaijan to Majles – a seat he still holds

In 2009 and 2022, he had criticised the state's handling of protesters, and called for easing Islamic moral laws and better engagement with the West

## Policeman-turned-preacher

**Narayan Sakar Hari (Bhole Baba)**

The self-styled godman, whose gathering in Hathras witnessed a stampede on July 2, that left 123 people dead, has built a network of ashrams across Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring States

**Anuj Kumar**

**"H**e tried to stay under the radar as he went about his business," said a retired police officer while explaining the rise of Narayan Sakar Hari or Bhole Baba from a modest hut to sprawling ashrams spread across Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring States. The statement usually used to describe a worthy intelligence officer fits Suraj Pal, the policeman-turned-preacher, who lost some of his carefully crafted cover when a stampede ensued after his holy gathering in Phulrai village in Hathras on July 2, leaving at least 121 dead and several injured.

Born in a Scheduled Caste (Jatav) farmer family, Mr. Pal grew up in Bahadur Nagar in Kasganj district of Uttar Pradesh. He joined the U.P. Police as a constable, worked in the local intelligence unit in Agra, and took voluntary retirement in the late 1990s after "a spiritual awakening".

When he was in service, he started making claims about divine experiences. In 2000, he was arrested, along with six others for creating a ruckus in a crematorium after claiming to bring back a 16-year-old dead girl to life. The case hit a dead end but his cult grew. He shifted base to his



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

ancestral village in Kasganj and spread the word about his special powers through direct marketing. "His agents, most of whom were women, would repeatedly share magical experiences like having seen a halo around his head with villagers and bring more followers into the fold," said one of his schoolmates in Patiyali. Stories were spread about the healing quality of the water that comes out of the hand pumps at the ashram.

"At his ashram, one could see civil servants from his community camping on Tuesdays when the *prasad* (offering) was distributed in huge quantities after the *satsang* (gathering)." These followers in government services are said to have trained Mr. Pal's volunteers and members of his private army in managing large crowds. They had created a general sense that they could manage their congregation without the local adminis-

tration's support until the stampede happened.

**A sense of hope**  
As his following crossed a critical mass, Mr. Pal intertwined the symbolism of the Hindu faith with the Ambedkarite thought, where seeing is believing. He started dressing up in white attires, mostly Western outfits, and his simple discourses are designed to give the most vulnerable sections of society a sense of hope, a place of pride, and a prophet from their stock to look up to.

He refers to his popular identity of Narayan Sakar Hari in the third person. For the uninitiated, it appears that he is a devotee of Narayan (Vishnu) and Hari (Krishna) and Bhole Baba (Shiva), but to his followers, he is an incarnation of *Parmatma* (almighty). "Prabhujii talks of leading a virtuous life where there is no space for addiction and abuse," said one follower. Cutting through the divi-

sions of caste and religion, Mr. Pal speaks of humanity in his preaching. "It is said five fingers are not equal but here, Narayan Sakar Hari has made you equal by weaving you into one thread by blessing you with virtue and noble action," he says in one of his discourses. In another, he says, "Narayan Sakar Hari will reach you whether you call him from a mosque or a church, a hut or a palace. The only condition is to call him with an open heart."

While he maintained a distance from the media and social media, locals say he has always been "very social" with the political and business class of the region. He crafts his message in a way that neither those who support the Ambedkarite thought nor those who swear by Hindutva ideology could dare ignore his influence on a huge mass of voters.

While the U.P. Police is being questioned for not naming Mr. Pal in the FIR registered in the case, it is interesting to note that no one from the victims' families or the civil society has turned up to complain against him so far. Questions on the source of his lavish lifestyle are not eliciting any responses for now. The narrative that is being built is that some "casteist miscreants" in the crowd generated the stampede.

## From the Moon's far side

**Change 6**

China's lunar exploration mission has returned soil and rock samples from the side of the moon that's permanently facing away from the earth

**Vasudevan Mukunth**

**O**n June 25, Chinese personnel picked up a 300-kg canister from the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region; it contained two fistfuls of soil and rocks. The event made international headlines because the canister had started its journey on the moon's far side – the side permanently facing away from the earth – and the soil and rocks it carried came from there, a place in the Solar System only Chinese robots have visited thus far.

The mission, called Change 6 (named after a mythological moon goddess), was part of the Chinese lunar exploration programme. A sample-return mission is more complicated than other types of robotic missions to the moon – including orbiters, landers, and rovers – because of the number of moving parts and stronger time constraints.

For Change 6, the China National Space Administration (CNSA) sent a lander to the moon's surface, like India did with the Vikram lander of Chandrayaan 3. There, a drill and scoop extracted some material samples from and just below the moon's surface and deposited them in the canister. The canister was then placed in an ascender module that lifted



PHOTO CREDIT: AFP

off from the lander to orbit, where it rendezvoused with the orbiter. The canister was here moved to a returner spacecraft. This spacecraft flew to within 5,000 km of the earth and ejected the canister. The canister finally made its way to the ground after a bounced atmospheric re-entry manoeuvre.

The lander landed on the moon's far side, which doesn't have line of sight from the earth, so no signal from the earth's surface could reach it. The CNSA instead had ground stations communicate with the lander by sending signals to a satellite it had already installed in orbit around the moon. When this satellite came in view of the lander, it relayed the signals to the lander, collected the replies, and later beamed them to the earth. The mission lasted 53 days.

Once the capsule landed, officials flew it to the Chinese Academy of Space Technology in Beijing. There, experts would have

taken the samples out and placed them in storage, in preparation for research and analysis. The world's first mission to the moon's far side was Change 4, which in 2019 delivered a lander and a rover there. In Change 5, the CNSA executed a sample-return mission from the near side, and followed it up with Change 6.

**Two leaders**  
Various countries have made 'returning' to the moon a priority of their respective national space programmes. Two vague leaders have emerged in this race: one led by the U.S. and the other by China. The U.S. is currently focusing on sending payloads built by private companies to the moon and on a major programme to regularly land humans on the moon from the early 2030s.

If the moon is to have room for everyone, we need to understand both its sides. The far side is lit-

tle like the near side. It is more covered by rocky terrain, has had less volcanism and, not being shielded by the earth like the near side, receives more solar radiation on its surface. The far side is scientifically important for two reasons. One, it's an important part of the spatial and temporal map of the Solar System scientists are piecing together to reveal its evolution and guide future exploration. Two, Yung Kai-leung, a Hong Kong Polytechnic University professor and member of a team that contributed to the moonstuff collection system, told the Chinese national broadcaster the far side suffers more meteor strikes, and which future moon bases must be protected against. The Change 6 lander also descended in the Apollo Basin, an ancient crater where materials from the moon's deep crust could have been pushed out.

Researchers will now study the 1.93 kg of moonstuff in the hopes of learning something about the moon and the early solar system. The CNSA has said China's researchers will have first crack at the samples, followed by researchers from abroad who applied for access. We don't yet know if any Indian groups did. The results of these studies will be more valuable than gold.



## REFLECTIONS

## THE BIG PICTURE

## In Guru Dutt's life and art, frames of disenchantment

The birth centenary of the filmmaker known for works such as *Pyasa*, *Kaagaz ke Phool*, and *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* begins on July 9. His cinema anticipated the disillusionment over Nehruvian India's failure to deliver on its promises

The birth centenary of Guru Dutt — easily one of Indian cinema's greats — begins on July 9. The occasion should invite the artistic fraternity and citizenry at large to pause and think as they face an overwhelming avalanche of technology and speed in all art, including cinema.

Independent India was only 10 years old when Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* was released. The film, both in its temporal and aesthetic conscience, is still significant as the country's political-cultural text, or subtext, refuses to move past Nehruvian agony and ecstasy. The year 1957 was also the time when the world's first elected Communist government in Kerala was formed, led by EMS Namboodiripad, the Hindi film *Jagte Raho* won the first prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* (second in the *Apu Trilogy*) won the Golden Lion in Venice, and Tapan Sinha's *Kabuliwala*, which adapted Rabindranath Tagore's short story, received a special mention for music (set by Pandit Ravishankar) in Berlin. It was also the year India's first Oscar-nominated film, *Mother India*, and the first Indo-Soviet co-production, *Pardesi*, were released. Nehruvian India was shining. Yet, for *Pyasa*'s sensitive Urdu poet Vijay (played by Dutt), all was not well. Heartbroken, as he roamed the streets of a red-light district where women live in abject poverty, he asked the country's leaders: *Ye kooche ye nilaam ghar dilkashi ke/Ye lutate huye caarvan zindagi ke/Kahaan hain kahaan hain muhafiz khudi ke/Jinhe naaz hai hind par woh kahaan hai* (These lanes, these houses of auctioned pleasure/ These ravaged caravans of life/ Where are they, the guardians of dignity?/ Where are those who claim to be proud of Hind).

Dutt, also the director-producer of *Pyasa*, made us feel the anguish of Nehruvian India through these lyrics of the progressive-humanist poet, Sahir Ludhianvi, which was set to music by SD Burman, and sung by Mohammed Rafi. The song is still relevant after India's 77 years of Independence. And, we are still in search of some elusive nectar (*amrit*) as time (*kaal*) passes, just as the fictional film director, Suresh Sinha (played by Dutt again), was, in India's first CinemaScope Hindi epic, *Kaagaz ke Phool* (*Paper Flowers*, 1959).

Dutt's first film as an actor, *Baaz* (*Falcon*, 1953), which celebrates its 70th anniversary, echoed the overall contours of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)'s films released a year before the Tricolour replaced the Union Jack — *Dharti ke Lal* (*Children of the Earth*, 1946), a Hindustani film directed by KA Abbas, and *Neecha Nagar* (directed by Chetan Anand, 1946) that was an adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel, *The Lower Depths*. Based on a story and screenplay by Dutt himself, apart from being directed by him, *Baaz* is set in the 16th century Malabar coast, where the ruler of a small state signs a treaty, giving the Portuguese the right to trade in

exchange of military protection. An entertainer with thrilling action scenes and scintillating songs composed by OP Nayyar, and lead roles for Dutt and Geeta Bali, *Baaz* still echoed unmistakably anti-colonial sentiments. The renowned Russian artist, Ludvika Primakoff, designed costumes for the film.

Dutt's directorial debut was the Hindi noir, *Baazi* (1951), written by Balraj Sahni. Starring Dev Anand, it was produced by Anand's production house, Navketan. The Nehruvian ethos was in the artistic air at that time. Interestingly, Dutt's consciousness of a class-fragmented society is seen even in romantic comedies such as *Mr & Mrs 55* (his fifth film as director) which was written by Abrar Alvi, Dutt's confidante and screenwriter. As Preetam, the cartoonist protagonist of the film, Dutt uses a familiar plot to satirise the "reformism" of India's upper class. In a scene, his sweetheart Anita (Madhubala) and her authoritarian aunt Seeta Devi (Lalita Pawar) are in the room where Preetam lives. The following conversation ensues.

**Seeta Devi:** How can you live in such a hovel?

**Preetam:** Very easily. I am used to it.

**Seeta Devi:** You may say that because you haven't seen a better life.

**Preetam:** Perhaps you haven't seen the life of the poor folk living on the pavements. I am far better off than most.

**Seeta Devi:** Are you a communist?

**Preetam:** No, a cartoonist. We see Preetam caricaturing the dictatorial aunt (in fact, it is the left hand of India's legendary cartoonist, RK Laxman, that we see in the film).

Dutt's manner of film editing has been the



Guru Dutt, like Ritwik Ghatak and Mani Kaul, yearned for "home", universalising personal sorrow intuitively

FILM HERITAGE FOUNDATION

least-discussed subject so far. In early 1991, I had the opportunity to interview his editor, Yeshwant Chawhan (YG Chawhan, sometimes credited only as Chawhan), in his modest home in the Mumbai suburb of Mahim. His eyes moist, Chawhan said, "On the editing table, Guru Dutt would sit with me and often insist upon bringing about a certain effect he had in his mind, and when I would manipulate frames to achieve that, he would say, 'Arre yaar Chawhan, I want something more, not just that. *Koshish karo, yaar...*' You can perhaps see the best use of montage in his *Kaagaz ke Phool*." Except for *Jaal* (1952), Chawhan edited all his films.

Not many people know that Mani Kaul wanted to make a film on Dutt. Sometime in the late 1990s, he had asked me to do some preliminary research, which I had done according to his instructions, but unfortunately, the film remained unrealised in its nascent stage. Or else, we would perhaps

have had a unique film by Kaul, on Dutt — much like his *Satah Se Uthta Aadmi* (1980), which is on the life and work of the eminent Hindi poet and writer, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh. Kaul always talked very eloquently about Dutt's film craft. He found a certain element of randomness in the way Dutt lighted the actor's face and body that made them moulded and supple, thanks to the cinematographer VK Murthy's sensitivity. I believe Ritwik Ghatak, Dutt, and Kaul shared the same intellectual-emotional-temperamental quotient. They yearned for "home", universalising personal sorrow intuitively and impulsively.

Dutt was devastated by the utter failure of his ambitiously self-reflexive epic, *Kaagaz ke Phool* at the box-office. Penned by Kaifi Azmi, composed by SD Burman and sung by Rafi, a song from the movie still rings in the air: *Ud jaa ud jaa pyaase bhanvare/Ras na milega khaaron mein/Kaagaz ke phool jahaan*

*khilte hain/ Baith na un gulzaaron mein* (Fly away, O thirsty bee/You will find no honey/ Amid these raging torrents/Where paper flowers bloom/Visit not these gardens).

Dutt, the luminous lament, was in perennial search of a fragrant garden where he could rest. Unable to find one, he took his own life on October 10, 1964, in Bombay. Gurudatta Padukone, born in Bangalore, was only 39.

Though the filmmaking process has now transformed from analogue to digital, Dutt remains exemplary, for making timeless cinema of the stories he wanted to tell, even while working within the boundaries of market demands. In the year of his birth centenary, he should return to us as a teacher and practitioner of telling one's truth.

Amrit Gangar is a Mumbai-based author, curator and historian. The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



## A charter for Parliament to improve its functioning

Now that we've elected the 18th Lok Sabha, it's time to raise two fundamental questions. First, is the Lok Sabha living up to our expectations? Second, what changes are needed to convince the Opposition that the voice of the Indian people — and not just that of the ruling parties — is given time and, therefore, adequately heard?

Facts published by PRS Legislative Research reveal the 17th Lok Sabha worked for only 1,354 hours. That's even lower than the 1,615 hours for the 16th, which was already 40% lower than the average of all full-term Lok Sabhas. In fact, 11 out of its 15 sessions were adjourned early. And with just 274 sittings, the 17th had the fewest out of all full-term Lok Sabhas.

In comparison, the first Lok Sabha sat

for 135 days a year. The 17th only managed 55. This clearly affected the way legislation was handled. Most Bills were passed within two weeks of their introduction, but a sizeable 35% with less than an hour of discussion. And only 16% were referred to parliamentary committees for scrutiny. That's less than the previous three Lok Sabhas.

So, not only are the hours the Lok Sabha spends at work shrinking but, within that, its ability to meaningfully scrutinise and debate legislation is diminishing. Since that is one of the most important functions of the Lok Sabha, we can unhesitatingly conclude it's not living up to our expectations. The remedy is simple and straightforward — the Lok Sabhas must sit for a fixed minimum number of days each year and all bills must be sent to parliamentary

committees for detailed scrutiny before they are passed.

The other — equally critical — function of the Lok Sabha is to hold the government to account. This is where the Opposition claim that their voice is not being heard needs to be addressed. Unless and until it is, the government will not be meaningfully questioned and challenged. So how do we achieve this?

One obvious solution is to adapt the practice of the House of Commons and ensure that on a certain number of days in each session the agenda is decided by the Opposition. In Britain, they're called opposition days and there are 20 in each parliamentary session. Seventeen for the principal opposition party and three for the second-biggest.

A second British practice we could adopt is Prime Minister's Questions. This is a dedicated half hour, on a fixed day each week, when the Prime Minister answers questions from the opposite benches including, at least, half a dozen asked by the Leader of the Opposition. PMQs, as it's called in the UK, has obvious appeal. It's a moment of drama which can either reveal the PM and LoP at their best or show them up as weak, uninformed and ineffective. It's also a window for the rest of the country to see and judge how their leaders perform. In short, it provides proof

of whether democracy is working or stumbling.

If adopted, these conventions would increase trust. They would give the Opposition a stake with a sense of their real contribution and they would give the Indian people confidence that different opinions and arguments are being canvassed and discussed.

Finally, if the missing element of trust is to be truly ensured, we also need to address the position of the Speaker. Whoever is chosen must immediately resign from their party. Only then can we believe the person is impartial and non-partisan. And if he or she wishes to continue for the next Lok Sabha, their election must be unopposed. Of course, a lot will still depend on the character and behaviour of the Speaker, but the obvious infirmities must be removed.

