SCIENCE

too early, scanning for in-

flammation can be helpful

in seeing the extent of the

disease, but it is not specif-

ic to TB, as inflammation

can be caused by other

conditions. Inflammation

can also persist in the lung

after the TB bacteria has

Specific PET scan for TB for more effective treatment

The Hindu Bureau

A more accurate way to scan for tuberculosis has been developed by researcher based in the U.K. and the U.S. using positron emission tomography (PET).

The team has developed a new radiotracer, which is taken up by live TB bacteria in the body. Radiotracers are radioactive compounds which give off radiation that can be detected by scanners and turned into a 3D image. The new radiotracer, called FDT, enables PET scans to be used for the first time to accurately pinpoint when and where the disease is still active in a patient's lungs.

The researchers have put the new radiotracer through extensive pre-clinical trials with no adverse effects and it is now ready

to go into Phase I trials in humans. The study has been published in the jour-Communications.

Currently, two methods exist for TB diagnosis: testing for the TB bacteria in a patient's sputum using smear microscopy or a molecular test. The other is the use of a PET scan to look for signs of inflammation in the lung, using the common radiotracer FDG.

While a sputum test can been eliminated, leading to show a negative long betreatment continuing longer than necessary. fore the disease has been fully treated in the lungs, which could result in patients finishing treatment

The new approach developed by the researchers is more specific as it uses a carbohydrate that is only processed by the TB bacteria. A key advantage of the new approach is that it only requires a hospital to have standard radiation control and PET scanners, which are becoming more available throughout the world. The new molecule is created from FDG using a simple process involving enzymes developed by the research team. This means it can be produced without specialist expertise or laboratories and so would be a viable option in low- and middle-income countries with less developed healthcare systems. These countries currently see over 80% of global TB cases and deaths from the disease.

India lacks diagnostic tests for emerging infectious diseases

Zika virus is a mosquito-borne pathogen belonging to the flavivirus family of viruses which also includes dengue; India's lack of significant Zika surveillance means we might never fully understand its spread

Bani Jolly Vinod Scaria

recent case of Zika virus infection in Pune has renewed concerns about India's preparedness for diagnosing emerging infectious diseases. After experiencing symptoms like fever and rashes, the 46-year-old doctor was hospitalised and diagnosed with Zika virus infection after his samples were sent for testing to the apex virology institute. Subsequent testing of his family members revealed that his 15-year-old daughter was also infected. This is not the first time Zika has been identified in India. Cases have been identified in multiple States in India in the past, with larger outbreaks occurring in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh as recently as 2021.

Zika virus is a mosquitoborne pathogen belonging to the flavivirus family of viruses which also includes dengue. Clinical symptoms of Zika infection in many cases could be mild and indistinguishable from other infectious aiseases incluaing dengue. However, for pregnant women, the Zika virus poses a significant risk as it can be transmitted from mother to child, potentially leading to microcephaly offspring.

Due to climate change, it is not surprising that multiple dengue outbreaks are making headlines. The same vectors that spread dengue could also spread Zika. However, India's lack of significant Zika surveillance means we might never fully understand its

Flying blind without diagnostic tests

There is over-reliance on apex institutes for diagnosis of Zika, Nipha and avian influenza due to lack of widely available diagnostic tests

Kerala has had Nipah

Zika cases have been identified from multiple States in the past. Largest outbreaks occurred in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh in 2021

Since India lacks significant Zika surveillance, the actual spread might never fully understood

In March 2023, the drug regulator confirmed that there is no approved diagnostic test for Zika

Multiple avian influenza outbreaks in poultry have been reported this year. Human testing and surveillance have remained limited partly due to lack of diagnostic tests and overreliance on apex institutes

outbreaks in 2018, 2021. development of diagnostics, whole and 2023, Each time. virus identification genome sequences relied heavily on clinical should be made suspicion. Some cases available in the public were missed initially as domain soon after diagnostic facilities were not readily available Dangerous vector: Aedes aeavpti mosquito that spreads dengue can also spread Zika virus

For the rapid

spread. In March 2023, CDSCO, India's apex organisation for diagnostic approvals, confirmed that there is no approved diagnostic test for Zika. This limitation hinders our ability to diagnose Zika, relying only on classical symptoms and nigh clinical suspicion, making it complex as we see a concurrent upsurge in dengue cases across the country. Surveillance by ICMR on Aedes mosquitoes showed Zika virus positivity following human cases, indicating that many cases are likely being missed. Zika is not an isolated case. A case of avian influenza A/H5N1 was recently reported from Australia in a child who had traveled to India, hinting at more undetected in-

fections. Despite multiple

avian influenza outbreaks

in India this year affecting poultry, and an ongoing outbreak in Kerala, human testing and surveillance have remained limited. This is partially compounded by the lack of widely available diagnostic tests and over-reliance on a iew apex institutes.

Consider the case of the Nipah virus, which has seen multiple outbreaks in Kerala. India has experienced several Nipah virus outbreaks, notably in West Bengal (2001 and 2007) and Kerala (2018, 2021, and 2023). In Kerala, identification of the virus relied heavily on clinical suspicion. Some cases were indeed missed during initial admissions due to the lack of routine testing. Rapid identification and isolation of cases, contact tracing, and targeted screening of contacts are key to the effective containment of Nipah outbreaks

While many countries grant emergency approvals for diagnostics based on synthetic genomic material, India requires validation on clinical samples, which are not readily accessible. These limitations hamper rapid development. Although there have been multiple publications on Zika and Nipah outbreaks over many years now, the genomes from these outbreaks are still not rapidly released in public repositories. For example, the Nipah virus genome from the 2023 outbreak in Kerala was only released last month. Even with ongoing avian influenza outbreaks in multiple States, we do not yet have the whole genome sequences available in GI-SAID, the primary repository for influenza sequenc-

hampering understanding of the disease and spread and more importantly, our ability to rapidly develop and deploy diagnostics.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India swiftly expanded its testing infrastructure by rapidly decentralising and leveraging the existing network of hospitals, medical colleges, and private laboratories nationwide and tapping into the industry with a systematic approach for approvals of diagnostic tests making diagnostics widely available and accessible. The experience gained from the COVID-19 pandemic can be a stepping stone for improving testing capacities other emerging diseases.

By decentralising testing facilities particularly at the district and sub-district levels, and developing accessible and affordable diagnostic tests for Zika, Nipah, avian influenza, and many more emerging infectious diseases, India can ensure a more enective response to future outbreaks. There has never been a better time to swiftly establish a decentralised system for diagnostics, genomic surveillance, and data sharing to enable preparedness and public health response to emerging infectious diseases.

(Bani Jolly is a senior scientist at Karkinos Healthcare, and Vinod Scaria is a senior consultant at Vishwanath Cancer Care Foundation and Adjunct Professor at IIT Kanpur and DY Patil Vidyapeeth)



Anti-measles antibody prevents viral fusion: study

Cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) structures of an anti-measles antibody reveal its therapeutic potential by blocking the virus's fusion process, a new study reports. The work paves the way for the next generation of measles virus therapeutics and illuminates a mechanism that may be shared by antibodies against other viral pathogens. The structures generated by the researchers also revealed an important epitope that may provide a new druggable target for MeV as well as other paramyxoviruses like mumps.



Proteins in cerebrospinal fluid offer markers of Alzheimer's

By mapping out the landscape of proteins in cerebrospinal fluid, researchers have discovered potential markers of Alzheimer's disease that appear as many as 20 years before symptoms. The scientists generated a robust map of protein activity, consisting of 34 "modules". They identified three that correlated with disease and with the genetic risk factor APOE-e4. Also, shifts in these modules in blood samples were linked to a risk of dementia more than 20 years before the patient was diagnosed.



