Trilobite fossils from upstate New York reveal extra set of legs

The Hindu Bureau

A new study finds that a trilobite species with exceptionally well-preserved fossils from upstate New York has an additional set of legs underneath its head. The research, led by the American Museum of Natural History and Nanjing University in China, suggests that having a fifth pair of head appendages might be more widespread among trilobites than once

thought. Published in the journal *Palaeontology*, the study helps researchers better understand how trilobite heads segmented.

Trilobites are a group of extinct arthropods whose living relatives include lobsters and spiders. Like other arthropods, the bodies of trilobites are made up of many segments, with the head region comprised of several fused segments. As with other parts of the trilobite body (the thorax and tail), these segments were associated with appendages, which ranged in function from sensing to feeding to locomotion.

Two ways

The segments in the trilobite head can be counted in two different ways: by looking at the grooves (called furrows) on the upper side of the trilobite fossil's hard exoskeleton, or by counting the pairs of

preserved antennae and legs on the underside of the fossil. The soft appendages of trilobites are rarely preserved, though, and when looking at the segments in the trilobite head, researchers regularly find a mismatch between these two methods.

In the new study, researchers examined newly recovered specimens of the exceptionally preserved trilobite Triarthrus eatoni from upstate New

York. These fossils, known for the gold shine of the pyrite replacement preserving them, show an additional, previously undescribed leg underneath the head.

Resolving mismatch

By making comparisons with another trilobite species, the exceptionally preserved Olenoides serratus from the Burgess Shale in British Columbia, the researchers propose a model for how appendages were attached to the head in relation to the grooves in the exoskeleton.

This model resolves the apparent mismatch and indicates that the trilobite head included six segments: an anterior segment associated with the developmental origin of the eyes and five additional segments, associated with one pair of antennae and four pairs of walking legs, respectively.

Diabetes drug may lower death rate in obese people: study

Excess body weight, especially abdominal obesity, is associated with health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease; various weight reduction methods have been tried over the years, most have not stood the test of time

Rajeev Jayadevan

body weight, especialabdominal obesity, is associated with several health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease. Various weight reduction methods have been tried over the years, but most have not stood the test of

Recently, a class of drugs called GLP-1 agonists, originally used for diabetes, has gained attention for its role in weight loss. These drugs mimic the gut hormone GLP-1, which enhances insulin release and slows digestion, promoting a sense of fullness. Among these drugs, semaglutide has been in use for diabetes since 2017.

In higher doses, it is now used as a weight-loss drug in Western countries. A study published recently in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology revealed promising results from its use in people without diabetes.

ed by the makers of semaglutide, included 17,604 obese or overweight participants with cardiovascular disease but no diabetes. They were randomised to receive weekly injections of either semaglutide or a placebo and were followed up for three years. The aim was to check for any reduction in deaths, heart attacks, and strokes, as the drug was known to reduce weight. During follow-up, 833 people (4.7%) died. Compared to the placebo group, participants who received semaglutide had lower death rates from all

Study raises a few important questions

Compared to the placebo group, participants who received semaglutide had lower death



Semaglutide is now used as a weight-loss drug in many developed countries

causes. The primary findings of the SELECT trial were published earlier in The New England Journal of Medicine in December 2023. A 19% reduction in cardiovascular mortality, heart attacks, and strokes in the semaglutide group was the highlight.

Reduced deaths

raised questions. For example, why was there an early reduction in deaths even before the participants lost weight? Typically, the health benefits of weight loss take longer to manifest. For instance, a Swedish bariatric surgery study by Sjöström et al., which also demonstrated reduced deaths from weight loss, had an average follow-up of 10.9 years. Following surgery, although weight loss occurred in the first year, death reduction only occurred much later.

Secondly, the SELECT study participants were

■ The study showed unexpected reduction in COVID-19 deaths though the vaccination status of participants is not mentioned ■ The use of loop diuretic drugs at the start of the trial was not the same among those who remained alive versus those who died

Only 11.7% of participants who remained alive used loop diuretic drugs compared with 35.9% among those who died

A preliminary results published last year

showed a 19% reduction in cardiovascular

An early reduction in deaths was found even

benefits of weight loss take longer to manifest

before the participants lost weight. Health

mortality in the semaglutide group

- Loop diuretic medicines are commonly prescribed for advanced disease conditions of the heart, liver and kidney
- Many participants who died during the trial may have had more advanced heart disease

not diabetic, implying that the known anti-diabetic effects of GLP-1 agonists could not have accounted for the reduced deaths. Finally, there was an unexpected reduction in CO-VID-19 deaths. The paper did not mention participants' vaccination status. This leaves unanswered questions about how GLP-1 VID-19 mortality.

When a clinical trial reports an unexpected benefit in the treatment arm compared to the placebo, possibilities arise - either the treatment is genuinely better, or the placebo group had participants in worse health at the start of the trial. The surprising results from this study were the earlier-than-expected death reduction and the apparent effect on CO-VID-19 mortality. This warrants a closer look at

whether the two groups

had important differences

at baseline.

Large randomised trials like SELECT can minimise such discrepancies. Accordingly, there were no major baseline differences between the semaglutide and placebo groups in terms of age, gender, HbA1c, blood pressure, cholesterol level, BMI, or waist circumference

the supple mentary tables comparing baseline parameters of those who died with those who remained alive have a striking difference in the use of loop diuretic medi-

Among those who remained alive, only 11.7% were using loop diuretic drugs at the start of the trial, compared to 35.9% among those who later died of cardiovascular causes. Loop diuretic medicines are commonly prescribed for advanced disease conditions of the heart, liver, and kidney, and their use could serve as an indirect indicator of the severity of the participants' health. This suggests that many participants who died during the trial may have had more advanced heart disease from the outset.

Although randomisation generally ensures a balanced distribution of participants,

unevenness could still occur. The total number of people with heart failure was comparable in both groups, which included varying degrees of severity. However, the paper does not specify whether the placebo group had a higher proportion of individuals on loop diuretics, which could indicate more advanced heart failure. Such a discrepancy could have potentially contributed to higher death rates during follow-up. This might also explain the unexpected difference observed in COVID-19 deaths. It is also possible that properties of GLP-1 agonists other than weight loss and control of diabetes are involved here.

advancing medical knowledge. While unexpected findings are not uncommon, it is vital to explore all possible explanations before concluding. GLP-1 agonists are already recommended for people with diabetes, and this study suggests they may also benefit overweight and obese individuals without diabetes. These findings could impact medical practice, particularly if further studies confirm the results.

(Rajeev Javadevan is Chairman, Research Cell, Kerala State IMA)



Smallpox vaccine moderately effective in preventing Mpox

One dose of modified vaccinia Ankara-Bavarian Nordic (MVA-BN) smallpox vaccine is moderately effective in preventing Mpox infection, a study finds. No randomised clinical trials of vaccination against Mpox have been conducted. To find the real world effectiveness, researchers used a technique called target trial emulation. Over 3,200 vaccinated men were matched to an equal number of unvaccinated controls. The estimated vaccine effectiveness of one dose of MVA-BN against Mpox infection was found to be 58%.



Fish fossil shows evidence of Earth's evolutionary march

The discovery of an exceptionally well-preserved ancient primitive Devonian coelacanth fish in remote Western Australia has been linked to a period of heightened tectonic activity, or movement in the Earth's crust, according to the new study in Nature Communications. The new fossil from the Gogo Formation in Western Australia, named Ngamugawi wirngarri, also helps to fill in an important transition period in coelacanth history, between the primitive forms and other more 'anatomically-modern' forms.



Study finds ozone pollution reduces tropical forest growth

Ozone gas is reducing the growth of tropical forests – leaving an estimated 290 million tonnes of carbon uncaptured each year, new research shows. It calculates that ground-level ozone reduces new yearly growth in tropical forests by 5.1% on average. The effect is stronger in some regions. The researchers ran experiments to measure the ozone susceptibility of tropical tree species and incorporated the results into a computer model of global vegetation.

Poems express ideas better than prose



D. Balasubramanian

UNICEF has declared March 21 of every year as World Poetry Day, with a chosen theme. It is devoted to supporting linguistic diversity using poetic expression. In 2022, the theme was 'environment'. Last year it was 'Always a poet, even in prose' and this year, the theme was 'Standing on the shoulders of giants'. Poetry is used to evoke emotions, create imagery, and convey ideas in a highly structured and imaginative manner. It has rhythm (using two or more syllables), metre (point of

by the reader or singer and appeals to the heart and mind more effectively. It has a sense of economy, embellishment, and rhythm. It is often singable. Note for example our national anthem 'Jana Gana Mana', a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, which we all sing with gusto and pride. At the same time, many of us also remember, hear, and sing sad songs in our languages.

The World Poetry Day 2022 focussed on endangered languages, their poems, prose, and songs. Across the world, more than 7,000 languages are endangered. In India, according to UNESCO, 42 Indian languages (spoken by less than 10,000 people) are endangered. Since 2013, India has initiated a scheme for the protection and preservation of endangered languages in the



While natural and grammatical language is used in prose, poetic language is figurative and symbolic.

country. The site 'endangered languages in India' offers a list of these languages such as the Great Andamanese, Tibetic Balti, and the Asur of Jharkhand. The Society for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) at Mysuru is actively engaged in the area.

World Poetry Day 2023 had the theme: Always a poet, even in prose. Shakespeare was an outstanding example. Even his prose had a poetic lilt to it. Here are some examples: 'Brevity is the soul of wit'; and 'my words fly up, but my thoughts remain below'. Similar poems in Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil have been written by several scholars. Why write a poem when

we can use prose to express what we wish to have in mind? While the language used in prose is nat-

ural and grammatical, poetic language is figurative and symbolic. Oxford Scholastica Academy points out that poetry is a form of literary expression that uses language. As the Encyclopedia Britannica says, in poetry you carefully choose and arrange language for its meaning, sound, and rhythm. While reading or listening to poetry, the 'pleasure centre' in your brain is actively engaged in searching for symbolism and interpreting metaphors. The site 'Scientists take

on poetry' points out that the mathematician Ada Lovelace, the chemist Humphry Davy and the physicist James Maxwell wrote poems about their work in India, and S.S. Bhatnagar wrote poems in Hindi. C.V. Raman, though not a poet, was interested in the scientific basis of musical

wrote "Experiments with mechanically played violins", which was published in the Proceedings of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science in 1920. He also studied the uniqueness of Indian drums. His analyses of the harmonic nature of the sounds of tabla and mridangam were the first scientific studies on Indian percussion. Likewise, the physicist S.N. Bose played the string instrument esraj. The naturalist Salim Ali (Birdman of India) wrote many books on the birds of India. The electronic engineer Rangarajan (with the pen name 'Sujatha') wrote excellent books and articles in Tamil, which are widely appreciated for his language skills. Should there not be more scientists who write poems and essays on music?

sounds in violins and

Risk factor Can light pollution be a new risk factor for Alzheimer's?

Question Corner

Outdoor light at night could be a significant risk factor in Alzheimer's disease, according to a new study. Light pollution has already been associated with an increased risk of some disorders and diseases. Based on light intensity, researchers divided people into different groups. While the cause is unknown, higher nighttime light intensity was associated with a greater Alzheimer's disease prevalence than any other risk factor examined in the study for those under the age of 65, suggesting that younger

sensitive to the effects of light exposure at night. Exposure to light influences the body's natural sleep-wake pattern, called a circadian rhythm. Exposure to light at night can disrupt a person's circadian rhythm, which can make a person less resilient and more prone to disease. The research results are limited to a subset of the population and further testing is needed to better understand the connection between evening outdoor light and Alzheimer's disease.

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Readers may send their questions /

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Will Mission Mausam improve weather forecasts?

What is on the anvil to make accurate predictions? What is the challenge with weather modification plans?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

n September 11, the Cabinet cleared a ₹2,000 crore programme called Mission Mausam to upgrade infrastructure used to make atmospheric observations. It will involve a major upgrade of instruments used by the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting, and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology.

What are its objectives?

The mission's focus is to improve atmospheric observations to enable better quality monsoon forecasts, improve alerts warning of deteriorating air quality, and warn of extreme weather events and cyclones. Critical elements of the mission include deploying 'next-generation radars' and satellite systems with advanced sensors and high-performance supercomputers, developing improved earth-system models, and a GIS-based automated Decision Support System for real-time data dissemination. The nodal agency involved in executing the mission is the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES). In the first tranche of the mission until 2026, the MoES hopes to procure and install up to 60 weather radars, 15 wind profilers, and 15 radiosondes. These instruments give regular updates on the changing parameters of wind speeds,

Meteorologists hope they are able to tweak the electrical characteristics of the cloud so that there are less lightning strikes that lethally traverse from sky to ground

atmospheric pressure, humidity, and temperature at various elevations of the atmosphere.

Is this the first time that a mission of this sort has been conceived?

No. The predecessor is the 'Monsoon Mission,' launched in 2012. Historically, the IMD has relied on statistical methods to forecast monsoons. Different weather parameters were permuted and combined in myriad ways to prepare forecasts about the likely performance of the monsoon in a particular year. These were extremely broad estimates; they almost never warned of the likelihood of droughts and also could not capture the wide regional diversity of

Droughts and floods co-exist and these weather models were usually inadequate at capturing that. The Monsoon Mission proposed a radical approach. Since 2004, meteorologists entiete have been working or different approach to forecasting that relies on high performance computing machines, or supercomputers. They sought to simulate the weather on a particular day and, via physics equations, make a map of how each day's weather would pan out over the next few days, weeks, and even months. These weather models, called dynamical models, are now the standard approach to weather forecasts and climate studies. This can give more accurate 'medium range' forecasts and often this is what consumers of weather information find useful. The Monsoon Mission eventually succeeded in developing a general-purpose dynamical model that can be tweaked to generate forecasts on multiple timescales – from daily forecasts to seasonal monsoon predictions.

Beyond the monsoon, such a model could be customised for heatwaves, cold waves, and local forecasts. It is also an expensive approach to forecasting and requires sophisticated computers, radars, wind profilers, and an array of data-gathering devices.

What is novel about this mission?

Improving dynamical models is an endless pursuit, limited only by money and intellectual curiosity. While the latest mission builds on its predecessor by getting more of such equipment, it has outlined a radical plan for "weather management." This means actively changing the weather using cloud seeding. The latter involves spraying clouds with appropriate chemicals to increase or decrease their water-carrying capacity. Plans are also afoot to control lightning. As statistics reveal, lightning strikes are the number one cause of nature-propelled deaths in India and were responsible for 2,821 or 35% of the 8,060 accidental deaths attributable to natural forces in 2022, according to the latest NCRB report.

Meteorologists say they hope one day to be able to tweak the electrical characteristics of the cloud so that there are less lightning strikes that lethally traverse from sky to ground. To this end, a large 'cloud chamber' - that simulates the interior of a cloud - will be set up at the IITM. To be sure, research into weather modification has a history stretching back to the 1950s and many experiments have been conducted in India, including spraying aerosols in certain regions of one cloud, and leaving out the others. However, the big challenge with weather modification is setting sharp boundaries. It is not unusual for seeded clouds to rain in places where they are not supposed to. Gleaning a better understanding of these processes is a major component of Mission Mausam.

What are the issues faced by EPFO pensioners?

Have some of the problems eased with the government announcing that 78 lakh beneficiaries can pick up their pension from any bank, any branch from January 2025? What are some of their other demands? Is a raise in the minimum pension amount likely? What are the difficulties?

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

early 78 lakh Provident Fund (PF) pensioners across the country under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995 (EPS-95) of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) will receive their pension through any bank, any branch from January 1, 2025. The Union Labour Ministry cleared the proposal earlier this month for a Centralised Pension Payment System (CPPS) as part of the EPFO's ongoing IT modernisation project, the Centralised IT Enabled System.

What contributed to the formulation of this new arrangement?

At present, if a pensioner decides to migrate, they have to seek the transfer of Pension Payment Orders (PPO) from one office to another. This has invariably resulted in complaints from pensioners about the delay in transfers, and subsequent payments. Moreover, pensioners can draw their monthly pension only through a group of three or four banks empanelled with the EPFO at every zone or region.

The new facility has been made possible in the wake of the implementation of the CPPS, which has been approved by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment, according to the Minister and Chairperson of the EPFO's Central Board of Trustees, Mansukh Mandaviya, in a statement issued on September 4. In the next phase, CPPS will enable a smooth transition to an Aadhaar-based payment system. The pensioners will no longer need to visit the branch for any verification at the time of commencement of pension and the pension shall be immediately credited upon release, the government said. The EPFO expects a significant cost reduction in pension disbursement after

Trade unions and even Members of Parliament, cutting across party lines, have been urging the government to hike the minimum pension amount

moving to the new system.

Will the proposed arrangement make things easier for pensioners?

"On the face of it, we welcome the development even though we are waiting for the full details of the announcement. Everything depends upon implementation, during which we will come to know whether there are practical difficulties or not," said K.P. Babu, general secretary of the Chennai EPF Pensioners' Welfare Association and Organising secretary of the All India Co-ordination Committee of EPF Pensioners' Associations. However, he added that for all practical purposes, many pensioners, like any other group of bank customers, draw money through ATM cards, thanks to the core banking

Has the announcement satisfied pensioners?

To many pensioners, the Union Ministry's decision has been a disappointment, as they expected the government to provide them with a pleasant surprise, just as it has done for its government staff – a unified pension scheme which seeks to combine many features of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) and the New Pension

Trade unions and even Members of Parliament, cutting across party affiliations, have been urging the government to hike the minimum pension amount of ₹1,000. Late last month, a BIP MP from Gujarat, Shobhanaben M. Baraiya, wrote to the Minister saying, that approximately seven years ago, the request for hiking the minimum pension to ₹7,500 along with dearness allowance (DA) and medical allowance was "assured consideration." The Chennai EPF Pensioners' Welfare Association, the EPS-95 Retired Employees' Welfare Association, Mysuru, and the Provident Fund Pensioners' Association, Kochi, have been seeking ₹9,000 plus DA. The same demand was raised by trade unions during their pre-Budget consultation with Union Finance Minister.

What is the status of applications by PF pensioners and members for pension on higher wages?

PF members and pensioners are increasingly anxious over how their applications for pension on higher wages are being processed. Many of them had nursed the hope that they would get higher pension immediately after the Supreme Court's judgment in November 2022 which approved, as a matter of principle, the payment of pension on wages that exceeded the PF ceiling. However, a recent reply from the EPFO under the Right to Information Act showed that as of August 7, 2024, the number of applicants

who were issued PPOs was 8,401, which included two from those who retired before September 1, 2014. Besides, demand notices were sent to 89,235 other applicants, requiring them to transfer their share of arrears. Nearly 17.5 lakh applications had been submitted online, of which about 1.5 lakh were rejected.

What is the Union government's position?

As regards the hike in minimum pension, the Centre has been citing financial constraints, though it has been increasing its allocation annually for the EPS-95.

The government's contribution to the Pension Scheme is at the rate of 1.16% of the basic wages of employees, apart from providing budgetary support to ensure the minimum pension payment. The Pension Scheme is also getting funds through the transfer of 8.33% of the Provident Fund contributions by employers. An official document reveals that during 2022-23, the government's contribution was approximately ₹8,785 crore and it was ₹ 9,760 crore for 2023-24. For 2024-25, the bill would be ₹10,950 crore. Under these circumstances, it remains to be seen to what extent the Union government will increase the minimum pension

On the issue of pension on higher wages, the EPFO was originally against it, as the body had contended that the EPS-95 was meant for economically weak workers, who had, proportionately, contributed more than the high wage earners. The "reverse subsidy" was an "anomaly," which was corrected by the modifications in 2014. Even now, its stand has been that it cannot be liberal in granting pension on higher wages as this would affect the sustainability of the Pension Fund. However, till now, the fund has not witnessed any cash flow problems, despite there being a projected actuarial deficit in the valuation. There has been a widespread complaint that the PF body has been "unrealistic" in seeking very old documents from pensioners, members, and employers.

What is the way forward?

Apart from increasing its contributions substantially to the EPS-95 and revising upwards the ceiling for PF contributions from ₹15,000 which was fixed 10 years ago, the Union government should implement the idea floated by former Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, during his Budget speech in February 2015, that an option be given to employees to invest in the EPF or the NPS, a move which will take care of the issue of returns on investment. This is not to overlook the fact that since 2015, the EPFO has been investing in exchange-traded funds (ETF), as notified by the Union Labour Ministry. The exclusion of the applicability of EPS-95 to those who joined after September 1, 2014, and earned more than the ceiling has to be removed, making pension eligible to all employees, regardless of the pay.



a disappointment, GETTY IMAGES

What rights are queer couples fighting for?

Why is the advisory to allow the LGBTQIA+ community to open joint bank accounts a small step towards easing their daily lives? Why is the community kept out of succession, inheritance, alimony, and maintenance? What did the SC rule on same-sex marriage in October 2023?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

recent Finance Ministry advisory took a first step at easing some of the difficulties of daily life for queer couples who cannot legally marry. The clarification, along with a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) circular, made it clear to all commercial banks that people from the LGBTQIA+ community and those in queer relationships cannot be prevented from opening joint bank accounts and nominating their queer partners as their beneficiaries.