These are obvious remedies, but they'll only happen if the government accepts them. On its own, the Opposition can just recommend, as the Congress manifesto did. But if the BJP balks at accepting them, can it continue to claim India is the mother of democracy? In that event wouldn't step-mother be more accurate?

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

## ENGENDER

Lalita Panicker



## Parties must fulfil poll promises to women

The last few elections established that women's vote matters. This explains the promises on parties' empowerment in almost all parties' manifestos. As the new government assumes office, the promises must be brought to centre-stage. All the parties had spoken of women's health, safety and employment among other issues. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s manifesto promised the creation of a Viksit Bharat where Nari Shakti would be a pivot for society's progress. "Through a series of legal and policy frameworks, we will ensure the dignity of women and provide them with equal growth opportunities... we will empower women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with the skills and tools in key service sectors... with an aim to increase their income," it promised.

But, Renana Jhabvala of SEWA says, "Women want 'earning work'. Around 50% of women are self-employed, and need finance ranging from ₹2 lakh to ₹10 lakh to grow their tiny, informal enterprises. At present, through Mudra, only small loans are available... the formal sector needs to train and hire a much larger number of women. (We need) child care, especially government-run creches on a large scale so that women can work."

The Congress manifesto was not far behind. It promised ₹1 lakh per year to every poor Indian family, to be transferred directly to the bank account of the oldest woman of the household. Maja Daruwalla, chief editor, India Justice Report, says, "Every party's manifesto lays out specific promises to improve the lot of women. Now that the dust of elections has settled, it's time to make good on them — not in some foggy future but immediately. Women's participation in education, employment and representation in the structures of government and in judiciary show that there is an iron, not a glass ceiling, of discrimination and disadvantage in place. If we are serious about ensuring women's participation in all spheres of national life, specific

policies with measurable goals must be immediately put in place."

One party which did its bit on fielding women candidates is the Trinamool Congress (TMC). TMC also promises the appointment of an Adhikar Maitri in every panchayat to assist women in the enforcement of their legal rights. Sagarika Ghose, TMC's Rajya Sabha MP says, "The rising importance of the woman voter is being revealed in election after election. In 2024, more women voted than men. The TMC's Lakhir Bhandar programme received a massive response from women and contributed to the party's triumph in Bengal." The CPM has championed a law for equal rights in marital and inherited property for all women, strengthening laws relating to maintenance for women and children, ensuring protection, maintenance and rehabilitation for all deserted women.

"Women are now the change-makers whether in entrepreneurship, politics, forces, sports or any leadership roles. It is crucial for the new government to support this momentum," says Rekha Sharma, chairperson, National Commission for Women.

The number of women in Parliament now is a dismal 74 but this does not mean that women's issues can be deprioritised once elections are done and dusted. As the last election showed, the vote of any group, leave alone one as disparate as women, cannot be taken for granted. Parties must redeem their manifesto promises without delay. Can they take their own time to fulfill pledges even as women increasingly use the electoral process to voice expectations? The writing on the wall is clear. Today, the winnability of even the most popular candidates rides on their approval rating among women. A lot has been done, to the credit of all parties, but a lot more needs to be done and women cannot be relegated to being just valuable voters at election time.

The views expressed are personal

## Ismail Kadare: A different dissident

Ismail Kadare, the Albanian author who defied the Communist regime in the small Balkan nation, died on July 1. Although Kadare belongs to the illustrious group of dissidents and critics of an omnipotent State, he also seems to differ from them in his relationship with power and in the way his stories are organised. In the works of famous dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Milan Kundera or Ivan Klima, all from former Communist countries, the stories focus on how the intimate lives of ordinary people are crushed by power. In Kadare's stories, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong and Albania's Enver Hoxha take centre-stage, and the workings of totalitarian power are seen from close quarters.

In his last published novel, *A Dictator Calls*, Stalin makes a telephone call to Russian author Boris Pasternak and asks him about Osip Mandelstam, a poet and one of the early victims of Stalin's political persecution. Pasternak answers: "We're different. Comrade Stalin", Kadare says, this is often cited as proof that Pasternak abandoned his friend. Kadare also points to a writer who acts as a dissident in public and submits to authority in private.

The call lasted only for three minutes. Kadare was obsessed with this anecdote from Soviet literary history. Mandelstam was arrested for writing *The Stalin Epigram* or *The Kremlin Mountaineer*, a poem critical of Stalin.

Kadare asks: "Why did Stalin make a phone call, and why was Pasternak confused... What did the poet and the tyrant expect from each other, did they have

something to hide and were they both afraid of what they were hiding?" Stalin never tells Pasternak the reason for Mandelstam's arrest, but only wants to hear his opinion. The three people involved — Mandelstam, Pasternak and Stalin — become the central figures in his story.

Different versions of the telephone call constitute the core of the narrative. However, what is certain is that Mandelstam was interrogated, and there is also proof of torture before death. Kadare referred to the works of Izzı Vishnevsky, Stalin, and Pasternak, which provided him with different versions of the call. Kadare himself provides 13 versions and ponders on the turbulent relation between authority and literature, therein giving insight into defiance and subjugation.

More than the "unknowability" of the truth, the novel's narrative is about the unreliability of the testimony from the archives of the regime. Totalitarian regimes spread lies in the form of "truthful" versions. The relationship between Kadare and Hoxha is reflected in an interspersed manner. What would the regime in Albania or North Korea have done with Mandelstam? Kadare says they would have put a bullet in his head, and that would have been the end of it. From Hoxha's point of view, says Kadare, the Soviet state proved that it was cruel, not because it treated the poet badly, but because it was too genteel with him.

The narrator in *A Dictator Calls* bears a strong resemblance to Kadare. Like him, the narrator leaves Tirana and goes to Moscow to study briefly at the Gorky Insti-



The narrator in *A Dictator Calls* bears a strong resemblance to Ismail Kadare

tute, returns to Albania and comes to terms with Hoxha's regime.

In an interview, Kadare explained what it means to be a dissident, and whether he was one. He said, "In the classical sense, a dissident is a person who is openly politically active against a regime and may end up in prison. In this sense, I was not a dissident. I don't think there were any dissident Albanian writers who openly spoke out against the Communist regime. It was so cruel that they would have been executed on the spot for it." While he admitted that he was never a dissident like Vaclav Havel or Solzhenitsyn, he talked about silent resistance, i.e., resistance through literature and art.

It is perhaps a Western liberal obsession to see Communist-country writers from a dissident-collaborator binary. In Albania, Kadare was confronted with a different and unique post-war context, not comparable to that of other socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. He was born in 1936 and grew up in affluent circumstances. He was seven years old when the

Germans occupied Albania and just nine at the end of World War II. He belonged to the new generation of Albanians who benefited from modernisation after the war. As a teenager, he was inspired by communist ideals, and there were great expectations about Hoxha's "modernising regime".

The narrator in *A Dictator Calls* says that he remembers everything from his Moscow years. But there was one thing he was forbidden to remember. That was Pasternak. Kadare had expected to win a Literature Nobel and identify himself with Pasternak's eventual fate. A Nobel would have put him in just as dangerous a position as Pasternak's when his win enraged the Soviet Communist Party. Hoxha's regime would have tortured him, then. Writers subjugated by power enter the virtual zone of death while those who defy like Mandelstam, become immortals, Kadare had once said.

Damodar Prasad is a media researcher and writer. The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY LETTERS

## Strengthening soft power

This is with reference to 'Soft power options to win and retain friends' by Janmejaya Sinha (June 30). India is extending its soft power globally, however it needs further strengthening. Fixing issues with education, health care, and strengthening R&D can help in further enhancing India's soft power.

Ravinder Parekh

## Prohibition is not the answer to tragedies

This is with reference to 'Claims to Prohibition is immoral, ahistoric' by Karan Thapar (June 30). Prohibition is no solution for the tragic deaths. Instead, the government should make safe liquor available at reasonable prices to prevent such tragedies in future.

Anuradha Bisaria

## Clubs must move past colonial hangover

This is with reference to 'Colonial clubs and the fetish about dress code' by Pavan K Varma (June 30). Clubs must move past this colonial hangover. They must ensure inclusion of citizens wearing traditional attires.

Sriram Bhatt

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)



Fifth  
COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH  
Twitter @tavleen\_singh

# We need real heroes

IN THE week just ended, we saw the heights to which India can reach as well as the depths to which it can sink. When it comes to reaching seemingly impossible heights, it is the Indian cricket team that takes first prize and the ecstatic welcome that they got on returning home was proof that most Indians see this. In a country that is badly in need of real heroes, they have shown that they are those real heroes.

I was in Mumbai on the rainy evening when they drove to Wankhede Stadium on the roof of a bus and was astounded by the thousands of people who were ready to wait for hours in the rain just to catch a glimpse of the team. The more adventurous hung from trees to take pictures on their phones. The less adventurous lined the route, and waved and cheered as the bus made its way to the stadium. The only annoying thing for me personally was that amid the players stood cricketers officials who had no business to be there. It reminded me of those times when Indian teams that went to the Olympics had more officials in them than athletes.

Inside Wankhede Stadium, there were thousands more people who had waited all day for the privilege of seeing the team take their victory lap. It was as if they believed it was their duty to be there for them because for one moment, they had proved that Indians can be the champions of the world. No political leader, in all the years that I have covered politics, has received the sort of welcome that was accorded the Indian cricket team. Not just in Mumbai but everywhere they went. Could it be because we all know that our political leaders have in some fundamental way failed us and India? They are elected to govern on our behalf and governance appears to be the one thing that they are bad at, as became evident in Hathras last week.

What happened would never have happened if there was minimal governance and minimal administrative competence. After more than 120 people, mostly women, were stampeded to death, questions have begun to be asked about how a gathering of this size was allowed at all. Where were the police when the fake messiah fled in his convoy as soon as the stampede began? Where were the arrangements for the medical treatment of the injured? When the questions began, the police arrested six people who worked for Bhole Baba or Suraj Pal, as he was called before he started pretending to be a messenger of God. But when the police filed charges, they did not mention the name of this fraud who had convinced those of blind faith that there were healing properties in the dirt left behind by his cavalcade.

The messenger of God had vanished till the time of writing this. The police claim that they have searched his many, many palatial ashrams and there is no sign of him. But from his unknown hideout, he sent a message saying that the stampede had been caused as part of a conspiracy against him. His lawyer told TV reporters that he was in touch with Bhole Baba and had been informed that if he was needed for questioning, he would make himself available. Then this lawyer launched into a tirade about how the stampede was an attempt to discredit the Sanatan Dharma. Why do people not speak of the number of pilgrims who died in Mecca?

This was so stupid a remark that I would ignore it if similar conspiracy theories had not become the norm ever since Hindutva became an essential ingredient of Indian politics. Religiosity has become so deeply entangled with politics today that supposedly 'secular' politicians go out of their way to display how devout they are. What used to be private visits to temples and other places of worship are now public events with TV cameras nearly always present when our political leaders say their prayers.

The danger of this kind of religiosity becomes evident only when there is a tragedy like the one in Hathras. Bhole Baba appears to be a man with powerful political connections. Most religious preachers have political connections, and most politicians have a deep fascination with preachers. There used to be a Baba who blessed his followers by kicking them on the head and I remember that many political leaders flocked to him for this blessing. So, who can blame desperately poor, illiterate women from putting their faith in a man like Bhole Baba?

It is not false prophets we need to worry about, but political leaders who have brought such religiosity into their politics that it is often hard to tell whether they want to be preachers or politicians. In doing this, they have harmed not just the country but themselves because they have lost the trust of ordinary Indians who long to see heroes in their leaders. The political landscape is so bereft of heroes now that people seek them elsewhere and end up in the toils of fake gurus.

The Indian cricket team more than deserves the euphoric welcome they got in Mumbai last week. They are shining stars in a bleak and difficult time. And it was wonderful to witness thousands of people come out that rainy evening to show them adulation and love.

# Prepare for more of the same

THE FIRST regular business days of the Parliament Session confirmed my suspicions. Apparently, nothing has changed as far as the government of Mr Narendra Modi is concerned. Apart from the visible signals (*read: 'What has changed? Apparently nothing', The Indian Express, June 30, 2024*), it is evident that Mr Modi has firmly decreed that the pre-election claims, boasts, policies, programmes, style, demeanour, vendetta et al will be defended, reiterated and continued.

The tragedy is that Mr Modi's decree seemed to prevail within both Houses of Parliament too. By convention, the two Houses of Parliament are run by *consensus*, not by the rule of the majority. A minor question like 'shall we avoid the lunch break and continue the proceedings in the House today' has to be resolved not by the fiat of the Presiding Officer or by the majority of the House, but by *consensus*. Nevertheless, for example, the two Presiding Officers rejected adjournment motions supported by hundreds of MPs to discuss the megascandal surrounding the examinations of the National Testing Agency. It was reminiscent of the past five years. Sad.

Clearly, the score of 240 'wins' for the BJP and 292 'wins' for the NDA in a Lok Sabha of 543 members has not deterred Mr Modi. What about the MPs? Four days are too few to arrive at a definite conclusion, but there are preliminary indications.

■ NDA/BJP MPs from Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand are running scared because there is a state election around the corner, and they fear the worst. The slow implosion of the Mahayuti government in Maharashtra; the even-steven result in Haryana (5 Congress, 5 BJP); and the thumping judgement of the Jharkhand High Court granting bail to Mr Hemant Soren have put a new wind in the sails of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc in the three states.

■ The NDA/BJP suffered setbacks in Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Karnataka but, fortunately, there is

no state election immediately. ■ The NDA/BJP was vanquished in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. ■ NDA/BJP MPs from Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Gujarat wore broad smiles on their faces but they are embarrassed by the 'coalition' tag and uncertain about the longevity of the alliance.

## MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

The BJP knows that it has a mountain to climb before it can claim to be an invincible party. Likewise, the Congress too has a mountain to climb; in fact, a taller mountain. I may point out that the Congress won the bulk of its 99+2 seats in nine states; in nine other states with 170 seats, the Congress won just four; and the Congress did not contest 215 seats (the allied parties contested them). While the Congress and the I.N.D.I.A. bloc constitute a formidable Opposition, they are not in a position to defeat the government.

The keys to the kingdom are in the hands of the TDP (16 MPs) and JD-U (12 MPs). Both will bide their time. Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them. Both will await the outcome of the state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand that are due in a few months.

## GUESSES ON POLICIES

What does the uncertain political situation mean for economic policies? I may hazard some guesses:

1. The government will continue to be in denial mode: they will deny widespread unemployment, high inflation in wage goods (especially food articles), stagnant wages/income among the 'non-regular' and 'casual' workers, entrenched poverty among the bottom 20 per cent of the population, and extreme inequality. Hence, there will not be a radical overhaul or re-set of the current economic policies.

2. The government will continue to invest in infrastructure and vanity projects. While there are economic benefits of government expenditure on infrastructure, absent private investment, the growth rate will be moderate. It will be boosted by dubious statistics.

3. The government will continue to follow the South Korea model of *chaebol*-led growth. Monopolies and oligopolies will flourish in key sectors. Consequently, MSMEs will languish; job creation will be sluggish. Semi-educated and unskilled youth — millions of such youth will enter the job market every year — will be the worst sufferers.

4. The third term of a government under an ageing leader will not be able to attract the talent that can bring about a radical transformation of key sectors like education, healthcare, environment and climate change, agriculture and forestry, and science and R & D.

Mr Narendra Modi believes in more of the same. His speeches in Parliament promised as much. So, prepare for more of the same.

## Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM  
Website: pchidambaram.in  
Twitter @Pchidambaram\_IN

The keys to the kingdom are in the hands of the TDP (16 MPs) and JD-U (12 MPs). Both will bide their time. Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them. Both will await the outcome of the state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand that are due in a few months

Both will bide their time. Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them.

Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them. Both will await the outcome of the state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand that are due in a few months

## MR MODI'S INTENTIONS

The first debate in both Houses of Parliament and the decisions taken outside Parliament made the intentions — and direction — of the government clear: the country will continue to be ruled by the decree of one person; the two cru-

# More to digitality inequality than access to phones

## Dalitality

MAYUKH DEVDAS

NICHOLAS DIRKS is quoted as famously saying, "When thinking of India, it is hard not to think of caste." No historical comparison exists for this evil social phenomenon's unique ability to survive across centuries, cultures, kingdoms, administrations, institutions, and borders. Caste dynamics in contemporary India have infiltrated the digital domain. Scholars Jan Van Dijk and K Hacker have rightly predicted that "preventing structural inequalities in the digital domain would be the fundamental task of the future society".

Although caste issues in the digital sphere have been extensively studied, the scope of most studies remains limited to access issues (first stage of digital divide) between the upper-caste and Dalits. They are yet to fully incorporate the second (digital skills and usage) and third (empowerment) stages into the framework of digital inequality issues. Although digital access in India is still a salient concern, the scope of digital inequality aspects, including access issues, should be broadened to gain a clearer understanding of the digital caste inequality situation in India.