Antibody shields hamsters from SARS-CoV-2 variants

Scientists show that a new antibody therapy for COVID-19 can neutralise the Omicron strain of SARS-CoV-2 in hamsters and is safe in humans, according to their research. The antibody (AZD3152) could provide an additional layer of protection to vulnerable groups at risk of severe COVID-19. The antibody binds to the back "left shoulder" of the receptor binding domain on the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, and is designed to be more potent against emerging variants.

inStem's fabric offers protection from pesticides

R. Prasad

Researchers at the Institute for Stem Cell Science and Regenerative Medicine (in-Stem), in Bengaluru have developed an anti-insecticide fabric that effectively neutralises organophosphate-based pesticides. In an earlier work published about six years ago, the team had developed a gel for topical dermal application to deactivate the pesticides. But considering that compliance might be poor, the researchers looked at another alternative that is as effective in deactivating the insecticide but at the same time does not reduce compliance. When esters present in

organophosphate-based pesticides enter the body they bind and inhibit an enzyme (acetylcholinesterase or AChE) critical for neuromuscular function from working. Therefore, inhibition of this important enzyme is implicated in learning deficits, suffocation, paralysis, muscle weakness among others.

In a paper published recently in Nature Communications, the team led by Dr. Praveen Kumar Vemula from inStem coated the cotton fabric with small molecules, rendering the final product the ability to deactivate the insecticide. "The small molecules are covalently bonded with the cellulose of the fabric making the cloth not only breathable but also durable," says Dr. Vemula. The small molecules that are covalently bonded with the fabric are nucleophile in nature, and can detoxify the pesticides upon contact through nucleophilemediated hydrolysis, says Dr. Vemula. "The fabric attacks the pesticide molecule and breaks it into nontoxic products. The pesticide is deactivated even

before it reaches the skin



Right way: The fabric deactivates the pesticide and breaks it down into non-toxic products. AP

surface," he says. The fabric with covalently-bonded small molecules was developed in collaboration with Sepio Health Pvt Ltd, a spin-off company from inStem.

"The fabric retains the anti-insecticide property even after washing 150 times." Though the reusability after 50 cycles was reported in the paper, the researchers continued the reusability testing and found the effectiveness to last up to 150 cycles of washing. "Unlike the gel, the reusability will make the fabric an affordable solution to prevent insecticide-induced toxicity to farmers. It will also increase compliance," he According to Dr, Vemu-

la, the small moleculecoated fabric does not act as a physical barrier to organophosphate-based insecticide. Instead, the fabric hydrolytically deactivates the insecticides, causing the prevention of insecticide-induced AChE inhibition.

To investigate the efficiency of the fabric containing the small molecules, the active AChE in the blood before and three days after exposure to the insecticide was measured in rats. While direct exposure or when normal cloth did little to halt the drop in active AChE in blood, no reduction in blood active AchE level was observed in the presence of the fabric coated with small molecules. Several organs from the exposed and unexposed rats were studied and compared, and the researchers found that the active AChE levels in the organs did not drop in the case of rats that were exposed to the insecticide in the presence of the fabric coated with small molecules. Also, while rats that were repeatedly and directly exposed to ethyl pa-

raoxon (an activated orga-

nophosphate insecticide) or through the normal fabric died within four days, none of the rats exposed to the insecticide in the presence of the special fabric died.

Farmers get repeatedly exposed to the insecticide due to frequent usage, and this can cause chronic toxicity and severe adverse health effects. The animal study results show promise that the fabric containing the small molecules can prevent chronic toxicity in farmers, he says.

"The design of one nucleophile that can deactivate a wide range of organophosphates carbamates was challeng-

ing. Subsequently, optimising the industry-friendly chemistry to covalently attach on the fabric was the key in developing anti-pesticide fabric," says Dr. Ketan Thorat, a former research student at inStem and coauthor of the paper.

Question Corner

Marsquakes

Can meteorite strikes cause quakes on Mars?

Using seismic data, researchers have derived the first estimate of global meteorite impacts on Mars. Their findings indicate that 280 to 360 meteorites strike the planet each year, forming impact craters greater than 26 feet across. Using data from the seismometer deployed during the NASA InSight Mission to Mars, researchers found that six seismic events recorded near the station had been previously identified as meteoric impacts. Now, researchers have found that these six seismic events belong to a much larger group of

quakes occurs much faster than for a tectonic marsquake of similar size. Where a normal magnitude 3-quake on Mars takes several seconds, an impact-generated event of the same size takes only 0.2 seconds or less, due to the hypervelocity of the collision. By analysing marsquake spectra, a further 80 marsquakes were identified that are now thought to be caused

marsquakes, so called very

high frequency events. The

source process of these

Readers may send their questions /

by meteoroid strikes.



What was the tussle over Covaxin IPR?

What are the rules for patenting the intellectual property rights of a vaccine? Why was the ICMR not included?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

he maker of the indigenous coronavirus vaccine, Covaxin, Bharat Biotech International Limited (BBIL), has admitted to an "inadvertent error" in patent filings to protect the vaccine's Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). One of India's leading biotechnology companies, it had failed to include scientists from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) as co-inventors in the Covaxin patent filings.

What kind of rights govern vaccine patents?

India's patent laws govern both product and process patents. Product patents grant an inventor a monopoly over, say, a drug. Process patents bar competitors from making a similar drug using the same sequence of steps. In response to queries from The Hindu, Bharat Biotech said it had patented the process, namely of making a batch of vaccines from the virus strains that were provided by the ICMR-NIV (National Institute of Virology). This is the lab that has expertise in extracting viruses from blood samples, identifying its characteristics, conducting various tests to gauge its infectiousness and qualify it in comparison to related strains. However, preparing a vaccine out of this at an industrial scale is beyond the capabilities of a lab and requires a different

Bharat Biotech International Limited had collaborated with the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Virology for all the steps in developing a vaccine

order of facilities that only established vaccine manufacturers have. Covaxin is an inactivated version of COVID-causing coronavirus; once injected into the body it coaxes it into producing antibodies that can

potentially protect against severe disease from a coronavirus infection. To do this effectively, an 'adjuvant' is added which increases the vaccine's potency. Vaccine makers may have their own ways of bringing all of these steps together and, given the competitive nature of the field, strive to ward off competitors from imitating these processes to gain a temporary monopoly in the market and rake profits.

To be sure, while companies are free to file for a product or process patent in as many countries as they can afford, a patent is only granted after regulatory authorities grant them one or are convinced that this process is indeed novel or inventive. BBIL, as far is publicly known, hasn't yet been granted these patents.

What were the roles of BBIL and ICMR?

BBIL had collaborated with the ICMR-NIV for all the steps in developing a vaccine. The two organisations had signed an agreement that spelt out each entity's responsibilities. As ICMR is a public entity and because of the scale of the COVID crisis, there were Right To Information requests to make this agreement public. However, it was only in July 2021, that parts of the agreement were made public in Rajya Sabha.

Beyond transferring the strains and making vaccines, the agreement said, ICMR would also test these vaccines on animals – rodents to monkeys – and then on people to establish that the vaccine worked as intended. The ICMR also funded these clinical trials – ₹35 crore – and incurred costs in developing Covaxin. In return it was to get 5% of royalties that BBIL earned from the sale of Covaxin. Since the announcement of the BBIL and ICMR collaboration, it was generally accepted that both entities would contribute to the vaccine and would therefore hold "joint intellectual property rights," as was stated in Parliament.