What are the problems queer people face when their unions are unrecognised? Supriyo Chakraborty and his partner have been together for 12 years, but when one of them is in hospital or needs to take a medical decision, his partner does not have a legal right to weigh in. "We are scared. Right now, our parents are still alive, so we have managed. But we are getting older. What happens when they are no longer there? For these kinds of life and death decisions, the hospital looks for blood relatives or a legal spouse," he points out.

If caregiving rights are at the heart of the demand for legally recognised marriages,

A six-member panel of various departments has been set up to define the scope of entitlements to queer couples

funeral rites provide an even bleaker example. Earlier this year, a Kochi man named Jebin had to petition the Kerala High Court to be allowed to attend the funeral of his live-in partner Manu who died of injuries sustained in a fall. Manu's family had refused to accept his body and pay his medical bills as they did not approve of their relationship. The court ruled that Jebin could pay his final respects at the funeral, provided Manu's family did not object.

Beyond such grave matters, the mundane routines of daily life can all become harder for queer couples. They cannot obtain a ration card as a family; be nominated for the payment of gratuity, provident fund benefits, or insurance benefits as a dependent spouse; or receive tax benefits for payments made on behalf of the spouse. The laws of succession, inheritance, alimony, and maintenance do not take queer couples into account. Their communications are not protected by evidentiary privilege reserved for married couples, meaning they could be compelled to give evidence against each other in court. They cannot donate organs to each other. They cannot adopt a child together.

"In our country, it is marriage that gives a couple access to a bundle of legal rights. It is about so much more than social acceptance," says Mr. Chakraborty, explaining why he went to court to seek the right to same-sex marriage.

What did the Supreme Court say?

In its October 2023 judgment, the court refused to recognise same-sex marriage, saying that judicial review must steer clear of matters that fall in the legislative domain. However, it also noted that the Constitution protects the freedom of all persons including queer couples to enter into a union, adding that "the failure of the State to recognise the bouquet of entitlements which flow from a union would result in a disparate impact on queer couples who cannot marry under the current legal regime". It also noted the Union government's commitment to set up a committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary to define the scope of such entitlements. This six-member panel – which includes the Secretaries to the Ministries of Home Affairs,

Social Justice and Empowerment, Law and Justice, Women and Child Development, and Health and Family Development – was set up in April, held its first meeting in May, and began stakeholder consultations in July. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community have been

encouraged to email the committee directly. Apart from joint bank accounts, the court directed that the panel must consider how to enable partners in a queer relationship to be treated as a part of the same family for the purpose of a ration card. It also noted that "medical practitioners have a duty to consult family or next of kin or next friend, in the event patients who are terminally ill have not executed an Advance Directive. Parties in a union may be considered 'family' for this purpose." The court directed the panel to consider jail visitation rights and the right to access the body of the deceased partner and arrange the last rites, succession rights, financial and material benefits, and rights flowing from employment such as gratuity.

What kind of changes in rules are needed?

Even before last month's advisories from the Finance Ministry and the RBI, some banks claimed that their inclusive policies allowed queer couples to nominate each other as beneficiaries and open joint accounts over the last few years. Mr. Chakraborty dismisses such claims as a "marketing gimmick", noting that bank branch employees had not been given the sensitivity training to back up the policies proclaimed from their headquarters. "The local clerk simply trades in familiar stereotypes. But now that we have a government order, we can demand our rights. Legal backing is essential,"

Similar advisories from the insurance regulator, the State departments in charge of the Public Distribution System, medical boards' guidelines, and the Income Tax department may be sufficient for some benefits to be made accessible to queer couples. However, amendments to family and inheritance laws, the Juvenile Justice Act, and the Income Tax Act may need to be passed by Parliament and State legislatures to make deeper changes.

"We tried to get ourselves a bouquet of rights through the petition [to recognise same-sex marriages], but that did not work. So now, it is a longer slog to gain each of them one by one," says Mr. Chakraborty.



queer couples. FILE PHOTO

The regulator at the centre of a storm

Madhabi Puri Buch

The SEBI chief has been facing a barrage of allegations following U.S. short-seller Hindenburg Research's August 10 statement asserting improprieties tied to the Adani Group that forced her and her husband to state that their lives and finances were an 'open book'

Suresh Seshadri

he Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is the apex regulator for the securities market with a preamble that affirms its commitment "to protect the interests of investors in securities and to promote the development of, and to regulate the securities market."

In February 2022, the Government announced the appointment of Madhabi Puri Buch, who was at the time a Whole Time Member on the SEBI board, as the first woman to head the securities markets regulator.

An Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad alumna with a graduate degree in Mathematics from St. Stephen's College, New Delhi, Ms. Buch is also one of the youngest chiefs at SEBI, taking the helm from her predecessor in March 2022, when she was about 56.

A veteran of the investment banking and financial services industry, who at one-time headed ICICI Securities as its MD &CEO, Ms. Buch was expected to bring vital industry perspective to her job of regulating the markets and securities issuances while ensuring that investor protection was always accorded the highest priority.

A protege of N. Vaghul and subsequently K.V. Kamath during her years at ICICI, Ms. Buch even had a stint as a consultant to the Shanghai-based BRICS-established New Development Bank, which Mr. Kamath led for a while.

Less than a year into her job at SEBI's helm, Ms. Buch faced her first stern test of regulatory stewardship when, in January 2023, U.S. short-seller Hindenburg Research levelled exhaustive charges of stock price manipulation and accounting fraud against the Adani Group of companies.

With the prices of all the listed Adani Group entities nosediving in the wake of the Hindenburg allegations, hundreds of crores of investor wealth

was wiped out in just a matter of a few trading sessions, sparking a series of petitions in the country's top court seeking judicial intervention.

In early March 2023, the Supreme Court ordered the formation of a committee to look into possible regulatory failure in dealing with the allegations that the Adani Group firms flouted norms in the securities market.

Clean chit

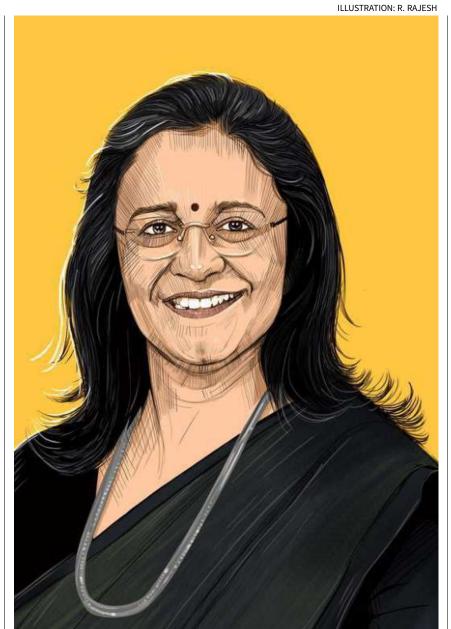
And in May, the court-appointed panel returned a finding that it could not conclude there had been regulatory failure.

It also cited the various investigations SEBI had been conducting since as far back as October 2020 into the ownership of 13 entities tied to allegations in the Hindenburg report about minimum public shareholding, adding that the markets watchdog's probe into the entities' final ownership had drawn a blank.

So, when on August 10 this year Hindenburg fired a fresh salvo, this time levelling charges against Ms. Buch of conflicts of interest including having invested in a Mauritius-based offshore fund with links to the Adanis, all hell broke loose.

The SEBI Chairperson and her husband Dhaval Buch, a supply chain specialist who had served as FMCG major Unilever's global chief procurement officer before retiring, issued two back-to-back statements in response to the short seller's allegations seeking to clear the air.

In the first statement, the Buch couple asserted: "In the context of allegations made... against us, we would like to state that we strongly deny the baseless allegations and insinuations. The same are devoid of any truth. Our life and finances are an open book. All disclosures as required have already been furnished to SEBI over the years. We have no hesitation in disclosing any and all financial documents, including those that relate to the period when we were strictly private citizens, to any and every



authority that may seek them."

The markets watchdog, for its part, also issued an exhaustive statement on August 11 in which it emphasised that "relevant disclosures required in terms of holdings of securities and their transfers have been made by the Chairperson from time to time. Chairperson has also recused herself

in matters involving potential conflicts of interest".

People with knowledge of SEBI's inner workings stressed that Ms. Buch had at no point in time sought to influence any of the multiple investigations being carried out by the markets watchdog.

"She can be very aggressive in her

approach to getting work done and demanding results," said a former member of one of the several committees SEBI uses in its consultative process to craft and fine tune policies and the overall regulatory environment.

"And yes, that level of abrasiveness is a clear failing. However, most of her former ICICI group colleagues appreciate and vouch for her personal integrity," the person added, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Ms. Buch is also facing a groundswell of internal restiveness in SEBI, with a grouping of officers questioning the "mistrust and lack of respect shown at the highest level towards employees".

"She is facing a real media trial with the Opposition also deciding to target her to get at the government," says a former banker. "Also, there are several regulatory measures that SEBI has taken and is planning that a group of market players are strongly opposed to. They too will be happy to see her fall," the banker added.

Tightening norms

Among the measures tightening norms is a SEBI guideline that took effect on September 9 requiring all Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) with more than 50% global exposure to India or holding ₹25,000 crore investment in Indian equities to disclose all granular details on the ultimate beneficiary of the fund to the regulator. Failing which, the FPI would have to liquidate and rebalance its holdings to comply with the threshold specified by SEBI. And another proposal aims to tighten guidelines for derivatives trading.

"For the sake of the institution and investor faith in the markets regulator, it will, however, be best if an independent review is conducted at the earliest to clear the air on everything related to the SEBI chief," said another former SEBI official. "This is something that will surely be in her interest too, especially given the statement asserting that her life is an open book," the person added.

THE GIST

In March 2022, Madhabi Buch, then 56, became one of the youngest chiefs and the first woman to head SEBI, taking the helm from her predecessor

She faced her first stern test in January 2023 when Hindenburg Research levelled charges of stock price manipulation and accounting fraud against the Adani Group of companies. A Supreme Court-appointed panel returned a finding in May saying it could not conclude there had been regulatory failure in the Adani matter

Her latest challenge came this August when Hindenburg accused Ms. Buch of conflict of interest for having invested in a Mauritius-based offshore fund with links to the Adanis

The challenger who fled

Edmundo Gonzalez

First starting off as a diplomat and then becoming the presidential candidate who fled to Spain after election results, Edmundo Gonzalez has had a tumultuous political journey

Sruthi Darbhamulla

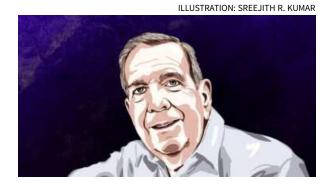
dmundo Gonzalez Urrutia landed with his wife in Madrid on September 8, seeking asylum in Spain. He had been the official presidential candidate of the Democratic Unitary Platform in the Venezuelan elections held on July 28. According to Opposition parties, the 75-year old retired diplomat was also the victor.

However, the country's National Electoral Council declared President Nicolas Maduro the winner, reelecting him for a third term. Opposition parties and poll observers dissented, citing their vote tallies to assert that his rival garnered more votes than Mr. Maduro. Exit polls had placed Mr. Gonzalez with 65% support, while Mr. Maduro reportedly had only between 14% to 31% of popular support. Countries such as the U.S, the U.K and Spain have not recognised Mr. Maduro's victory.

But the powers that be have refused to capitulate. An arrest warrant had been issued for Mr. Gonzalez ahead of his departure, accusing him of several crimes, including conspiracy and forgery of documents.

Mr. Gonzalez was born in 1949 in La Victoria, close to Caracas, to a family of limited means. His mother was a teacher and his father a shopkeeper.

Keen on foreign service, Mr. Gonzalez studied international relations at the



Central University of Venezuela, also becoming a student leader during his time there. After graduating in 1970, he joined the diplomatic services, serving in Belgium and El Salvador. Mr. Gonzalez also served as Ambassador to Algeria and later Argentina, during the Hugo Chavez regime. He came back to Venezuela in 2002 and retired from the

Unobtrusive beginning

His political innings began in an unobtrusive manner. He became a backbench adviser for the Democratic Unity Roundtable – a coalition of Opposition parties - in 2008. He became president of the coalition's Board of Directors in 2021, but continued in relative public obscurity. He spent his time in academic research, writing papers and giving talks, and being a loving grandfather to his four grandchildren.

Mr. Gonzalez found himself the presidential pick after two Opposition leaders - the popular Maria Corina Machado and Corina Yorisx – were barred from running by of-

As a deadline loomed, Mr. Gonzalez was selected as the Opposition's candidate in April. He exuded calmness

and a grandfatherly air, particularly contrasted to other firebrand opposition leaders. His demeanour garnered him public appeal and opinion polls showed he had built a sizeable lead over Mr. Maduro ahead of the elections.

ficials citing technicalities.

"It's time for the big Venezuelan family to come together once more," he said in an interview with CNN en Español. His poll plank consisted of curtailing inflation, at a 64% yearon-year high, and bringing back trust in government institutions and the judiciary. Further, Mr. Gonzalez was not as openly critical of Mr. Maduro's regime as other Opposition leaders, and left the prospect of amnesty for political opponents open. Notably, some of these leaders are under investigation by the International Criminal Court for their role in crimes against humanity, following brutal

attempts to suppress dis-

sent in Venezuela, which

has been witnessing a spiralling economy, sanctions and the flight of citizens ov-

er the last few years. **Elections and aftermath**

Early results on July 28 pointed to a Gonzalez win, but Mr. Maduro was declared as having garnered 51% of the vote. Opposition leaders say their vote tallies indicate a clear victory for Mr. Gonzalez, and have called upon the authorities to publish the final poll results. International leaders have called for transparency in polling data, while Venezuelans have taken to the streets in protest.

Now, following what Mr. Gonzalez has called "episodes of pressure, coercion, and threats that I wouldn't be allowed to leave," he has sought asylum in Spain.

On September 10, Spanish lawmakers debated a symbolic motion from the main opposition party to recognise Mr. Gonzalez as winner of the election, as many exiled from Venezuela gathered outside the Spanish Parliament in Madrid. Among the crowd, which held Venezuelan flags and chanted "Brave Venezuela" and "Edmundo, president," was Carolina Gonzalez, the retired diplomat's daughter. She had a message from

her father for the protestors: "I assure you that this fight will continue until we reach our objectives, until the end... Do not lose heart, I will not let you down."

Return of the hardliners

Hefazat-e-Islam

After Sheikh Hasina, it is the turn of Muhammad Yunus to include the hardline Islamists by including them in the Bangladesh government

Suchitra Karthikeyan

n the absence of the 'Begums' in ruling Bangladesh, Islamists have staked claim to the nation's polity once again. Just like Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who attempted to placate hardliner outfit Hefazat-e-Islam, leader of the caretaker government Muhammad Yunus too has adopted a similar approach by inducting the extremist group's deputy chief Prof. A.F.M. Khalid Hossain as Adviser for Religious Affairs in the interim government.

Hefazat-e-Islam, which translates to 'Protectors of Islam', was formed in 2010 to oppose the Sheikh Hasina government's Women's development policy which promised equal rights to property for women. Comprising mainly of Sunni clerics heading a network of 19,199 Quami madrassas and its students in Bangladesh, Hefazat rose to prominence as they took to the streets against the Women's Bill. The group also protested against the repeal of the Fifth Amendment which had altered the Constitution's secular, socialist nature during the

Founded by Islamic scholar Shah Ahmad Shafi, the group initially started

military rule. The demon-

strations, in which dozens

were injured in clashes

with the police, eventually

resulted in the passage of a

watered-down Women's



off as a 'purely religious' outfit with an aim to restore an Islamic administration in Bangladesh. Its current amir (chief) is Muhibbullah Babunagari who heads the central committee comprising several Maulanas. Most of the committee members were incarcerated in 2021 for staging violent protests against Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka. According to a 2017 Economist report, Hefazat's madarassas are funded by Salafi-Wahabi Islamists in Saudi Arabia.

Hasina's soft stance Emboldened by its initial display of street power, Hefazat launched a 'long march' to Dhaka in 2013 demanding capital punishment against 'atheist' bloggers involved in the Shahbag protests who had allegedly 'insulted Islam'. Through a series of massive rallies in Dhaka, the extremist group rolled out its 13-point agenda which demanded a stricter dress code as per Islam, a ban on statues, candlelit vigils, women's development policy, public mixing of men and women and to declare Ahmadiyas as 'non-Muslims'. Violent clashes broke out between the Islamist protestors and security forces as Hefazat attempted to 'lay siege to Dhaka', killing at least fifty.

Despite its extremist policies, Sheikh Hasina chose to indulge Hefazat. Ms. Hasina's decision to remove the statue of the Greek Goddess Themis from the premises of the Supreme Court in 2017, recognising Dawra-e-Hadith (a master's degree equivalent offered by the Quami madarssas) in 2018, and altering history texts are proof of her choice to appease the fundamentalists.

After its successes, Hefazat launched its biggest protest in 2021 when Mr. Modi visited Dhaka. Accusing Mr. Modi of anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, Hefazat, along with several other Islamist bodies, launched anti-Modi protests clashing with the police, resulting in at least 13 deaths. Several Hindu temples were also targeted and a train was attacked in Brahmanbaria.

Upon Mr. Modi's departure from Dhaka, the

Sheikh Hasina government cracked down on Hefazat, arresting hundreds of its members including 23 of its top leaders such as Mamunul Haque, Harunur Rashid and Monir Hossain Qasemi. As Hefazat began reorganising and reforming, Ms. Hasina once again indulged the group by promising to 'look into its more reasonable demands' in 2022. Most of the incarcerated leaders except Mr. Haque and Mr. Qasemi were granted bail

Bigger ally

Ms.Hasina's Following olive branch to Hefazat and her abrupt departure, Islamists have found an even bigger ally in Bangladesh's chief adviser Muhammad Yunus. The Yunus government

has lifted the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and granted bail to Jashimuddin Rahmani, the chief of the al-Qaeda-inspired group Ansarullah Bangla. Moreover, Mr. Yunus also met Mr. Haque, who had spearheaded Hefazat's 2021 anti-Modi protests, raising alarms in India. Amid reports of multiple attacks on Hindus and vandalism of temples and houses, Mr. Yunus has downplayed it saying they were not communal, but a fallout of a political upheaval due to the community's supposed support for the Hasina government - marking Bangladesh's dark return to a hardline Islamist regime.

REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Renewing commitment to democratic principles

The International Day of Democracy is an appropriate moment for us to re-dedicate ourselves to upholding the values of our parliamentary democracy by fostering open dialogue, encouraging civic engagement, and holding institutions accountable

he International Day of Democracy, observed annually on September 15, is a celebration of democratic principles and values globally. Started by the United Nations in 2007, this day aims to promote and uphold the importance of democracy in ensuring human rights, peace, and sustainable development.

India's democratic roots can be traced back to the Vedic period, where assemblies like the sabha and samiti embodied early democratic principles. These institutions allowed for collective decision-making within the community. Around 600 BCE. republics known as gana sanghas emerged, exemplifying democratic governance. Notable republics such as Vajji and Malla were governed by elected councils and leaders, emphasising public participation and shared decision-making. Our ancient texts provide evidence of these practices, underscoring India's long-standing tradition of governance through discussion, consensus, and inclusion. It is a matter of great pride for us that we have successfully established democratic values and ideals in the world in spite of our great geographical, linguistic, and other diversities

Our journey with modern parliamentary democracy began with our Independence in 1947. The adoption of our Constitution in 1950 officially established our country as a sovereign and democratic Republic. Over the years, our democracy has evolved through key political and social developments, including the integration of the princely

states, economic reforms, and the growing influence of regional political parties. Despite many challenges, we continue to stand strong as the world's largest democracy, consistently working to uphold our democratic values and principles even as many countries which attained independence at the same time could not remain functioning democracies. That we could navigate through the diverse challenges even as

a nascent country bears testimony to our resilience as a country with democratic

India is a country where democracy permeates institutions, from the village to the national level. These democratic institutions enjoy constitutional status at all levels. It is indeed our great achievement that democracy has reached the grassroots level.

The Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav was a grand celebration marking 75 years of our Independence. The celebration of democracy during the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav has ushered in Amrit Kaal, a transformative era spanning 2022 to 2047 that aims to propel India towards becoming Viksit Bharat. It underscores the importance of collective responsibility, youth empowerment, and national pride. Amrit Kaal seeks to build upon India's rich democratic legacy, ensuring inclusive growth and sustainable development for all.

At the dawn of the Amrit Kaal, India had the opportunity to host the G20 Summit. As the world's largest democracy, India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 showcased our growing influence on the global stage. The summit, appropriately themed "One Earth,

One Family, One Future," emphasised inclusive and sustainable development, reflecting India's democratic values of equality and collective progress. The Ninth G20 Parliamentary Speakers' Summit (P20), held in October 2023, underscored the nation's role in promoting democratic values and international parliamentary cooperation. At the P20 Summit, India provided

a platform for parliamentary leaders from G20 nations to discuss and address global challenges collectively. A pre-summit conference was also organised where the parliaments of the world re-emphasised their commitment towards Lifestyle for Environment

Each year, International Day of Democracy is observed with a specific theme that seeks to address current challenges and opportunities for democratic governance. This year the theme is "Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Good Governance", emphasising the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance democratic processes. It also highlights the importance of effective governance to mitigate the risks associated with



India is a country where democracy permeates institutions, from the village to the national level

HT ARCHIVE

AL including misinformation and deepfakes. By focusing on AI, this year's theme encourages a global dialogue on how technology can be harnessed to strengthen democratic institutions across the globe.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that India is leveraging AI to revolutionise governance and public services. Initiatives such as IndiaAI support AI start-ups and aim to establish AI centres of excellence. AI is being used to enhance data-driven decision-making, improve citizen services, and streamline administrative processes. Platforms like the Aadhaar Enabled Payment System (AePS) facilitate banking services for citizens using biometric authentication. These efforts reflect India's commitment to using AI for more efficient, transparent, and inclusive governance.