I conducted digital sociological research in Kerala, interviewing 45 students from five types of schools (rural government, urban government, CBSE, international, and vocational higher secondary) who belong to three caste groups. While upper-caste students have access to better technology, including high-end smartphones, tablets, and laptops, the access of Dalits, who are mostly from poorer backgrounds, is limited to lower-quality smartphones, considered as 'under-connected' by digital inequality scholars like Vikki Katz.

The access to a secondary device and Wi-Fi connectivity increases digital autonomy and motivates students to incorporate technology into their daily learning and capital-enhancing activities. Furthermore, while Dalits are often confined to unfiltered, unsupervised online content produced for mass consumption, upper-caste students from middle- and upper-middle-class families have access to high-quality, paid online resources for their learning.

Apart from access, digital inequality stems from various factors, including family income, occupation, education, English language proficiency, neighbourhood, and numerous other sociocultural factors. For instance, English language proficiency poses a significant challenge for Dalit students to search, navigate, filter, and locate information. It is becoming even more vital as digital learning transitions into AI and Language Learning Models (LLMs) that demands the ability to prompt and engage with these technologies.

Upper-caste parents, leveraging their higher education, occupational exposure, and social capital, encourage their children to utilise all resources, including digital ones, for their educational and career advancement. However, the majority of Dalit parents, who are involved in low-skilled, low-wage occupations, lack these exposures and are unable to transfer such digital capital to their children. Even though the rural-urban divide in digital and internet access is diminishing, new location-specific inequalities are emerging in the digital era. Upper-caste students, who generally hail from better neighbourhoods, are exposed to the possibilities of digital technology and the importance of incorporating it into learning. In contrast, Dalit students, historically confined to poorer neighbourhoods in rural and urban areas, do not receive such inputs.

The introduction of feedback loops and recommendation algorithms is exacerbating digital inequality. In particular, the digital usage of students, mostly Dalits, who share their devices with their families, is largely impacted by their family's digital choices. This means that the educational disparities emerging from the advent of technologies will compound the existing ones.

This could result in an increasing divide between Dalits and the upper castes in terms of social advancement, educational development, economic advancement, power sharing, and political participation in future. However, these digital inequalities may remain purposefully unnoticed and unaddressed by focusing on closing gaps in digital token access, which has become the sole yardstick for measuring digital inequality.

Mayukh Devdas is a Ph.D. student in digital technology and its impact on caste-based educational disparities at the University of Glasgow. Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality, and has returned to Harvard University

## She SAID

ANGELICA ARIBAM

IT IS that time of the year when millions of students across the country are picking institutions and courses they want to pursue. According to AISHE 2020-2021, the total enrolment of women in higher education is around 49%, almost on a par with men. The Ministry of Education data further indicates that female Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has overtaken male GER since 2017-18. These numbers certainly gladden the heart, especially given that women were not allowed admission to most higher educational institutions almost a century ago.

It is common knowledge that girls' education was one of the major areas of focus in the 19th century for social reformers as well as the British government. One would assume that the ripple effect would have led to the entry of women into higher education. But it wasn't as simple as that. Women who wanted to pursue higher education were expected to study in women's colleges, which scarcely existed, and most reputed universities and colleges didn't enrol women students. The doors of some of these institutions opened only due to the sheer determination of the women who wanted to study there.

In my research for a book on women in India's Constituent Assembly, I came across some interesting anecdotes about the struggles and challenges these women leaders endured in their pursuit of higher education. Let me share some examples.

## A LETTER TO TAGORE

Established in 1901, Tagore's residential school at Santiniketan had gained a high status in society. Building on that premise, a university called Visva-Bharati was established in 1921. It was a strictly male environment and didn't have provisions for female students. Undeterred by this technicality, a spirited teenager Malati Choudhury, who later became a famous social worker, wanted to study there.

She directly wrote to Tagore, a family friend, requesting admission to the institute. This unprecedented plea made Tagore think. He then decided to open a girls' hostel to accommodate female students and asked Malati's mother to be the superintendent of the hostel. She, of

# Women who paved the path in higher education



While Malati Choudhury (left) studied at Visva-Bharati University, Leela Roy got a degree at the University of Dhaka. Wikipedia

course, accepted the offer and Malati's desire to study at Santiniketan led to the entry of the first girls' batch of 1921-22.

Another woman revolutionary, Leela Roy wanted to pursue a Master's degree from the University of Dhaka, established in July 1921, but it was open only to male students. Determined to secure admission, Leela petitioned the university authorities. Her request put the administration in a dilemma — how would a lone woman adjust on a campus of 800-odd men. They denied her plea, which then stirred her activist spirit. She went to Vice-Chancellor P J Hartog and demanded an environment for co-education. Impressed by Leela's persistence, he set up evening classes for her and three other young women who had made similar requests to the authorities.

In western India, Hansa Mehta was one of the first women enrolled in Baroda College (now known as the Maharaja Sayajirao University), between 1913 and 1917. Her father was a professor who taught there, a factor that could have aided in breaking the barrier to admit Hansa and the two other women students. Still, the college atmosphere was hostile and unfriendly towards the young women, as the male students and faculty weren't used to having women students around. The women had to self-censor in terms of appearance and mannerisms throughout their time there.

A similar ordeal was faced by Sucheta Kriplani, the first woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, during her student years at St Stephen's College, Delhi. The only woman in the class of Master's students, she was picked on by her male classmates. The titters died down when she outscored

them on all but one paper. She wrote in her autobiography, "I heaved a sigh of relief. I had no longer to bother about the sniggering of the boys. My reputation in St. Stephen's was established."

## FIRST DALIT WOMEN TO GO TO COLLEGE

It wasn't easy being women in these highly masculine and patriarchal set-ups. Additionally, one must also recognise the intersectionality of the challenges faced by women from marginalised communities. Being one of the first Dalit women to go to college in Cochin, Dakshayani Velayudhan faced discrimination not just from her peers but also from her teachers. A student of BSc Chemistry, she had to learn crucial practical experiments from afar because one of the upper-caste teachers did not show her any of them. She graduated in 1935 in the second division.

Today, the barriers to accessing education for women students have diminished significantly. Much of this credit goes to women leaders from our history who used their grit and relative privilege to open the door for generations of women who came after them. Hopefully, their stories will motivate our youth to do away with the residual patriarchy that still lurks in the hallways of our higher educational institutions. After all, sometimes it only takes one person to change the course of history.

Angelica Aribam is a political activist and the lead author of the book, 'The Fifteen: The Lives and Times of the Women in India's Constituent Assembly'

## Life & WORK OPSINGH



THE STAMPEDE in Hathras on June 2 is another in a long line of tragedies manufactured by a lack of sense for science. I cannot speak with authority on what occurred in Hathras on the day of the stampede; a probe is underway, hopefully, those responsible will be held to account. But I suspect a few factors were at play — overcrowding, religious fervour and mismanagement. A *satsang* organised by Suraj Pal alias Bhole Baba, attended by scores of devotees, one of many all over the country on any given day, turned ugly, claiming 121 lives. That this was a private event should not have mattered.

Regardless of whether a gathering is private or public, certain protocols have to be

# Lessons from Hathras

adhered to. These standard operating procedures (SOPs) must not be relaxed for any reason or person. The organiser has to approach the police station concerned for permission and provide a multitude of details. The police allow or reject the application based on their assessment — which is based on credible information or "intelligence".

From my understanding, people from all over started arriving at the venue three to four days before D-Day. Local intelligence should have been aware of this. The foresight to have a comprehensive plan to tackle crowds, which ultimately ended up being as big as 2.5 lakh people, was missing.

Although not comparable with the Hathras mishap, given the difference in scale, in my time as the head of the police force (SSP) at Kumbh Mela in 1993-1994, this was my takeaway: strategy, not num-

bers, is the key. Instead of deploying thousands of officers, we have to learn how to strategically place much fewer in the right spots with the right considerations in mind.

In the event of a private gathering, the organiser has to be involved in the security planning. Bhole Baba's organisation had 12,000 *sewadars* (volunteers) on the ground, but they were not structured workers with fixed responsibilities. The police cannot provide thousands of personnel on end for the innumerable gatherings that happen across India. Given that, there should be a synergy between organisers and the police force.

India is a religious country. In UP, you have thousands of such processions in any given area every year. The police are hard-pressed to manage such crowds. It is a two-fold challenge. One, Indians do not take well to people interfering with faith and religion.

Second, private organisers have a lot to gain, unfortunately, from desperate people. The nexus between faith and money created and fuelled by godmen, and other political and cultural leaders complicates the process.

Organisers tend to make choices that align with profit more than safety, and SOPs are hard to adhere to, given the tension between faith and procedure. In my opinion, the nature of a gathering and how to manage it with the requisite sensitivity and due diligence should be formalised and introduced into the SOP.

This is what authorities have always done — adapting and learning from things that went wrong. The 1954 Kumbh was another dark chapter. From there, lessons learnt led to the reframing of policies and that process has never stopped. When I was

managing Kumbh, we had volunteers down in the riverbed to ensure no devotee was taking a dip longer than 40 seconds so that there was no pile-up behind and any potential for a catastrophe.

Finally, technology has to be roped in. We live in the age of social media, crowds are easier to gather now than ever before. The police cannot wish technology away. But they can use it to their advantage. When an Integrated Command and Control Centre was started in Uttar Pradesh, we started using it to anticipate crowd density using AI and used CCTV's to our advantage. It aided our process. No policeman can afford to turn away from technology. Anticipating events is our job. Adapting is not optional.

The writer is former DGP, UP police, and was SSP at Kumbh Mela (1993-1994) (As told to Sukhmani Malik)

# Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 7, 2024



Of the eight Signature Series, events in the recently concluded PGA Tour season, Scheffler teed it up seven times

INSTAGRAM

## Scheffler special

Scottie Scheffler's complete dominance on the PGA Tour is almost tiger-esque

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

**THIS IS GETTING** a bit ridiculous: you can't really talk about the level of competition — depth of field — on the PGA Tour with a straight face anymore. Not that you're wrong: there have never been more players on that tour who are capable of having a good week and winning. Except that no matter which player makes a run for it, he almost always comes up short of one guy who can do no wrong, one bloke who is just in a different league from everyone else.

In fact, if Scottie Scheffler is there on the starting grid for the race, then it's more than likely that he's going to lap the field. Consider these gobs-macking stats: of the eight Signature Series, events in the recently concluded PGA Tour season, Scheffler teed it up seven times. And the world number one won four of those events: the Arnold Palmer Invitational, the RBC Heritage, the Memorial, and finally, last month's Travelers Championship. In the three events that he didn't win, Scheffler finished tied fifth (The Sentry), tied-sixth (AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am), and tied-10th (Genesis Invitational).

In case you missed the memo, the Signature Series is a set of limited-field events on the PGA Tour, which have bigger purses (\$20 million) and offer more FedExCup points to the players. The field is limited to 70-80 players and comprises top performers from the previous season and the current season. Four of these events don't have a cut: no coincidence since the entire raison d'être for the series' conception was for the PGA Tour to respond to the challenge posed by the LIV Golf Tour.

But I digress. Scheffler's win ratio in these events was 57%, and, in case you're wondering, he had other wins as well. There was a Major: he donned the Green Jacket at the 2024 Masters Tournament and an unofficial Major — the Players' Championship to boot. That's Scheffler's record in just the last four months; it's more than most of his peers will win in their entire careers and is almost enough to get a player into the Hall of Fame. The last player to win six events before July was Arnold Palmer in the 1960s. You see what I'm getting at...we're running out of things to say about Scottie Scheffler, the golf media is.

The closest someone got to Scheffler was Tom Kim. Kim and Scheffler beat the field by two strokes at the Travelers Championship, which in itself is rare these days, and Scheffler got the better of Kim on the first playoff hole. The other newsmaker at The Traveler's Championship was long hitter Cameron Young. On the penultimate day of the event, Young made seven birdies and two eagles at TPC River Highlands to shoot a historic 11-under 59. The ironic bit about Young's performance was how he wasn't quite 'feeling it,' before he teed off. "Didn't feel particularly awesome," Young said of his pre-round warm-up. "I chunked a few less on the range than I did yesterday." Now pros don't chunk it, so it's a fair conjecture that something was badly off with Young's game. But whatever it was sorted itself out by the time he made his way to the first tee. Young birdied the first two holes and then stuck a pitching wedge for a gimme Eagle on the third and then added another birdie at the 4th to start five under through four holes. And that pretty much set the tone for the day. Young shot a four-under 66 on the final day to finish tied-ninth for the event.

**If Scottie Scheffler is there on the starting grid for the race, then it's more than likely he's going to lap the field**

Akshay Bhatia, the Indian-origin player has been on a roll ever since he won the Valero Texas Open in May this year for his second PGA Tour victory in a playoff with Denny McCarthy. Both of Bhatia's wins have come in playoffs, suggesting that the young player has the mental strength to back up his extraordinary action through the ball. Bhatia is amongst that crop of young players who hold nothing back as they swing through the golf ball. Bhatia finished tied fifth at the Travelers Championship and continued in the same stride at next week's Rocket Mortgage Classic. Bhatia shot an eight-under to lead the field after the first round and was involved in an exciting tussle with English player Aaron Rai over the weekend. Just when it looked like Bhatia had finally put one past Rai, he missed a putt on the 72nd hole to tie 2021 champion Cam Davis, who had stealthily come out of nowhere to take the clubhouse lead. Davis, who won the event in a three-way playoff in 2021, would not have to go to the trouble on this occasion. The heartbreak for Bhatia will hopefully add to the young player's mettle, and remind him that on the PGA Tour, it's not over until it's over. Even Scheffler would agree.

*A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game*

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The keys to the kingdom are in the hands of the TDP (16 MPs) and JD-U (12 MPs). Both will bide their time. Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them. Both will await the outcome of the state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand that are due in a few months

**THE FIRST REGULAR** business days of the Parliament Session confirmed my suspicions. Apparently, nothing has changed as far as the government of Mr Narendra Modi is concerned. Apart from the visible signals (read: 'What has changed? Apparently nothing', *The Indian Express*, June 30, 2024), it is evident that Mr Modi has firmly decreed that the pre-election claims, boasts, policies, programmes, style, demeanour, vendetta et al will be defended, reiterated and continued.

The tragedy is that Mr Modi's decree seemed to prevail within both Houses of Parliament too.

By convention, the two Houses of Parliament are run by *consensus*, not by the rule of the majority. A minor question like 'shall we avoid the lunch break and continue the proceedings in the House today' has to be resolved not by the fiat of the Presiding Officer or by the majority of the House, but by *consensus*. Nevertheless, for example, the two Presiding Officers rejected adjournment motions supported by hundreds of MPs to discuss the mega-scandal surrounding the examinations of the National Testing Agency. It was reminiscent of the past five years. Sad.

Mr Modi's intentions

The first debate in both Houses of Parliament and the decisions taken outside Parliament made the intentions — and direction — of the government clear: the country will continue to be ruled by the decree of one person; the two crucial allies (TDP and JD-U) and the other minor allies will have no role except to cheer from the Treasury Benches; Mr Modi will not yield any space to his own ministers or to the Leaders of the Opposition in the two Houses; that the government will not accept any mistake on its part; that blame for all the deficiencies of the *present* government will be laid at the door of *past* governments beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru; that BJP's spokespersons will con-



PM Narendra Modi in Parliament

## Prepare for more of the same

tinue to be aggressive and obnoxious; that the paid trolls will continue to be paid (may be a little more?) to be more active; and no restraints will be placed on the investigative agencies who will continue to do the bidding of the government.

Clearly, the score of 240 'wins' for the BJP and 292 'wins' for the NDA in a Lok Sabha of 543 members has not deterred Mr Modi. What about the MPs? Four days are too few to arrive at a definite conclusion, but there are preliminary indications.

■ **NDA/BJP** MPs from Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand are running scared because there is a state election around the corner, and they fear the worst. The slow implosion of the *Mahayuti* government in Maharashtra; the even-steven result in Haryana (5 Congress, 5 BJP); and the thumping judgement of the Jharkhand High Court granting bail to Mr Hemant Soren have put a new wind in the sails of the INDIA bloc in the three states.

■ **The NDA/BJP** suffered setbacks in Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Karnataka but, fortunately, there is no state election immediately.

■ **The NDA/BJP** was vanquished in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

■ **NDA/BJP** MPs from Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Gujarat wore broad smiles on their faces but they are em-

barrassed by the 'coalition' tag and uncertain about the longevity of the alliance.

Mountain to climb

The BJP knows that it has a mountain to climb before it can claim to be an invincible party. Likewise, the Congress too has a mountain to climb; in fact, a taller mountain. I may point out that the Congress won the bulk of its 99+2 seats in nine states; in nine other states with 170 seats, the Congress won just four; and the Congress did not contest 215 seats (the allied parties contested them). While the Congress and the INDIA bloc constitute a formidable Opposition, they are not in a position to defeat the government.