However, BBIL first told *The Hindu* that it made a distinction between the rights governing the making of the vaccine and the rights over the data generated from clinical trials. The ICMR hadn't invested in the actual making of the vaccine and so wasn't included in patent applications. However, a day after the matter became public, BBIL said it had made a mistake, and that it would be making amends by filing fresh applications that listed ICMR personnel as inventors. It is unclear what prompted this.

Why does being cited as an inventor matter?

IPR is a vast, complex domain and spans the minutest parts of the product invention process. As the development of pharmaceutical products involves a wide range of expertise, it is hard for single firms or entities to develop everything in-house. Just like the BBIL-ICMR collaboration, companies may enter into several licensing agreements - BBIL for instance had a technology licensing agreement with Virovax for the adjuvant – with other companies. If a single product thus involves multiple entities and collaborators, being listed as an inventor has a bearing on the sharing of intellectual property rights, royalties and even determining how a product can be used. There is no field of human activity that is untouched by disputes over IPR. In patent filings, not listing out all the inventors - in the U.S especially - could even lead to patent applications being rejected.

Why has the NTA failed to deliver?

How many examinations are under the charge of the National Testing Agency? Is it equipped to handle the large number of students and centres? What are the challenges? What are the loopholes in the system that can be manipulated by unscrupulous players?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

he National Testing Agency (NTA) has come under intense fire over the past few weeks, with widespread allegations of cheating, paper leaks and other irregularities impacting flagship examinations such as the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) for undergraduate medical college admissions and the UGC-NET for Ph.D and assistant professor appointments. The agency's director general, Subodh Kumar Singh, has been removed, the CBI is probing irregularities, and a high-level panel has been set up to create a roadmap for a systemic overhaul.

What is the NTA?

The NTA was set up in 2017 as a specialist, self-sustaining and autonomous organisation under the aegis of the Union Education Ministry. Its director general and governing body are appointed by the Union government. However, it is registered as a society and is a separate legal entity, which raises questions about the government's legal liability for the NTA's actions. Its main mandate is to conduct efficient, transparent and international standard tests to assess the competency of candidates for admission, and recruitment purposes. Soon after it was established, the NTA took over the conduct of major all-India examinations, such as the IEE for engineering college admissions, NEET-UG, and UGC-NET (both of which had previously been conducted by the Central Board for Secondary Education or CBSE), as well as the entrance tests for Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University. The National Education Policy of 2020 envisaged a broader role,

Educationists propose broader pathways equipping NTA better dismantling the centralisation process

recommending that the NTA conduct an entrance or aptitude test for all universities across the country. In all, the NTA now has charge for more than 20 examinations.

Why have there been so many problems?

One of the main problems is that the NTA was originally intended to conduct computer-based tests only. "This will ensure that high volume can be processed in a short period of time," says the agency's website, claiming that such online testing will "eliminate the possibility of leakage of questions and question papers, post-test malpractice of filling in the OMR sheets, late entry of students to cheat in the test, subjectivity errors on descriptive testing, etc...In a short period of three years, all the tests administered by NTA will be computer adaptive. This will completely eliminate the problem of cheating," it declares. Thus, when the NTA took over conduct of the UGC-NET examination from the CBSE six years ago, it was converted from a pen-and-paper examination to a computer-adaptive test. This year, however, for reasons that are unclear, UGC-NET shifted back to the pen-and-paper mode. The day after it was conducted for over 11 lakh aspirants, the government cancelled the examination, citing inputs from the cyber crime unit. "Pen-and-paper is a heaven for scamsters," said one former official, noting that the printing process is particularly vulnerable to leaks. It is interesting that when the government announced fresh dates for UGC-NET 2024 to be held again, it also stipulated that it would be a computer-adaptive test this time.

However, when the conduct of NEET-UG was taken over by the NTA, the Health Ministry flatly refused to allow it to shift to a computer-based exam, citing concerns about students in rural areas who would not be prepared for an online exam, as well as Supreme Court rulings on how the examination should be conducted. Hence, the NTA has been forced to run a major examination in a mode that it was never intended to implement by design.

Officials and educationists note that the agency is severely understaffed for the role it is currently being asked to undertake. According to a senior official, the agency was set up with only about 25 permanent staff positions. A number of its functions have also been outsourced to technical partners from the very beginning. Given that NEET-UG alone had more than 23 lakh candidates writing the examination in almost 5,000 centres across the country and abroad, this has left the agency stretched thin, according to some officials. "The NTA was set up to be a lean, professional organisation. The

more people, the higher risks. The NIC [National Informatics Centre] simply does not have the capacity or IT infrastructure needed, so it was always meant to engage third-party technical partners which have the robust cyber security expertise needed to run large-scale computer based examinations," said R. Subrahmanyam, former Higher Education Secretary who was in charge at the time the NTA was set up. However, some educationists have complained that engaging third-party players takes accountability out of the government's hands and leaves loopholes in the system which can be exploited by unscrupulous players.

Officials say the NTA has also failed to develop robust mechanisms needed to handle a large-scale pen-and-paper examination, including the setting of the question paper and its encryption, selection of external printing presses and exam centres, transportation to printing presses, storage and distribution to examinees at examination centres and then the collection and transportation of answer sheets to evaluation centres. Each of these is a stage where malpractice can occur without robust security mechanisms.

What is the way ahead?

The high-level panel headed by former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan has been given two months to recommend reforms in the examination process, improve data security protocols, and overhaul the NTA's functioning.

Educationists, however, propose starkly different pathways for the future. One option is to add manpower and infrastructure to the NTA to equip it to take on large-scale pen-and-paper examinations in an improvement to the CBSE system that preceded it. Those recommending this return to the past point out that pen-and-paper examinations are more equitable, especially for students in rural and remote areas with little access to technology.

Another option is to dismantle the centralisation process that seeks to move all testing in the country under the NTA. Some State governments, and professors from individual universities, notably JNU, have called for entrance tests for their institutions to be removed from the NTA and handed back to the institutions themselves, arguing that more decentralised structures are needed to meet the vastly differing needs of institutions.

However, others seek a more radical reform of the assessment system. They suggest systemic changes to remove the single, high-stakes entrance examination which results in extreme pressure on students, encourages an inequitable coaching industry, and incentivises malpractice. Instead, periodic assessments of knowledge, concept-based understanding, and aptitude can be conducted in the final years of school education as the precursor to the admission process, using online testing, and AI-based proctoring which can be overseen by the NTA.



protest in Vijayawada on June 22. G.N. RAO

What is holding up the Teesta treaty?

What has the Indian government told Bangladesh? What is the technical team going to look into? Why is Bengal Chief Minister protesting this development? What about the Ganga water sharing agreement? When does it come up for renewal? What is the state of both the rivers?

Shiv Sahay Singh

The story so far:

uring the recent state visit of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 22 said: "A technical team will soon visit Bangladesh to discuss conservation and management of the Teesta river in Bangladesh." The remark triggered fresh speculation about the Teesta water sharing treaty with Bangladesh, a key bilateral agreement that has been pending between the two countries for over a decade.

What is India's stand?

After Mr. Modi's comment, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra told the media that the discussion "between the two leaders was less about water sharing per se, and more about the management of the water flows within Teesta". West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee took issue with the Centre's stand. On June 24, she wrote a letter to Mr. Modi conveying her strong reservation that no discussion on the sharing of Teesta waters should be taken up with Bangladesh without the involvement of the State.