India's new Parliament building integrates advanced technologies to enhance its functionality and efficiency. One of the key features is the Digital Sansad platform, which uses AI for real-time translation of House proceedings in languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India to improve accessibility and inclusivity. The building also employs AI-driven facial recognition and biometric systems to ensure secure and efficient access. Additionally AI-powered tools are being conceived to facilitate seamless communication between members of Parliament, government officials, and citizens, promoting transparency and efficiency. These innovations reflect our commitment to leveraging technology for better governance and democratic processes.

In order to strengthen the democratic values in our country and other countries, it is crucial that we give our youth adequate opportunities to ensure their active participation in democratic processes. AI and technology can play an important part in this. The Parliamentary Research and Training Institute for Democracies (PRIDE) of our Parliament has made significant contributions to this end. PRIDE has, so far, successfully conducted training and appreciation courses for parliaments of more than 100 countries in the world. It also facilitates study visits of school and college students to the Parliament House, where they are

briefed about the functioning of Parliament. The International Day of Democracy is an auspicious occasion to celebrate and cherish the lofty democratic ideals and principles that underpin our societies, the advancements in freedom, equality, and justice, while acknowledging the challenges that persist. It is also an appropriate moment for us, al stakeholders, to reflect and re-dedicate ourselves to upholding the values of our parliamentary democracy by fostering open dialogue, encouraging civic engagement, and holding institutions accountable. As we reflect on the significance of this day, let us all pledge to participate actively in the democratic process of our country and collaborate to create a just and equitable society for all.

> Om Birla is Speaker, Lok Sabha The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS } Karan Thapar



HH Asquith, on the precipice of propriety

A prognosis of the film industry's shame

■ hese days, in India, we are accustomed to history as fiction, but what we are not familiar with is tantalisingly-crafted historical fiction. That's what Robert Harris' latest book *Precipice* is. It uses real people, actual events and genuine letters to create a spellbinding story that leaves you asking happen or is it made up?

Precipice is the story of Herbert Henry Asquith, the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, who was prime minister of Britain from 1908 to 1916, and his infatuation for Venetia Stanley, an aristocratic socialite. He was 62, she 27. As the author states. "All the letters quoted in the text from the Prime Minister are — the reader may be astonished to learn — authentic ... the letters from Venetia Stanley to the Prime Minister are entirely invented.

He calls her "my darling", "dearest love" and "dearly beloved". He shared secret diplomatic cables with her, detailed accounts of cabinet discussions and frequently sought her advice on how to handle Winston Churchill or Lord Kitchener. It seems he wrote every single day, often two or three times in fact.

On Fridays, they took long leisurely afternoon drives. "They met often in between, of course, at lunches and dinwith other people around. The car was the one place where they could be sure of being alone." The suggestion is they had sexual relations in the back of his chauffeur-driven 1908 Napier after she "drew the blinds" and 30 minutes later "straightened her skirt".

I have little doubt that, like Harris' other masterpieces, Precipice will sell in millions. But it has created quite a controversy for Asquith's heirs. His great grandson, Raymond, the 3rd Earl, has said it's "nonsense". The suggestion they had sex is "totally ridiculous". Perhaps, but Asquith's obsession with Venetia makes it seem more than probable.

Om

According to Harris, so intense and irresistible was his love that Asquith spent much of the cabinet meeting, where Churchill's disastrous Gallipoli campaign was presented, writing a letter to Venetia. His attention was on his amour, not the Dardanelles. Perhaps that's why it was such a failure

This is how Harris' delightful account of that meeting proceeds. "'Prime Minister?' He looked up. Winston was staring at him. 'I wonder if I might now bring before the Council the matter of the Dardanelles?' 'Of course'. He quickly covered his letter with a few Foreign Office tele-

But the letter soon returned to the top of Asquith's mind. "(He) pulled the letter he had just begun from beneath his pile of documents. He shielded it with one arm from Balfour's languid gaze as he wrote." "returned his full attention to Winston's presentation". By then "the First Lord of the Admiralty had made a tremendous impression". As Harris writes, "nobody raised any objections" and Asquith declared "an operation to force the Dardanelles Straits is approved unanimously". But it seems the prime minister hadn't paid attention to its details! Thus, one of the worst disasters of World War I was set

Asquith's was, of course, a different time, a part of a forgotten world. His style was unhurried, often casual and languid, never driven by emergency or crisis. Din-

PRECIPICE IS THE STORY OF HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH, THE EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH, WHO WAS PM OF BRITAIN FROM 1908 TO 1916, AND HIS INFATUATION FOR VENETIA STANLEY, AN ARISTOCRATIC SOCIALITE

ner parties were frequent and lasted till midnight. He took taxis, spent time browsing in bookshops, went for walks without security and drank uninhibitedly.

"At one o'clock in the morning", writes Harris of an occasion just before the war. "the Prime Minister, with a quarter bottle of brandy inside him, climbed slightly into the bac driven by an amazed cabbie to Buckingham Palace ... where presently George V appeared, wearing a pair of slippers, a brown dressing gown over his night shirt, his eyes full of sleep." Asquith wanted the king to telegraph the tsar for support against the kaiser.

Leave aside other prime ministers. even Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak would hesitate to emulate such behaviour. But that's what makes Asquith's story special.

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

{ ENGENDER } Lalita Panicker



Men, masculinity and gender justice for all

he horrific rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata, one of many incidents of violence against women, underscores how important it is for men and boys to be actively involved in countering all forms of abuse. Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) has been trying to do this for the past 31 years, engaging in critical absurd concept that "boys will be boys", something put forward by some of our elected representatives when they have no real answer to why women are targeted so often.

MAVA rests its work on the precept that there is no such thing as men being inherently prone to violence and that attitudes can be moulded by interventions. It also advocates for the fact that it is not enough for men to stay away from participating in any form of violence but to also be actively involved in creating a more inclusive concept of masculinity.

There are many developmental practitioners, including women's groups, wanting to work with men and boys, but do not know what effective processes can be employed to engage with the latter. The participatory exercises and youth-friendly modules tested by our team have received enthusiastic participation and positive results. And they could now be used by any individual or organisation wanting to work with groups of men," said Harish Sadani, co-founder of MAVA.

MAVA's eight-module manual on this subiect is worth a read. It addresses crucial issues which every young boy should be made aware of. It talks of empathy, collaboration and power-sharing, all essential to creating a level playing field for gender equality. Omkar, a participant in one of MAVA's workshops, said, "The workshop activities simplify the complex topics of gender relations and power dynamics. During one such workshop, the "Privilege Bingo" exercise was conducted, which prompted me to reflect on my privileges in a non-confrontational and insightful manner.

Challenging patriarchal mindsets cannot succeed without involving men in the mix to redraw notions of gender roles and stereotypes. If we are to succeed, we need to actively involve men in conversations about male privilege and the pressure they face in living up to societal expectations.

The manual may not have all the answers but it is a promising start to look at how men can be empowered to join the movement against violence and harassment. It highlights ow gender discussions should no women alone but on the commitment of men to all gender-based initiatives. A spokesperson for the Centre for Equity and Inclusion, Delhi that worked with a group of male social media influencers, said, "At the grassroots level, we've used some of the manual's exercises to engage young boys and explore themes of masculinity, power and violence. The well-explained interactive exercises have significantly enhanced the impact of our training sessions.

The manual uses participatory methods to tackle concepts like patriarchy, gender stereotypes, inequality, power dynamics and privileges, intersectionality, inclusivity, equality, and equity. Altamash Khan, programme coordinator and gender trainer, MAVA, said, "The manual will inspire justice systems, media houses, government institutions, and the corporate sector to include its content in their employees' orientation programmes and development workshops. It will prove to be a valuable resource for teachers, human rights educators, animators of community-based and civil society organisations, women's

rights groups, and youth associations.' Writing in the manual, Lakshmi Lingam, chair professor, School of Public Health, DY Patil University, Navi Mumbai, said, "From understanding the complexities of masculinity to developing partnerships, the manual offers a holistic approach that is enlightening and empowering. The exercises have been tested by MAVA during their sensitisation work among male youth in rural and urban areas... It is paramount to acknowledge that men and boys are equal stakeholders in the struggle for gender equality."

The views expressed are personal

പും സുരങ്ങ നിമം ഭവദനം

Lekhavude Maranam Oru Flashback, the 1983 film by KG George, showed an interpretation of the exploitation women face in the film industry

These are not new revelations. These are facts, but they need to be reiterated so they don't become mere memory, so Anuradha that the imagination of cinema Vellat stays true to its marrow. KG George, one of the most prolific filmmakers in Indian cinema.

industry's closet haven't stopped

tumbling out since a redacted ver-

sion of the Justice Hema Commit-

tee report was made public. There have

always been skeletons, since the time

Indian women aspired to be actors. They

envisioned the same fame and recognition

their male colleagues seemed entitled to,

but they were handed a tweaked version,

only to make elbow room for

"some compromises and a little

adjustment".

showed an interpretation of this reality in his 1983 Malayalam film Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback (The Death of Lekha, A Flashback). There has not been a time in Malayalam cinema when this film was more relevant.

Shanthamma, or Lekha (a monicker she takes before entering the world of cinema), played by Nalini, is already dead at the beginning of the film. We know what may have happened to her even before Lekha's lived experiences are showcased. The scenes outline the crude episodes from the life of a teen aspiring to work in films in line with her mother's wishes. It begins with the faint ambition of shifting base to Madras — the hub of South Indian cinema

¬ he skeletons in the Malayalam film at the time. The exploitation of Lekha's body begins days after she arrives in the city with an assistant director who promises marriage and tricks her Thereafter, it is a crowd of filmmakers.

producers and others she is forced to have sex with on the route to what appears to be a career in cinema, in exchange for acting roles. George's robust writing smudges the moment Lekha's discomfort

becomes a familiarity and a norm. He does not show the surface of the coercion, but its repercussions on Lekha's life are portrayed through the rapid advancement of her career as an actress. She attains fame, stardom, money, and even a smidgen of love, but loses the will to live in the end and dies by suicide

George's writing was prognostic. It gave screen time to an episode where Lekha seeks permission from a male superstar before signing an artsy film with a critically acclaimed director. She has to carefully navigate male egos while trying to ensure she does not upset the "power group". Ironically, the main character of this power group was depicted by Mammootty — essaying the role of superstar Prem Sagar — who has now denied the existence of a power group in his response

to the Hema Committee report. This fraught underbelly of cinema has been at the heart of the report submitted to the Kerala high court last month. Over ten days after the release of the report and resigning from the post of the president of

Association of Malavalam Movie Artists (AMMA), veteran actor and stalwart of the industry, Mohanlal, broke his silence on the matter. Shortly after, Mammootty too spoke out

and said that cinema was at the centre of increased scrutiny because it reflected the good and bad of society. But this perspective is rather reductive. The scrutiny is not only because of the oft-quoted addendum that "cinema mirrors life". The scrutiny is because a generation of artistes have failed their women colleagues and are continuing to sit on the fence over the issue. Statements made by these celebrities are guarded. They said: What happened was unfortunate, the matter is under investigation, but please don't blame all of us words that are oblivious to decades of suffering endured by their colleagues, most of which continue to remain unaccounted

The fandom that propels the stardom also thrusts responsibility on it, and rightfully so. The fandom seeks entertainment. good storytelling and a histrionic representation of social issues. But it also demands a commitment to churn the cultural violence, righteous indignation, activism, and a general sentience of empathy

outside of the celluloid After the decades of scrutiny and subjection to male gaze the bodies of women artistes have undergone, the concern should not be whether or not artistic morality can be questioned. Careers have ended, lives have perished, but the lessons have not stopped. A little introspection will not hurt at this historical and cultural moment in Indian cinema.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

China's expanding influence in Africa

This is with reference to "In Africa, China eyes minerals and UN clout" by Gurjit Singh (Sep 8). China's pursuit of more BRI projects, despite the poor implementation of the contracted ones is concerning. Beijing should focus on existing BRI projects instead of further expansion.

Deepa Mishra

Government must clarify stand on Ayush

This is with reference to "Transparency is the right drug for Ayush regulation" by Dinesh Thakur and Prashant Reddy T (Sep 8). It is unfortunate that the government is buying the Ayush industry's argument instead of working to protect public interest.

Sanjay Chopra

Eccentricities on LinkedIn

This is with reference to "Why I love LinkedIn, and LinkedIn stories" by Abhishek Asthana (Sep 8). LinkedIn amplifies insecurities and preys on imposter syndrome — not for connections, but for professional climbing.

Naiyya Patel

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Across THEAISLE



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Manipur is trapped in a web of suspicion, deceit and ethnic conflict. It was never easy to maintain the peace and carry on a government in Manipur. It has become unimaginably worse thanks to the callousness of the central government and the incompetence of the state government, both run by the BJP. The prime minister of India has perhaps realized that his journey to Manipur, a state in the Union, will be as perilous as a journey to

the dark side of the moon

Manipur: dark side of the moon?

LEAFING THROUGH previous columns, I chided myself for not writing about Manipur more often. I last wrote on Manipur on July 30, 2023, and it is now over 13 months. It is unpardonable. As it is unpardonable for all Indians to have consigned Manipur to the deepest recesses of their collective consciousness.

When I wrote last year, the portents were ominous. I had said 'It is the beginning of ethnic cleansing'. I had said 'Today, from all reports that I have received or read, there is practically no Kuki-Zomi in the Imphal valley and there is no Meitei in the areas dominated by the Kuki-Zomi'. I had said that 'the chief minister and his ministers work out of their home offices and do not — or cannot — travel to the affected areas'. I had also said that 'None of the ethnic groups trusts the Manipur police' and 'No one believes the official numbers of the casualties'.

THREE IN THE DOCK

Every word that I wrote has, regrettably, come true. In a parliamentary democracy, one or more in authority must bear the responsibility for the tragic slide of Manipur. Here are the three men who are in authority –

Mr Narendra Modi, the prime minister: he seems to have taken a vow that, come what may, he will not visit the state of Manipur. His attitude seems to be 'let

looms larger if she is widowed, divorced or

has been abandoned by the father. In this

form, she is nearer to the primal Mother —

the unrivalled creator and provider whose

primacy cannot be challenged. In this way,

she becomes an article of faith rather than

a flesh and blood woman. The tricky part, of course, is that articles of faith never have

any longings of their own. In *Of Woman*

Born: Motherhood as Experience and

Institution, Adrienne Rich writes that it is

only as mothers that women's bodies are

seen as "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual,

nourishing". In order to be deemed wor-

thy, a woman must be seen as maternal, or

at least potentially maternal, and these

ers who are simultaneously all-forgiving

and a force of moral rectitude. A few recent

films such as Kapoor and Sons (2016) and

Badhaai Ho (2018) have offered us more

complex mothers but even here, the

mother is neither sexually assertive nor am-

bitious beyond the domestic realm. Perhaps

because in our real-world cultures too, we

find it difficult to accept mothers cast in any

role other than nourishing, the schism be-

tween good and bad mothers is maintained

on-screen. Good mothers are givers and the

bad ones are takers. Besides, bad mothers

in Hindi cinema are often pictured as step-

mothers or aunts (thus, not "real" mothers)

— and the plot occasionally revolves around

getting them to fall in line. In films like Beta

(1992) where Laxmi (Aruna Irani) is a mur-

derous stepmom, but Raju (Anil Kapoor) is

willing to drink poison rather than confront

the possibility that his mother would hurt

his interests. Absolute devotion to an ide-

alised Ma thus transforms even a bad

appeal to a mass base. US Vice-Presidential

hopeful J D Vance's remarks about "child-

less cat ladies" is a fine illustration of the

anxieties surrounding women's bodies

should they refuse to be herded into the cat-

egory of mother. In marked contrast, as Rich

had pointed out half a century ago, father-

lessness is not seen a problem to be fixed,

much less a slur. It is hardly surprising then,

that politics has little room for female lead-

ers who assert themselves as sexual beings

but who are not mothers. We need them to

be maternal so that they nourish us and, if

they're smart politicians, they put to good

use the full power invested in motherhood.

But as for changing the way things are for

women in general, it might take more than

Zaidi is a writer and filmmaker

Like popular cinema, politics too must

mother into a good one.

Hindi cinema especially favours moth-

ideas still play out in public discourse.

Manipur burn, I shall not step on Manipur's soil'. Since the start of his third term on June 9, 2024, the PM has found the time to visit Italy (June 13-14), Russia (July 8-9), Austria (July 10), Poland (August 21-22), Ukraine (August 23-24), Brunei (September 3-4) and Singapore (September 4-5). His schedule for the remaining months of 2024 include visits to the United States, Laos, Samos, Russia, Azerbaijan and Brazil. It is beyond contest that the PM has not visited Manipur not because of lack of time or energy but because he is determined to not visit the hapless state.

His refusal to visit Manipur is a measure of his stubbornness. We got glimpses of that during the Gujarat riots, the anti-CAA protests and the farmers' protests against the three farm laws, and when he instructed his ministers to oppose all adjournment motions — whatever the urgent matter — in both Houses of Parliament.

Mr Amit Shah, the Home Minister: his instructions cover every aspect of the governance of Manipur from appointment of senior officers in the state government to deployment of the security forces. He is the government of Manipur. Violence has escalated rapidly on his watch. The people of Manipur are not fighting each other with only guns and bombs. For the first time in independent India, *rockets* and weaponised *drones* have been used. In the past week, curfew

has been imposed in two districts, schools and colleges have been closed, internet has been suspended in five districts, and police are fighting students on the streets of Imphal. Two more battalions of the CRPF (2000 men and women) have been rushed to Manipur to strengthen the 26,000 personnel already deployed.

Mr N Biren Singh, the chief minister of Manipur: he is captive in a prison of his own making. He and his ministers are not able to go around even in the Imphal valley. He is hated by the Kuki-Zomi. The Meitei thought he would ensure their security but his complete failure has made him the most unpopular man in Manipur, including among the Meitei. There is no semblance of administration. His inept and partisan governance was the cause of the civil unrest, now he is the problem and the provocation to all sides. He should have resigned many months ago. His continuance reflects the imperious, never-admit-a-mistake attitude of Mr Modi and Mr Shah.

DIVIDED DE FACTO

Manipur is, *de facto*, two states. The districts of Churachandpur, Pherzwal and Kangpokpi are fully controlled by the Kuki people, and Tengnoupal district (including the border town of Moreh) that has a mixed population of Kuki-Zomi and Naga is practically under the control of the Kuki-Zomi. The Kuki-Zomi run a separate administration. There are no Meitei government employees in the Kuki-Zomi controlled area; they are ensconced in the districts of the valley. The Kuki-Zomi do not want to be part of a state where the Meitei are in a majority (40 MLAs in a House of 60 members). The Meitei want to preserve the identity and territorial integrity of Manipur. The level of enmity between the communities is high and deep.

There are no talks between any one - government and the ethnic groups or between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zomi. The Nagas have their own, historical grievances against the central and state governments, and they do not want to be embroiled in the Meitei vs Kuki-Zomi conflict.

No Light Anywhere

Manipur is trapped in a web of suspicion, deceit and ethnic conflict. It was never easy to maintain the peace and carry on a government in Manipur. It has become unimaginably worse thanks to the callousness of the central government and the incompetence of the state government, both run by the BJP. The prime minister of India has perhaps realized that his journey to Manipur, a state in the Union, will be as perilous as a journey to the dark side of the moon.

Rahul needs

an education

EVERY TIME POLITICAL analysts and polls indicate that it is time to take Rahul Gandhi seriously, he trots off on a foreign visit and says enough stupid things to prove them wrong. Of the stupid things he said on this visit, his first foreign trip as Leader of the Opposition, the stupidest was that the Lok Sabha elections were rigged. Why do I consider this the stupidest of the things he said on his trip in the United States? Simply because you do not need to be politically literate to know that if Narendra Modi had rigged the elections, he would have at least ensured that he got a full majority.

This simple piece of deduction appears to have escaped the notice of the Leader of the Opposition. So, speaking at Georgetown University he said, "In a fair election, I do not think the BJP would have come anywhere near 240 seats...I don't view it as a fair election at all. It was rather a controlled election." In the same breath (interview), it stunned me to hear him say that the Election Commission had not played fair and had done what Modi wanted. This, from a man whose mother ensured that a Chief Election Commissioner was nominated to the Rajya Sabha as soon as he retired and made a minister in the government she controlled. This, from a man whose family presided over rigged elections in the Kashmir Valley for decades. It is time for some history lessons for the man who, a recent poll reveals, is the people's choice for prime minister after Modi.