The keys to the kingdom are in the hands of the TDP (16 MPs) and JD-U (12 MPs). Both will bide their time. Both will await the Budget. Both will keep up the demand for 'special category' status which they know Mr Modi will not give them. Both will await the outcome of the state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand that are due in a few months.

Guesses on policies

What does the uncertain political situation mean for economic policies? I may hazard some guesses:

1. The government will continue to be in denial mode: they will deny widespread unemployment, high inflation in wage goods (especially food articles), stagnant

wages/income among the 'non-regular' and 'casual' workers, entrenched poverty among the bottom 20% of the population, and extreme inequality. Hence, there will not be a radical overhaul or re-set of the current economic policies.

2. The government will continue to invest in infrastructure and vanity projects. While there are economic benefits of government expenditure on infrastructure, absent private investment, the growth rate will be moderate. It will be boosted by dubious statistics.

3. The government will continue to follow the South Korea model of *chaebol*-led growth. Monopolies and oligopolies will flourish in key sectors. Consequently, MSMEs will languish; job creation will be sluggish. Semi-educated and unskilled youth — millions of such youth will enter the job market every year — will be the worst sufferers.

4. The third term of a government under an ageing leader will not be able to attract the talent that can bring about a radical transformation of key sectors like education, healthcare, environment and climate change, agriculture and forestry, and science and R&D.

Mr Narendra Modi believes in more of the same. His speeches in Parliament promised as much. So, prepare for more of the same.

Website: [pchidambaram.in](http://pchidambaram.in)  
Twitter: @Pchidambaram\_IN

FIFTH COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH

## We need real heroes

**IN THE WEEK** just ended, we saw the heights to which India can reach as well as the depths to which it can sink. When it comes to reaching seemingly impossible heights, it is the Indian cricket team that takes first prize and the ecstatic welcome that they got on returning home was proof that most Indians see this.

In a country that is badly in need of real heroes, they have shown that they are those real heroes.

I was in Mumbai on the rainy evening when they drove to Wankhede Stadium on the roof of a bus and was astounded by the thousands of people who were ready to wait for hours in the rain just to catch a glimpse of the team. The more adventurous hung from trees to take pictures on their phones. The less adventurous lined the route, and waved and cheered as the bus made its way to the stadium. The only annoying thing for me personally was that amid the players stood cricketing officials who had no business to be there. It reminded me of those

times when Indian teams that went to the Olympics had more officials in them than athletes.

Inside Wankhede Stadium, there were thousands more people who had waited all day for the privilege of seeing the team take their victory lap. It was as if they believed it was their duty to be there for them because for one moment, they had proved that Indians can be the champions of the world. No political leader, in all the years that I have covered politics, has received the sort of welcome that was accorded the Indian cricket team.

Not just in Mumbai but everywhere they went. Could it be because we all know that our political leaders have in some fundamental way failed us and India? They are elected to govern on our behalf and governance appears to be the one thing that they are bad at, as became evident in Hathras last week.

What happened would never have happened if there was minimal governance and minimal administrative competence. After more than 120 people, mostly women, were stampeded to death, questions have begun to be asked about how a gathering of this size was allowed at all. Where were the police when the fake messiah fled in his convoy as soon as the stampede began? Where were the arrangements for the medical treatment of the injured?

When the questions began, the police arrested six people who worked for Bhole Baba or Suraj Pal, as he was

called before he started pretending to be a messenger of God. But when the police filed charges, they did not mention the name of this fraud who had convinced those of blind faith that there were healing properties in the dirt left behind by his cavalcade.

The messenger of God had vanished till the time of writing this.

The police claim that they have searched his many, many palatial *ashrams* and there is no sign of him. But from his unknown hideout, he sent a message saying that the stampede had been caused as part of a conspiracy against him.

His lawyer told TV reporters that he was in touch with Bhole Baba and had been informed that if he was needed for questioning, he would make himself available. Then this lawyer launched into a tirade about how the stampede was an attempt to discredit the *Sanatan Dharma*. Why do people not speak of the number of pilgrims who died in Mecca?

This was so stupid a remark that I would ignore it if similar conspiracy theories had not become the norm ever since Hindutva became an essential ingredient of Indian politics. Religiosity has become so deeply entangled with politics today that supposedly 'secular' politicians go out of their way to display how devout they are.

What used to be private visits to temples and other places of worship are now public events with TV cameras nearly always present when our

political leaders say their prayers.

The danger of this kind of religiosity becomes evident only when there is a tragedy like the one in Hathras.

Bhole Baba appears to be a man with powerful political connections. Most religious preachers have political connections, and most politicians have a deep fascination with preachers. There used to be a Baba who blessed his followers by kicking them on the head and I remember that many political leaders flocked to him for this blessing.

So, who can blame desperately poor, illiterate women from putting their faith in a man like Bhole Baba?

It is not false prophets we need to worry about, but political leaders who have brought such religiosity into their politics that it is often hard to tell whether they want to be preachers or politicians. In doing this, they have harmed not just the country but themselves because they have lost the trust of ordinary Indians who long to see heroes in their leaders.

The political landscape is so bereft of heroes now that people seek them elsewhere and end up in the toils of fake *gurus*.

The Indian cricket team more than deserves the euphoric welcome they got in Mumbai last week. They are shining stars in a bleak and difficult time. And it was wonderful to witness thousands of people come out that rainy evening to show them adulation and love.

ODD &amp; EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE





The idea that you're successful because you are smart and hardworking is pernicious and wrong, because it means everyone who is unsuccessful is stupid and lazy

Minouche Shafik

## COST OF LIVING AND THE RISING PRICE OF POLITICAL SURVIVAL

X-PM is ex-PM! She was UK's prime minister for 49 days and lost from a Brexit-backing seat that voted Conservative for 50 years—the first former PM to be defeated in 90 years. For sure, Liz Truss cannot be held solely responsible for the post-Brexit mess in the British economy. But her rise and fall—that included a disastrous mini-budget and the coining of the phrase 'moron-risk premium' in financial markets—will represent a tipping point in British politics. The spectacular 412-seat victory of the Labour Party, nuanced in expression across cultural geographies, saw an astonishing number of cabinet ministers ousted.

Voters in both Dover and Calais are angry. Last week, voters in France, angered by rising prices of food, energy, fuel, rent and water, drove the centrist front of Emmanuel Macron out of the race as they gravitated towards the far-right National Rally led by Marine Le Pen and to the Left. The allure: promises to tax billionaires, cut gasoline taxes, higher wages and early retirement. In desperation, the centrists are courting the Left, pulling out candidates with Prime Minister Gabriel Attal urging voters that "not a single vote" must go to the far right in the second round. The outcomes in France and the UK are a sequel to the European parliament polls where far-right parties cornered a fourth of the 720 seats.

Globally, voter distrust and anger is fuelled by the many manifestations of the two I's—immigration and inflation. Parties on the far right and far left are selling one as the cause of the other. Consider the main issues. In the UK, the angst is about healthcare, inflation, economy, immigration and housing. In France, the big-ticket issues are purchasing power, inequality, inflation and, of course, immigration.

Across the Atlantic Ocean in Canada, headed for polls next year, the ruling Liberals suffered a shock 590-vote defeat in a byelection for a traditionally conservative seat. The reasons: cost of living, inflation, high home prices and surging immigration. In the US, which will vote in November, inflation is the top concern for over half the voters, followed by the economy, homelessness, federal debt, immigration, drug use and social security.

Underlying public anger is the rise in costs. Any claim of falling inflation is met with disbelief. After all, while the rate of price rise is slowing, bazaar prices haven't come down. And that is the judgement which matters in politics. The impact of inflation varies across sectors—on large corporations and small enterprises, and between advanced and emerging economies. At a micro and individual level, this experiential reality is visibly K-shaped, where those with resources can harvest returns and those without capital feeling poorer and angrier.

This is illuminated by a PEW survey that found a majority of people in 14 major economies believed their economy was doing rather poorly. The US economy, with unemployment at a 50-year low, is a striking example of the experiential divide. A recent poll found that 55 percent of Americans believed the US economy was shrinking and 56 percent thought it was in recession; 49 percent believed unemployment was at a 50-year high.

Take the case of the Indian economy. It is the fastest growing large economy; its stock indices are at all-time highs, its tax revenues are rising and, as per the government, over 250 million have been lifted out of multidimensional poverty. The latest GDP data shows the economy grew at 8.2 percent but private final consumption grew at 4 percent. The gap reflects the impact of inflation—food price inflation has persisted above 8 percent. The reality of pain in an uneven economy and its consequence was audible in the election rhetoric and results.

Electoral outcomes influence policy. Last month, Maharashtra—which is heading for polls in October—announced a new cash transfer scheme of ₹1,500 a month to women. It now joins 10 other states—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, Himachal Delhi, Punjab and Telangana—with a similar programme. It bears mention that India runs the largest free food programme, for 813 million, the largest healthcare insurance, for 500 million, the largest farmer income support scheme and a rural employment guarantee scheme with over 247 million enrolled.

India is by no means an outlier in its welfare spending. Data published by the OECD shows countries have ramped up subsidies across a range of sectors—most notably, over \$850 billion for agriculture and nearly \$1.5 trillion in support measures for fossil fuels. The rising cost of living has also forced emerging economies to follow suit pushing up deficits and debt. Global government debt is currently over \$92 trillion, or nine-tenths of global GDP. Chronic fiscal deficits and debt represent misalignment of costs and incentives.

Later this month, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present Budget 2024-25. The government is expected to respond to the echoes of the 2024 verdict. The questions facing the scripters of the budget are the following. What is the total extent of the welfare net, states plus the Centre? Is the expansion of welfare sustainable? Do the interventions address asymmetries of access and opportunity or serve as political band-aids?

The debate is not whether subsidies and cash transfers are necessary, but whether they empower the people or enfeeble them.

### QUOTE CORNER



Let the president violate the law, let him exploit the trappings of his office for personal gain... Because if he knew that he may one day face liability, he might not be as bold and fearless as we would like him to be. That is the majority's message today... With fear for our democracy, I dissent.

**Sonia Sotomayor**, US Supreme Court justice who dissented against the decision to grant Donald Trump limited immunity for acts when he was president

We do not trust the state... The accused was not taken to hospital because he is from the Kuki community. So sad! We direct him to be examined now.

**J B Pardiwala and Ujjal Bhuyan**, Indian Supreme Court justices, on a plea from Lunghongam Haokip that he was denied hospital visit by Manipur jail authorities despite chronic illnesses

The heart is always more important than the legs. We are going to enjoy, celebrate, but calmly, because in a few days we have the semi-finals.

**Dani Olmo**, midfielder, goalscorer and man of the match in Spain's 2-1 extra-time win over Germany in the quarter-finals of Euro 2024

## TIME FOR MAXIMUM MODI, MINIMUM GOVT



### POWER & POLITICS

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

**P**OLITICIANS who show promise face a crisis of promise when they begin to slide on the delivery index. India's chutzpah chief Narendra Modi has been on the top of his game from 2014 till 2024. Poll verdicts that go from exhilaration to deceleration convey both warnings and reminders: mend or perish. Most importantly, the warnings are *vox populi* questions to winners and losers about promises made and forgotten. Under Modi, BJP did spring some surprises: it opened its account in Kerala and formed its first government in Odisha. Now his promoters, followers, friends and foes expect him to deliver at least on his word to sustain 'Modi ki guarantee', if not more. Since 2014, India has acquired a new image and meaning. It is one of the top five global economies and the fastest growing large one. It has made pioneering progress in technology. Its presence is mandatory at every diplomatic high table. To wipe the moss off the gloss, Modi must reacquire his mojo and majority.

First, no more new slogans *sans* substance. One of Modi's stellar achievements was to send the Indian psyche to rehab to cure its pseudo secularism. Modi's barmy army privately expects him to dilute his hard Hindutva crusade. It has delivered maximum electoral dividend. With more than half of India already saffronised, the PM should revisit his previous promises which he left trusted ministers and babus to implement. Swachh Bharat and 'Maximum governance and minimum government' would have been game-changers had they been implemented with commitment. The blame falls on the bureaucra-

cy, which refuses to change and respond to the needs of aspirational India. Unfortunately, he didn't or couldn't give it the attention and monitoring it deserved. Modi declared: "I believe government has no business to do business. The focus should be on minimum government, but maximum governance. For decades, we have had extraordinarily large governments while, ironically, the quality of governance has been quite poor. More attention has been paid to the size of the government, not so much to its quality."

Ten years later, his own government's size is bloating. Expenditure is rising faster than the GDP. Salaries and allowances are likely to increase from ₹2.80 lakh crore in 2023 to over ₹3 lakh crore next year. The number of sarkari employees will be up from 31 lakh to 35 lakh. Irony just died: India's mojo is maximum technology, but the government hires more and more people to do the same job. For example, the sanctioned strength of the direct tax department has climbed from 49,000 to 79,000 in two years. According to the latest budget documents, the number of officials dealing with indirect taxes will go up from 53,000 to 92,000. The family welfare ministry's employee count will rise from 20,000 to 28,000. But only 61 officials will be in R&D. The culture ministry has 10,000-plus staff, while the tourism department has only 583—any wonder it seems more like 'diva bhava' than 'atithi devo bhava'?

Modi's jumbo cabinet tradition, which started in his first term, continues in this coalition government. There are 30 cabinet ministers, five ministers of state with independent charge and 41 ministers of state. According to unofficial estimates, the monthly bill to maintain each minister, their staff and perks exceeds ₹1 crore. India has 53 ministries and around 80 departments. There is a

minister of industry, a minister of heavy industries and a minister of micro, small and medium enterprises; a minister for power and one for new and renewable energy; a minister for education and one for skill development.

Rajiv Gandhi tried to rationalise government by merging ministries: for example, railways, surface transport and civil aviation were merged as one. He had to dismantle his aggregator model under political compulsions. More that ministry numbers, the money and time splurged on keeping the system alive is the crisis. According to the department of personnel, each cabinet minister is entitled to a personal staff of 15—a private secretary, additional secretary, assistant private secretary, first personal secretary, second personal secretary, Hindi stenographer, a clerk, a driver, an attendant and four peons. If a cabinet minister holds two or three portfolios, they can double or triple staff numbers to create a mini empire with taxpayers' money.

An MoS with independent charge is entitled to an 11-member personal team. An MoS gets nine. In Modi's government, all five MoSes with independent charge have been given additional charge under a cabinet Minister. And 20 of the 41 MoSes have been allocated two or more departments—for example, Jitendra Singh holds two independent charges and four other portfolios. If he chooses, he can have an army of 60 personal staff. Hence, most ministers have at least 20-25 persons working in their various offices. This maximises not only peregrinations from between offices, but also delays decision making. The number of secretary-level officers has risen by almost 50 percent in the last decade.

Modi couldn't wield the broom in the dirty closets of the highly-hyped Swachh Bharat Mission. It became a photo op for

attention-addictive celebs and politicians. Modi chose rich and famous films stars, media barons, industrialists, civil society leaders and sports persons as ambassadors of Swachh Bharat. In association with various government agencies, they were expected to adopt a few neglected places and hold events to spread awareness. The funding was massive. The PM's objective was to erase the image of India as a subcontinent of squalor. But his chosen champions betrayed him; they lost interest, and so did the government. Modi failed to mobilise local bodies and elected representatives like municipal councillors, health and sanitary officials and involve the youth.

All municipal corporations comprise corruption caucuses. Some have higher budgets than a mid-level state. A nefarious nexus of sanitary inspectors, engineers, elected councillors and commissioners have converted cities into stinking slums. Indian rivers are sewage pits. Roads and houses are flooded during heavy rains. Airport roofs are collapsing, while airports, and bus and train stations are under water.

Modi must give fresh impetus to a new Swachh Bharat campaign. Corporates have made billions from a liberalised economic regime. Modi must convince them that removing and treating garbage and sewage make good business and serve a social cause. Such a massive nationwide campaign would create employment, introduce new technology, invite investment in hygiene products and lead to a mass movement personally led by Modi. Nobody has paid the price for keeping India filthy. The government must make the culprits as accountable as economic offenders. The glitter of surging stock markets will vanish if India becomes unlivable.

To ensure a fourth win at the Centre in 2029 and to retain its states, the BJP needs a new Modi. The current numbers and slogans have outlived their utility. India will become a \$5-trillion economy sooner than later. A *swasth* Modi would mean both Swachh and Samridh Bharat. Invention must replace investive, and vindication must replace vindictiveness of ideologically-unaccredited attention-seekers for Modi 4.0 to arrive with a bang, not slang.