Why is Bengal upset?

Ms. Banerjee pointed out that if Teesta's water is



Extreme weather: The flooded bank of the Teesta river following heavy downpour, in Siliguri, West Bengal, on June 14. PTI

Bengal claims if Teesta water is shared with Bangladesh, lakhs of people in north Bengal will get severely impacted

shared with Bangladesh, lakhs of people in north Bengal will get severely impacted. This is not the first time she has voiced her opposition to the proposed water sharing agreement of India with Bangladesh. In July 2019, the Trinamool Congress chairperson admitted that Bangladesh is hurt because the Teesta waters could not be shared and added, "If I had the ability, I would have definitely shared Teesta waters with them." In 2017, the Chief Minister had also referred to an alternative proposal of sharing waters of the Torsa, Manshai, Sankosh and Dhansai rivers but not Teesta.

In all, 54 rivers flow between India and Bangladesh and sharing of river waters has been a key bilateral issue. India and Bangladesh agreed on the sharing of waters of the Ganga in 1996 after the construction of the Farakka Barrage and by the 2010s the issue of sharing of the Teesta came up for negotiation. In 2011, during the United Progressive Alliance-II government, India and Bangladesh were close to signing an agreement on the Teesta but Ms. Banerjee walked out of the deal, and since then, the agreement has been pending.

What is the proposal?

In 2011, when the proposal for sharing Teesta water was drawn up, it was said India would get 42.5% and Bangladesh 37.5% of the river water from December to March.

A tributary of the Brahmaputra, the Teesta river originates from the Tso Lhamo Lake at an elevation of about 5,280 metres in north Sikkim. The river travels for about 150 km in Sikkim and 123 km in West Bengal, before entering Bangladesh from Mekhligunj in Cooch Behar district; it flows another 140 km in Bangladesh and joins the Bay of Bengal. Teesta is Bangladesh's fourth largest trans-boundary river and its floodplain covers an area of 2,750 square kilometres in Bangladesh. But 83% of the river's catchment area lies in India and the remaining 17% is in Bangladesh, supporting 8.5% of its population and 14% of its crop production.

What are the political considerations? While the Awami League government in Bangladesh is facing questions from the

Opposition about the delay in inking an agreement on the Teesta, the dams for hydro-electric power generation in Sikkim and the Teesta Barrage Project at Gazoldoba in West Bengal is making the flow of the river erratic in Bangladesh, leading to either floods or scarcity of water. The visit of a technical team from India to discuss conservation of the Teesta in Bangladesh also comes amid the backdrop of China proposing major dredging work on the river and building reservoirs and embankments in 2020. The Bangladesh government has put the proposal on hold for the past four years.

Soon after returning to Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina announced that her country would accept India's proposal to develop the Teesta River basin. Ms. Banerjee raised questions about the health of the Teesta river after the construction of a series of hydropower projects in Sikkim, deforestation in upper catchment areas and impact of climate change. She expressed surprise that no concrete steps have been taken by the Ministry of Jal Shakti to restore the river to its original form and health on the Indian side when a bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh for restoration of Teesta in Bangladesh is being proposed.

Environmental activists have also been raising questions on the ecological impact of hydro-electric projects on the river. In October 2023, a glacial lake outburst triggered floods in the Teesta basin that claimed hundred lives and destroyed the Teesta III hydroelectric dam.

Sharing of waters of transboundary rivers have been mandated by international laws including The Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers in 1966. Article 253 of the Indian Constitution gives powers to the government to enter any transboundary river water-related treaty with a riparian state.

Why is Bengal talking about Ganga treaty?

The Ganga water sharing treaty with Bangladesh completes 30 years in 2026 and a renewal of the agreement is on the cards. The Trinamool Congress chairperson has pointed out that water sharing with Bangladesh has changed the Ganga's morphology and affected lakhs of people in West Bengal owing to river erosion.

"Lakhs of people have been displaced from their habitation rendering them homeless and also leading to their loss of livelihood. The reduced silt load in Hooghly has impeded the nourishment of the Sundarban delta," she wrote in the letter to the Prime Minister.

PROFILES

Overlords of the developing world

Mass protests in Kenya, in which at least 30 people were shot and killed by police, against an IMF-backed finance Bill that sought to raise taxes on essentials bring into focus, once again, the conditions the multinational lender imposes on poor countries in return for loan assistance

G. Sampath

enya is roiled by protests against a new finance Bill introduced by the government of President William Ruto. As demonstrations spread across the country's 47 counties, protesters in the capital Nairobi attempted to storm Parliament. The government clamped down, with 30 people killed in police firing and over 200 injured. Mr. Ruto eventually bowed to public pressure and announced he would not sign the controversial Bill, which sought to raise taxes on essentials such as bread, cooking oil, sugar and diapers.

Despite Mr. Ruto backing down, the protesters have called for his resignation. They see him as more loyal to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) than to the people of Kenya. A sign from the protests seemed to reflect the public mood: 'Kenya is not IMF's lab rat,' it read.

In 2021, Kenya signed a four-year loan agreement with the IMF for \$2.34 billion, and with another deal signed in May 2023, its loan volume rose to \$3.6 billion. But IMF money for developing countries comes in tranches, and with conditions.

As part of the 2021 loan deal, the IMF forced a COVID-battered Kenya to agree to austerity measures that would raise its revenue collection to 25% of GDP. The lender's demands included a combination of tax hikes and budget cuts, including elimination of subsidies on fuel and electricity and cuts in spending on education and health.

Mr. Ruto, when he came to power in September 2022, went about diligently following the IMF diktat. He cut subsidies on maize and fuel, with the latter sparking a surge in inflation. Massive protests ensued in March and July 2023, in which 30 people were killed by the police. Nonetheless, Mr. Ruto stayed the course on other fiscal consolidation measures, and earlier this month, his government reached a staff level agreement with the IMF. It was expected to open the tap on another \$976 million, provided the finance Bill - projected to raise revenues of \$2.68 billion - went through. But with Mr. Ruto forced to



abandon it, the future flow of IMF funds is in doubt.

None of this, however, is new. Kenya has been through this before, as have much of Africa, whose governments often find themselves caught between the interests of their people and that of private investors and Western commercial banks, fronted by the IMF. The IMF describes itself as "being governed by and accountable to its member countries". But its history and management structure tell a different story – of an organisation that has served as a tool of American foreign policy, and works to further the interests of Western financial elites.

In 1944, when the IMF was created at a conference of 44 nations in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, the U.S., the global supremacy of American economic might was already a reality, with the rest of the world either devastated by the Second World War or by colonial plunder, or both. This power dynamic got encoded into

both the Bretton Woods twins – the IMF and the World Bank. For instance, the World Bank president is always an American, while the IMF head is always from a European ally of the U.S.

Unwritten mandate

In theory, their function is to aid economic development and promote monetary cooperation and stability. But in practice, they have followed an unwritten mandate to foster the integration of newly independent former colonies into a global economic order on terms designed to serve the interests of American capital.

Against this background, it shouldn't be surprising that voting rights at the IMF don't follow the democratic logic of one-member country-one vote but are quota-driven, based on dollar contributions. The U.S. alone has a voting share of 16.5%, while the wealthy G-7 countries together command more than 40% of the voting power. This is more than

that enjoyed by all the nations in Africa and Latin America put together, and populations most affected by decisions taken by IMF bureaucrats live precisely in these countries.