The second stupidest thing that Rahul Gandhi said on this visit was that Sikhs in India are no longer able to wear turbans or a 'kada'. The words were barely out of his mouth when a Canadian Khalistani leader went loudly and visibly public with a statement that basically said, 'we told you so'. What is it about foreign climes that make the heir to our most storied political Dynasty nearly always spout nonsense when on foreign soil? Remember that on an earlier foreign excursion Rahul Gandhi declared that democracy had ceased to exist in India.

What annoys me deeply about this kind of reckless ranting is that India desperately needs a strong Opposition so that there are guardrails that prevent the delusional overconfidence Modi has exhibited often in the past ten years. The Prime Minister's autocratic style of governance and the offensive arrogance of some of his ministers have unsettled even Modi's most ardent supporters. When he failed to get the BJP a full majority this time, you could almost hear a collective sigh of relief across the length and breadth of our ancient land. But this does not mean that Indian voters would have preferred to replace Modi with Rahul. He would do well to remember this. It might persuade him to stop behaving as if he has all the an-

He may discover that caste is not the only reason why '90% of Indians' are not participants in India's journey towards prosperity. He rails against the absence of lower castes in positions of power without noticing that this is because they have not been given the tools to rise above poverty and deprivation. The most powerful of these tools is education. If lower caste children had access to good schools, they would compete easily with those who come from the upper castes. It is one of the mysteries of Indian politics that so many 'socialist' prime ministers never noticed the urgent need to build schools capable of providing real education instead

swers.

of just basic literacy. One of Modi's biggest failures is that he did too little to improve our lousy school system. If he had put as much energy into this as he did into Swachh Bharat, things could have changed immensely in the past ten years, when most of our biggest and least literate states have been run by BIP chief ministers. The situation is so bad that our vaunted demographic dividend could end up being use-

There have been other failures of governance in the past ten years, but they have gone unnoticed by Rahul Gandhi and his advisors. Like a needle stuck in a rut, he continues to rant and rail against the takeover of educational institutions by the RSS without observing that there is not much for them to take over. They may tinker with history books, and they certainly have been doing this. But they have failed to address the real problem, which is that most Indian children leave school without learning or skills.

When Rahul Gandhi returns home, he

would do himself and his party a big favour if he directed his energy towards giving Indian children the chance of a real future. He said on this foreign trip that ninety percent of Indians lacked 'access to opportunity' and hinted that this was because of the evils of the caste system. For months, he has banged on and on about the need for a caste census. Clearly, this would result in more reserved jobs, and more reserved seats in schools and colleges.

ing reservations. The answer is for our political leaders to realise that for India to ever become a fully developed country the most vital change that must happen is for India's children to have access to real schools.

The answer is not to continue expand-

Mere paas Maa hai: From Salim-Javed to Kamala





WHEN THE celebrated Hindi writing duo Salim-Javed wrote "Mere paas Maa hai", they were clearly on to something. That brief line of movie dialogue has survived five decades in public memory as a pithy reminder of the emotional, moral and ideological power invested in motherhood in our collective imagination. However, one reason it remains deeply resonant is that, aside from death and taxes, if there's one other thing we can be sure of, it is our mothers. If we exist, someone birthed us, and regardless of how present or absent our individual mothers might be, mothering marks us in life as well as in the realm of imagination.

Julia Kristeva has written of consecrated motherhood as a fantasy of lost territory that is nurtured by all adults. In the religious sphere, we see it in the form of a Mother Goddess or as Mother Mary, while in culture, we see it as the ordinary-seeming Ma who holds her son's heart in her fist. In politics too, it emerges as the motherland, although politicians also tap into the power of consecrated motherhood when they bring their flesh-and-blood mothers into political discourse. We saw this most recently when Kamala Harris described her mother as an immigrant in the US — "a brown woman with an accent" who was tough courageous, and yet, never lost her cool.

What Harris doesn't quite say is that her mother, being human, is fallible. Instead, she sticks with the fantasy Ma — an unfailing temperate presence who compensates for other lacking, including an absent or distant father. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the docu-series Angry Young Men (Amazon Prime), where we see screenwriters Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar reflecting on the loss of their mothers in childhood. Like childhood itself, everyone experiences mothering as a gradual loss and writers often tap into this, capturing our longing to return to a maternal lap where we are eternally safe. It is in this lap that Birju (Sunil Dutt) dies, shot by the righteous Radha (Nargis) in Mother India (1957) and it is towards this lap that Vijay runs in *Deewar* (1975), despite having been rejected by his Ma (Nirupa Roy).

Interestingly, the Hindi screen Ma





THE NEARLY century-old exercise to last count castes in a Census in India gives a good idea of the challenges the enumerators can face in any fresh effort, plus the complexities of the exercise. While the Opposition is ramping up its demand for a caste census, the RSS last week indicated its support for a caste census, though adding it should not be used for political or electoral purposes.

The BJP, on the other hand, has neither op-

posed the demand openly, nor made any

commitment to it. The 1931 Census that counted castes was conducted by the colonial British government, and was the first such exercise after the 1901 Census. The caste section put the numbers of Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 52% of the total 271 million population. This figure became the basis of the Mandal Commission's recommendation in 1980 to grant 27% reservations to OBCs in education and government jobs, which was

implemented only in 1990. JH Hutton, then Census Commissioner, countered those who argued against adding caste to the Census exercise saying that "the mere act of labelling persons belonging to a caste tends to perpetuate the system". Hutton's logic was that "it is impossible to get rid of any institution by ignoring its existence like the proverbial ostrich".

"It is difficult to see why the record of a fact that actually exists should tend to stabilise that existence," Hutton wrote in the 1931 Census. "Caste is still of vital consideration in the structure of Indian society."

But Hutton and his team ran into a series of problems while enumerating caste. Hutton enumerated some of them — from "a wave of non-cooperation, and the (salt) march of Mr Gandhi and his contrabandistas" to the Congress observing a 'Census Boycott Sunday', to numerous local-level movements which hampered efforts.

Besides, over the course of previous Census exercises, the methodology on caste had undergone several changes. For instance, in 1881, only groups with more than one lakh population were counted. In 1901, Census Commissioner HHRisley decided to use the "varna hierarchy" system, sparking numerous movements by caste groups who viewed the Census as a vehicle to move

up the social order. In the book *Caste*, *Politics*, and the Raj, historian Sekhar Bandyopahdyay writes that at the time, the Census was viewed not merely as a population count for each caste, but as a way "to fix the relative status of different castes and to deal with question of

1931 caste Census: from British to Mandal link



The Census schedule from 1951. Census of India

social superiority... (which) gave rise to a considerable agitation both at organised and unorganised levels".

R B Bhagat, a professor at the International Institute for Population Sciences in Mumbai, wrote for the Economic and Political Weekly: "In the Census, the underprivileged found an opportunity to express their aspiration and if possible to acquire new identity through enumeration".

Hutton was openly critical of using the varna hierarchy in the Census. "All the subsequent Census officers in India must have cursed the day when it occurred to Risley ... to attempt to draw up a list of caste according to their rank in the society. He failed, but the result of his attempt is as troublesome as if he has succeeded," he wrote.

So, in 1931, occupation rather than varna was used to classify castes. But this model had its own pitfalls. For one, it was unable to reconcile the variations in an occupational group's social standing across regions – for instance, Hutton noted "cultivation in northern India is a respectable occupation, whereas in parts of southern India it is largely associated with the 'exterior' castes".

"Admittedly this method... is far from being entirely satisfactory, since it... cannot simultaneously recognise more than one of several traditional occupations for the same caste," Hutton wrote, but added that grouping castes roughly by occupation "also avoids any semblance of arrangement by order of social precedence".

While Hutton's use of the occupational model addressed the question of defining caste, the 1931 Census still was unable to fully account for the fluidity of caste identity and the variations in the names of groups across regions, says Ayan Guha, a research fellow at the University of Sussex who has written on the history of caste.

"The first problem was to define caste. You have to agree on the traits that make certain groups a caste and certain groups not a caste... The second problem was that caste has a lot of fluidity... The third problem was the standardisation of names same castes with different names in different regions," Guha tells *The Indian Express*.

Guha adds that Hutton had also flagged the problem of the dynamic nature of identity claims with groups changing caste identities from census to census. "A caste group that was Rajput in the last Census is now (in 1931) claiming to be Brahmin," he says.

In fact, an official in Madras noted in the 1931 Census report, "Sorting for caste is really worthless unless nomenclature is sufficiently fixed... Had caste terminology the stability of religious returns, caste sorting might be worthwhile. With the fluidity of present appellations it is certainly not..."

Guha also points out there was "there was no uniform approach towards classification criteria for ordering of caste groups". "It depended on provincial census commissioners and their subjective assessment," he says.

Guha says that if a caste census is to be conducted today, it is likely to run into the same issues as the 1931 Census. In particular, the fluidity of caste identity — from one group seeking to be identified as a tribe, like the Meiteis in Manipur, to some groups fusing over time, like herder communities coming together as Yadavs, to the fission of some castes — will likely pose a challenge.

"Those who are saying do (a caste census), they should think about how to do it. We already know how the colonial Census had issues with caste. That debate on the methodological dimensions of caste enumeration, its fluidity and the boundaries between groups is missing," Guha says.

She **SAID ANSHUSALUJA**

motherhood to pull that off.

FROM THE protest site at Delhi's Jantar Mantar to the Paris Olympics, from the nailbiting quarter-final and semi-final matches to looking forlorn in a hospital bed, from the wrestling ring to the electoral ring — life has indeed turned into an unpredictable rollercoaster ride for wrestler Vinesh Phogat.

Not long ago, the 30-year-old was defamed, called names and written off. When she questioned the stranglehold of power in her sport, particularly women athletes being preyed on, she was hounded, and dragged through the mud, both literally and figuratively. But she rose above it all, thanks to her determination and resilience, and

what a spectacular rise it was. Though her indefatigable spirit and ef-

Vinesh readies for another bout

forts were not rewarded at the Paris Olympics, should we have cheered and lauded her any less? When she returned home, weary and disheartened, she was once again confronted with a toxic mix of derision, contempt and misogyny — an ugly game of subversion and displacement of responsibility that played out at multiple levels. Once again, and a little too hastily, attempts were made to discredit and dismiss Vinesh.

In 2023 too, when she and other wrestling stars protested in the open and fearlessly spoke truth to power to clean the rot in the sport, the response was a brute mix of apathy and hostility. The protest had to be crushed by all means, including the use of force. To this end, she and other defiant wrestlers were battered, shunned and dismissed. Still, Vinesh stood her ground. Systematic attempts were made to project

her as an irresponsible and self-consumed athlete who was ungrateful for the facilities being showered upon her. For her discomforting questions and stiff resistance, she was accused of discrediting her sport even the nation. However, Vinesh tore into all these at-

tempts with her steely resolve and force of will. She claimed her nation back for herself, and claimed it with a fervour and ferocity. She has truly lived up to the Olympic motto — Citius, Altius, Fortius — Communiter (Faster, Higher, Stronger — Together) where she fought so fearlessly. The exceptional endurance she displayed in successive bouts on that fateful day at the Olympics was inspiring for an entire generation. We stood humbled by her courage in facing the overwhelming odds stacked up against her. She swam against the tide and defied it to surge across the ocean,

unimpeded and unbound. Her journey will, without doubt, encourage many others to resist oppression at the hands of the resourceful and powerful.

Now, Vinesh has entered a new arena electoral politics. Unlike sports, where persistence, regular training and hard work are highly likely to pay, electoral politics is a circuitous struggle without defined principles or practices. In this contest, there are hardly any set rules to play by and two plus two rarely, if ever, adds up to four. There is no assured recipe for electoral success. It depends on a mishmash of complex factors like the party's ideological and organisational strategies, its appeal among the voters, the candidate's image, identity, social relations, available finances and many others.

Vinesh is set to contest from Haryana's Julana Assembly seat. Whether she will win or not, remains to be seen. What certainly

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seems promising is that she will, to quote her, "win the battle of life" (The Indian Express, September 6, 2024), on the strength of her indomitable spirit.

Her relentless struggle teaches us a valuable lesson. Voices sought to be muted and marginalised for going against the grain and "discrediting" the nation — feminist and queer collectives, environment protection activists, human rights advocates, scholars, journalists and other dissenting groups should, in fact, be allowed in the spirit of democratic values and inclusivity. Through their language of protest, defiance and dissent, they often strive to craft a more inclusive and representative nation. Thus, they expand hopes and claims for a just, equitable and dignified existence for all.

Anshu Saluja is an assistant professor of History at Azim Premji University, Bhopal. The views expressed are personal. **FE SUNDAY** WWW.FINANCIALEXPRESS.COM

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2024



Callaway to revert to golf equipment and lifestyle business, while Topgolf will focus on being a pure-play venue-based golf entertainment business

A mulligan for Topgolf?

decade plus, we have transformed Call-

away into the No. 1 brand in golf equip-

ment, while building a successful and

complementary apparel and accessory

business," said Chip Brewer, Topgolf Call-

away Brands president and CEO in a

recent statement. "We believe this business, on a stand-alone basis, will be well

understood and valued by the market.

Since our merger with Topgolf, we have

made considerable investments in the

Topgolf business that have dramatically

expanded its scale, digital capabilities,

and venue profitability. These invest-

ments, combined with the hard work of

the Topgolf team, have allowed us to outperform our original growth and free

cash flow expectations. Looking forward,

we remain convinced that Topgolf is a

high-quality, free cash flow generating

business with a significant future value-

golf Callaway reported \$1.16 billion in

revenues for Q2 of 2024. This is a -1.9%

year-on-year decline following Q1's

-2.0% decline indicating an underlying

trend. The report has raised concerns

among investors, revealing a worrying

decline in same-venue sales at Topgolf

that signal a drop in customer footfall.

While the company attributes this partly

to a broader economic slowdown and

cautious consumer spending, a deeper

analysis suggests the challenges may be

more deeply rooted. Same venue sales for

Topgolf fell 8% in Q2 year-on-year, even

though revenue - fired by new venues-

increased 5% year-on-year to \$494.4

million. The merger was expected to

bring in new customers and add a

stronger digital component to golfing,

including microtransactions around

personalised content in the future.

Investors weren't convinced: Callaway

shares dipped 19% following the

announcement of the merger in October

2020. From the time of the merger in

2021, Topgolf Callaway's share price has

dipped from \$28.60 to a 52-week low of

golf Callaway has initiated a compre-

hensive strategic review of the Topgolf

business. This review aims at revitalising

same-venue sales growth and inorganic alternatives, including a potential spin-

off of the Topgolf segment. CEO Brewer

emphasised the company's commit-

ment to "maximising long-term share-

holder value" through this process, sig-

nalling a willingness to consider bold

moves to address the current situation.

The company's statement says that Call-

away is considering spinning off at least

80.1% of Topgolf "to obtain the desired

tax-free treatment of the spin-off for tax

purposes and will also consider retaining

a limited ownership in Topgolf for a

period of time." Under this route Topgolf

would have a cash balance of more than

\$200 million while Callaway is expected

to absorb all of the current joint entity's

doctor ordered. It's a fair conjecture that

investors interested in putting their

money into a golf manufacturer may not

be interested in investing in a golf enter-

tainment and F&B business and vice

versa. At the end of the day, Topgolf is a

profitable business with a healthy top

line and a long list of new and upcoming

venues. "As we look forward, we remain

convinced that Topgolf is a high-quality

business with significant future oppor-

tunity," Brewer said. "It is transforming

the game of golf, and we believe it will

deliver substantial growth and financial

returns over time." That may well turn

out to be true. In fact Topgolf should

come to India; there's a great deal of

interest in golf, and with only a handful

writes about the game

A spin-off might be exactly what the

financial debt.

In response to these challenges, Top-

\$9.24 earlier this week.

Brewer's statement came after Top-

creation opportunity," he said.

Callaway, Topgolf might realign for future growth





ONCE UPON A time, in a popular South Delhi market, there was a street food vendor with a loyal clientele. He differentiated himself from the competition not just by the quality of his product, but by quality of service: staying open till late in the night when the rest of the market would shut shop. Over the years, he bought and moved into a shop and diversified his business. There was a time when you could have a 'chaat,' a lemonade, an ice cream, and a 'paan' at the same shop. With the exception of a roadside 'momo' stall that pulled in a steady stream of customers, this street-food vendor had garnered the lion's share of the F&B footfall to the market.

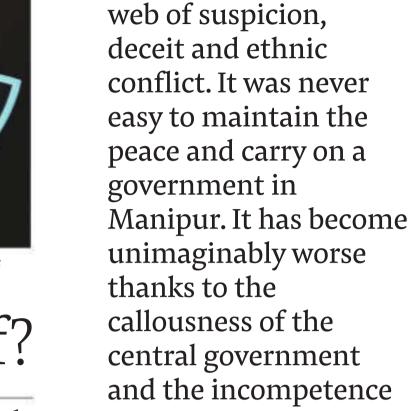
A couple of years back, visitors to the market found that the 'momo' vendor was nowhere to be found. Eventually they realised that the street food vendor had subsumed the 'momo' business and added the dumplings stand to his shop. On the face of it, this seemed like a good strategy, but things didn't quite work out like that. What the vendor failed to realise was that even though both 'chaat' and 'momos' are classified as 'street food,' it was, in fact, a different clientele that each of these catered to. And clubbing the two products together under one roof appeared to dilute their respective brand equity. The demand for momos in particular began to fall and that had a cascading effect on the 'chaat' sales. The overall business suffered.

Earlier this year, the street food vendor bought a smaller hole-in-the-wall kind of outlet in the same market and moved the momo shop there. The last time I visited, it was business as usual at the 'chaat' shop that seemed to be reclaiming its popularity but things were still slow at the momo shop. Either way, the vendor told me, he'd managed to get his original business back on track. And he did not think it was a good time to invest more in the momo shop as it wasn't doing particularly well.

I was reminded of this – and couldn't resist the urge to serve it up as a rather long winded analogy – when news came out earlier this month that Topgolf Callaway Brands Corporation's board had approved a split of the company into two independent entities. While Callaway will revert to its core business in golf equipment and lifestyle, Topgolf will focus on being a pure-play venue-based golf entertainment business.

Callaway is the global market leader in golf equipment sales and second (to Acushnet) in golf ball sales. Callaway's portfolio also includes Odyssey putters, Ogio accessories, Travis Mathew apparel, Jack Wolfskin apparel and equipment, and Toptracer – the popular ball-flight analytics and gaming technology brand. Topgolf entertainment has over a 100 venues – that combine driving ranges with entertainment and hospitality – around the world. At Topgolf, players accumulate points by striking microchipped golf balls at targets spread across a large outfield. The utilisation of Toptracer ball-tracing technology and the presence of hundreds of high-definition screens at the hitting bays introduce a diverse realm of gameplay options. The multiple dining outlets, bars and events have made Topgolf a one-of-a-kind experience hitherto missing in golf.

The news of the potential spin-off comes three years after Callaway Golf Company paid out \$2 billion to acquire Topgolf Entertainment Group creating the Topgolf Callaway Brands Company. Before the acquisition, Callaway held a 14% stake in Topgolf. "Over the last



thanks to the callousness of the central government and the incompetence of the state government, both run by the BJP. The Prime Minister of India has perhaps realised that his journey to Manipur, a state in the Union,

ACROSS THE

P Chidambaram

AISLE

LEAFING THROUGH PREVIOUS columns, I chided myself for not writing about Manipur more often. I last wrote on Manipur on July 30, 2023, and it is now over 13 months. It is unpardonable. As it is unpardonable for all Indians to have consigned Manipur to the deepest recesses of their collective consciousness.

will be as perilous as a

journey to the dark

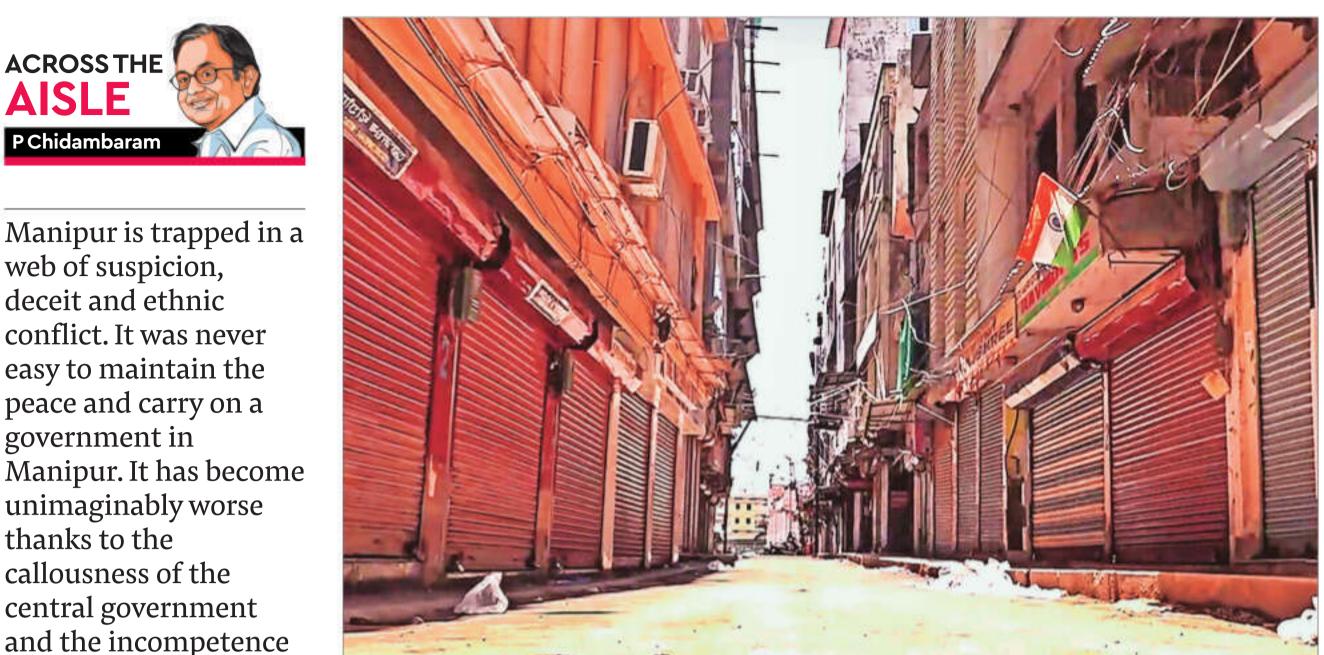
side of the moon

When I wrote last year, the portents were ominous. I had said 'It is the beginning of ethnic cleansing'. I had said 'Today, from all reports that I have received or read, there is practically no Kuki-Zomi in the Imphal valley and there is no Meitei in the areas dominated by the Kuki-Zomi'. I had said that 'the chief minister and his ministers work out of their home offices and do not — or cannot — travel to the affected areas'. I had also said that 'None of the ethnic groups trust the Manipur police' and 'No one believes the official numbers of the casualties'.