PTI

## WHAT INDIA CAN EXPECT FROM LABOUR



### OPINION

**SHYAM BHATIA**  
Former Diplomatic Editor, The Observer, and author of Goodbye Shahzadi: A Political Biography of Benazir Bhutto

**I**KE the Conservatives he ousted, new British Prime Minister Keir Starmer is all too aware of the Hindu voters in the UK. Hence his visit last Friday to the Swaminarayan temple in London's Kingsbury, where he declared, "There is absolutely no place for Hindu phobia in Britain... If we're elected next week, we will strive to govern in the spirit of seva to serve you and a world in need... Strengthened by Hindu values, you're not only contributing massively to our economy, you're bringing innovation and expertise that keeps us competitive on the global market."

On the other hand, the Conservatives' defeat means New Delhi can no longer count on London's silence or automatic support for policies undermining minority communities in India. Some Labour activists still take their cue from their party's 2019 emergency motion that noted "a major humanitarian crisis taking place in Kashmir".

In contrast to earlier visits, when the ruling Conservatives, fearful of upsetting the BJP, avoided any public contact with Rahul Gandhi, the new Labour government is likely to have fewer inhibitions about maintaining contact with Indians of all political persuasions.

During Rahul's 2018 visit to the UK, he was given the cold shoulder: The Conservative Friends of India announced they would host an event for him in parliament, but then, just hours before he was due to speak, the event was cancelled without any explanation. Similar experiences were recorded for other Indian visitors such as former cabinet minister Salman Khurshid and Pradyot Bikram Manikya, leader of the Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance. Events at which they were due to speak were boycotted by Conservative MPs.

Conservative sources say their boycott of Indian opposition leaders was organised by former Home Secretary Priti Patel, a devoted supporter of the Hindutva agenda. She had the support of former PMs Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak.

Johnson's understanding of India's political ideologies was less than his interest in the economic allure of India's vast market. But Sunak was at home with the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda. One of Sunak's relatives once told me that Sunak carried a Ganesh or Hanuman in his pocket wherever he went.

As it balances views on human rights issues, Labour can take some comfort from the prospect of rebuilding historical political links that predate India's in-

dependence. After all, it was Labour-supporting intellectuals like Harold Laski as well as political grandees like former Prime Minister Clement Attlee who championed India's just demand for independence. Labour MPs like Reginald Sorensen highlighted abuses of colonial officials and the party embraced Congress activists like V K Krishna Menon, who went on to serve as independent India's first high commissioner to the UK.

However, this would not preclude future differences, irrespective of which

**Labour grandees such as Clement Attlee and Reginald Sorensen championed India's case for independence. The party can invoke those links for a warmer relationship. But on foreign policy, the UK will remain closely aligned with the US**

political party rules in London or New Delhi. Some of these differences could emerge as the British continue to align their policies with the US, their closest friend and ally. The significance of the US was summed up last week by shadow foreign secretary David Lammy, who wrote, "We should not fail to recognise that the US will remain the UK's most essential ally, whoever occupies the White House."

### Grumpy Ananda

After dilly-dallying for more than a month, West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose nominated the deputy speaker to administer the oath of office to two newly-elected Trinamool MLAs when the speaker was available to perform the ritual. Realising the ulterior motive and the insult it would cause to the speaker, the deputy requested the speaker to do the deed. The miffed governor took the case to the president, treating the episode a constitutional impropriety. It is time governors realised theirs is only a post with limited powers bound by the tenets of the Constitution.

**Tharcus S Fernando, Chennai**

### Keep NEET

Ref: In SC, government, NTA oppose demand to scrap NEET-UG (Jul 6). We have seen that many students from marginalised communities and economically poor backgrounds getting their seats on merit. The opposition parties antagonism to NEET just because of the paper leak and other malpractices by some unscrupulous interests is not apt. The push

for abolishing the exam is political. The NTA should be once bitten, twice shy to ensure perfection.

**R Sridharan, Chennai**

### Recover costs

Ref: Nitish suspends 16 engineers for Bihar bridge collapses (Jul 6). Ten bridges collapsed across Bihar in a span of 16 days. The Supreme Court has advised the Bihar government to conduct a structural audit of all existing and under-construction bridges, and demolish or retrofit weak structures. The government should also recover the cost of all damaged bridges from the contractors. Future contracts should contain a clause for recovery if the construction fails to survive a guarantee period.

**V Venkatasubramanian, email**

### Cheer others

I give full credit to the Indian Team for winning the T20 World Cup. But I feel we are overdoing it now. Cricket is not the only sport. There are many others. Are they felicitated even to a fraction of what the returning cricket team was? Why this discrimina-

tion? Our Olympics performance is just short of dismal because there is no proper encouragement, though the government is trying to rectify it.

**Akhila Gopalan, Coimbatore**

### Andhra pickle

The Andhra chief minister is telling the Centre that his state needs more than special category status by blaming the previous government for the state's precarious economic condition. Bifurcation of the state, much to the chagrin of a majority of the Telugu speaking populace, is one of the factors.

**H P Murali, Bengaluru**

### Indian-origin MPs

Ref: Kottayam man rides Labour wave (Jul 6). Sojan Joseph, hailing from Karapuzha in Kottayam, made history by emerging as the first Malayali member of the British House of Commons. It is a proud moment for India as a whole, as he is one of the 26 Indian-origin MPs in British parliament now. Let us wish them the best.

**PP Sahadevan, Nileshtar**

## REFLECTIONS

## Yearning for basic civility

TOUCHSTONES  
IRA PANDE

WE have just completed a month since the stunning results of the national elections were declared, yet it feels as if the election rallies are still going on. The only difference is that they take place now in our Parliament rather than in the open grounds, *mukhads* and *chai* shops. I have never been so dismayed as when I watched the new coalition government and the new Leader of the Opposition take each other down in full public view of the entire nation. From the moment they took their oaths and gave their inaugural speeches, there was little grace or decorum displayed. Gone are the days when parliamentarians rose above petty politics and rabble-rousing to address those questions that ought to engage the attention of our elected representatives. Insults were freely hurled and no one listened to the other as answers were given.

If this is going to be the way that serious matters of governance and the genuine problems we all face are going to be addressed, then it is time we asked some uncomfortable questions from all the stakeholders. First, the Speaker and the Chairman of the two Houses must be held accountable for not being firm and fair. Surely, this is not such a difficult task. There is a provision to adjourn the House and call the two leaders to his chamber and sort out the mess over a cup of tea. Come now to the behaviour of both the Treasury and Opposition benches. Their constant heckling and loud sloganeering even as the Prime Minister was

speaking was not at all becoming of a mature and responsible bunch of politicians. The speeches of some of the Opposition MPs were heard in silence and were very impressive, but was the same courtesy extended to the other side? In the ensuing din, it seemed as if the Opposition was daring the Speaker to expel them for unruly behaviour, so that they could go out and claim victimhood.

In the Rajya Sabha, matters were fine in the beginning when some banter was also exchanged in a light-hearted manner, but then all hell broke loose. The relentless shouting drowned out any sensible exchange. Most will agree that walking out in protest when the Prime Minister was speaking about the questions they had raised only revealed a childish and immature mindset. Ironically, all this while upholding the little red book that declared their unwavering loyalty to the Constitution. Perhaps they need to be told that

**Gone are the days when MPs rose above rabble-rousing to address questions that matter**

holding it aloft all the time is not as important as holding the conventions and laws it contains in mind while in Parliament.

Let us now turn our attention to another election and another set of actors. I am speaking of USA and the almost comical drama taking place there between two equally unsuitable candidates. One who is well past his prime and displays disquieting signs of early dementia, and the other who is full of lies and gas. One shudders at what we are going to witness when the results will be announced in November. Whichever one of them wins, the nation is going to lose. The story of knockout verdicts doesn't

end there. Rishi Sunak has lost in Britain. As in France, other European countries are also taking a sharp turn to the right: a fact that will radically alter the politics of decades and give a new turn to the European Union that we know.

What is behind this crazy turnaround? For one, the days of socialist governments seem to be over. The new generation of voters has little time for high-minded ideologies any more. The hypocrisy that is behind the so-called liberal values they profess has been hollowed out by greed and populism. The young today want money to come into their hands rather than welfare promises. Rampant inflation, which is often the consequence of freebies and doles, high public debts and an open-door policy towards immigration without factoring in the long-term results, in Europe for instance, may have been behind the violent swing towards right-leaning politicians.

I am no expert on foreign affairs so I hesitate to go further, but many of us firmly believe that the world will heal itself only if it follows the path shown by Gandhi, Mandela and the Dalai Lama. These three leaders have never let down their followers because their actions and speeches enshrine the highest human values. We, in India, decided to follow a different path in the first few decades and then, as time went on, we became more distanced from the lessons that Gandhi had wisely laid down. Love all men as equals, care for the last man standing, speak the truth, live the life you want to promote and, most importantly, never deviate from the path of non-violence. As I heard Rahul Gandhi give his maiden speech as Leader of the Opposition, I felt he had said all the things one yearns to hear but soon, the speech swung in another direction. I sincerely hope he will discover the median between the split sides of his personality to chart his political journey. For the ruling government, I have only one prayer: let them become humble and accept that they are not always right. The ability to accept one's faults is the hardest lesson for anyone, yet it must be cultivated.

## Warranty changes on electronic goods

CONSUMER RIGHTS  
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

LAST fortnight, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) took the initial steps towards the much-needed reform vis-à-vis the warranties on electronic goods, when it asked the manufacturers to adopt global best practices.

It is often seen that in respect of quality, after-sales service and also warranties, manufacturers have different standards for different countries, based on the consumer protection laws of that country, the enforcement regime and, of course, the expectations and demands of consumers. Nidhi Khare, Chief Commissioner, CCPA, was obviously referring to this when she urged the manufacturers to make available the warranty upfront, respond to consumer grievances about warranties with alacrity, and ensure that the warranty clock starts ticking from the date of installation and not the date of purchase, as that could considerably reduce the warranty period in respect of goods that need installation.

Some household products like washing machines and dryers, air-conditioners, geysers, refrigerators, electric chimneys, microwaves and dishwashers require a representative of the company to install them. And there could well be a delay in that. Similarly, there could also be a delay in delivery of the product, particularly if you are ordering it online. It is, therefore, only fair that the warranty card is stamped or signed by the person installing the machine, kickstarting the warranty period. After all, the warranty has to begin from the time you start using the machine and not from the time of purchase, particularly when there could be a wide gap between the two.

But that's just one of the many problems that consumers face in respect of warranties. Since these are drawn up by the manufacturer, keeping only his interest in mind, the warranties are full of disclaimers and highly prejudicial to consumer interest.

In fact, if you see the warranty clauses of manufacturers, you will realise that your warranty period gets reduced not only because it starts from the date of purchase and not the date of installation, but also because many of them say that in case of a problem, the time taken for repair and in transit shall not be excluded from the warranty period. So, if the service centre takes a long time to repair the snag because the required part is not available, your warranty period is further reduced, even though you are not using the product.

Some of the warranties say that if spare parts are not available, the com-

pany's prevailing depreciation rule will be binding on the purchaser to accept as a commercial solution in lieu of repairs! In the absence of any legal stipulation mandating how long manufacturers should make available spare parts, companies are known to force consumers to buy new models on the ground that spare parts are unavailable. Obviously, the price that they offer for the 'irreparable' one as an 'exchange' offer is too low and exploitative. The absence of standards specifying the life of various household appliances also makes bargaining tough for consumers, besides the stifling warranty conditions.

**Consumer Protection Authority should form a committee to draw up a model warranty that's fair to both the parties and is easily understood**

When you buy an electronic product, do you ever check whether the retailer is an authorised dealer? Well, there are warranties that say that the promises made therein are null and void if the product is not purchased from an authorised dealer!

Again, some of them say that the warranty is not applicable to defects caused while in transit to the service centre or to the purchaser's residence! I must also mention that some warranties do not cover the cost of transportation, if the product has to be taken to the service centre!

In some cases, the warranty is invalid if the consumer does not fill up and mail a registration card to activate the warranty or register the purchase online. Again, warranty should be available throughout the promised period, but companies say that it is only applicable to the original buyer! Thus, most warranties take away the guarantees at the slightest pretext.

The Consumer Protection Act gives the consumer the right to get defect-free goods and in case of a defect, the right to proper repair, replacement or full refund, depending on the nature of the defect. The warranties offered by manufacturers should fully reflect these rights and be fair to the consumer.

Now that the CCPA has made a beginning, it should constitute a committee to draw up a model warranty that's fair to both the parties and is easily understood. Or, come up with warranty guidelines for companies to follow. It is also necessary to mandate the availability of spare parts during the life of a product, so that the consumer is not forced to replace it for want of a spare part. This is also extremely important for environment protection, as it reduces electronic waste and is in keeping with the 'Right to Repair' movement the world over.

## Walking shoes and the Kasauli Club

POONAM KHAIRA SIDHU

IT was a simple issue, really. The Kasauli Club, renowned for its storied history as a sanctuary for the British Raj's elite, where social meetings, tea and dinner dances were the norm, found itself in the middle of a footwear fiasco. The debate? Whether or not walking shoes, recommended for seniors, should be allowed inside the hallowed halls of this venerable establishment.

You'd think such a matter would be resolved swiftly with a nod of agreement and, perhaps, a polite round of applause. But no, the erudite members of the club argued the point until the cows came home. The dress code, it seems, is sacrosanct, especially in the bar and dining hall. Here, tradition holds sway like an overbearing grandmother at a family reunion. One must don the proper attire, lest they offend the ghosts of club members past, who presumably wore top hats and tails even to breakfast.

Pavan K Varma, a former diplomat, wrote that a dress code in clubs is necessary but should not become a fetish. Yet, here we were, embroiled in a debate that felt like choosing sides in a sartorial civil war. On one side were the modernists, championing comfort and commonsense. "Walking shoes are recommended for seniors!" they cried. They spoke of arches and orthopaedics, of podiatry and practicality. They envisioned a future where one could stride confidently into the club without

the fear of being rebuked for wearing comfortable shoes. Opposing them were the traditionalists, staunch defenders of decorum. "What's next?" they demanded. "Tracksuits at teatime? Sneakers at soirées?" They painted a picture of a slippery slope leading to the ultimate downfall of civilisation, or at least the club's reputation. Formal Indian traditional dresses, they conceded, could be allowed. After all, there's a certain gravitas to a well-draped *saree* or an elegantly tailored *kurta*. But walking shoes? That was a bridge too far.

A member of the Calcutta Club recounted the memory of MF Husain, India's most famous artist, being denied entry for not wearing appropriate footwear. And then there was Ananda Shankar, the choreographer, who was also turned away for dress code infractions. Clearly, clubs have a history of ensuring that the spirit of elegance was preserved, even as members shuffled about in sensible shoes elsewhere. And so, the arguments raged on, with each side bringing forth their champions, armed with anecdotes and expert opinions.

One gentleman, surely resplendent in his blazer and brogues, declared that he had once seen a man in walking shoes and torn jeans order a cocktail, and the horror of it still haunted him. Another member countered, sharing a story of his grandmother, who had taken up brisk walking at the age of 80 and credited her longevity to her trusty walking shoes. "Sir, walking shoes will be defined differently by

each individual," someone said, "My grandparents and parents have always walked into the club appropriately dressed for the last 55 years. So, coming to the rules, let's implement them to the hilt."

Another worthy suggested implementing a new rule: all members above 60 should produce a medical certificate and could then wear the approved footwear. And let's not forget to station a panel of podiatrists at the entrance, ready to approve or disapprove each pair of shoes.

In the midst of this debate, the Kasauli Club itself stood as a silent witness, trying to change with the times while holding on to its cherished traditions. It had seen trends come and go, from the days of tennis whites to the era of designer tracksuits. But this discussion about sports shoes? It was a conundrum for the ages.

Every institution reflects its unique culture and ethos, and members are typically drawn to it because of these qualities, not in spite of them. Therefore, it's perhaps important to respect and maintain these traditions. Also, at the very daunting interview prior to receiving membership, hadn't members assured they would uphold the very traditions that made Kasauli Club the venerable institution it is?

And so, life at the Kasauli Club went on. The debate over walking shoes had not only brought the members together in an spirited discussion, but also underscored that some issues are worth every minute of debate — if only for the stories they leave behind.

## The unfathomed wonderland that is Zanskar

MITINDERPAL SINGH SEKHON

WE four childhood friends, classmates since 1972, journeyed through Ladakh and returned via Zanskar last fortnight. Zanskar in Tibetan means the 'land of white copper' and the accounts we read or heard were indeed alluring. So, we decided to traverse the region — my three friends in an SUV and I on my motorcycle. At the end of two weeks, it did turn out to be an unfathomed wonderland, be it the landscapes, the cultural milieu or the flora and fauna.

Zanskar falls in Kargil district of the UT of Ladakh. It is sandwiched between the Great Himalayan ranges to its south-west and Zanskar range to its north-east. Since it falls in the rain shadow region of Great Himalayas, it is a high-altitude cold desert. The altitude of Zanskar varies between 3500m and 6000m above the mean sea level.