As of March 2024, among Africa's 54 countries, 31 had outstanding loans with the IMF. But they have nothing remotely resembling a 'say' in how the IMF is run.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres flagged the bias in the IMF framework last year when he said the Bretton Woods system reflected "the power relations of 1945".

This unfairness, and the unequal relationship with the IMF, is partly why so many developing countries, from Kenya to Ghana, Zambia and Pakistan, have witnessed protests against the IMF and IMF-imposed economic policies – the infamous 'Structural Adjustment Programs' (SAPs).

SAPs, adopted by the IMF from 1986 onwards, typically require governments to cut public spending,

privatise state enterprises, reduce import duties and tariffs, and implement other measures so that the country pursues export-led growth. The predictable outcome of these policies, documented in the IMF's own internal research, is extreme inequality.

Impact of SAPs

A 2002 World Bank-funded study by the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network tracked the impact of the IMF's SAPs in nine countries across four continents.

Its report highlighted four ways in which they furthered "impoverishment and marginalisation of local populations": one, by causing the demise of domestic manufacturing sectors and loss of employment for small producers; two, agricultural, trade and mining reforms decimated small farms and poor rural communities; three, they triggered job losses; and four, the reduced role of state in providing guaranteed access to essential services led to increase in poverty. Yet, the IMF, as the international lender of last resort, continues to impose SAP-like requirements.

Faced with a backlash in dozens of countries, the IMF did introduce 'social spending floors' to protect public spending on education, health and social protection from being cut as part of its loan conditionalities. But an Oxfam analysis of 27 loan programmes negotiated with low- and middle-income countries found that "for every \$1 the IMF encouraged governments to spend on public services, it has told them to cut six times more than that through austerity measures."

In 1994, the New York Times described the IMF and the World Bank as the "overlords of Africa". In the 30 years since, as Kenyans can testify, little seems to have changed. The overlords continue to influence economic policies in low and middle-income nations, with the fates of millions determined not in their own Parliaments but in the boardrooms of the IMF headquarters in Washington.

THE GIST

The IMF was created in 1944, at a conference of 44 nations in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, the U.S.

Voting rights at the IMF don't follow the logic of one-member country-one vote but are quota-driven, based on dollar-contributions. The U.S. alone has a voting share of 16.5%, while the wealthy G-7 countries together command more than 40% of the voting power

As of March 2024, among Africa's 54 countries, 31 had outstanding loans with the IMF, but they have nothing remotely resembling a 'say' in how the IMF is run

Chair of the House

Om Birla

The BJP lawmaker's first term as Speaker of the Lok Sabha was known for both his inclusive approach as well as the unprecedented punishments he handed to Opposition lawmakers

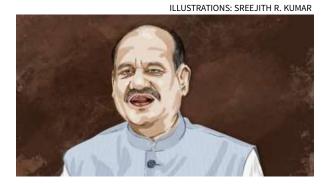
Nistula Hebbar

ok Sabha Speaker Om Birla's re-election as the chair of the Lok Sabha after completing a full five-year term is being seen as part of the continuum that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to establish between his last term and the current one.

After repeating nearly all Ministers in his Council of Ministers, and reappointing his earlier team of officials at the Prime Minister's Office, the re-nomination of Mr. Birla as the Na-Democratic Alliance's (NDA) candidate as Speaker was almost a given. Mr. Birla won, but not before some high drama with the Opposition fielding its own candidate and stopping just short of asking for a division of votes.

While this election of Mr. Birla had an air of inevitability around it, it was not always the case. The choice of Mr. Birla for his first term as Speaker had taken everyone by surprise, including himself. Mr. Modi's choice for Speaker in his first term as Prime Minister was the veteran Sumitra Mahajan, an eighth-term MP. In his second tenure, he picked Mr. Birla, a second-term MP from Kota, Rajasthan.

Mr. Birla, who began his career in student politics, in Kota, steadily climbed



the party ladder while working at the youth wing of the BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM).

He went from the district unit head of the BJYM to its State president. He was elected to the Rajasthan legislature three times. His appointment as the Lok Sabha Speaker was a leap, both in profile and responsibility.

An RSS recruit, he was ideologically aligned to the Sangh Parivar, and had the trust of Mr. Modi, who had engaged with him on several occasions in the past with regard to politics in Rajasthan. Mr. Birla was evolving as an important resource from Rajasthan for the BJP's national leadership, when this offer came his way.

First session It was perhaps his expe-

rience as a backbencher in Parliament that helped him conduct the House smoothly in the early years. In the first session he presided over in 2019, all first time MPs got an opportunity to speak as he kept the Lok Sabha working till very late in the evening. A record 1,066 subjects were raised in the Zero Hour in the first session, another record.

When Pramila Bisoyi, a first term MP of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) who had not even completed her primary education, kept avoiding all attempts to make her speak in Parliament, Mr. Birla sought her out to find out the reason only to discover that her hesitancy stemmed from her inability to speak either in Hindi or English. She spoke a local version of Odia. Mr. Birla then arranged an Odia to Hindi translator from among the Parliament staff, to help her speak.

When Ministers of the BJP-led government did not come up with satisfactory answers to questions by MPs on Question Hour, some got the sharp end of Mr. Birla's tongue, with many Opposition MPs appreciating his efforts at ensuring everyone had their say in the House.

All this, however, was eclipsed when he created a new record by suspending 100 Opposition MPs in the Winter Session of 2023. And while everyone got a chance to speak, least number of government Bills went through parliamentary scrutiny. On the day he was re-elected as Speaker, Mr. Birla read out a statement condemning the Emergency– the Indira Gandhi-led Cabinet imposed Emergency 49 years ago - drawing protests from the Opposition.

The rough start raises questions on what approach Mr. Birla would take in his second term. Unlike in his first term, when the BJP had absolute majority in the House, this time, the BJP has formed a coalition government with NDA allies, and the Opposition seems resurgent.

Opposition MPs are hoping that Mr. Birla's acgestures commodative from his previous tenure, in ensuring that all MPs get a chance to speak, and calling Ministers to account for not doing their parliamentary homework be the model he chooses to continue in his second tenure. But if he chooses to take the confrontational path, that could lead to showdowns. It is to be seen, which aspect of continuity chooses to enforce.

Rabble-rouser

Biörn Höcke

The far-right AfD leader, who stands trial for using Nazi-era slogans, calls for a '180-degree turn' in how Germany remembers its past, including Holocaust

Sumeda

hile addressing a gathering late last year, farright German politician Björn Höcke, then on trial for raising a Nazi slogan at a 2021 rally, invoked the phrase "Everything for...," prompting the crowd to respond "Germany" to complete the banned Nazi slogan, which was inscribed on the knives of Adolf Hitler's storm troopers, who played a key role in his rise to power in the

The former history teacher had earlier faced criticism for inciting racial hatred and using anti-Semitic language when he described the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a "monument of shame" and called for a"180-degree turn" in how Germany remembers its past.

"Never, never must we allow ourselves to let the demagogy of a Björn Höcke go unchallenged," the then Germany's Vice Chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel, said. The Central Council of Jews said the "anti-Semitic and utterly inhuman words" had revealed the true face of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The party nearly expelled him, warning that his approach could "damage its acceptance."

Despite a string of controversies, the 52-year-old



rose through the ranks of the AfD to become one of the most powerful figures in the shifting German political landscape. He has consistently pushed the limits of public discourse with controversial stances on history, nationalism, race and migrants.

He now stands trial for the second time on charges of using a Nazi slogan, just months ahead of the regional elections in Thuringia, where he plans to run for Governor.