Three In The Dock

Every word that I wrote has, regrettably, come true. In a parliamentary democracy, one or more in authority must bear the responsibility for the tragic slide of Manipur. Here are the three men who are in authority —

Mr Narendra Modi, the prime minister: he seems to have taken a vow that, come what may, he will not visit the state of Manipur. His attitude seems to be 'let Manipur burn, I shall not step on Manipur's soil'. Since the start of his third term on June 9, 2024, the PM has found



A curfew was imposed in Imphal following a clash between students and security forces during a student-led march to Raj Bhavan in the state capital

Manipur: Dark side of the moon?

the time to visit Italy (June 13-14), Russia (July 8-9), Austria (July 10), Poland (August 21-22), Ukraine (August 23-24), Brunei (September 3-4) and Singapore (September 4-5). His schedule for the remaining months of 2024 include visits to the United States, Laos, Samos, Russia, Azerbaijan and Brazil. It is beyond contest that the PM has not visited Manipur not because of lack of time or energy but because he is determined to not visit the hapless state.

His refusal to visit Manipur is a measure of his stubbornness. We got glimpses of that during the Gujarat riots, the anti-CAA protests and the farmers' protests against the three farm laws, and when he instructed his ministers to oppose all adjournment motions whatever the urgent matter — in both Houses of Parliament.

Mr Amit Shah, the Home Minister: his instructions cover every aspect of the governance of Manipur from appointment of senior officers in the state government to deployment of the security forces. He is the government of Manipur. Violence has escalated rapidly on his watch. The people of Manipur are not fighting each other with only guns and bombs. For the first time in independent India, *rockets* and weaponised *drones* have been used. In the past week, curfew has been imposed in two districts, schools and colleges have been closed,

internet has been suspended in five districts, and police are fighting students on the streets of Imphal. Two more battalions of the CRPF (2000 men and women) have been rushed to Manipur to strengthen the 26,000 personnel already deployed.

Mr N Biren Singh, the chief minister

of Manipur: he is captive in a prison of his own making. He and his ministers are not able to go around even in the Imphal valley. He is hated by the Kuki-Zomi. The Meitei thought he would ensure their security but his complete failure has made him the most unpopular man in Manipur, including among the Meitei. There is no semblance of administration. His inept and partisan governance was the cause of the civil unrest, now he is the problem and the provocation to all sides. He should have resigned many months ago. His continuance reflects the imperious, never-admit-a-mistake attitude of Mr Modi and Mr Shah.

Divided *De Facto*

Manipur is, de facto, two states. The districts of Churachandpur, Pherzwal and Kangpokpi are fully controlled by the Kuki people, and Tengnoupal district (including the border town of Moreh) that has a mixed population of Kuki-Zomi and Naga is practically under the control of the Kuki-Zomi. The Kuki-Zomi run a separate administration. There are

no Meitei government employees in the Kuki-Zomi controlled area; they are ensconced in the districts of the valley. The Kuki-Zomi do not want to be part of a state where the Meitei are in a majority (40 MLAs in a House of 60 members). The Meitei want to preserve the identity and territorial integrity of Manipur. The level of enmity between the communities is high and deep.

There are no talks between any one government and the ethnic groups or between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zomi. The Nagas have their own, historical grievances against the central and state governments, and they do not want to be embroiled in the Meitei vs Kuki-Zomi conflict.

No Light Anywhere

Manipur is trapped in a web of suspicion, deceit and ethnic conflict. It was never easy to maintain the peace and carry on a government in Manipur. It has become unimaginably worse thanks to the callousness of the central government and the incompetence of the state government, both run by the BJP. The Prime Minister of India has perhaps realised that his journey to Manipur, a state in the Union, will be as perilous as a journey to the dark side of the moon.



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Rahul needs an education

EVERY TIME POLITICAL analysts and polls indicate that it is time to take Rahul Gandhi seriously, he trots off on a foreign visit and says enough stupid things to prove them wrong. Of the stupid things he said on this visit, his first foreign trip as Leader of the Opposition, the stupidest was that the Lok Sabha elections were rigged. Why do I consider this the stupidest of the things he said on his trip in the United States? Simply because you do not need to be politically literate to know that if Narendra Modi had rigged the elections, he would have at least ensured that he got a full majority.

This simple piece of deduction appears to have escaped the notice of the Leader of the Opposition. So, speaking at Georgetown University, he said, "In a fair election, I do not think the BJP would have come anywhere near 240 seats... I don't view it as a fair election at all. It was rather a controlled election." In the same breath (interview), it stunned me to

hear him say that the Election Commission had not played fair and had done what Modi wanted. This, from a man whose mother ensured that a Chief Election Commissioner was nominated to the Rajya Sabha as soon as he retired and made a minister in the government she controlled. This, from a man whose family presided over rigged elections in the Kashmir Valley for decades. It is time for some history lessons for the man who, a recent poll reveals, is the people's choice for prime minister after Modi.

The second stupidest thing that Rahul Gandhi said on this visit was that Sikhs in India are no longer able to wear turbans or a 'kada'. The words were barely out of his mouth when a Canadian Khalistani leader went loudly and visibly public with a statement that basically said, 'we told you so'. What is it about foreign climes that make the heir to our most storied political dynasty nearly always spout nonsense when on foreign soil? Remember that on an earlier foreign excursion Rahul Gandhi declared that democracy had ceased to exist in India.

What annoys me deeply about this kind of reckless ranting is that India desperately needs a strong Opposition so that there are guardrails that prevent the delusional overconfidence Modi has exhibited often in the past ten years. The Prime Minister's autocratic style of governance and the offensive arrogance of some of his ministers have unsettled even Modi's most ardent supporters. When he failed to get the Bharatiya Janata Party a full majority this time, you could almost hear a collective sigh of relief across the length and breadth of our ancient land. But this does not mean that Indian voters would have preferred to replace Modi with Rahul. He would do well to remember this. It might persuade him to stop behaving as if he has all the answers.

He may discover that caste is not the only reason why '90% of Indians' are not participants in India's journey towards prosperity. He rails against the absence of lower castes in positions of power without noticing that this is because they have not been given the tools to rise above poverty and deprivation. The most powerful of these tools is education. If lower caste children had access to good schools, they would compete easily with those who come from the upper castes. It is one of the mysteries of Indian politics that so many 'socialist' prime ministers never noticed the urgent need to build schools capable of providing real education instead of just basic literacy.

One of Modi's biggest failures is that he did too little to improve our lousy school system. If he had put as much energy into this as he did into Swachh Bharat, things could have changed immensely in the past ten years, when most of our biggest and least literate states have been run by BJP chief ministers. The situation is so

New Delhi

bad that our vaunted demographic dividend could end up being useless.

There have been other failures of governance in the past ten years, but they have gone unnoticed by Rahul Gandhi and his advisors. Like a needle stuck in a rut, he continues to rant and rail against the takeover of educational institutions by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) without observing that there is not much for them to take over. They may tinker with history books, and they certainly have been doing this. But they have failed to address the real problem, which is that most Indian children leave school without learning or skills. When Rahul Gandhi returns

home, he would do himself and his party a big favour if he directed his energy towards giving Indian children the chance of a real future. He said on this foreign trip that 90% of Indians lacked 'access to opportunity' and hinted that this was because of the evils of the caste system. For months, he has banged on and on about the need for a caste census. Clearly, this would result in more reserved jobs, and more reserved seats in schools and colleges.

The answer is not to continue expanding reservations. The answer is for our political leaders to realise that for India to ever become a fully developed country the most vital change that must happen is for India's children to have access to real schools.

of driving ranges, it's likely that Topgolf won't have to worry about footfalls here. Agolfer, Meraj Shah also

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Bob Dylan

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STATE PUBLIC UNITS AND THE EROSION OF TAXPAYER WEALTH

HE discourse in living rooms in the run-up to the assembly elections is justifiably focused on parties' use of taxpayer monies to woo voters. This week saw a parade of promises in Jammu and Kashmir, with the Congress offering ₹3,000 a month for women, 11 kg of rations and ₹25-lakh health cover, and the BJP promising ₹18,000 cash transfer to a family's eldest woman, ₹10,000 under PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, a 50 percent cut in power tariffs and land for the landless. The battle to win votes is fierce in Haryana, and will unfold in Jharkhand and Maharashtra, too.

The sop story has been riveting attention—this column has highlighted the consequences of taxpayer-funded acquisition of votes. The pursuit of power also demands the retention of votes. And the destruction of taxpayer wealth to preserve political capital has largely escaped attention. It is a silent fiscal crisis. The auditor general's reports on state public sector enterprises (PSEs) reveals the rot unravelling across states.

For starters, consider the state of PSE affairs in the poll-



THE THIRD EYE **SHANKKAR AIYAR** Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaai* A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India

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bound states. Let's start with Maharashtra, which has 105 PSEs-88 of them functional and 17 inactive. Of the functioning units, 43 were in profit when last audited and 47 were loss-making. Their accumulated losses are at ₹49,373 crore. The present value of the state's investment: ₹5.28 lakh crore. The return on equity: -0.17 percent.

Haryana has 37 PSEs, of which four have been in liquidation processes for 18 years. Twenty reported profits of ₹648 crore and 13 were in the red with accumulated losses of ₹28,237 crore. The return on equity:

1.41 percent. Resource-rich Jharkhand has 31 PSEs, of which three are non-functional. In 2022, only 16 of the 28 functional PSEs submitted their accounts for audit—the 10 profitable PSEs netted ₹23.35 crore, while five reported losses of ₹2,702 crore. The accumulated losses were at ₹10.859 crore.

Poll-bound states have company in states of sloth. As of March 2021, Karnataka had 113 PSEs, of which 13 were nonworking. Between 2016 and 2021, nearly half the PSEs were running at a loss. During 2020-21, 50 state PSEs incurred a loss of ₹8,246.47 crore and the net worth of 33 PSEs was eroded. The accumulated losses: ₹26,193 crore.

In Tamil Nadu, of the 57 PSEs that submitted their 2021-22 accounts, 29 earned a net profit of Rs 1,657 crore, while 28 suffered a net loss of ₹16,617 crore. According to a Comptroller and Auditor General report, 26 PSEs had accumulated losses of ₹1.41 lakh crore. Gujarat has 101 PSEs in two categories government companies and government-controlled companies. Of these, 63 reported profits of ₹9,927 crore and 30 incurred losses of Rs 2,456 crore, with the accumulated losses touching ₹18,379 crore in 2022-23.

Take the agrarian and populous states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As of March 2023, there were 113 PSEs in Uttar Pradesh, of which 41 were inactive. Of the PSEs that submitted accounts, 39 clocked profits of Rs 2,169 crore, whereas 27 recorded losses of ₹32,429 crore; the net worth of 15 PSEs was completely eroded and the accumulated losses were pegged at ₹1.95 lakh crore. There are no surprises from Bihar, which in 2023 had 76 PSEs of which 39 were non-active. Of the active 37 units, 16 reported profits totalling ₹317 crore, while 15 reported losses of ₹2,847 crore; the accumulated losses were at ₹26,991 crore.

In March 2021, West Bengal had 85 PSEs, of which 66 were working and 19 non-working. Out of the 66 state PSEs, 33 earned profits of ₹1,752 crore and 33 incurred losses of ₹1,061 crore. The accumulated losses of 41 of the 85 PSEs were ₹17,130 crore; 41 PSEs cutting across sectors from agro and manufac-

turing to services had negative net worth. It is manifest that there is a systemic crisis. Data is detained by the impunity with which PSEs across states fail to file accounts. Nearly every third—if not every second—PSE is in the red. The accumulated losses in just 10 states add up to nearly ₹5 lakh crore. It doesn't seem to matter whether the state is industrialised or agrarian, is in the north or the south.

The race to the bottom engenders a fiscal fragility. The gross fiscal deficit of all states is up from ₹3.2 lakh crore to ₹9.4 lakh crore in 10 years. The total outstanding liabilities of states stands at ₹83.31 lakh crore. Nineteen states are running revenue deficits—states are paying over ₹4.89 lakh crore, or ₹1,400 crore a day, in interest costs.

The political resistance to a shift in strategy is about employment protection and triggers questions of sustainability. The state of affairs calls for a national census on state-owned PS-Es—on the total number of employees, jobs created, investments, borrowings, interest costs, accumulated losses and surplus. It is evident that good money—taxpayer money intended to fund human and physical capital—is chasing poor outcomes. Ideally, the 16th Finance Commission should look into these

questions and design a pathway for states to monetise assets. The persistence of rot regardless of the party in power validates the existence of a political consensus for weak reforms. Ironically, in the public square there is much lather about lossmaking central PSEs, but scarcely a ripple about the erosion of wealth by hundreds of state PSEs. The spectre unfolding symbolises the boiling frog syndrome—the elector and the elected seem to be inured to the unfolding devastation of taxpayer wealth.

IS RAHUL RIDING THE KHALISTAN TIGER?



OPINION BALBIR PUNJ Former Chairman, Indian Institute of Mass Communication

AS the irrepressible Rahul Gandhi stoked the very fire that consumed his grandmother, Indira Gandhi, on October 31, 1984, singed the country for decades and turned Punjab into a petri-dish of terror? Indira Gandhi uncorked the genie of Sikh radicalism in the 1980s and couldn't bottle it back. She engineered the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, pushed Punjab into the vortex of violence, ordered army action in the Golden Temple to clear the mess she had created, hurt the Sikh psyche irretrievably in the process, and finally paid with life for her misadventure. Isn't Rahul Gandhi following in her footsteps?

Addressing a meeting in Washington DC during his three-day US visit, Rahul said, "The fight is about whether he as a Sikh is going to be allowed to wear his turban in India and he, as a Sikh, is going to be allowed to wear a kada in India, or he as a Sikh is going to be able to go to a gurudwara—that's what the fight is about, and not just for him, for all religion."

to the reality in India. He has desper- Congress leader. He is an insider and ately issued such an untenable statement to further his political agenda. The idea is to tarnish Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image in the global arena and garner support for himself from all those disparate sections who hate India.

To what extent Rahul's irresponsible remarks would serve his political ends is difficult to guess, but two conse-

quences will undoubtedly follow. One, his rants will be used by the anti-India pack, including Pakistan's ISI and its proxies, to be mirch India's image globally. It would also provide impetus to the Khalistan movement, which has little base within the country.

It's in this context one has to see the statement made by the US- and Canada-based Khalistani leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun: "Rahul Gandhi justified Sikhs for Justice's global Khalistan referendum campaign... Rahul's statement on 'existential threat to Sikhs in India' is not only bold and pioneering, but is also firmly grounded in the factual history of what Sikhs have been facing under successive regimes in India since 1947, and also corroborates SFJ's stance on the justification for Punjab independence referendum to establish Sikh homeland Khalistan."

Pannun is the poster boy of the Khalistan movement, particularly in the US and Canada. He co-founded the banned SFJ. He has been declared a terrorist in India and is charged with sedition and secessionism. He happily announces that Rahul's statement resonates with his Khalistan agenda.

To repeat an adage, 'Those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it.' The tragic assassination of Indira Gandhi was the culmination of a disastrous chain of events she had set in motion to achieve her political ends. This sordid story is convincingly narrated by G B S Sidhu in his deftly-researched work, *The Khalistan* Conspiracy: A Former R&AW Officer Unravels the Path to 1984. Sidhu, a former police officer, is the son-in-law Rahul's remarks bear no relation of Sardar Swaran Singh, a veteran thus a credible witness to the conspiracy that set Punjab ablaze. He was a special secretary of India's external intelligence agency.

> According to him, the genesis of the Khalistan problem can be traced to 1978, "when former chief minister of Punjab Giani Zail Singh advised Indira Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, that the Akali Dal-Janata Party coali-



The genie of Sikh radicalism was uncorked decades ago to pursue political ends. As an account by a former spy shows, the Congress supported Jarnail Singh

Bhindranwale as a foil against the Akali Dal-Janata Party government in Puniab. Indira Gandhi tragically paid for it with her life

tion government in Punjab could be destabilised if the moderate policies followed by the senior Akali leadership... could come under constant attack by a suitable Sikh sant... the moderate Akali leaders would be forced to adopt an uncompromising stance on issues of Sikh interest to retain their following". He further reveals, "With Indira Gandhi's approval, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale of Gurudwara Darshan Prakash at Chowk Mehta was chosen as the sant who would do their bidding in Punjab."

What led to the sudden spurt in pro-Khalistan activities in Punjab and abroad only after the Congress came to power in January 1980? Siddhu answers, "The real reason was a conscious decision taken by some senior Congress leaders, soon after Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980, to win the next elections (due before January 1985) by first creating and then solving the Khalistan issue

through the use of Bhindranwale."

How was Bhindranwale elevated to the status of a top Sikh leader, and by whom? According to Sidhu, "Despite the ban imposed by the Punjab government on possession of arms, not only was Bhindranwale openly moving around in Punjab with a possé of armed men, he also visited Delhi in the first week of April 1982 at the invitation of Santokh Singh, president of the Congress-controlled Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee. Bhindranwale was accompanied by two busloads of his followers, who were seen in the capital with armed men sitting on the roof of a bus." Such brazen contempt for the system by Bhindrawale raised his stature to that of an invincible, fearless cult leader among the Sikh masses.

Do Sikhs suffer from any discrimination in India? Sikhs constitute about 2 percent of India's population, but have had some of the highest offices in the republic. India had a Sikh prime minister, Manmohan Singh, for two consecutive terms, and a Sikh president in Giani Zail Singh.

However, the Congress party has, at times, used Sikhs as pawns in its mad pursuit of power. Following Gandhi's tragic assassination, thousands of innocent Sikhs became victims of a pogrom unleashed by marauding mobs led by some Congress leaders.

Rajiv Gandhi went as far as to justify the pogrom, saying at a public gathering: "We know that the hearts of the Indian people were full of anger, and for a few days, people felt India was shaking. When a big tree falls, the earth shakes." His party's 1984 Lok Sabha campaign was based on the demonisation of the Sikh community.

It's a settled fact that the ogre of Khalistan was created by Indira Gandhi and her two sons Sanjay and Rajiv, with help from Zail Singh and some other sidekicks to win Punjab for Congress. Is Rahul carrying on the squalid family legacy? Isn't he riding a tiger, too?

> (Views are personal) (punjbalbir@gmail.com)

WHY OVERWORK DOES NOT HELP ANYONE



OPINION GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN Former bureaucrat and author, most recently of The Spell of the Rain Tree

HE necessity of increasing working hours to augment productivity has been recently debated in the public domain. Certain successful industry leaders have stated that a 70-hour work week is necessary for the growth momentum to be maintained. Highly successful entrepreneurs who have built enterprises, generated jobs and wealth are being held up as examples. With the advent of the knowledge economy and carry-on mobile devices, the concept of fixed working hours has become blurred. The work-from-home culture, which gained traction during the lockdown, has further effaced the bounda-

ries of the workspace. In earlier decades, workers could drop their tools to retire for the day. Labour union activism and consequential legislation ensured the rights of workers to prevent exploitation through overwork. However, the hustle culture has changed the game. The glorification of extreme work—the celebration of CEOs who sleep in an office cubicle or do not sleep

at all—has fuelled this trend.

In coffee shops across the globe, it is common to see employees hunched over their laptops, their eyes glued to the screen, their ears plugged. They perhaps do not even smell the coffee that they have ordered. The fierce competition for jobs, the desire to gain better rewards and personal success drives them. While there is perhaps a digital log maintained of the hours clocked, there is no record of the opportunity cost. Further, there is prospective burnout and circadian rhythm imbalance which also has to be reckoned with.

It is necessary to analyse the nature of rewards that accrue from the extra work put in by employees. Without doubt, wealth is created and there is a benefit to society. Perhaps, C-suite employees are rewarded in direct proportion to the increased production of goods and services. Some benefits also trickle down to workers. However, the human cost of the additional working hours is to be factored in.