We entered the region from Suru valley and realised that the roads ran between the tree line (3000m) and the snow line (4000m). The slopes of the towering mountains were bare, brown and weathered or covered in snow. As soon as we rode over Pensi La, the gateway to Zanskar, we were welcomed by a flock of *bharal* (blue sheep), which charged

up the ravine but offered us a wonderful sighting. I walked to the road berm which abutted a glacial outwash. It was covered with small plants bearing bright yellow flowers. Suddenly, two Himalayan marmots, all fat and cuddly, lumbered up to the edge and stood up on their hind legs in the typical rodent fashion, quite unafraid. Perhaps, people were feeding them or the gentle locals left them alone, thus prompting them to lead fearless lives! I shooed them away, because these unsuspecting souls become road-kill victims when they start trusting people and keep walking up to the roads.

They ran into their burrow screaming and whistling their alarm calls. I sat down on the road berm and soon the marmots started appearing from there burrows. I counted 16 of them and the entire outwash seemed to be a warren of marmot burrows. They regaled me with their antics and all of a sudden, there was some more whistling and shrieking while they all vanished into their subterranean safe houses. I had not moved, what was it that set off the alarm? A shadow moved and when I looked up, a golden eagle was soaring on its 2-metre wingspan, looking for its breakfast. It was a glorious sight. The first step into the valley was so eventful.

As we descended from the pass, we



Yellow-billed Chough



Horned Lark. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

entered the breeding grounds of the migratory birds seen in winter in the plains. There were Eurasian Magpies, Hill Pigeons, White-winged Redstarts, Blue Throats, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs, Chukar Partridges, flocks of House Sparrows, Mountain Finches and Rose Finches near every village or field. At the Rangdum Dak Bungalow, where

we spent the night, a pair of Hill Pigeons was nesting on the windowsill and a flock of Asian House Martins under the eaves of an adjoining house. Across the road, on the sand bars of Stod river, I saw for the first time a nesting sight of Ruddy Shell Ducks.

At Sani lake, which is a kettle lake formed by glacial action, there were a pair of Whiskered Terns nesting on a dry mound in the water. I also saw that the lake was a breeding ground for the indigenous Snow Trout. There were many other birds like Citrine Wagtails, White Wagtails, Grey Wagtails, Wood Sandpipers — that migrate to plains in winters.

Just outside the Sani monastery, in a mustard field, I saw large flocks of House Sparrows, Great Rose Finches, Common Rose Finches, Fire-fronted Serins and Brandt's Rose Finches, feeding peacefully.

We spent a couple of days in Padum, visiting the monasteries and other places of interest. At Karsha monastery, someone rang the gong and the monks and novices lined up for lunch. As soon as the gong rang, a large number of Yellow-billed Choughs

appeared literally out of thin air and sat on the parapets, waiting till the monks shared their rice with the crows.

From Padum, we rode over dirt tracks and non-existent roads to Pume. Since the ride was very taxing, we decided to spend the night in Dolma camps, an assortment of cottages, tents and camping space arranged in a semi-circle with the owner's fields in the middle. Early morning, I was greeted by a covey of Chukar Partridges and a flock of Hill Pigeons feeding in the wheat and pea fields, but they took flight when they saw me and settled on the slope above. Moments later, I heard alarm calls of the Chukar. On investigating, I saw a Red Fox stalking the Chukars, but fled when more people gathered. We moved off around 7 am from Pume on our last day in Zanskar and headed for Shinku La. Just short of Gonbo Rongjon, the 'God's Mountain', I saw four Ibex on the mountain slope, their horns curving back majestically. A few Lammmergeiers and Himalayan Griffons were circling lazily, floating on rising thermals as the sun heated the land below.

— The writer is former president of the Chandigarh Bird Club



"See how the Ganga flows by and what a nice building! I like this place. This is the ideal kind of place for a Math"  
— Swami Vivekananda



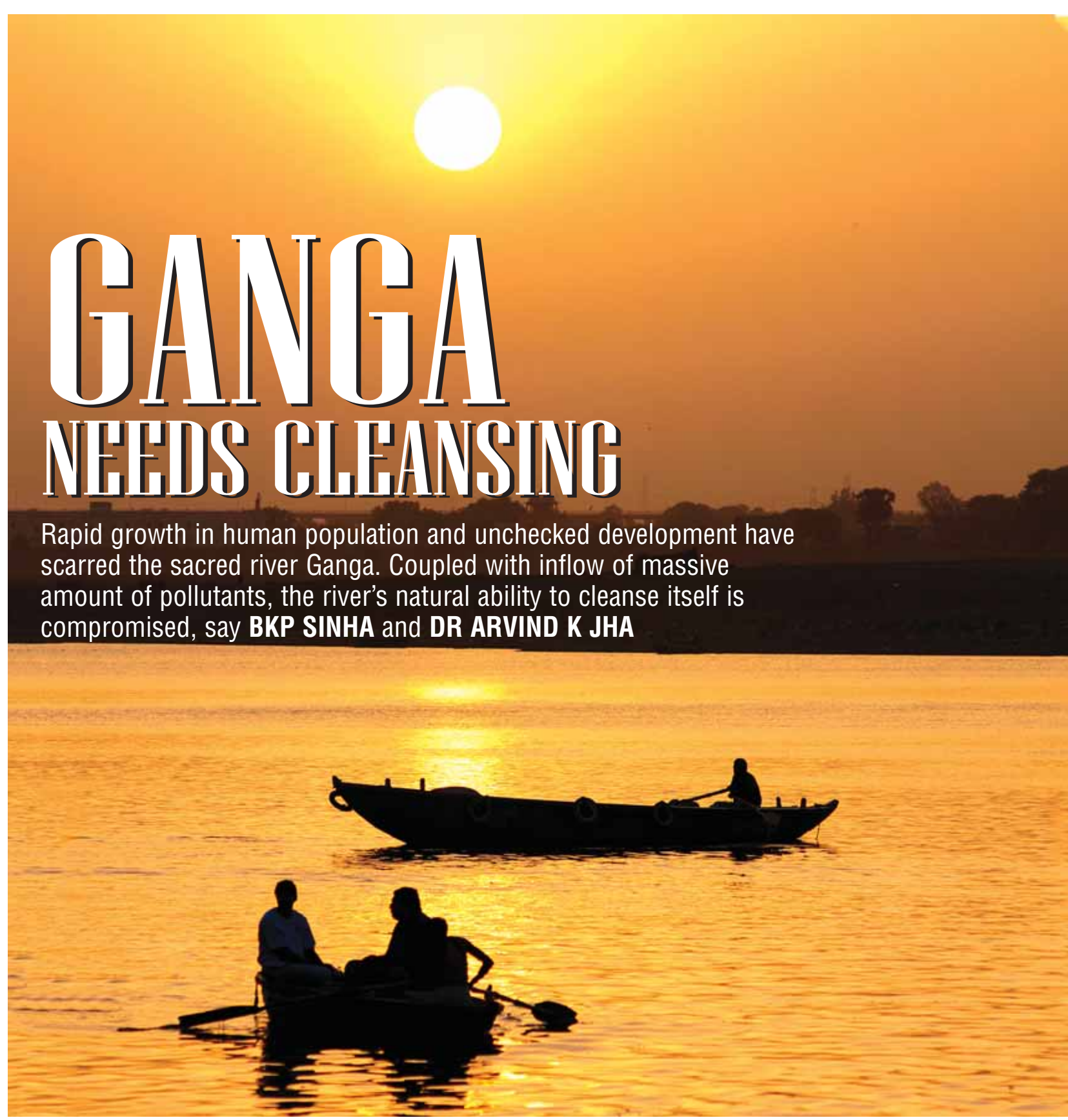
BKP SINHA



DR ARVIND K JHA

# GANGA NEEDS CLEANSING

Rapid growth in human population and unchecked development have scarred the sacred river Ganga. Coupled with inflow of massive amount of pollutants, the river's natural ability to cleanse itself is compromised, say **BKP SINHA** and **DR ARVIND K JHA**



Photos: Pankaj Kumar/The Pioneer

The Ganga River, also known as the Ganges, is the longest river in India with the most populated basin, the home to 600 million people. Originating from the Gangotri glacier in Uttarakhand, it embarks on a journey of 2,525 kilometers, meandering through five states - Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal before it merges with the Bay of Bengal. It nourishes a variety of life forms, provides livelihoods to people, and contributes to country's economy, trade, and commerce. The Ganga basin, spanning an area of 10.16 lakh square kilometers, contributes around 40% of the country's GDP. As per Hindu mythology, the river is believed to have descended from heaven when King Bhagiratha performed intense austerities for the river to descend to Earth. Considering river's immense force, Lord Shiva received the celestial river in his matted locks releasing it in a controlled flow. The Ganga is revered as a goddess; its journey symbolizes purity, life, and redemption; and its water is believed to wash away sins and facilitate *Moksha*, the liberation from the cycle of life and death. The Ganga itself, however, is under severe threat today.

The rapid growth in human population and unchecked development have degraded its catchments. With obstruction and diversion of its flow coupled with inflow of massive amount of pollutants from industrial, human, and agricultural sources, its natural ability to cleanse itself is compromised. The polluted water in the changed flow regime poses serious threat to humans and river's own biodiversity alike. While the future of 140 fish species and 90 amphibian species is threatened, Gharial and endangered Ganges River dolphin respectively are classified by IUCN as critically endangered and endangered. Severity of the issue that impacts the life, health and livelihoods of people and even undermines the cultural and spiritual significance of the Ganga deserves to be realized in its entirety and tackled with promptitude. Efforts have been made to clean and preserve the Ganga. During the late 1980s the Ganga Action Plan was implemented. This initiative led primarily to

the construction of wastewater treatment facilities at selected places in addition to the closure of a number of polluting industrial plants along the river. In 2008, the Ganga was declared as the national river of India. Subsequently, in 2014, the Government of India initiated the Namami Gange project that aimed to rejuvenate and protect the Ganga River by addressing pollution sources and promoting sustainable practices for improving its biological richness. The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), popularly known as the Namami Gange Mission, was billed as a "scientific programme" by the Indian government that aimed to clean the river using advanced technologies at a project cost of INR 20,000 crores with the dual objectives of effective abatement of pollution and conservation and rejuvenation of the Ganga River.

EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO CLEAN AND PRESERVE THE GANGA. DURING THE LATE 1980S THE GANGA ACTION PLAN WAS IMPLEMENTED. THIS INITIATIVE LED PRIMARILY TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF WASTEWATER TREATMENT FACILITIES AT SELECTED PLACES IN ADDITION TO THE CLOSURE OF A NUMBER OF POLLUTING INDUSTRIAL PLANTS ALONG THE RIVER. IN 2008, THE GANGA WAS DECLARED AS THE NATIONAL RIVER OF INDIA

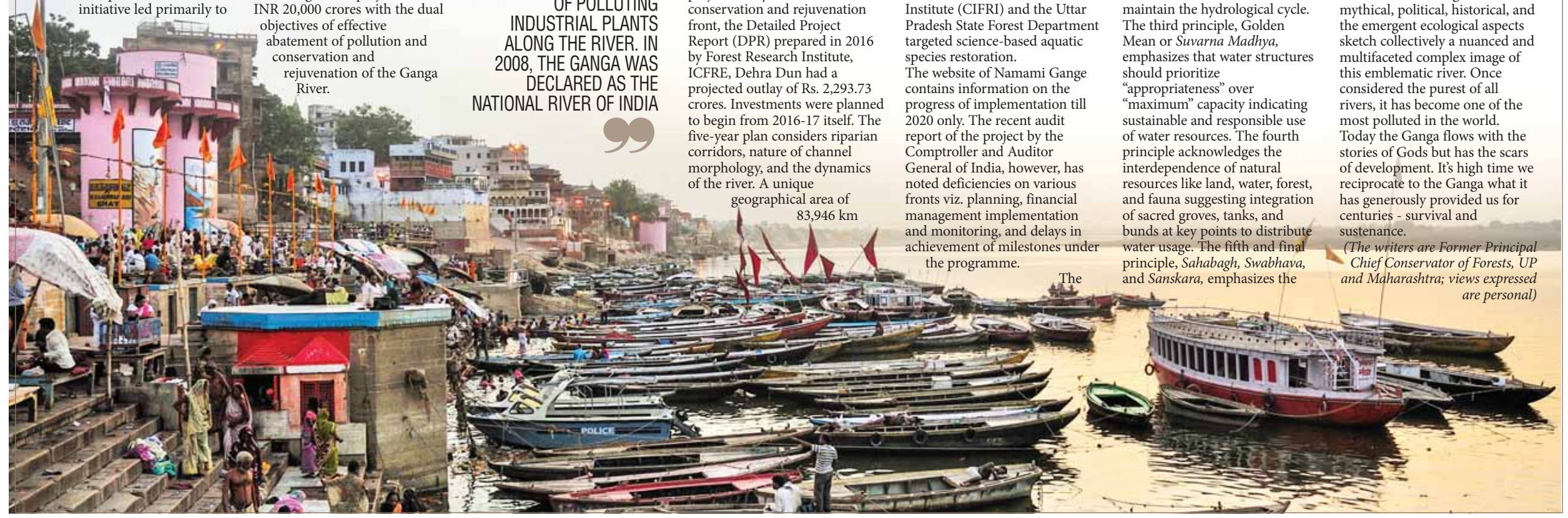
The Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation (MWRRDG) issued a notification on 7th October 2016, defining the River Ganga to include the entire length of six head-streams in the State of Uttarakhand, namely, Rivers Alakananda, Dhauri Ganga, Nandakini, Pinder, Mandakini and Bhagirathi, as well as the main stem of the river up to Ganga Sagar, including all its tributaries up to Ganga Sagar. The establishment of sewerage treatment plants and sewerage networks with a primary focus on bioremediation figured predominantly in the Namami Gange project and accounted for about 80 percent of the overall project outlay. On the conservation and rejuvenation front, the Detailed Project Report (DPR) prepared in 2016 by Forest Research Institute, ICFRE, Dehra Dun had a projected outlay of Rs. 2,293.73 crores. Investments were planned to begin from 2016-17 itself. The five-year plan considers riparian corridors, nature of channel morphology, and the dynamics of the river. A unique geographical area of 83,946 km

delineated as 'Ganga riverscape' along the Ganga has been identified for planning, assessment, and implementation of measures that include activities like reforestation or afforestation, managing vegetation to prevent soil erosion, and creating buffer zones to protect the river from pollutants. Further, the Wildlife Institute of India prepared the 'Biodiversity Conservation and Ganga Rejuvenation' plan with focus on development of local level 'Ganga Prahari' volunteers for playing a crucial role in conserving the ecological integrity of the Ganga and reducing the direct dependency of locals on the river. The projects of the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute (CIFRI) and the Uttar Pradesh State Forest Department targeted science-based aquatic species restoration. The website of Namami Gange contains information on the progress of implementation till 2020 only. The recent audit report of the project by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, however, has noted deficiencies on various fronts viz. planning, financial management implementation and monitoring, and delays in achievement of milestones under the programme.

The current scenario warrants improvement not only on the above aspects but also introduction of innovative and effective approach. In this context, one can draw inspiration from an ancient text by Sage Kashyapa on agriculture. He outlined five principles for water resources development. The first principle, *Udhgamsthana*, suggests that conservation should commence at the river's source. This includes construction of temples for protection, management of upper catchments, and redirecting streams and rivulets to enrich river's source. The second principle, *Nyunatam Gati-avarodh*, advocates for minimal disruption to the natural flows of water and air to maintain the hydrological cycle. The third principle, *Golden Mean or Suvarna Madhya*, emphasizes that water structures should prioritize "appropriateness" over "maximum" capacity indicating sustainable and responsible use of water resources. The fourth principle acknowledges the interdependence of natural resources like land, water, forest, and fauna suggesting integration of sacred groves, tanks, and bunds at key points to distribute water usage. The fifth and final principle, *Sahabagh, Swabhava, and Sanskara*, emphasizes the

need for community participation that takes care of the needs of all stakeholders. The concept of Rejuvenation defined as 'restoring a living entity to a previously agreed state of health and wellness' is most relevant in the context of the Ganga. Given the definition of Ganga by the MWRRDG, it's high time that the rejuvenation approach for Ganga targets the entire riverscape in an integrated manner while drawing and utilizing funds from all concerned departments. All the tributaries require treatment to ensure they remain clean and flowing and contribute to the flow of the Ganga. In order to foster larger community engagement in the rejuvenation mission, catchment areas of tributaries can be named after revered personalities or temples at their origin, followed by the suffix 'Namami Gange Van'. For instance, the catchment of Ramganga, originating from the Doodhatoli ranges of Pauri in Uttarakhand, could be named 'Veer Chandra Singh Gadhwal: Namami Gange Van'. Similarly, as the Ghagra river converges with the Ganga after the confluence of Mahakali (Sharda) at Tanakpur housing the Purnagiri temple, the catchment could be named 'Purnagiri: Namami Gange Van'. Likewise, the catchments of Gomati in Pilibhit could be named Vashishtha, that of Sai river meeting Gomti in Parsa village (Hardoi) as Adi-Ganga, that of Saryu and lower Ghagra as Ram, and those of Gandak, Kosi, and Budhi Gandak as Valmiki, Kausika, and Champakaranya respectively. The origin of Ganga's tributary, the Sone River at Amarkantak could bear the name Sone, the catchment of Punpun river originating in Jharkhand as Punpun, and the Namami Gange Van of Damodar, Mayurakshi, Ajay, Bansloi, and Ghumani could respectively be prefixed with the names Sarhul, Trikut, Ajay, Venu, and Rajmahal. Restoration of suitable forest cover, construction of water conservation structures, keeping river beds encroachment-free, prevention of water diversion, and curbing exploitative livelihood systems near the banks shall have to be prioritized in these areas as in the main stream of the Ganga. The overarching strategy for rejuvenation must combine pollution prevention through stricter regulations and rigorous implementation in order to transform Ganga's biological profile making it 'NIRMAL' and the restoration of status of its stream to 'AVIRAL'. In 2017, the Uttarakhand High Court declared the rivers Ganga and Yamuna as 'legal persons' with all corresponding rights of a living person. Considering it together with the concepts of spiritual ecology and earth stewardship, one should come up with innovative strategies in the Indian context. Standing on its banks, one is left with a profound sense of awe and a lingering question—what will the next chapter in the Ganga's story be? The narratives connected with religious, mythical, political, historical, and the emergent ecological aspects sketch collectively a nuanced and multifaceted complex image of this emblematic river. Once considered the purest of all rivers, it has become one of the most polluted in the world. Today the Ganga flows with the stories of Gods but with the scars of development. It's high time we reciprocate to the Ganga what it has generously provided us for centuries - survival and sustenance.