History deeply influenced Mr. Höcke's life and career. He was born in Lünen, Westphalia, in 1972, with roots tracing to German refugees from East Prussia. His upbringing instilled a sense of displacement and a longing for a lost homeland, themes evident in his political ideology. "Key to understanding Höcke is his ideology-shaping heritage of East Prussia where Höcke's forebears originated... A second ideology-shaping element is

the idea that 'battles create

identities'... Höcke says, 'to be Prussian is a lifestyle'... This means Prussian authoritarian militarism," Sebastian Hennig notes in the book Never Twice in the Same River. He described Mr. Höcke's life as "dutiful" until he became aware of "German suffering" and felt the need to change the national discourse. In 2013, he co-founded the AfD's Thuringia chapter, launching his political

Revisionist views Quickly rising to prominence as one of Thuringia's most radical figures, Mr. Höcke gained notoriety for his revisionist views on Nazi history and rhetoric reminiscent of the 1930s. During the 2015 European migrant crisis, he warned large crowds against "German alienation". His oratory style drew comparisons to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

Mr. Höcke participated in far-right demonstrations, made racist comments, attempted to normalise Nazi-era words, and questioned national guilt over the Holocaust. "Germans are the only people in the world who plant a monument of shame in the heart of their capital... the laughable policy of coming to terms with the past is crippling us," he said. He claimed multiculturalism threatened Germany's

existence. Mr. Höcke's divisive remarks caused internal strife. In 2019, a court ruled that it is legally justifiable to label him a "fascist". The AfD's regional branch was placed under surveillance as a "rightwing extremist" group.

His relentless testing of political boundaries peaked when he concluded a speech at a political event with the Nazi slogan "Everything for Germany" in 2021. In court he argued he was unaware of its "criminal relevance." However, he repeated the slogan at another event in December 2023. The legal troubles didn't affect his popularity, though.

Following the AfD's strong show in the EU elections, Mr. Höcke is now focused on Thuringia, aiming for victory in the regional polls. If successful, Björn Höcke could secure his first constitutional post, transitioning from a polarising figure to a potential state Premier.

REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Soft power options to win and retain friends

How India can delay the backlash that its economic rise will inevitably bring

ll rising powers face contestation and containment. How should India prepare for it? China had a 10-year honey-moon when it went from a \$1.2 trillion economy to a \$6.5 trillion economy between 2000 and 2010. The United States (US) facilitated China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) as US consumers benefitted from lower prices, US companies got cheaper supply chains, bigger profits, and ulti-mately a large market to sell into. It was only with Xi Jinping's appointment as general secretary in 2012 that there was a change in tone and tenor in China's attitude to the US. Xi mounted a challenge to US supremacy and sought a redrawing of the world order to accommodate China's rapid rise. This led to a growing backlash against China which is now at a fever pitch with tariffs and non-trade barriers imposed by the US with bipartisan support. What should India learn from this? Can it use its soft power to extend the honeymoon phase to 15 years rather than China's

The 30-year globalisation phase post the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union is under major challenge today. The electorate in many countries is upset by what they believe globalisation has done to their lot. Populist Right-wing leaders in many west-ern countries have blamed globalisation for the stagnation in living standards, growing inequality, and joblessness in their country. So, there is a return to nationalistic jingoism and reaction against free trade and immigration, whatever the long-term costs. Supply chain disruptions during Covid have further spurred self-reliance and a return to industrial policy, witness the US IRA and our own production-

linked incentives-type actions across the world. The WTO is giving way to regional and bilateral trade deals. Geopolitical agility is now a requirement for countries and companies alike.

India is in a bad neighbourhood. China and Pakistan are hostile nations. Other neighbours such as Afghanistan, Nepal and Myanmar are unstable. Despite this, geopolitically, this is India's moment.

The US has shifted its attention to the Pacific and India belongs to useful US-led arrangements - Quad (US, Japan, Australia, India), I2U2 (India, Israel, US and UAE), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC). Yet it has retained workable relations with Russia and Iran. At the same time, it has strengthened its relations with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and has good relations with the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe. It has also reached out to African nations with suc-

The backlash against China has created space and opportunity. Despite India's fast growth and its ascent on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) league tables, today it is not seen as threatening as it only accounts for 3.6% of global GDP. It remains a poor country with a per capita income below \$3,000 and is not expected to reach developed status till 2047 even by its own estimates. India must use its soft power to extend this honeymoon period and be allowed to grow without containment for the foreseeable future.

A word on using soft power. Soft power is the ability to co-opt rather than coerce. It involves shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. Soft power is non-coercive, it uses culture, political values, and foreign policies to enact change. India has a long tradition of soft power, which originates with its ancient belief in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

or (the world is one family). During the Independence struggle against the British, Mahatma Gandhi's actions and the poetry of Ravindranath Tagore increased India's soft power and embarrassed the British, creating global goodwill for India.

Janmejaya

Sinha

The world sans China and Pakistan does not feel threatened by India's rise. India's soft power is rooted in the core Indian values of secularism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and assimilation of multiple cultures in its civilisation. So much so that William Dalrymple writes, "India has always had a strange way with her conquerors. In defeat, she beckons them in, then slowly seduces, assimilates, and transforms them." Today,



India's soft power is rooted in the core Indian values of secularism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and assimilation of multiple cultures in its civilisation. Today, this is enhanced by India's democracy, food, movies, music, inclusive non-missionary religion

this is enhanced by India's democracy, food, movies, music, inclusive non-missionary religion, the easy use of the English language, and respected higher education institutions. Its technology services companies and global capability centres (GCC) have created a strong services brand. In fact, the number of GCCs has doubled in the last 10 years.

Its diaspora in the US and UK is especially strong. It is rich and well-placed in academia, business, health care, technology, and politics. Top US companies have CEOs of Indian origin, the US vice-president and the UK prime minister belong to the Indian diaspora. Just as an example, I was in a Seattle nightclub a few years ago and a mixed crowd were all dancing to Bol-

Yet we must recognise that the soft power of the US is, in fact, as strong as its hard power (nuclear, military, technology, economic, space). Despite major errors in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Gaza, US soft power cannot be underestimated. It is further bolstered by the opinion-shaping role of the Anglo-Saxon press and Hollywood movies. I don't know whether the US dollar is a soft or hard power — but it is clearly a superpower. The US still defines who the

bad guvs are!

We need to recognise that an "opportunity" is not the same as an "outcome". Our soft power needs constant strengthening. We must nurture our respected institutions and take steps to fix what is currently broken, like primary education, health care access and delivery, and strengthen corporate research and development further. Complacence, in today's context, is a death wish and yet the opportunity before India is like never before.

> Janmejaya Sinha is chairman, BCG India. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS



Claim to prohibition is immoral, ahistoric

Colonial clubs and the

fetish about dress code

Pavan K

Varma

ALLOWED.

consumption of spurious liquor are double tragedies. Not only are they horrific but they're also entirely preventable. Man has caused them but man can also ensure they do not occur. All it requires is the acceptance of a cold fact of reality. Not all human beings are teetotalers. Many They enjoy doing so. Ar frankly, in any mature, sensible, democratic society, they have an inalienable right to do so. It is attempts to deny that right or place unacceptable curbs on it that cause the problem.