Recently, a proposal by the Karnataka government to increase IT employees' workdays to 14 hours was met with protests. Even if additional compensation is offered, such terms are bound to have an adverse personal cost for the employees. They would be required to reallocate personal time to work demands.

The effect of stress caused by long working hours brings the focus on worklife balance. Some industry heads have suggested that work commitments should be the most important aspect of an employee's time. It is unclear whether the increased hours will translate

into productivity and improved quality. Rather, productivity may be enhanced by constraints as it could foster the optimal use of resources. Spending longer hours at work without involvement or dedication is counter-productive. Breaks from work help in divergent thinking and creative problem-solving. The fact that people are looking not merely at numbers either in terms of remuneration or working hours, but seek job satisfaction, must be borne in mind.



The glorification of extreme work has fuelled a hustle culture. The hours put in may be digitally logged, but the stress and burnout caused by overwork is not. Japan's example shows only monetary rewards are not enough for a society to prosper

Changes in the workplace being brought about by use of AI are also significant. Many employers have deployed AI to streamline processes, resulting in lower costs and increased productivity. The flip-side is the potential reduction in manpower. This can be a source of concern to the workforce, as the future is riddled with uncertainties. Strategic planning to tackle the prospect of employee redundancy, with the use of AI through upskilling and reskilling, is the need of the hour.

Working long hours beyond a fixed

schedule is the norm in several professions, including academics, defence, medicine and bureaucracy. Those who have chosen such professions are conscious that they have to be available at all times to deal with situations that may require their attention or response. Employee benefits, leave, adequate remuneration and a certain degree of job security help deal with such circumstances.

Toxic workplaces, where there are steep demands on the time and energy of employees, breed stress and anxiety, leading to physical and mental health challenges. This is bound to impact long-term productivity. It could also result in a loss of experience and mid-level leadership skills for the workforce.

One of the most workaholic nations in the world, Japan, is looking at a shorter working week of four days. Workers are being allowed a choice of working styles based on varied circumstances. The Japanese language has the term karoshi for death from overwork. Among other consequences of overwork is a fall in the country's birth rate, which has led to a reduction in the viable workforce of the future. The lessons of the Japanese experience are too valuable to be ignored. Work schedules must be sustainable in the long term.

In his essay In Praise of Idleness, Bertrand Russell said, "The individual, in our society, works for profit; but the social purpose of his work lies in the consumption of what he produces." Only when workers get adequate time to themselves would the economy be able to produce and consume in good (Views are personal) measures.

QUOTE CORNER

India's position [on Gaza] has been principled and consistent. While we condemn acts of terrorism and hostage taking, we are deeply pained by the continuing death of innocent civilians. Any response must take into account the principles of humanitarian law. We support a ceasefire as soon as possible... We have consistently stood for a resolution of the Palestinian issue through a two-state solution.

S Jaishankar, Indian foreign minister, at the first India-GCC Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue in Riyadh

It is imperative that CBI dispels the notion of it being a caged parrot. Rather, the perception should be that of an uncaged parrot.

Justice Ujjal Bhuyan of the Supreme Court, while granting bail to Arvind Kejriwal

It's all the club, not only players, everything as a unit, united. They have to

rebuild from the bottom; if not, they cannot compete, it will be impossible. **Cristiano Ronaldo** to his former Manchester United teammate Rio Ferdinand

MALIDAC INTEREST MAILBAU letters@newindianexpress.com

Parents' duty

Ref: Need to change our approach to student suicides (Sep 14). Many students who die by suicide within the precincts of educational institutes could not withstand syllabus pressure after being forced to join the course by their parents. The last sentence of the article advising parents to lend their ears to their children's future plans and having faith in their calibre is appreciable. Allowing young minds to have self-appraisal is the best course for parental duty in modern times.

K Jayanthi, Chennai

Moral education

Young people die by suicide for various reasons. I saw the report a 20-year-old student who took the step just because his poor mother, a house help, could not buy a motorcycle he wanted. She had even managed to save Rs 50,000 for the purpose. Lack of concern for a loving mother leading to suicidal tenR Kasthurirangan, Bengaluru

Indian approach

As the author opines, there is no use adopting a Western model in dealing with suicides of Indian students. Indian culture, values and lifestyles are different. Eastern, indigenous methods like pranayam, meditation, engaging in socially useful work and avoiding recreational drugs would go a long way in curbing self-destructive thoughts.

G Nataraja Perumal, Elathur

Financial literacy

Ref: Keep eye on global interest rate cuts for market moves (Sep 14). Indian investors must explore new investment opportunities to avoid missing out. Unfortunately, a significant portion of our population lacks basic financial knowledge. India needs to develop stronger financial literacy programmes to educate the youth on finance and investing, which could help reduce unemployment too.

Aman Aditya, Dhenkanal

Ref: Don't sacrifice airport growth for lobbies (Sep 14). The editorial has highlighted appeasement of billionaire stakeholders at the expense of common fliers and Kochi airport's growth prospects. It's a model of shareholder ownership. It's shortsighted to ignore the high dividends that even the state government is enjoying as a stakeholder. But the aviation authorities should look into the functioning of the airport and ensure the "goose that lays" golden eggs" is not sacrificed.

Hemanth Bhide, Mangaluru

Caged parrot

The Supreme Court has rightly chided the CBI as a "caged parrot" for the inordinate delay in Arvind Kejriwal's case. During the UPA regime too judges used this epithet in the 2G spectrum case. It is obvious the investigative agency is not independent from the ruling dispensation, irrespective of the party in power. The CBI also comes under fire from the opposition. Until the national probe agency is made autonomous, it will remain a punching bag. Will our political parties allow it to function independently through parliamentary laws? R Sridharan, Chennai

Kejriwal bail

The Supreme Court's bail decision for Arvind Kejriwal highlights the importance of protecting personal liberty, a key democratic principle. The court criticised the CBI's delay and handling of the case, stressing the need for fair treatment and adherence to legal standards. The ruling reflects a balance between accountability and individual freedom. Sakshi Gawhade. Indore

Resolve impasse

Ref: WB govt to pay Rs 2 lakh to families of 29 who died due to doctor's protest (Sep 13). While I commend the state government's decision to compensate the bereaved families, the cause of the crisis remains unaddressed. There is a dire need for improved dialogue between the state and medical professionals to prevent further disruptions.

Md Shakaib Shoaib, Bengaluru

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REFLECTIONS

Comrade's love, not war



TOUCHSTONES IRA PANDE

AST week, we had more rain than I can remember in a long time. News trickling in from friends and relatives in the hills is frightening and one lives in terror of the floods and lands lides that will surely follow. The previous week, during an idyllic vacation at a resort on the Ganga in Rishikesh, I was appalled to see the surging waters of the river. One slip of the foot and one could be swept away forever. The hotel had barred the gates where guests could walk down for a private dip in normal times and the aarti, done each evening, was performed but with an awning strung over the area. Nevertheless, the serenity and beautifully green ambience was like a balm on the soul of those of us who crave for peace and a noise-free environment.

Back in Noida, where we consider ourselves fortunate if we get a brief, occasional shower during the monsoons, we have been blessed with overcast skies, steady drizzles and the kind of dark thundery sky that uplifts sagging spirits. Of course, we oldies can savour this but the plight of the commuters, delivery boys and schoolchildren caught in the interminable traffic jams is another story.

Then there was the presidential debate in Philadelphia — an event that had everyone waiting to see the outcome. I must say, our politicians are better at hurling insults and trading non sequiturs. The stage was set up clearly to trump (excuse the pun) one candidate, while the other relied on age and charm rather than on facts and policies. Disappointing, to say the least. Meanwhile, our media has been feeding off the visit of our LoP, and he provides good TRPs is all I can say. Let's wait now for the next Indian leader's visit and seewhat he will provide to his friends and foes.

The triviality of all these events was revealed by



Sitaram Yechury was often at odds with his fellow travellers, but was also a consensus builder par excellence

the demise of Sitaram Yechury after a brief battle in Delhi's AIIMS. It is significant that every newspaper and all the news channels paid fulsome tributes to aman who was truly one of a kind. Brilliant, without being arrogant, true to his ideological beliefs despite his innately liberal outlook, warm, respected across parties — in short, a man of many parts. He was just a year younger than I and his early yearstransported metomemories of myown youth, the '70s, when all of us were looked upon as lefties. From the Gandhian lives of our parents and the heady years of Nehru's romance with socialism, our first encounter with Marxism came in the wake of a worldwide movement against imperialism and senseless wars. 'Make love, not war' was the rallying cry that reached out to us even in the boondocks of provincial India.

Vietnam became a kind of crucible of one's faith, when young students across universities took to the streets to bring the world's attention to the courage of this little country in taking on the might

of America. Some unforgettable lyrics and poetry became anthems for us students, who never forgot the power of those words. The Beat Poets, singers such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, among many others, branded their words, forged — as someone memorably commented - in the smithies of their souls. We were young and believed every word. Later, much later, we became involved in our careers and families, and slowly became lapsed Marxists.

However, there were many in that generation who never gave up. And Yechurywas certainly one of them. They did not chase success, security and the comfort of a middle-class life. All his life, Sitaram Yechury lived the life of a dedicated party worker, in an austere but dignified way. He remained a Comrade to all and did not deviate from the path he had chosen early in life.

There were many others like him, some dear colleagues in Panjab University, who lived by the ideals (however discredited by time) of the ideology they had chosen as theirs. What made Yechury different was that while he never reneged on his commitment, he realised that the lonely path chosen by other Comrades and the rigidity of their beliefs were alienating them from a larger polity. He was often at odds with his fellow travellers, but he was also a consensus builder par excellence. Of late, he was often reviled as a quasi-Congressman but, unlike many others, he never sought any office or Rajya Sabha seat from them. Nor, like most of them, did he resort to cheap political cracks. Hisability to never violate that core of pure humanity is a rare gift now seldom appreciated.

What made that generation of Comrades special was that they were all brilliant minds and schooled in the literature of the world. Not surprisingly, many of them were marvellous poets, playwrights or filmmakers. Just recall the films of Mrinal Sen and others to understand why almost every great writer of those times was left-leaning. If Marxism ultimately failed, it was because no one could ever reach the ideal world they hungered for.

So, today, we live in a dystopic world, peopled by pettymen with small brains, but never forget there was a time when we all believed we could change the world by love alone. How wrong and naïve we were, but how grand were our dreams!

Cyber fraud is rampant, be aware and mindful



CONSUMER RIGHTS **PUSHPA GIRIMAJI**

OU may be an extremely cautious person, but sometimes scammers can get the better of you. A Pune resident learnt this the hard way. He was checking out hospitals online for a consultation and when he got a call from someone claiming to be from one of the well-known hospitals he had visited virtually, he found no reason to suspect the veracity of the caller.

So much so that he readily opened the link sent to his mobile phone for payment of the 'registration fee' for appointment with a doctor, and transferred the money through it. It was only when his bank informed him that ₹64,000 had been deducted from his account through various online transactions, did he realise that he had been taken for a ride! Obviously, the cybercriminals had installed some spyware on his phone, possibly through an application he had installed, and were following his digital footprint.

Today, online frauds have become rampant. Worse, with the help of artificial intelligence, cybercriminal sare perfecting their modus operandi to such an extent that it is becoming almost impossible for consumers to identify the fake. Earlier, poor language skills exposed them, but with AI, language is not a barrier anymore. There have been 'fake traffic challan' scams, 'narcotics-in-yourparcel' fraud, 'Aadhaar card linked to terrorism' hoax, cryptocurrency and investment rackets, online loan and job scams, matrimonial cons, fraudsthrough impersonation using deep fakes and voice cloning. Well, the list is endless and the victims in many cases have lost their entire savings, or incurred huge liabilities.

Recently, a reader told me about a phone call that he received — an automated pre-recorded message in faultless English and Hindi, telling him that it was from the Reserve Bank of India and that his bank accounts would be frozen in two hours for involvement in 'illegal transactions'. 'Press 9 for more information,' said the voice at the other end. Consumers have also got such calls claiming to be from their bank, asking whether they had made a transaction of considerable amount on their debit or credit card. Press #1 to confirm and #9 to deny and report the fraud, they are told. In their anxiety, people press #9 and are asked to give their name, card number and date of birth to confirm their identity. Next, they are sent a link or an appon WhatsApp with malicious software, ostensibly to lodge a complaint with the cybercrime police. When they open the link or install the app and follow the instructions, they end up becoming victims of cybercriminals. Recently, a friend received an authentic-looking email from the

'cybercrime police', saying she was under their radar for using her Internet connection for child pomography!

Last year, a senior citizen lost ₹1 lakh to another carefully crafted ploy. It all started with the man trying to add ₹155 worth of talk time and data on his phone. The bank deducted the money, but the recharge was unsuccessful. He sent an email to the service provider, and was asked to contact his bank. Meanwhile, someone claiming to be an executive of the service provider called and said they would credit ₹155 to his bank account. To facilitate that, they asked him to download an application and scan his debit card on it. The app that he

Resist clicking on links sent on email, WhatsApp or SMS, or downloading applications sent by anyone

downloaded was Rust Desk - an open source remote access and control software, using which the fraudster carried out transactions worth over ₹1 lakh on his card. Obviously, the man's email was compromised.

While the Central government as well as several state governments are equipping cybercrime police with sophisticated equipment and skills to track and nab online scammers, consumers need to exercise utmost caution and resist the temptation to click on any links sent on email, WhatsApp or SMS, or download applications sent by anyone, as they are the source of malware that cantrackyour online browsing, steal crucial data stored on your computer or phone and access your email.

So, even if your service provider sends a link to help you pay your dues, it would be safer to download the official app of the service provider, or go to its authentic website to pay. If you want an app, go to your phone's official store and download the app from there, but only after reading the user reviews and ensuring its authenticity. And allow the app to access only those controls or data that is necessary for its functioning. Install good anti-virus software and always download the security updates sent by your phone's computer operating systems.

If anyone calls from an unknown number, claiming to be from your service provider or even the police, disconnect and call them on the official number provided on their website. Keep yourself updated on online frauds. Remember, today, every Internet user is at risk. Only your awareness and presence of mind can save you.

Memorable visit to DAV College, Lahore

VIJAY SABHARWAL

HE importance of preserving cultural heritage came to the fore when I recently visited DAV College, Lahore, and my birthplace, Eminabad. The Pakistani town is associated with Guru Nanak Dev and historical monuments and artefacts have been well maintained.

DAV College was started in 1886 as a memorial to the founder of Arya Samaj, Swami Dayanand Saraswati. After Partition, the college was relocated to Ambala city in 1948. The campus in Lahore served as a refugee camptill 1952. Thereafter, it was used as a medical and law college by an Islamic NGO, before being converted in 1958 into Government Islamia College Civil Lines for post-graduate studies. At present, 7,500 students are studying in this institution.

DAV College, Lahore, was associated with many fearless freedom fighters. Famously, Bhagat Singh and Rajguru sought refuge here after Assistant Superintendent of Police John Saunders was shot in front of the police station, located across the road from the college. They fled through the college gates as Chandrashekhar Azad fired at Constable Chanan Singh, who was in pursuit.

DAV College is also the site of samadhis of three members of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's family. A board on the campus states that the

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1. MESSRE BANKA MAL SONS & BROS BANALOS FEROZEPUR	Rs. 50001
MESSES KINDA RAM BRIJ LAL RAIS FEROZEPHIN	
2. BANNOIN RAM DAS ENHIRDAN LANDRE	
S. L. SRANKAN DAS KONLI BHERA	27747
4. HAT AMAR CHAND PARTI SHAM CHURASI	23201
5. H.B.L. ISHAR DASS SAWHNEY,	35.0
MAWANGHENN ABSOTTABAD	21,000
5. BHAT RAM SINCH DUA AMBITSAR	20,000
7. L. EARORS MEL KHOSEA, 5/0 DR BELL RAM	
LANGRE	20,000
8. L. SHIV LAL PORT BLAIR	12,400
3. SIR CHHAJJU BAM CALCUTTA	10,000
10. L. RAM RATTAN ACCARWAL ROHTAN	10,000
II. TH. SUNH CHAIN SINGH, SIMLA	9,800

Names of those who donated more than ₹5,000 towards the establishment of the college.

first samadhi belongs to Raj Kaur or Datar Kaur, who died in 1838. She was the mother of Kharak Singh, the Maharaja's eldest son and successor. The second samadhi belongs to Chand Kaur, wife of Kharak Singh and mother of their son Nau Nihal Singh. She died in 1842. The third samadhi is of Sahab Kaur, who married Nau Nihal Singh at the age of 16 in 1837. and died in 1841.

Hard to miss on the campus is the board listing the names of all those who donated more than ₹5,000 towards the establishment of the

college in 1883. One of the top donors contributed as much as ₹60,000, which was a very significant amount at the time.

College principal Dr Akhtar Hussain Sandhu, who joined as the vice-principal after completing his higher education from London in 2019, found the donor board plastered over with cement. He was told that this was done since the board carried the names of Hindus and Sikhs associated with the institution. He sought help from Dr Assal Ali Dani, an associate professor of Urdu, to restore the board.

Both appreciated the work done by the DAV college managing committee and Arya Samaj leaders for setting up the college, saying had they not set up the institution, "we would still have been shepherds".

The main building of the college displays a foundation stone acknowledging the gift by Rai Bahadur Ganga Ram. A drinking water tower in front of another building acknowledges the donation made by Malan Devi in memory of her husband, Lala Sada Nand Grover.

When my friend Amar Raj Singh Nain politely mentioned that Sandhu is in fact a caste amongst the Sikh community in India, Dr Sandhu disclosed that his ancestors had converted to Islam. All religious places and historical legacies must be given 'izzat' (respect) and 'itram' (reverence), he said. A message leaders on both sides of the divide would do well to adhere to.

A Buddhist monk in his exclusive aviary



LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)

NE bright morning in March 1981, my journey to Gangtok was interrupted by a sizeable landslide, about 20 km short of the destination. A functionary of the PWD estimated three hours for the resumption of traffic. Noticing my camera and binoculars, he stated pointing to the ridgetop, "Uperwahan Karmapa Sahib kay pinjre mein bahut sundar parinday hain..." (Up there in Karmapa Sahib's cage are very beautiful birds).

Twenty minutes later, huffing and puffing, I stood transfixed by the 'pinjra', which was a spacious, state-of-the-art aviary-cum-hermitage of the venerable Kamapa. Tall and handsome, he was a high priest of Buddhism ordained by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, at the Potala, in the 1940s. After brief pleasantries, as he led meinside, the birds, at once, scuttled around or perched on his shoulders as he casually informed that they were 108 in number. Noticing my puzzled look, he then put me wise about the sacredness of the figure, both to the Hindus and Buddhists — 108 Upanishads as also 108 beads in a monk's rosary.

At this stage, the Karmapa discreetly moved away, stipulating that he and his hermitage must not figure in any photo frame. My challenge, however, lay in picking the seven birds corresponding to the unexposed film. The dilemma resolved itself as the first to make 'parikramas' around me was a female green peafowl, the most coquette photo-model as she mischievously moved the moment I zeroed out the camera! Unlike our National Bird, which has a pan-India presence, their green cousin was essentially confined to Manipur, Mizoram and a few in Jalpaiguri, from where this interloper had seduced the Karmapa. After all, who could resist their blue and yellow facial skins, heads adorned by an erect bluish-green plume, necks and breasts a glistening bronze-green and the tail of males tinged copper bronze turning violet under certain light!



Golden pheasant



Green peafowl

The male ring-neck's plumage was yet

head offset by red wattles, upper parts barred bright gold tinged with copper and purple, small of back royal blue and tail light brown barred black! But, sadly, they are destiny's discarded creatures, having become the favoured 'game bird' of Europe and Americas.

My cup of luck brimmed over on two more counts, firstly lifetime's yet another first sighting, the emerald dove, and secondly, that I had one vacant photo frame to freeze her likeness! True to her name, the dazzling emerald green on her back, wings offset by mellow pinkishgrey underparts and the bright red bill made for a euphoric memory.

There was one other-worldly aspect to this entire episode. I was the only "outsider" ushered in by the Karmapa inside his hermitage, and I shall never know why. When I revisited some six months later, armed with several rolls of film, gone was the 16th Karmapa and his aviary. He had been claimed by cancer and the birds had been freed in the Pharaohic belief that they would accompany the Karmapa's soul to heaven! My wife and I sat for long, facing the Rumtek monastery, in silent homage to a great Buddhist.



Unknown tome at that moment, I became,

perhaps, the last person to photograph possi-

bly the last surviving green peafowl of India.

Riding on luck's high tide inside the

Karmapa's hermitage, my lifetime's next

encounter was with a male grey peacock

pheasant. As pheasants go, his silver-brown

plumage was somber, but the purple-green

eyespotsover the crown and tail were simply

mesmerising but regrettably so spooky that

the photograph is worthless. Let's hope that

because of the species' retiring nature, they

may survive farther into the future than was

the case with our green peafowl.

Tragic, but that is God's truth.

another colour extravaganza; bottle green

legs and feet, yellow. Phew!