(The writers are Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, UP and Maharashtra; views expressed are personal)





CHESA VEGLIA ST MORITZ



THE NEWEST AND BIGGEST OUTDOOR POOL AT ST MORITZ



BADRUTT'S PALACE

# ST. MORITZ SUMMER'S RICH ALPINE PALETTE

Apart from being famous for its enchanting winter charm, St. Moritz also changes its appearance during the summer. It unveils a collection of lush green scenery which offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy nature, engage in thrilling sports, and fully embrace the peaceful Alpine way of life

BY **AKANKSHA DEAN**

Setting off on an enchanting Swiss journey armed with an eight-day Swiss Travel Pass and a carefully crafted plan, my travels unfolded like a dream aboard a selection of prestigious panoramic trains - the Bernina Express, Glacier Express,

and GoldenPass. The quintessential Swiss adventure began with my first lengthy train ride from Zürich to Chur. Emerging from a dark tunnel, the train revealed a stunning mountain view against the vast sky, almost like a scene from a perfectly set movie. This

was the Switzerland I had always imagined - reminiscent of the landscapes found in Heidi's stories and the ads for Ricola. The sight of quaint chapels perched daringly on rocky cliffs amid lush meadows and glimmering peaks brought me immense joy. Changing trains at Chur, I arrived in the elegant town of St. Moritz. Despite its small year-round population of under 6,000 residents, this former host of the Olympics and luxurious mountain escape has captured the hearts of the wealthy and famous. During the summer, St. Moritz transforms into a place that feels more like the Mediterranean than northern Europe, with most days filled with abundant sunshine.

**A SUMMER EXTRAVAGANZA**  
With just a single word, Badrutt's Palace exudes allure. It's renowned among a select few for its post-ski parties in the King's Social House, chance meetings with well-heeled billionaires in Moncler gear, and hosting one of the most sought-after New Year's Eve celebrations globally. Additionally, it conjures images of lavish bedrooms with views of the frozen lake, making it a top choice for winter getaways among the elite. Another facet of Badrutt's, lesser-known but equally captivating, comes alive in St. Moritz during the summer. This version offers a fresh experience



waiting to be explored. During our stay, our suite featured a balcony opening to a picturesque terrace. On our first night, we enjoyed a horse-drawn carriage ride, soaking in the stunning scenery of the lake, the majestic mountains, and the vast Engadin valley. In the summer, the mountains transform from a monochrome landscape of snow and rock to a vibrant tapestry of colours and textures. From lush green forests hugging the calm blue lake to vivid emerald meadows and the rugged peaks dusted with remnants of winter snow, the view

from our balcony was awe-inspiring. Unlike many hotels that claim to be palaces, Badrutt's lives up to its regal status. The grand state rooms exude a palace-like atmosphere, inviting guests to wander in elegant attire. While casual wear is allowed, formal dress seems more appropriate. In Le Restaurant and Le Relais, the elegant dining options call for formal attire to match the graceful setting. The ambiance is truly exceptional and sets Badrutt's apart as a regal retreat where luxury meets sophistication effortlessly.

**SUMPTUOUS FEASTS, MOUNTAIN MAJESTY**

As I set foot on Paradiso Mountain Club & Restaurant for my initial summer escapade under the stewardship of Badrutt's Palace Hotel, I awaited eagerly the promise of sun-soaked days amidst stunning vistas. Paradiso, embodying a steadfast commitment to local traditions and unwavering standards of excellence and openness, presents a menu that encapsulates the essence of St. Moritz's Mountain lifestyle - a tribute to delectable fare, pure mountain breezes, and abundant sunshine. The dining experience at Badrutt's transcended mere expectations. Our culinary voyage led us to the enchanting Chesa Veglia, a quaint heritage abode just

a skip across the street, metamorphosed into what can only be described as the epitome of high-class pizzerias. Here, within this tucked-away gem, Badrutt's Palace seemed to unfurl a more carefree, laid-back persona, akin to a majestic retreat momentarily letting loose, bedecked in an Italian leather bracelet, relishing in copious servings of Ornellaia. The pizzas served were sheer perfection - a symphony of flavours that would satisfy even the most discerning pizza aficionado. The ambiance at Chesa Veglia exuded an air of joviality, with the staff mirroring the joy and enthusiasm of the guests, creating an atmosphere where every bite felt infused with a sense of shared merriment and contentment.

**RECHARGE IN ENGADIN**

Nestled in the heart of Palace Wellness, we had the pleasure of enjoying a refreshing swim in the newest and largest outdoor pool in St. Moritz at a luxurious hotel in Engadin. The pool overlooks breath-taking views of the mountains and the lake, creating a picturesque backdrop for a delightful lunch at La Diala. The restaurant's name, which means 'mountain fairy' in Romansh, reflects its deep connection to the surrounding environment and offers a light and wholesome

menu. Even on the one cloudy day we experienced during our week-long stay, we found solace in the expansive indoor pool area, complete with its own artificial rock mountain perfect for kids to dive off. The deep-tissue massages at the spa were as rejuvenating as expected, adding to the overall relaxation experience in a mountain spa setting. St. Moritz's charm in the summer goes beyond extravagant lunches, indulgent spa treatments at Palace Coiffeur, savouring ice creams at Gelateria, and admiring the panoramic views of the lake. Engaging in activities like kitesurfing on Lake Silvaplana, sailing on Lake St. Moritz, and exploring the scenic nature trails by bike or on foot offers guests of Badrutt's Palace a diverse range of outdoor adventures at their fingertips. Moreover, the distinction of Badrutt's Palace as one of the World's 50 Best Hotels further solidifies its reputation as a top-tier destination for discerning travellers.

*Akanksha Dean is an independent food & travel writer, a chef and a catalyst and is the first Indian to have trained at Osteria Francescana, in Modena, Italy, rated as the world's best restaurant in the World's 50 Best Restaurants, in 2016 and 2018 and currently in the Best of The Best Category.*

# Rejoice in the Monsoon Magic This Season

Embark on a journey to charming monsoon retreats for a blissful vacation, writes **SHARMILA CHAND**

With monsoons round the corner, it is time to plan a vacation to soak in the beauty of nature. Immerse in the rich tapestry of exotic destinations across the country. From the mist-laden cliffs of the Western Ghats to the tranquil backwaters of Kerala, and lush green landscape of Goa, enjoy an alluring escape into nature's lap. Let the droplets of rain be musical notes and characteristic scent of the wet earth allure all your senses. Rain Soaked Offerings At Radisson Blu Resort and Spa, Alibaug

After braving a hot summer, you deserve to cool off and enjoy the rainy season, and a luxury resort lets you do that while providing every comfort your heart could desire.

Whether you are traveling on holiday or business, the Radisson Blu Resort & Spa, Alibaug invites guests to experience unparalleled luxury and the tranquility of natural beauty.

Guests can enjoy a leisurely walk around the landscaped gardens, or simply sit beside the stillness of the Lotus pond. For adventure seekers, the resort offers activities such as guided cycling tours, nature trails, and bird watching. By being close to historical sites such as the Kolaba Fort and Alibaug Beach, there are also opportunities for exploration and adventure to ensure a rich and fulfilling stay for all. Radisson Blu Resort & Spa, Alibaug is designed around wellness and relaxation, with moments of mindfulness offered in the form of daily yoga and meditation sessions - the resort provides a sanctuary for rejuvenation of the body and mind.

**RAINDROPS AT THE MACHAN - A TREEHOUSE RESORT, LONAVALA**

The Machan, a unique eco-resort located near Mumbai and Pune, offers a selection of tree-houses that ascend 30-45 feet above ground level, allowing visitors to stay in 'treetop' accommodations. Nestled in Jambulne, a 'biodiversity hotspot' as one of the 25 globally, The Machan is a great destination for nature lovers. On the property, visitors can participate in a number of



activities such as trekking, bird watching, and exploring historic sites. The resort also offers comfortably furnished chalets and "tree houses." Feeling a bit adventurous? Start your day with a rush of adrenaline by waking up in the 'Tree House' perched 30 to 45 feet above the forest floor in Jambulne. The experience of the monsoon season at the Machan will usher in a sense of tranquility as you enjoy your endless supply of hot beverages and snacks. Along with the unique and luxurious tree house accommodations, The Machan has much to offer to keep one busy during their stay. With guided nature walks, bird watching and historical forts and caves nearby, there's always something to do. A stay at the Machan during the monsoon season rewards you with abundant waterfalls, cool breezes and lush greenery for a truly ethereal experience as you enjoy your hot drinks and comforting snacks. Plus, the resort recycles 80% of its grey water and is almost entirely powered by renewable solar and wind energy. So when you book your monsoon getaway here, you aren't just rewarding your soul - you're doing your bit for sustainability.



**ENCHANTING VIEWS OF NERUL RIVER AT HILTON GOA RESORT**

Nestled in the picturesque hills of Saipem, Hilton Goa Resort is a synonym for luxury and tranquility. It provides enchanting views of lush greens and Nerul River. The resort will offer you an incredible opportunity to escape from the hustle and bustle. Relax by one of the excellent four outdoor pools or break a sweat in the well-outfitted fitness center. The restaurant with a patio on the resort offers a unique dining experience with mesmerizing coastal views of Goa, while the Doce cafe and Coco lounge bar provide the taste buds with an extensive range of patisserie and Mediterranean flavors.

When it comes to families, the kids club ensures your kids have a good time as you relax. The resort's location is convenient for exploring attractions such as Aguada Fort and Panjim, with Vagator Beach only being a 30-minute drive away for even more sea, sun and sand. If you are looking for a romantic getaway, family vacation, or corporate-relaxation, the resort's event facilities and group travel services offer all you will need. In Hilton Goa you can sip your morning coffee and watch the raindrops fall on the lush greenery outside as the

clouds wash away the heat of the summer. Take a dip in one of the four outdoor pools, hit the gym at the fitness centre, or simply walk about outside and enjoy the pitter-patter of the raindrops.

**WATCH RAINDROPS ON PADDY FIELDS AT EVOLVE BACK, COORG**

One can only imagine what it feels like to be woken up by the smell of coffee and the cold mountain breeze. That's exactly what a monsoon trip to the 300-acre Evolve Back resort in Coorg will buy you. The private pool villas are traditionally furnished as they were in ancient times, making them perfect for outdoor experiences whether you are alone or with family members. For quiet moments, the Reading Lounge is an ideal spot. Here, you can enjoy a cup of freshly brewed coffee while watching the rain fall on the lush paddy fields, creating a perfect ambience for relaxation and reflection. Visit to Evolve Back is incomplete without taking part in its rich coffee culture. Right inside this place is a Coffee Museum where people have opportunities to journey through history while learning about processes involved in growing coffee plants and beans. Just by stepping into the plantation field and walking across lush coffee farms one can find better appreciation for their favorite morning drink. The resort also offers a range of cultural and wildlife experiences that highlight the region's biodiversity and heritage. Guided nature walks, bird watching tours, and interactions with local artisans provide a comprehensive understanding of Coorg's rich ecosystem and traditions. Whether you're seeking

adventure, relaxation or want to curl up with coffee in the Reading Lounge while watching the rain fall on the lush paddy fields Evolve Back, Coorg is your destination.

**MISTY LANDSCAPES AT RIVERMIST RESORT CHIKMAGALUR**

In the lap of the Western Ghats, Chikmagalur is known for its lush coffee plantations and misty landscapes. In the monsoons, it transforms into a vibrant tapestry of green, punctuated by cascading waterfalls and blooming flora, making it a sanctuary for rare bird species, elusive animals, and unique insects. Hidden amidst this mountainscape, is a boutique getaway called RiverMist Resorts. Perfectly situated with the Charmady Ghats in the backdrop, it provides guests with an authentic experience of this region. Traditional Malnad architecture, and local cuisine adds to its charm. Unique nature centric activities and luxury accommodations that offer mesmerising views of the mountains from wooden cottages on stilts to the Luxury Pavilion that features glamping tents with outdoor jacuzzis and showers, is an experience to behold. RiverMist Resorts is more than a place to stay; it's a story in itself. Upon arrival, guests cross a river in a 4x4 vehicle, setting the tone for the



adventures ahead. The resort boasts an infinity pool that overlooks the surrounding hills, providing a peaceful spot to relax while enjoying the vistas.

Nature walks led by an in-house naturalists offers a fun and insightful journey through the diverse flora and fauna. They guide guests along winding trails through the property, revealing smaller natural wonders that you may have otherwise missed. The resort's private waterfall is in full gush during the monsoons, offering a peaceful escape to sit and enjoy the soothing sounds of flowing water.

Another highlight is the Nature Connect. Every evening, as it gets dark, guests are encouraged to gather by the pool area and soak in the sounds of nature. All the lights of the resort are switched off for ten minutes and amidst the darkness, your sense of hearing begins to heighten as the sounds of birds and animals slowly waking up become louder, your eyes adjust to the darkness and you see fireflies and more stars. You begin to feel one with nature in the true sense. As night falls, the bonfire is then lit and you are welcome to join the naturalist on a night trail.

Further, RiverMist organises monsoon treks to Ballaraya Durga, Kudremukh and Nethravathi peaks for the trekking enthusiasts. If not, you can opt to go offroading around the estate or even drive up to explore the Rani Jhari viewpoint which is close by. So if you are someone who enjoys the beautiful synergy of monsoons, mountains and meaningful experiences, RiverMist Resort is an ideal destination.

**MONSOON BLISS AT COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT GOA COLVA**

Courtyard by Marriott Goa Colva offers a unique and enchanting monsoon getaway. Its comfortable accommodations and amenities, combined with the lush beauty of Goa's landscape, provide an idyllic setting for relaxation and rejuvenation. Whether savouring local cuisine, exploring the lush surroundings, or simply enjoying a serene stay, guests are guaranteed an unforgettable experience that captures the essence of Goa's monsoon magic. The hotel's recent opening in the midst of the rainy season perfectly showcases a different, greener side of Goa, making it a must-visit destination for those seeking a blend of serenity and revelry. Located in the serene village of Colva in South Goa, the hotel offers an immersive experience of Goa's lush, rain-kissed scenery, surrounded by verdant paddy fields and swaying coconut farms. The monsoon season breathes new life into the region, and the resort provides the perfect setting to witness this transformation. As the rain begins to fall, the surroundings of the hotel come alive with a symphony of nature's sounds and sights. The paddy fields turn a vibrant green, creating a stunning contrast against the moody grey skies. The coconut palms, tall and graceful, sway gently in the breeze, adding to the picturesque scenery. The hotel is designed to blend seamlessly with this lush environment, offering guests a comfortable and welcoming retreat amidst nature's bounty. Nestled away from the bustling tourist hubs, the hotel

provides a peaceful haven where guests can truly relax and unwind. The monsoon amplifies this sense of tranquility, as the rains cool the air and the landscape transforms into a bright green paradise. Guests can take leisurely walks or cycle through the surrounding locale, breathing in the fresh, rain-scented air, or simply relax on their private balconies, soaking in the serene views.