If safe, good quality and cheap or reasonably priced alcohol is available for all adults to buy, within all the acknowledged and accepted conditions of the law, few if any people would risk their lives drinking hooch. The vast majority of drinkers are not suicidal. They simply want to relax, ease their tension and tiredness, or spend

ajnath Singh, the raksha mantri, may be a little surprised that the

Kasauli Club, whose chairperson is the serving brigadier of the can-

tonment, could well stop him from enter-

ing the Club. This is because the Club.

founded in 1898, still persists with an anti-

quated dress code, which allows men to

enter wearing lounge suits, safaris, and

blazers, but not what is the impressive

trademark dress of the minister – an ele-

gantly worn dhoti with a starched kurta.

He may find it difficult too

because the Club also insists

only on shoes with socks, and

bans sandals, even closed

chain of clubs for themselves,

and for long, they were for

"whites only". When they left,

Indians were admitted, but

mostly "brown sahibs", who

were, as Macaulay had prophetically pre-

dicted, Indian only in colour. This class of

anglicised, English-speaking Indians was

also the new power elite — members of

the civil services, senior police and Army

officials, the old rich, and some leading

exclusionist bastions. In Kolkata, the Ben-

gal Club where Macaulay once lived,

opened its doors to Indians only in 1959,

more than a decade after Independence,

and an Indian did not displace a Britisher

as the president of the club until another

seven years after that! In Mumbai,

another leading club kept this notice out-

side its premises for many years after

Thus, nothing really changed in these

Our British rulers set up a

Peshawaris.

corporate figures.

♦ he truth is deaths caused by the an enjoyable evening. It's because they can't buy what they want that they resort to what is dangerous and even likely to kill. But, remember, death was never their intention. It's just the unintended corollary of what circumstances have forced

At the root of the problem is the belief that alcohol is bad and, therefore, its conseverely discouraged. Article 47 of our Constitution says, "the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption, except for medicinal purposes, of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health".

No doubt, in excess, alcohol is bad. Only a fool would deny that. But so, too, is sugar, butter, cream and, indeed, even exercise. However, taken in moderation it becomes a different matter. And, anyway, adults are entitled to decide for themselves. Even make their own mistakes. Prohibition as

1947: DOGS AND INDIANS NOT

today the symbols of a cultural confronta-

tion, between a new, less anglicised and

more egalitarian India, and the colonial traditions of the past. The Delhi Gym-

khana Club, founded in 1913, occupies 27.3

acres of prime land in Lutyens Delhi. But

in 1991, when I went to the club, wearing

a silk kurta, starched pyjamas, expensive

buttons, and Peshawari sandals, I was

asked by the burly doorman who

had known me since childhood.

to wear a Jawahar jacket as well.

I agreed until I saw that people in jeans and T-shirts were allowed

in, while I, dressed in formal

attire in my own cultural tradi-

tions, could not. I protested

strongly, and fortunately, the then

president, Admiral Tahliani,

But old habits die hard. In 2013, the

same club stopped a high-ranking Bhuta-

nese monk from entering because of his

traditional dress. The Delhi Golf Club,

another elite citadel, had a shameful inci-

dent in 2017 when a Khasi lady from

Meghalaya, Taiin Lyngdoh, invited there

for lunch, was asked by club officials to

leave because she was dressed in the jain-

sem, her state's formal attire. Apparently,

the officials told her that it looked like a

"maid's dress". The incident created pub-

lic outrage, but colonial mentalities per-

sist, and little attempt has been made to

accommodate India's vast formal sarto-

rial diversity. For instance, the popular

Tollygunge Club in Kolkata, founded in

revised the rules.

Such clubs have, therefore, become

state policy (as in Bihar and Gujarat) is not just a deliberate denial of the rights of citizens but it infantilises them. The nanny State makes children of us and it doesn't know best. But governments that treat their people like toddlers in a nursery seem unable to accept that.

There is, however, a deeper problem. It explains this attitude to alcohol. It's why leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and sometimes, Constitutions like ours seek to wean people away from what they consider human weakness or vice. It's the mistaken quest to make people perfect or, at least, to strive towards it. From a moral position, this may make sense. Perhaps from a practical standpoint, it could prevent problems. But from a human perspective, it assumes someone in authority is entitled to decide what's right and if you differ, you're wrong. This is true of how Mahatma Gandhi

and the governments of Bihar and Gujarat view alcohol. It's also true of Rishi foolish proposal to ban people born after a particular year from smoking cigarettes. They believe that if protected from their own temptation, human beings can be transformed. But they're wrong.

True transformation comes from learning from your mistakes. But you have to first make those mistakes to learn. This is the difference between people who've given up smoking and those who never took it up. A lesson learnt from experience is deeper and longer lasting than one enforced by mummy.

TRUE TRANSFORMATION **COMES FROM LEARNING** FROM YOUR MISTAKES. BUT YOU HAVE TO FIRST MAKE THOSE MISTAKES TO LEARN. THIS IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO'VE GIVEN **UP SMOKING AND THOSE** WHO NEVER TOOK IT UP

The truly bizarre part is alcohol is part of our culture and ancient traditions. Soma ras was the nectar of the Gods. Indra was particularly partial to it. Prohibition, on the other hand, is foreign. America tried it in the 1920s and failed. And that raises another set of issues we need to address. Why don't we follow the way of our Gods? That would be the perfectly des do. Why, instead, are we imitating the American way?

The moral of this piece is simple and straightforward. Good governance lies in making sure honest people can drink safely within the prescriptions of the law. Bad governance is making that difficult, if not impossible, and pushing them to alternatives that often kill.

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

For small islands, climate finance is about survival

Patricia

Scotland

his month, sadly, more than 100 people have died from oppressive heat in India. At the recent Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting, we considered how the climate crisis is increasing the spread of vector-borne diseases, including malaria and other dangerous diseases.

Commonwealth leaders have been calling for global climate action since 1989, before international negotiations even began. In line with their calls, climate scientists have long warned the world of the need to limit global warming to 1.5°C to avoid irreversible damage.

Worryingly, in February 2024, we breached this critical threshold. Global temperatures surpassed 1.5°C over the past 12 record. This increase has intensified extreme weather events, sea-level rise and other climate risks which disproportionately affect Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Despite covering only 3% of the world's land area, SIDS are vital for humanity and the planet we share. They safeguard 11.5% of the oceans' Exclusive Economic Zones, which include 20% of all terrestrial bird. plant, and reptile species. Yet SIDS experience five times more climate-attributable deaths due to extreme weather events, and

when shocks hit. SIDS are hit hard.

A single cyclone can derail a small State's growth for years, if not decades. In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated my own country of birth. Dominica. destroying 225% of its Gross Domestic Product. The damage of such shocks is worsened

by inadequate financial support. Despite contributing only 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS struggle to unlock climate finance. In 2019, they had access to only \$1.5 billion out of the \$100 billion pledged to developing countries. With no alternative, these countries are often forced to obtain financing on unfavourable terms, resulting in high debt burdens, creating a vicious cycle where debt becomes unsustainable and access to finance becomes more limited

The Commonwealth is home to two-thirds of the world's SIDS, and this exceptional convergence of hardships is at the heart of my motivation to support SIDS at every level. SIDS have also been saying enough is enough, and

are leading the charge to reset our climate finance ambitions. At the 28th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (CoP28), the Commonwealth SIDS were at the forefront of hard won progress on Loss and Damage

Samoa, the Commonwealth's incoming chair-in-office, joined other small islands and vulnerable countries at the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4), calling for "collective quanti fied finance goals and funding" to help them deal with intensifying natural disasters.