These Assembly seats are a microcosm of politics in the state, where the more things change, the more they remain the same. Political dynasts, surname as the golden ticket, family bonding and splits, fickle loyalties and merit too, if other factors favour

CUES THAT STAND OUT IN HARYANA

JULANA

Vinesh Phogat versus the rest

DEEPENDER DESWAL

ROM being one of the most low-key Assembly segments, Julana in Jind district is now the cynosure of all eyes. The entry of wrestler Vinesh Phogat in the dangal of Haryana politics has spiced up the election atmosphere in this nondescript segment, tossed between the

towns of Jind and Rohtak. There's a reason the Congress has



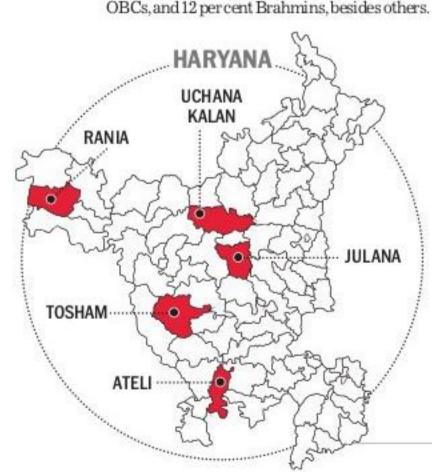
fielded Vinesh from Julana. She is from the Jat community of course andher husband, Somvir Rathee, is from Khera Bakhta village in Jind district, which is part of the Assembly segment. "Vinesh is bahu for the people of this constituency. We have seen her in an intense battle on the wrestling mat in the Olympics. We are also witness to her prolonged struggle against former Wrestling Federation of India president and BJP leader Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. She is a fighter. And we love her fighting spirit," says Rajpal Singh, a former sarpanch of Karsola village in Jind district.

Up against Vinesh are Yogesh Kumar Bairagi of the BJP, Surender Lathar of the INLD, professional wrestler Kavita Dalal from AAP, besides sitting MLA Amarieet Dhanda of the JJP. On the ground, though, these rivals seem to have been overshadowed by Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Soon after the Congress fielded Vinesh, Brij Bhushan unleashed verbal volleys to target her. From taking political jibes like "her real motive is exposed" to making personal remarks, he has emerged as a key issue in her electoral battle in Julana.

While she has been countering him and brushing aside the allegations levelled by him, Vinesh says "this man could stoop even lower". For many of her supporters and wrestling fans — and there is no shortage of them here — the political fight is turning into one of prestige and honour. "He is not in the electoral fray but seems the only rival for Vinesh here. By ensuring her victory, we will take revenge for all the gibberish he has been saying," says Ravinder, a resident of Gatauli village.

Vinesh, however, maintains that she is not taking her political opponents lightly. "I learnt this from wrestling that we should not deem our rivals as being lightweight. Though I have been getting support and the love of people, I cannot lower my guard. I have been working hard. It's a new learning as well," she says. She also faces dissension within the Congress, as some leaders are upset over her sudden entry. Though twotime MLA Parminder Singh Dhull and most of the other aspirants joined the Phogat bandwagon when Rohtak MP Deepender Hooda came during the filing of her nomination papers, the probability of "bheetarghat" (internal sabotage) by the disgruntled aspirants is not ruled out.

Julana constituency has a total of 1.8 lakh voters — 46 per cent of them are Jats, 21 per cent belong to the Scheduled Castes, 18 per cent are





RANIA

Devi Lal clan, one against the other

ANIL KAKKAR

O Assembly constituency exemplifies the twists and turns as well as the internal family dynamics of Haryana politics better than Rania in Sirsa district. Pitted against each other this time are members of the Devi Lal clan. The Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) has fielded Arjun

Chautala, the younger son of senior

leader Abhay Chautala. He will be

up against sitting MLA Ranjit

Singh — former Deputy PM Devi

Lal's son and the younger brother

of Arjun's grandfather, former

Chief Minister Om Prakash Chauta-

la. The Minister of Power and Jails

again, though he had joined the BJP

As the BJP candidate, Ranjit Singh





till recently, Ranjit Singh had won in Arjun Chautala 2019 from Rania as an Independent. He is contesting as an Independent earlier this year.

lost the Hisar Lok Sabha election to Congress' Jai Parkash. The poll saw even the Chautala bahus competing against each other—former Deputy

Ranjit Singh CM Dushyant Singh Chautala's mother Naina Singh Chautala from the INLD offshoot Jannayak Janta Party (JJP), and her sister-in-law Sunaina Chautala as the INLD candidate.

Arjun had contested the Kurukshetra Lok Sabha seat

in 2019 as an INLD candidate and finished fifth. The JJP and Ranjit Singh have joined forces to contest the Rania and Dabwali seats. Ranjit Singh will support JJP's Digvijay Singh — Dushyant's brother — in Dabwali, and the JJP will assist Ranjit Singh in Rania.

Meanwhile, Aditya Sihag, the son of Om Prakash Chautala's youngest brother Jagdish Chander, who joined the BJP in 2014, is now the INLD-BSP alliance candidate from Dabwali. He will support the INLD in Rania.

On the last day of nominations, INLD and Gopal Kanda's Harvana Lokhit Party formed an alliance, potentially benefiting Arjun Chautala. In the 2019 Assembly elections, Gopal Kanda's brother Gobind Kanda contested against Ranjit Singh, securing 34,394 votes and finished second. Singh won the election with 53,825 votes in his kitty as an Independent candidate. The INLD-HLP-BSP alliance has made the contest tougher for Ranjit Singh. who is likely to face a formidable challenge.

Before 2019, Ranjit Singh contested twice from Rania on a Congress ticket but lost both times. In 2009, he lost to Krishan Kamboj, and in 2014 to Ram Chandar Kamboj. After being denied a ticket by the Congress in 2019, Ranjit Singh turned a rebel and won as an Independent.

The Congress has fielded journalist Sarva Mitra Kamboj and the BJP Shishpal Kamboj.

UCHANA KALAN

A whole new chapter of legacy contests

DEEPENDER DESWAL

HE high-profile Uchana Kalan constituency in Jind district is set to witness a keen contest between the fourth generations of two prominent political families of Haryana — former Deputy Chief Minister and sitting MLA Dushyant Chautala is pitted against former MP Brijendra Singh. The entry of

BJP's Devender Atri, a Brahmin candidate and a resident of Kahsoon village in the segment, has made it a triangular contest.





Facing anti-incumbency, it would be a challenging task for JJP leader Dushyant to retain his seat. The Congress has fielded former Union minister Birender Singh's son Brijendra Singh, who had won the Hisar Lok Sabha seat as a BJP candidate in 2019. The father-son duo shifted to the Congress before the recent Lok Sabha polls.

Dushyant had defeated Brijendra's mother Prem Lata, who was contesting on a BJP ticket, by 47,000 votes in the 2019 Assembly polls. Five years earlier, in 2014, Prem Lata, fielded by the BJP, had defeat-

ed Dushyant, then in the INLD, by about 7,000 votes. The intense political rivalry between the families started in 2009 when former Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala decided to contest from Uchana Kalan and defeated sitting MLA Birender Singh, then in the Congress, by 621 votes. Birender has represented Uchana

Kalan in the Assembly five times. Brijendra, who resigned from the IAS to take a plunge into politics, is the great-grandson of Sir Chhotu Ram, an iconic farmer leader of the pre-Independence era. Dushyant is the son of former MLA Ajay Chautala, grandson of Om Prakash Chautala and great-grandson of former Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal.

Dushyant is banking on his five years' work in the Uchana Kalan segment. "I have been able to do so much for the development of the constituency and for the entire state during my tenure as Deputy CM. People will ensure JJP's victory," he says.

Brijendra claims his real challenger is the BJP candidate. "Though I am happy he (Dushyant) has opted to contest from here, people are upset with him due to political back stabbing of the mandate after the 2019 Assembly poll results and allegations of corruption," he says.

Farmer activist Azad Palwan and a woman activist, Sikkim Nain, who have been raising issues related to farmers and the molestation of a student by the principal of a government school, have also joined the electoral fray as Independents.

ATELI

Rao stronghold, third generation takes shot

SUMEDHA SHARMA

SMALL town in Mahendergarh district, Ateli has attained centrestage in this election. The Assembly constituency in the Ahirwal region, with _around two lakh voters, is witnessing the electoral debut of the third generation of the powerful Rao clan. Fielded from the family stronghold by the BJP for the

Arti Rao



October 5 polls, Arti Rao is the daughter of six-time MP Rao Inderjit Singh and granddaughter of former Chief Minister Rao Birender Singh. The clan traces its roots to freedom fighter Rao Tula Ram.

For Arti, victory is far from assured. After the strong resistance to her candidature from within the party, her opponents are targeting her for being an outsider who is oblivious to the issues that the residents of the constituency face.

"The entire Ahirwal is my home," counters Arti, "those targeting me should know that Ateli is part of Ahirwal and Mahendergarh. While preparing for this debut for the last 10 years with the BJP, I have been

Santosh Yadav the most active here not just as a politician, but a resident. I know this place like the back of my hand, its problems, its issues and its expectations."

Her grandfather Rao Birender Singh is known across political circles for coining the term Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram', referring to political representatives switching loyalties with alacrity.

Arti's father Rao Inderjit Singh has emerged as the tallest BJP leader in south Haryana, though there's a constant buzz that the saffron party has not done justice by allotting him a berth in the Union ministry that fails to measure up to his status.

To allegations of nepotism and being a poster girl of dynastic politics, Arti says, "I am a national shooter and like any other political leader, have spent a decade working as a party worker on the ground. I am proud of my family's legacy of serving people and lucky to take it forward, but that doesn't define me. None of those in the

fray have toiled for this segment like I have." In addition to battling the BJP government's antiincumbency, she faces a strong opponent in Santosh Yadav, a former BJP MLA. The former Deputy Speaker in the Vidhan Sabha filed her nomination papers as an Independent candidate after being denied a ticket by the BJP from Ateli. It would be Yadav's fifth Assembly election and first as an Independent. She

had emerged victorious in 2014 but lost in 2019. The Congress has fielded Anita Yadav (60), a three-time MLA and former Chief Parliamentary Secretary.

The grand rivalry of Bansi Lal's grandkids



Shruti Choudhry Anirudh Chaudhry

TOSHAM

ITH both the BJP and the Congress fielding members of the family of former Chief Minister Bansi Lal. the Tosham Assembly segment in Bhiwani district has turned into a battle royale between estranged cousins.

BJP's Shruti Choudhry, Bansi Lal's grand-daughter and a former Congress MP, will face the challenge posed by his grandson, Anirudh Chaudhry of the Congress. The two have joined the electoral fray in

the family stronghold for the first time. The contest has turned into a battle for supremacy within two factions of the Bansi Lal family to claim his political legacy.

Of the late Bansi Lal's two sons, Ranbir Mahendra and Surender Singh, Mahendra got politically estranged from his father. Surender always stood by him but died in a chopper crash in 2005.

Shruti's mother Kiran Choudhry (wife of the late Surender Singh) recently became a Rajya Sabha member of the BJP after she quit the Congress soon after the Lok Sabha polls. Kiran Choudhry is a four-time MLA from

Tosham, having won on a Congress ticket. "She is a determined and strongwilled woman who was calling the shots in Tosham when she was in the Congress. Anirudh, son of Ranbir Mahendra, has thrown in his hat with the backing of former Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda. The winner of the contest will obviously claim to be the one who carries forward Bansi Lal's political legacy," says a political expert, adding that this is the reason that the tussle is going to be bitter.

Anirudh says everybody has the right to contest even though his cousin is the

main opponent. "I have no problem facing her. She is my sister and it will be a good contest," he says, adding that he had made a commitment to himself to

follow in his grandfather's footsteps. Kiran Choudhry, however, refuses to call it a contest between bhai and behan. "It should be called a contest between rivals," she stated in an interaction with the media recently. Shruti claims she would work to fulfil the aspirations of people and follow in Bansi Lal's footsteps.

Tosham has 2.2 lakh voters.

Deepender Deswal

New Delhi, September 15, 2024

the pioneer

"Despite hanging up my racing wheels over a decade ago, I still get a buzz when we enter an Olympic and



PARA ATHLETES BASK IN GLORY AND GOLD

The accomplishments of para athletes at Paris Paralympics are not just sporting success but a story of grit and determination, a story of indomitable spirit that soars high despite hardships and challenges, writes RISHABH MALIK

he Paris 2024 Paralympics will go down as one of the most celebrated sporting moments in India's history. The Indian contingent's extraordinary performances were not just a display of athletic prowess but also a powerful reminder of human resilience, willpower, and the ability to triumph against all odds. From setting new records to inspiring millions, the Indian athletes left a remarkable imprint on the global stage. India's Paralympians wasted no time in making their presence felt at Paris 2024. In 12 days of competition India registered 29 medals includes 7 gold, 9 silver, and 13 bronze. India's medal count marked significant landmark and breakthroughs in Indian history of Paralympics. India's first medal in the Paralympics

came in the 1972 Games, with Murlikant Petkar winning a gold medal in swimming. Up to the recent 2024 Games, India have won 60 medals across all Paralympic Games, with the most successful Paralympic campaign being the Paris 2024 Games with 29

Shooting has traditionally been one of India's strong suits in both the Olympic and Paralympic arenas. In Paris, India's para-shooters continued their stellar run from previous Games. Avani Lekhara, a name that had already become synonymous with Indian Paralympic shooting, won gold in the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 category. Avani's calm demeanor and laser-focused concentration were on full display as she once again climbed to the top of the podium. This win made her a two-time Paralympic champion and reinforced her place among the world's elite shooters.

India's shooting success didn't end there. Manish Narwal, competing in the men's 10m air SH1 pistol event, clinched silver, narrowly missing out on gold. His performance was another testament to India's dominance in precision sports, along with Rubina Francis in the same women's 10m air pistol category clinched bronze in shooting.

India witnessed some historic milestone

in the paralympics event, For the first time India won 17 medals in athletics, with Dharambir winning gold and Pranav Soorma taking silver in the men's club throw F51 event. Dharambir also established a new Asian record of 34.92 metres. Later, Praveen Kumar set an Asian record by winning the high jump T64 championship, giving India its sixth gold medal at the Paralympics. Mariyappan Thangavelu became the first Indian to win medals at three successive Paralympic Games when he won a bronze in the T42 high jump event. He took home silver in Tokyo 2020 and

the Games, her bronze

in the 200m made her

the most successful

competitor. India finished the

India ever. Eventually, Harvinder Singh became the first-ever Paralympic India. made headlines was thrower who had previously set a world Paris, Sumit not only shattered his own record, 70 meters in the F64 earned him his second gold in Rio 2016. With a personal best time, Preethi Pal won bronze in the women's 100-meter short in height T35 competition. It was the first-ever medal for India in a Paralympic track event. Being the only athlete from India to win two medals at



Rakesh, Sheetal, at just 17 years old,

become the youngest medallist from

won bronze in the mixed team event to

archery champion for Another athlete who Sumit Antil, the javelin record in Tokyo 2020. In defended his title but also throwing an unbelievable category. His performance consecutive Paralympic gold, establishing him as a global force in the Delhi boy Navdeep Singh genetically

DELHI BOY NAVDEEP SINGH **GENETICALLY SHORT IN** HEIGHT 4FT TALL (DWARFISM) NAVDEEP WHO HAILS FROM HARYANA EMPLOYED AS INSPECTOR IN THE INCOME TAX DEPARTMENT. THE 23 YEAR OLD WON A HISTORIC GOLD IN DAY BEFORE THE CLOSING **CEREMONY OF PARIS** PARALYMPICS. FROM BEING BULLIED TO NATIONAL CHAMPION AT F41 JAVELIN THROW EVENT WHICH WAS A ASTONISHING TURN OF **EVENT BEFORE THE** PODIUM AFTER HE WAS CONFIRMED TO SILVER MEDAL HIS IRANIAN **COMPETITOR GOT** DISQUALIFIED BEFORE HIS THROW WHICH AUTOMATICALLY **UPGRADED HIM TO** GOLD MEDAL.

(Dwarfism) Navdeep who hails from Haryana employed as Inspector in the Income Tax Department. The 23 year old won a historic gold in day before the closing ceremony of Paris Paralympics. From being bullied to national champion at F41 Javelin throw event which was a astonishing turn of event before the podium after he was awarded to silver medal his Iranian competitor got disqualified before his throw which automatically upgraded him to gold medal. There are ups and downs, there are also descents, Suyash Jadhav, (Asian para games gold medallist) in the men's 50m butterfly (S7) fell short in the competition finished fifth in Heat 1 with time 33.47 although he didn't qualify for final but his fight against the strong contenders from the U.S. and Ukraine gave a solid remark of ginger to younger athletes. IAS officier Suhas Yathiraj came in paris to achieve the previous best in Tokyo Paralympics 2020 but restricted to silver medal in SL4 badminton.

After returning from Paris on Tuesday with India's best ever medal tally

sponsorships remains uneven, with athletes in rural areas particularly disadvantaged. ever(29) andr ranked A Movement, not just Medals Paris 2024 Paralympics should not be seen as 18th on team's tally an isolated success but as part of a athletes received grand welcome larger movement towards inclusion, surrounded empowerment, and equality. India's Paralympians have shown that they are not defined by their disabilities but by their abilities. Their victories are symbolic of a changing India, one that is slowly

signed jersey to PM Modi.

2028 campaign.

Rewards were announced by Union

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya of

medallists in the games and pledges full

While the Paris 2024 Paralympics was a

roaring success for India, it also showed

the challenges that continue to plague

the country's para-sporting ecosystem.

Access to training, medical support, and

support from Government for the LA

75 lakh to gold-medallists, 50 lakh to

silver winners and 30 lakh to bronz-

by huge numbers of supporters greeted but surely starting to embrace diversity with showering of flowers on them. in all its forms. As India commemorates this new The Indian contingent met Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his chapter in athletic prowess, the effect of residence on Thursday in New Delhi, these players will continue to resonate, where PM Modi interected with all pushing the Government to provide para-athletes of Indian contingent and greater support, recognition, and congratulating the medal winners of growth for para-sports. India's Paris Paralympics 2024 achievement at the Paralympics is more Athletes shared their journeys and than simply a moment of glory; it is the start of a future in which the country's challenges to overcome the stereotypes of the society. Paralympic Gold differently-abled athletes will continue Medallist Avani Lekhara gifted her to smash barriers, demonstrating that

> Famous Columnist Akhileswar Sahay stated in his article Khel Vaani India's Paralympic Rise: A Beacon for a More Inclusive Future

with spirit and drive, nothing is

impossible.

NEXT STOP: MISSION TOP FIVE AND MIS-SION INCLUSIVE REVOLUTION

It's time to jumpstart two missions to be accomplished in four years: Mission Top Five Rank at Los Angeles and Mission Inclusive Revolution to make India disabled-friendly. For the first mission, India must broaden its participation base across the 550 events—both in terms of events participated in and the number of sportspersons per event. No country has a larger pool of disabled individuals than India, with "55 to 90 million," according to a recent World Bank estimate. This demographic presents a potential goldmine of "Khojo-Paralympians" and a driving force for "Khelo Paralympics". The lowest-hanging fruit? Track and field events, where the investment per sportsperson is low and the potential return high. All Bharat needs to join the elite Top 5 club is 100 medals at the Los Angeles

2028 Paralympics. It's eminently doable, and the time starts now. Considering that in the last three years (2021–2024), between Tokyo and Paris, Indian Paralympians have amassed 48 medals, 100 medals in 2028 is not a far-fetched dream.

New Delhi, September 15, 2024



Discover a hidden gem in the Irish capital overlooking the water in the revitalised Silicone Docks. Here, a unique facet of Dublin unfolds, where the historic charm of the city seamlessly intertwines with modern vibrancy

BY **AKANKSHA DEAN**

ven for locals, this area distinctly refreshing, offering a different perspective of Dublin while ensuring that all of its iconic landmarks remain conveniently accessible. Embrace the fusion of old and

Docklands, Dublin's affectionately dubbed the 'Silicon Docks,' serve as the European headquarters for tech giants like Facebook, Google, and Airbnb. At the heart of this dynamic district stands Anantara The Marker Hotel, a striking geometric marvel that has become its unofficial emblem. The name 'The Marker' pays homage to the Grand Canal's rich trading history. The canal, stretching 82 miles, was once adorned with cast iron markers indicating the distance to the journey's end. The hotel stands proudly at the site of

the last of these markers. Situated on the south bank of the river Liffey, the hotel commands stunning views of Grand Canal Dock and the vibrant Grand Canal Square, featuring the striking Bord Gais Energy Theatre, designed by Daniel Libeskind. At night, the plaza comes alive, illuminated in captivating hues of red and green. This dynamic locale is at the heart of Dublin's thriving tech industry, with one area even dubbed 'Googletown'.

Airport and a mere 15-minute an ideal base for exploring the capital's rich offerings.