Courtyard by Marriott Goa Colva is more than just a hotel; it is a tribute to the destination itself. It offers the serenity of South Goa married to the vibrancy of North Goa, presenting guests with a different side of the region. This blend creates a unique experience that combines relaxation with excitement, making it an ideal destination for all kinds of travelers. Dining at Courtyard by Marriott Goa Colva is an experience in itself, especially during the monsoons. Colva Kitchen, the hotel's all-day dining restaurant, offers a menu that celebrates the flavours of the region, with an emphasis on fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Guests can savor a variety of local delicacies, from traditional breakfast specials to flavourful Goan curries, ending with warm desserts. With its large glass windows, this dining area provides a perfect vantage point to watch the monsoon showers, with the sound of raindrops creating a soothing backdrop to the culinary delights.

The hotel also offers a range of activities designed to make the most of the monsoon season. Guests can indulge in spa treatments that utilize natural ingredients, providing a holistic and rejuvenating experience. The hotel's pool offers a unique opportunity to swim in the rain, adding a touch of magic to the monsoon experience. For those looking to explore, the hotel organizes guided tours of the surrounding village routes and paddy fields, providing an intimate glimpse into the local way of life. Families can enjoy quality time at the hotel's Kids Club, which offers engaging activities for children.

*Sharmila Chand is an author and independent journalist who writes on Travel, Food and Lifestyle*

# A RESOUNDING TRIBUTE TO PANDIT BHAJAN SOPORI

A symphony of strings fills the air as the world unites to celebrate the first World Santoor Day. This poignant tribute honors the legendary **PANDIT BHAJAN SOPORI**, the "Saint of Santoor," while ushering in a new tradition that celebrates the instrument's captivating melody and rich cultural legacy says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In an extraordinary celebration of music and heritage, the inaugural World Santoor Day brought the global music community together in a magnificent tribute to the legendary Santoor maestro, Pandit Bhajan Sopori. Hosted by the Sopori Academy of Music and Performing Arts (SaMaPa) last week, this event marked not only the birth anniversary of Pandit Bhajan Sopori but also established a new tradition in the world of classical music. The choice of 22 June for World Santoor Day is profoundly fitting, honouring the 76th birth anniversary of Pandit Bhajan Sopori, celebrated as the 'Saint of Santoor' and the 'King of Strings'. His unparalleled contributions to the Santoor and Indian classical music have left an indelible mark, and this day served as a perfect homage to his legacy. The evening at Triveni Kala Sangam was nothing short of spectacular. The event featured an impressive lineup of performances by distinguished Santoor players like Pandit Abhay Rustum Sopori and Padmashri Pandit Satish Vyas. The programme included a rich tapestry of Indian classical music, Kashmiri Sufiana and Iranian, Chinese and Argentinian artists, showcasing the Santoor's universal appeal. The celebration began with heartfelt tributes to Pandit Bhajan Sopori, followed by a captivating performance of Kashmiri Sufiyana Mausiki by Ustad Shabir Saazanawaz. Maestro Siamak Aghaei from Iran mesmerised the audience with his classical Santur piece, while disciples of Pandit Bhajan Sopori, including Dr Mi Xuanyen from China and Guido Estrada from Argentina, added an

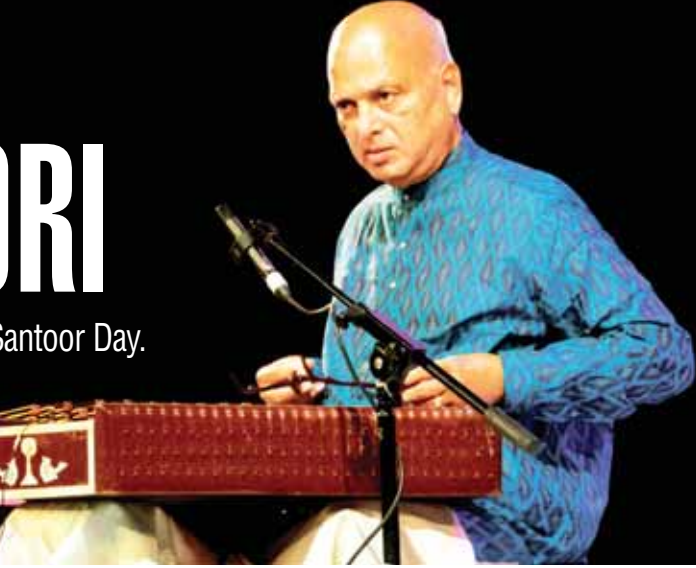


international dimension with their renditions, all presented via online projector. The live performances were a testament to the enduring legacy of Pandit Bhajan Sopori. Divyansh Srivastava, a disciple of Pandit Bhajan Sopori and Pandit Abhay Sopori, opened the live

segment with a mesmerising rendition of Raga Kaushik Dhvani, followed by a series of intricate compositions in the Sopori Baaj style. Pandit Abhay Rustum Sopori himself took the stage, presenting Raag Jog with a blend of Tantra and Gayaki, accompanied by Ustad Akram



Khan on Tabla. The evening culminated with Padmashri Satish Vyas, accompanied by Pandit Ram Kumar Mishra on Tabla, who performed Raag



Santouri in Greece, Yangqin in America and Cimbalom or Hackbrett in Europe." Prof. Aparna Sopori, Chairperson of SaMaPa, emphasised the historical and cultural significance of the Santoor, noting, "World Santoor Day will spotlight the rich heritage, historical significance and legacy of the Santoor, or Shatatantri Veena, on a global stage, emphasising its deep roots in Kashmir Shaivism culture." The event also saw tributes and wishes from renowned personalities through video messages, including AR Rahman, Kailash Kher, Anup Jalota, Pt. Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Vidushi Sumitra Guha, Ustad Akram Khan, Ustad Rafiuddin Sabri, Siddharth Kak, Dr Agni Shekhar, and Utpal Kaul. The presence of many eminent musicians, such as Pt. Rajinder Prasanna, Pt. Chetan Joshi, Pt. Bholanath Mishra, Ustad Asghar Hussain, Ustad Saeed Zafar Khan, Pt. Ajay P Jha, and Pt. Ajay Prasanna, added to the

occasion's grandeur. Sohrab Sopori expressed his gratitude and vision for the future, saying, "This first edition is being celebrated in cities across India and around the world. We are fortunate to have so many voices come together to mark 22 June as World Santoor Day. From next year, it will be organised in a grander way with more cities and musicians joining hands." Reflecting on Pandit Bhajan Sopori's enduring legacy, Pt. Vijay Shankar Mishra remarked, "Pandit Bhajan Sopori's legacy is great. He was a visionary, keeping things simple yet broad enough to touch the souls of music lovers through his music. His contribution is immense, and Abhay Rustum Sopori is carrying it forward to the next generation. He will always be among us." Padmashri Pandit Satish Vyas echoed these sentiments, stating, "It is a great occasion and I am delighted to present my recital here and pay my tributes to Pandit Bhajan Sopori." Attending the first World Santoor Day was an experience steeped in both reverence and celebration. The event not only honoured the profound legacy of Pandit Bhajan Sopori but also showcased the Santoor's rich cultural heritage and its universal resonance. The evening's performances were a powerful reminder of music's ability to transcend boundaries and connect souls. As the Santoor's enchanting melodies filled the air, one couldn't help but feel a deep sense of gratitude for the maestros who continue to enrich our lives with their art. The first World Santoor Day was a resounding success, setting a high standard for future celebrations. It was a fitting tribute to a legend and a testament to the timeless beauty of the Santoor.



Photo: Pankaj Kumar

## A Celebration of Artistic Diversity and Creative Dialogue

Step into the dynamic realm of art at CONFLUENCE 24, where each masterpiece narrates an alluring tale. This lively gathering of established and emerging artists explored diverse creative practices, embracing art and community for an enriching week-long celebration. says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In the world of art, where every individual in the exhibition appreciates and understands the worth of each artist, the immersive experience of CONFLUENCE 24 truly stood out. The Welham Old Boys Society (WOBS) proudly presented this spectacular event, a week-long art exhibition and community engagement initiative held at The Stainless Gallery, New Delhi. This second edition of CONFLUENCE 24 was an evolving platform that supported diverse creative practices and upheld constructive dialogue across multiple communities. During this eight-day group art exhibition, featuring established and emerging artists, architects, designers and photographers from diverse backgrounds, the exhibition featured prominent Indian artists Anupam Sud and Ananda Moy Banerji, both renowned for their significant contributions to art education. Akshay Raj Singh Rathore's artwork, grounded in social realities and Viveek Sharma's powerful pieces offered immersive and thought-provoking experiences for visitors. Amongst the artists from the younger generation, New York-based photographer Nanki Singh stood out with her focus on social documentaries. Her work, "Aaine Tak Ka Safar," was immersive and beautiful, featuring a series of photographs depicting survivors of acid attacks. Kunal Batra, a water-colourist photographer, enthralled viewers with his artwork that evoked the serene beauty of Himalayan landscapes, complete with charming huts that felt like scenes from a dreamy, fairytale-like midnight. Artist Divyam Raghunath, presented his work on subconscious interpretation, titled "Architectural Demise." His journey began with photographing Indian urban architecture, which he used as references in his paintings. However, the mesmerising aspect of his work was his ability to paint without direct

references, relying instead on his imagination. As he explained, "I let the brushstroke create curiosity within the painting," which added a unique beauty to his art. His architectural pieces formed abstract shapes, with one painting inspired by Bangalore's MG Road. Exhibition attendees perceived his work in diverse ways, some recalling the Durga Puja of Kolkata, while others were reminded of the streets of Japan, showcasing the varied perspectives his art elicited. Delhi-based sculptor Pratima Narang's iconic sculptures, 'Divide' and 'Gaze,' added significant value to the exhibition with their beautiful craftsmanship. A journal depicting a "Trip to the Andamans" was also displayed, resonating deeply with visitors by capturing every detail of the journey in a visually appealing form. Artist Saksham Singh's paintings, created with natural pigments like turmeric and pomegranate, highlighted the connection to nature using everyday materials. His other works, made with indigo, were inspired by his experiences in the forests and grasslands of Bangalore and the Western Ghats. Singh aimed to help people connect with nature, finding landscapes within themselves as well as outside. Photographer Aliza Mirza's lino-cut depictions of the 'Nasreen Building' were truly immersive and glorious. Additionally, artist Guncha Sharma's beautiful depictions of European streets, adorned with pink bougainvilleas under the summer sun, and her hand-painted rhododendrons transported viewers back to childhood holidays in the hills. Her work combined the tactile texture of hand-painting with a vibrant mix of colours, creating an evocative and nostalgic experience for all who viewed it. CONFLUENCE 24 unfolded as a mesmerising window of artistic expression, showing a rich array of artworks by talents like Usha Chengappa, Archita Bharadwaj,

Harshi Agarwal and Tushar Sharma. The exhibition further illuminated the creative landscape with the contributions of educators like Nirupama Sekhri, photographers including Dr. Abhishek Gaurav and Harsh Bansal, wildlife conservationist Mohit Dang and the promising advertising student Ujjwal Gupta, captivating visitors with their unique perspectives and creative flair. After the well-deserved success of the first edition, Rohit Jaiswal, President of Welham Old Boys Society, and his team were enthusiastic about staging this year's CONFLUENCE 24. The focus on art education, particularly in regions facing multiple challenges, underscored the exhibition's commitment to assist and promote creative talent. As one artist at the exhibition poignantly noted, "Nothing is more valuable for us than having people here see every artwork and create their own understanding and thoughts. It feels surreal." CONFLUENCE 24, a week-long collective gathering featuring photography, architecture, design, conversations, sessions and more. This evolving platform supported diverse creative practices and encouraged constructive dialogue within and across multiple communities. Visitors at The Stainless Gallery witnessed the beauty and depth of CONFLUENCE 24, where every piece of art told a story and every individual found a unique connection. As the curtains close on CONFLUENCE 24, the echoes of creativity and the spirit of artistic expression linger on. The exhibition not only showcased the immense talent of artists but also served as a platform for meaningful conversations and reflections. It was a celebration of art, culture and creativity, reminding us of the profound impact of artistic expression on our lives. CONFLUENCE 24 was more than an exhibition; it was a tribute to the power of art to inspire, provoke thought and bring people together.

## CAPTURING HOPE THROUGH THE LENS

In the bustling world of photography, Nanki Singh stands out as a beacon of compassion and change. This young, New York-based photographer has made waves with her powerful exhibition "Aaine Tak Ka Safar" which shines a light on the lives of acid attack survivors in India. Singh's work goes beyond mere images; it's a call for empathy and action says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

Photographers are the lens of everyone's life as they have the power to deliver a message that needs to be seen by everyone. Every photograph has the ability to share unspoken messages to the world that words can't express. This is where Nanki Singh excels, using her photography not just to capture moments, but to tell compelling stories that resonate deeply with audiences around the globe. Nanki Singh is an emerging New York-based photographer who is passionate about social photography. Her work reflects a deep involvement and an undeniable soul, making her lens a viaduct that connects the hearts and minds of viewers to diverse stories, emotions, and journeys. Focusing largely on the determined women of India, Singh offers a glimpse into their often challenging lives, creating powerful narratives that demand attention and inspire change. Nanki Singh's journey as a photographer began in an unexpected manner. As a shy and diffident schoolgirl, she struggled to express her thoughts until she started experimenting with her cousin's camera. It was during a holiday to Namibia at the age of 16, while shooting wildlife on a borrowed camera, that Singh discovered her voice. The diversity of the world around her became her muse, and through photography, she found a means to articulate her innermost thoughts and feelings. "Fashion, weddings, and product photography are enjoyable, and I love being in a studio, but it is photo-documentation that truly captivates me," Singh reflects. This love for capturing real-life stories led her to focus on social issues, with a particular emphasis on the struggles and triumphs of women in India. Singh's latest exhibition, "Aaine Tak Ka Safar," at the Confluence 24 art exhibition holds special significance for her. The title, which translates to "Journey to the Mirror," was inspired by the stories of acid attack survivors who found it



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

excruciatingly difficult to look at themselves in the mirror post-attack. While society often considers their physical pain, medical journey and psychological trauma, the everyday anguish of facing a mirror is frequently overlooked. Singh wanted to highlight this overlooked aspect and offer viewers a glimpse into the survivors' mirrors. Her collaboration with the Chhanv Foundation, an organisation supporting acid attack survivors, was pivotal. Singh's initial attempts to work with medical professionals were stifled by restrictions that threatened her artistic voice. However, Chhanv Foundation welcomed her interpretation, allowing her to portray the survivors not as victims, but as strong, resilient individuals who had worked hard to overcome unimaginable pain and trauma. Starting this project at the age of 18, Singh faced numerous challenges, the foremost being making the survivors feel comfortable and at ease. "I set very strict boundaries for myself," she explains. "I was always mindful of their trauma and decided to sensitively depict their story without sensationalising it. I gave them full agency over how they were portrayed, engaging them in discussions about their representation." Her creative process was slow and deliberate, nurtured over four years. She embraced a simple, documentary style, ensuring her subjects were depicted true to their personalities. "My work should aim to empower the subjects and give them a voice," Singh states. "It's crucial to represent women authentically and respectfully,



avoiding stereotypes and clichés." The reaction of the survivors to being photographed and having their stories shared was overwhelmingly positive. Singh's empathetic approach and long-term commitment made the survivors comfortable with her being their voice. They drew her into their lives with their positivity, resilience and strength. Singh always "Photography raises awareness and drives societal change by capturing and sharing the stark realities of issues like acid attacks in a way that is accessible and emotionally engaging." Through her visual storytelling, Singh humanises victims, educates the public, challenges societal norms, and inspires action. The impact of Singh's work is profound. By presenting these images to the public, she provokes deeper reflection on cultural and societal norms. "How does our society perpetuate conditions that

enable such acts?" she asks. "What roles do power dynamics, gender roles and lack of legal protections play?" These are the questions Singh hopes her work will inspire viewers to consider. Singh's exhibitions have garnered attention both in New York and New Delhi. While the Chelsea exhibition was a success, raising \$13,000 for the survivor's cafe, Singh found the Delhi exhibition particularly meaningful. "What made The Confluence '24 in Delhi exhibition better was the girls' presence," she says. "I have always felt it was their story and they were there that day to tell it." Nanki Singh's "Aaine Tak Ka Safar" is more than an exhibition; it is a powerful narrative of strength, resilience and hope. Through her empathetic and authentic approach, Singh bridges the gap between viewers and the often overlooked stories of acid attack survivors. Her work not only raises awareness but also inspires change, challenging societal norms and advocating for justice. In a world where brutalities like acid attacks reveal a disturbing undercurrent of violence and misogyny, Singh's photography serves as a beacon of hope and a call to action. Her lens captures not just images, but the very essence of human experience, making the invisible visible and the forgotten remembered. Through her work, Nanki Singh continues to prove that photography has the power to change the world. Nanki Singh is not just a photographer to watch - she's a vital voice in the ongoing dialogue about gender, violence and human rights in India and beyond.