MODERN ELEGANCE AWAITS

All the design elements at Anantara

The Marker tell a story, much like

the vibrant neighbourhood surrounding it. The Docklands continues to evolve as a thriving part of the city. As I step into The Marker, I'm immediately struck by its vibrant atmosphere that its vibrant atmosphere that resonates throughout. The luminous lobby leads into colourinfused bedrooms, each exuding modern elegance. I notice young Dubliners gathering in the atrium for drinks, fostering a lively social scene that pulses with energy. On sunlit days, the rooftop bar becomes a buzzing hub, offering breath-taking views-a perfect retreat amid the city's bustle. Originally opened in 2013 and recently rebranded under Anantara in 2023 after an extensive renovation, this hotel stands as a beacon of modernity. Its striking chequerboard façade, inspired by the Cliffs of Moher, welcomes me into a mesmerizing 67-meter-long atrium with a cantilevered ceiling reminiscent of the Giant's Causeway, where public spaces, including a bar, lounge, and restaurant, invite relaxation and enjoyment. Embodying the Anantara philosophy, the hotel seamlessly integrates the brand's three core pillars-Indigenous, Expertise, and Authentic Luxurythroughout its offerings. Each of the 187 rooms and suites offers breath-taking views of the city, Dublin Bay, 20-minute drive from Dublin mountains, enhanced by floor-towindows. stroll to the city centre, making it accommodations are thoughtfully designed with ergonomic



and for an indulgent experience. The Junior Corner Suite proved to be the perfect refuge for my stay. With ample space to work, unwind, or simply relax, I enjoyed the gentle sunlight streaming onto my Eames-style chair at the desk. A freshly brewed espresso awaited me, a delightful touch to start my day. I was pleasantly surprised to find a bar of Co Wexford's Bean and Goose chocolate by my bedside, boxty on the breakfast menu, and an 'Írish Wine Geese' section on the wine list. The fusion of striking architecture and local storytelling in this 187-bed haven feels refreshingly new. I balanced work and rejuvenation effortlessly. Prioritizing wellness, the awardwinning spa provides an array of rejuvenating body treatments and massages, complemented by a 75foot indoor infinity pool, a steam and a whirlpool tub. This was the perfect way to begin my mornings before venturing out. One of my



boasts breath-taking panoramic views. Each evening, I found myself captivated by the skyline, capturing the stunning sunsets that bathed the city in warm orange hues. At the heart of Marker's culinary journey is the vibrant new Forbes Street by Gareth Mullins. As a fan of Gareth's weekly cooking segment, I eagerly anticipated the experience. I began with exquisite Flaggy Shore oysters on crushed ice Mary. Next, the marbled rib-eye, flawlessly seared, accompanied by zingy Chimichurri, house-cut ergonomic favourite retreats was the chic chips, and a rocket salad, was a dolphins and seals. Afterward, a the hotel. This interactive museum cutting-edge rooftop bar and terrace, which delight. For dessert, creatively visit to Kish Fish, one of Ireland's delives into the history of the Irish



presented North County Dublin rhubarb, with smoked vanilla and crispy potatoes, encapsulated the essence of simple yet exceptional

STORIES OF DUBLIN

Unlike the traditional luxury of the Westbury, Shelbourne, The Marker embraces bold architecture while ensuring substance accompanies its style. Anantara's mantra, 'Life is a journey,' resonates through its various activities like docklands walks and sea swimming. What distinguishes are its unforgettable bespoke experiences, meticulously designed to immerse visitors in the local culture and lifestyle. For food enthusiasts, the signature Spice Spoons journey with Executive Chef Gareth Mullins is a delightful highlight. Guests spend the day with Mullins exploring the charming fishing from Dublin, and embark on a chartered fishing boat around Dublin Bay, where they might spot

premier salmon smokehouses, precedes an enriching lesson in baking traditional Irish soda bread back at the hotel. Other curated include experiences Swimming in a popular local spot under the guidance of an open-sea coach, an insightful deep dive into equine culture at the Irish National Stud and Gardens with a renowned horse trainer, and Afternoon Tea: Poetry and Places, which celebrates Ireland's literary heritage. For me, the highlight was the Docklands Storytelling Tour led by Derek Brennan, the hotel's Irish storyteller and guest experience manager. His captivating narratives weave together the rich history of the Docklands, bringing the area's past to life through his engaging tales, a connection forged since the hotel's inception in 2013.

SIP. STROLL. EXPLORE

A trip to Dublin is incomplete A must-visit is EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, conveniently located within walking distance of the hotel. This interactive museum

diaspora and emigration. Just around the corner lies The Ferryman Townhouse, a lively pub where locals warmly welcome visitors, eager to share a table and demonstrate the art of enjoying a pint in under ten seconds. For those with a sense of adventure, Grafton Street, The Temple Bar, and Trinity College Dublin are a leisurely 30-minute stroll away. Be sure to reserve an evening for the renowned Guinness Storehouse, where a guided tour reveals the brewing process, and guests can even create a 'stoutie,' a selfie on the frothy beer head. This fusion of modernity and community encapsulates the essence of Dublin's evolving urban landscape, making it a must-visit destination for locals and travellers alike.

Akanksha Dean is an independent food & travel writer, a chef and a catalyst and is the first Indian to

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.

CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF INDIAN ACCENT A Journey Through Taste and Tradition

Indian Accent's 15th anniversary marked a memorable evening, celebrating its rich legacy with a blend of nostalgic classics and inventive culinary creations, says SAKSHI PRIYA

anniversary, the occasion paid tribute to its remarkable culinary journey. With softly dimmed lighting and elegant candlelit tables, the ambiance set a warm and inviting tone for the evening. The sophisticated atmosphere, combined with a touch of nostalgia, created a perfect backdrop for a dining experience that was both refined and memorable. Walking into *Indian Accent* felt like stepping into a space where the charm of tradition and the excitement of modernity seamlessly merged, unforgettable crafting an experience.

The evening featured a nostalgic look back at *Indian Accent's* inaugural tasting menu from 2009, allowing guests to revisit beloved classics that had

enduring appeal. The journey

began with Chef Shantanu

Mehrotra at the helm, who crafted

a menu that would soon become a

been instrumental in shaping the restaurant's journey. the Dishes like the Whole Wheat and Semolina Puchkas, Paneer Tikka Chaat and Khakra Mille Feuille served as a heartwarming reminder of

s Indian Accent New Delhi celebrated its 15th days, Chef Mehrotra recalls the excitement and challenges of the original menu. While some dishes met with mixed reviews, others quickly captured the hearts of diners. Today, Indian Accent is celebrated for its pivotal role in bringing modern Indian cuisine to the global stage.

The celebration commenced with a sensory feast, beginning with the Blue Cheese Naan. This dish was a revelation, a delightful twist on a classic favourite. The crisp texture combined with the bold, creamy blue cheese offered a unique start to the evening. Paired with the Mushroom Shawarma, subtly spiced with garam masala, it was a comforting yet adventurous introduction that set the tone for the meal to come. The evening

begins with a nod to the past through a selection of appetisers that have become icons of Accent's innovative approach. The Whole Wheat and Semolina Puchkas provided a playful yet refined take on street food. The trio of the restaurant's evolution and waters - mint and coriander, tamarind and jaggery and buttermilk - offered a delightful

balance of flavours, beautifully



approach to blending traditional elements with modern

sophistication. Chef Shantanu Mehrotra's talent was unmistakable throughout the tasting menu. His creations, such as the Paneer Tikka Chaat and Khakra Mille Feuille, were perfect examples of his ability to blend textures and flavours in imaginative and delightful ways. The Beetroot and Peanut Tikki with Caper Wasabi Chutney was particularly memorable. showcasing his knack for transforming humble ingredients into something truly remarkable. The main courses continued to impress with their inventive twists encapsulating Indian Accent's on both classic and global flavours.





Cheese Mousse and Chilli Aam Papad Chutney was a revelation, blending bold flavours with finesse. The Paneer Lasagna with Smoked Aubergine and Goji Berry Makhni offered a creative and comforting take on a beloved classic. The Turkish Sultanas and CousCous Ki Tahiri with Anar Avocado Raita was a brilliant example of how global influences can be seamlessly integrated into modern Indian cuisine.

The grand finale of the evening was nothing short of a dessert lover's dream come true. The Indian Accent Kulfi Sorbet was like a refreshing burst of icy goodness, cleansing the palate with a playful,

creamy touch. But hold on tight, things got even sweeter with the Kinnaur Apple Shakarpara Crumble. Imagine the crunch of perfectly baked apple crumble mingling with the smooth, homemade vanilla bean ice creamevery bite was a joyous celebration of texture and flavour. And just when you thought it couldn't get any better, the Coconut and Jaggery Brulee with Ruby Grapefruit Pops Amarula Ki Chuski arrived, turning dessert into an art form. The rich brulee, with its luscious coconut and jaggery notes, paired with

grapefruit pops and a hint of Amarula, was an explosion of taste that left us craving Complementing this sweet finale was the Daulat Ki Chaat, which emerged as a standout. Its

saffron-infused elegance, exceptional flavours. *Chef* adorned with almonds and a hint *Shantanu Mehrotra's* innovative of sugar, was both a visual delight and a burst of refined flavours. This dish exemplified the restaurant's commitment to creative excellence and its ability to elevate even the most familiar flavours into something extraordinary. Each dessert was a playful, indulgent end to a meal that was nothing short of

spectacular!

Reflecting on this milestone, it became clear that the 15th anniversary was not just a celebration of Indian Accent's rich history but also a vibrant showcase of its future. The event honoured the restaurant's legacy while highlighting its ongoing dedication to culinary excellence and innovation. Chef Shantanu Mehrotra's passion and creativity were evident in every dish, underscoring the restaurant's status as one of New Delhi's most cherished culinary destinations. Indian Accent's 15th

anniversary celebration

was a memorable reflection on its past, with a touch of nostalgia, while also offering a glimpse into its future. The evening all about elegance, creativity and exceptional flavours. Chef approach and remarkable talent shone through in every dish, proving that *Indian Accent* is more than just a restaurant - it's a symbol of innovation and sophistication in the culinary world. This anniversary wasn't just a milestone, it was a celebration of a remarkable journey filled with flavour,

creativity and lasting excellence.

New Delhi, September 15, 2024



The story of transport through time is showcased meticulously at the Heritage Transport Museum and is a nostalgic journey for the grownups and curious potent for the young, writes GYANESHWAR DAYAL

estled in the heart of Gurugram, the Heritage Transport Museum offers a vivid glimpse into India's rich transport history. It is not merely a museum but a living narrative of how India's transportation systems have evolved over the years. From early bullock carts to vintage cars, each display in the museum is a portal to a time when travel wasn't just about the destination but the experience itself.

India's transport history offers a vivid reflection of the country's broader cultural and social transformations. The evolution of transportation-from traditional bullock carts and hand-pulled rickshaws to modern vehicles and advanced public transit-parallels significant societal, technological, and economic changes. Various modes of transport illustrate the evolution of cultural practices and daily life. For example, traditional transport methods like palanquins and bullock carts reveal historical social structures and regional customs, while the advent of motorized vehicles signifies a shift toward modernization and globalization. The Heritage Transport Museum is a treasure trove of historical gems, each piece providing a transport legacy. The Museum in Gurugram offers a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of transportation in India. As India's first comprehensive transport museum, it showcases a wide array of unique items that reflect the country's rich history in this sector.

Among the standout exhibits is an extensive collection of vintage cars, including iconic models like the Ford Model T and the Rolls-Royce Phantom. Each vehicle tells a story, with plaques detailing their origins, ownership histories, and their journeys through India's

The museum also houses an impressive collection of two-wheelers, featuring everything from early Royal Enfield bikes to classic Vespa scooters. These vehicles capture the changing dynamics of transportation in India, from rural commutes to urban lifestyles.

A particularly unique feature is the railway exhibit, which includes vintage carriages,

We hope to instil a respect for our heritage: Tarun Thakral passion and labour of love, The arun Thakral, the founder

&managing Huster
Heritage Transport Museum
Director at CI &managing trustee of is also the Executive Director at CJ International Hotels Ltd, New Delhi that owns and manages Le Meridien New Delhi. Tarun started his career in the Hospitality business in 1986. In 1990, he won French Government scholarship to pursue MBA International program in Hospitality Management from 'Institut de Hotelier Management International', Paris.

To pursue his hobby and passion in vintage and classic cars, in 1996 Tarun founded Heritage Transportation Trust (HTT) - a registered not-for-profit trust to promote the preservation of modes of transportation that have been used in India. As its Founder and Managing Trustee, HTT has developed India's first comprehensive Transport Museum, Heritage Transport Museum, which opened to visitors in December 2013. in December 2013.

onal Tourism Award for being the most innovative and unique tourism project in the country, the Award by TripAdvisor, International PATWA award for innovation at ITB, Germany, the BITB Tourism Excellence Award, SATTE Tourism award for innovation, and more. He talked to Gyaneshwar Dayal about his

Heritage Transport Museum: What inspired you to create the Heritage Transport Museum? Was there a specific moment or experience that ignited your passion for preserving India's

transport history?

India did not have a comprehensive transport museum until the Heritage Transport Museum opened its doors to visitors. Given the presence of remarkable transport museums worldwide, I often wondered why India didn't have one of its own. As my personal collection of transport memorabilia expanded, managing it became increasingly difficult. We launched the Heritage Transport Museum in December 2013, and it remains India's sole transport

museum to this day. How did you go about collecting such an impressive and diverse array of transport artefacts? Were there any particularly challenging or memorable acquisitions?

Since its opening Museum won In 1994, I purchased my first many prestigious awards - The vintage car from Ramgarh in a state of disrepair. The process of restoring this vehicle over nearly 2016 and 2018 Travellers Choice a year brought me immense joy and ignited a passion for collecting and preserving vehicles from being scrapped. My collection soon grew to include cars, two-wheelers, bicycles, carriages, and carts. In I came across an advertisement from Indian

Railways about scrapping several 1930s railway saloons. I quickly contacted the Railway Board, expressing my interest in purchasing and preserving one of these saloons. Since the Railways had never before sold such items to private individuals, it took over a year of negotiations. Ultimately, I succeeded in acquiring and restoring the saloon, which now

museum?

buses, two-wheelers, traditional transport methods, non-motorized vehicles, railways, trams, aviation, and maritime. We choose items based on their historical importance, popularity, and how they complement our existing collection. We also carefully evaluate how each object will engage and benefit our visitors. What are the biggest challenges

you've faced in preserving and more delicate items in the museum's collection?

Many items, especially those that are decades or even centuries old, face natural deterioration over time. Components can become fragile or worn, making the restoration process meticulous and delicate. For vintage vehicles and machinery,

necessary experience can be What are your future plans for the Heritage Transport Museum? Are there any upcoming exhibitions or expansions that visitors can look forward to? We have several exciting initiatives in store for the Heritage Transport Museum to enrich its offerings and

locating original or compatible

parts can be extremely challenging,

often necessitating custom

fabrication or innovative solutions

to replace missing or damaged

components. Restoring complex

items, such as early aviation or

railway equipment, requires

specialized knowledge and skills,

and finding experts with the

continue captivating our visitors. One of our key plans is to introduce an experience centre that will provide a unique, multisensory experience. We're also expanding our exhibitions to feature rare artefacts that showcase various aspects of transportation history. To keep up with the latest technological advancements, we aim to incorporate more technologies, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and advanced simulation tools, to make the exploration of transport history

even more engaging. What drives your passion for curating and expanding the museum's collection? How do you stay motivated in continuing this labour of love?

A deep passion for history, culture, and education, coupled with a strong commitment to preserving and sharing important stories and artefacts for future generations. The continual excitement and inspiration of discovering new ways to present these treasures and enhance the museum's narrative. The joys of seeing visitors engage with, learn from, and appreciate the museum's offerings. The profound personal fulfilment derived from working in a field I genuinely love and enjoy. And, of course, the pride in contributing to the museum's enduring legacy.

What kind of experience do you hope visitors take away from the museum? Is there a particular message or feeling you want them to leave with?

One of the greatest compliments we've received is being recognized as a world-class museum in India. Many visitors leave with a profound sense of nostalgia, feeling moved, inspired, and reflective. They depart with a deeper understanding of the evolution of continues to ignite curiosity and further interest in its visitors. We hope to instil a respect for our heritage, encouraging visitors to think about ways to preserve it for future generations. For younger visitors, we aspire to inspire them to develop hobbies that bring them fulfilment and satisfaction.

proudly stands at the museum on a What criteria do you use to select

The Heritage Transport Museum features a diverse array of transportation modes used for both private and public transport throughout history. Our aim is to display the full range of transportation, encompassing cars,

the items displayed in the

history by preserving and showcasing these transportation milestones. Through its diverse collection of transport artifacts, the museum offers visitors insights into how transportation has both shaped and been shaped by the broader socio-cultural context. It effectively connects the past with the present, providing a tangible link to India's rich history and its ongoing evolution.

The museum houses impressive collection, thoughtfully curated to spark fascination. The assortment bicycles, and even airplanes. Visitors can explore artifacts that depict the evolution of transportsome centuries old, others representative of the industrial age. There is also a segment dedicated to maritime history, complete with beautifully preserved models of ships, giving the experience an almost

encyclopaedic richness. What truly sets the Heritage Transport Museum apart is the meticulous passion with which it has been curated. The layout of the museum is designed not just to showcase relics but to narrate

lifelike dioramas, and thematic galleries transport visitors into the very eras these machines were part of. Each exhibit is placed within a larger cultural and social context, enabling visitors to appreciate its significance beyond

It's not just a collection of vehicles; it's a carefully woven tapestry of India's transport evolution, enhanced by attention to detail. For anyone with an interest in history, innovation, or transport, the Heritage Transport Museum is a must-visit, where every exhibit is a labour of love, offering a journey through time.

the mechanics.

museum features models and artifacts from India's early civil aviation history, including scaled replicas of early Indian aircraft.

signaling systems, and detailed

replicas of early Indian trains.

Visitors can explore the interior of

these carriages and get a sense of the grandeur of rail travel during

For aviation enthusiasts, the

the colonial period.

Another intriguing exhibit is a full-size 1950s Piper J3C Cub aircraft, providing a rare close-up mid-20th-century aviation.

One of the more immersive experiences is the display of maritime memorabilia, with detailed models of ships and boats that were integral to India's naval history and trade routes.

The museum's art and design installations also deserve mention, with sections devoted to the design evolution of vehicles, showcasing how aesthetics and functionality have shaped modern transport. Besides, the Museum has also a 3D virtual reality ride on a rickshaw over the China wall which is a big hit with the children and elders alike.

development transportation also mirrors India's economic progress. The transition

from horse-drawn carriages to trains and automobiles highlights the country's industrial growth and enhanced connectivity, which has facilitated trade and mobility. Additionally, transportation innovations have been crucial in driving social change. The introduction of transportation systems such as buses and metro rails has influenced urbanization, accessibility, and social integration, affecting how people

live and work. The Heritage Transport Museum plays a crucial role in enriching our understanding of India's

ranges from classic vintage cars to engines, traditional stories. Interactive displays, THE MONSOON'S WHISPER IN EVERY NOTE

Vidushi Sunanda Sharma's Boondan Phuhaar concert celebrated the monsoon with enchanting Indian classical music, says SAKSHI PRIYA

is something undeniably timeless and evocative about Indian classical music, especially when performed by an artist as deeply rooted in tradition as Vidushi Sunanda Sharma. On a beautiful evening at the Stein Auditorium in New Delhi, Sharma brought monsoon season to life with her performance, 'Boondan Phuĥaar.' The concert was not merely a display of musical mastery but a heartfelt celebration of nature, tradition and the

human spirit. Sharma, a vocalist of the Banaras Gharana, captivated her audience with her soulful

voice that seemed to capture the very essence of the rainy season. Each note felt like a raindrop, each melody a breeze dancing through the trees. She was accompanied by a gifted ensemble, including Pt. Vinay Mishra on the harmonium, Pt. Mithilesh Kumar Jha on the tabla and U. Ghulam Ali on the sarangi, who together created an atmosphere that was almost spiritual. Their performance reminded everyone present of the unique power of live music to evoke deep emotions and transport listeners to another world.

What stood out most was not just the technical excellence on display but the depth of



feeling in every note. There was a genuine joy and emotional connection to the monsoon season that resonated throughout the performance, making the audience feel the beauty and poignancy of the rains. In a world that often feels dominated by digital and impersonal entertainment, this concert was a poignant reminder of the impact of live music and its ability to make people feel truly alive.

The evening was also a celebration of India's rich cultural heritage. Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha's reflections on Varanasi's reflections on Varanasi's spirit and its deep-rooted connection to the classical

importance of preserving these traditions. Sunanda Sharma's commitment to her craft and her work with the Girija Darshan Trust, named after her revered Gurus, Smt. Girija Devi ji and Pt. Sudarshan Sharma, is commendable. Through her efforts to nurture young talent and provide a platform for established artists, she ensures that this exquisite form of music remains vibrant and relevant, not just a relic of the past.

underscored

More than just a concert, 'Boondan Phuhaar' felt like a journey into the heart of the monsoon - a gentle escape from the rush of daily life.

The performance offered a rare chance to slow down, to be present and to savour the profound beauty of music that is so intricately connected to nature. Sunanda Sharma's devotion to her heritage and artistry was evident in every note, making the evening a memorable and moving experience. In an age where life often moves at a relentless pace, this event was a timely reminder of the importance of taking a moment to appreciate the simple, yet profound joys - a rain-soaked evening, a beautiful melody and a shared experience that brings people closer to the essence of life itself.

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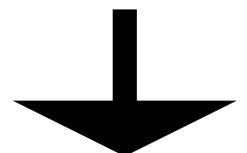
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