The Commonwealth is working to ensure that the SIDS' voices are heard at the highest level of the international system while providing practical support in c areas. Our Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub has unlocked \$330 million for small States, with another \$500 million worth of project proposals in the pipeline. For years, we have seen these countries take the steps needed to transition toward low-

carbon, climate-resilient development. But to scale up this action, reliable climate finance is key.

We will continue to advocate for increased funding for adaptation, mitigation, and resiliencebuilding. Our commitment to the climate crisis is not new; it is part of the Commonwealth's DNA.

The next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will take place in Samoa this October — the first summit in a Pacific Small Island State - with a focus on building resilience essential for our 56 nations. If we are to achieve this, the world must keep its promises Every commitment to climate action and finance made by world leaders is vital Every failure to meet those commitments is an insult to the vulnerable. Every example of inaction is an act of violence against those who need us to succeed, now and for generations to come.

The call to action on climate finance will continue to resound from Commonwealth SIDS at the UN General Assembly in September to the negotiations at CoP29 in November. It must be heeded.

> Patricia Scotland is the secretary general of the Commonwealth. The views expressed are personal



The Delhi Golf Club is an elite citadel

was wearing his elegant veshti and shirt. I am a member of most of these clubs. and my criticism comes from an insider as cautionary advice on the need to change, especially since most of the members of the current ruling party, without an anglicised pedigree or felicity in English, would not qualify to become members, and quite understandably resent these remnants of cultural colonisation. The situation becomes worse because inbreeding breeds infighting. Allegations of financial irregularities

ARASTU GUPTA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

1855, and occupying 110 acres of prime land, does not allow a formally clad pyjama-kurta guest or member in any venue of the club but permits all varieties of T-shirts and jeans. Nor would it allow in former minister P Chidambaram, if he between rival groups in the clubs swirl around, literally inviting the government to take over, as has happened with the Delhi Gymkhana Club.

Clubs are entitled to their autonomy, but not to their refusal to change. It is not coincidental that after the government takeover of Gymkhana, Om Pathak was appointed the administrator. A member of the Bharatiya Janata Party national executive, he had applied for membership as far back as 1982 but never got it. Two of his decisions were to keep an open copy of the Bhagavad Gita in the library and have a performance of the Ramayana

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal



SUNDAY LETTERS

Education for future citizens

This is with reference to "Preparing our children to encounter the world" by Rajmohan Gandhi (June 23). The fact that political science textbooks are being "cleansed" or revised is a troubling notion. As Indians, we must introspect on the kind of education that should be imparted to our children

India cannot be compared with Quebec This is with reference to "Seditious hearts and mature

democracies" by Karan Thapar (June 23). Scotland and Quebec have a far less complex religious and ethnic spread than India. Therefore, Arundhati Roy's comments on the integrity of one of the most sensitive regions in India could be considered irresponsible.

Amol Subhedar

Good transport can bridge gender gap

This is with reference to "A pink auto route to empowering women" by Lalita Panicker (June 23). It is the duty and responsibility of the government to minimise the gender gap through a reform in transport.

Subhash Taneja

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There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire

horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir...

consumed the aspirations of

lakhs of students. There was a

What has changed? Apparently nothing

THE BJP-led government under the Hon'ble Mr Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9, 2024. It did not have a happy start. Mr Modi had to share the head table with the leaders of the TDP and JD(U) and allot portfolios to them and other allies. In the election of the Speaker he had to go through the motions of consultation. Both were unusual experiences for Mr Modi in his 22 years as head of government.

SEVERAL SETBACKS

There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir. The prices of tomato, potato and onion increased, year on year, by 39, 41 and 43 per cent, respectively. The Sensex and Nifty soared to historic highs while the dollar-rupee exchange rate plunged to a historic low. Toll tax on highways was raised by 15 per cent. In an apparent censure, Mr Mohan Bhagwat, the sarsanghchalak of RSS, admonished those who displayed "arrogance"; the BJP's leadership squirmed but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Local mutinies broke out in several

state units of the BJP. In the first session of Parliament, save the election of the Speaker and the President's Address, there was no substantive business. But even the routine business had its share of controversies. By con-

vention, the member of Parliament who has been elected most times to the Lok Sabha would be nominated the pro-tem Speaker to preside over taking the oath by elected members. That person, undisputedly, was Mr K Suresh (Congress-Kerala) who has been elected for the 8th time, though with a break. However, the government nominated Mr B Mahtab (BJP-Odisha) for the office although he has been elected only 7 times (six times on the BJD ticket and, after he crossed over, the 7th time on the BIP ticket).

Why did the BJP kick up the avoidable controversy? Possible answers are: BIP wanted to signal that the results of the LS elections have not dented its supreme leader's way of doing things, namely, 'it's my way or highway'. Another answer could be that the controversy-courting Mr K. Rijiju, the new minister of parliamentary affairs, wanted to signal his arrival. The most plausible answer is that the nomination was a reward for Mr Mahtab's defection from the BJD to the BJP and to encourage more MPs to defect to the BJP.

STALE ASSURANCES

Although the election of the Speaker concluded on a sour note, the rest of the session need not have been affected. But the Hon'ble Speaker added more bitterness when he moved a resolution from the Chair excoriating the Congress for the imposition of Emergency 49 years ago (yes, 49 years, not 50)! Next, Parliament may 'teach' other history lessons by condemning Pakistan for the invasion of Kashmir in

1947, China for the war in 1962 and the United States for sending an aircraft carrier to intimidate India in 1971. The resolution was an unwarranted provocation.

The President's Address to the joint session of both Houses was an opportunity to restore civility after false starts, but the opportunity was missed. The speech could have recognized the changed composition of the Lok Sabha, the fact that the leading party (BJP) was short of a majority by 32 seats, that the prime minister was the *primus inter pares* of a *coalition* government and that, after 10 years, there would be a Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Disappointingly, the President's Address made no reference to the altered circumstances.

The speech was a litany of claims

made by the BJP before and during the elections. The claims were rebuffed by the vast majority of the people. The new government is not a BIP government but a coalition government. The BJP has refused to acknowledge the bittersweet fact and the President echoed that view. The word 'coalition', did not occur in the speech. Other words that were conspicuous by their absence included 'consensus', 'inflation', and 'parliamentary committee'. There were references to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes but all others — especially the minority communities — were clubbed in the catch-all phrase 'social and religious groups'. There was no reference to the tragedy of Manipur. As a small mercy there was no reference to 'Agniveer' or 'Uniform Civil Code'. Finally,

India is no longer a *Vishwa Guru*, and is content to be a *Vishwa Bandhu*!

More of the

SAMENESS

Apparently, in the view of the BJP, nothing has changed, not even the mood of the people.

Hence, it is the same Cabinet, the same ministers, the key ministers hold the same portfolios, the same Speaker, the same principal secretary to the prime minister, the same National Security Adviser, the same chief of the Intelligence Bureau, the same government law officers, and many others remaining in the same positions. Besides, I am told that the social media is full of the same paid trolls who are semi-literate, diversionary, proficient in the science of scatology, and obvious losers. That, I am afraid, is conclusive proof that nothing has changed despite the verdict of the people!

In the run-up to the Budget, the top concerns of the people remain (1) unemployment and (2) inflation. According to,the CSDS' post-poll survey (The Hindu dated June 25, 2024), 'price rise/inflation' and 'growing unemployment' got 29 per cent and 27 per cent as the most 'disliked' work of the BJP government. On addressing the top two concerns, the formation of the Cabinet and the President's Address let down the people. Will the Budget for 2024-25, due in July, awaken the Modi government? Parliamentary etiquette requires that we keep our fingers crossed.



Criticism we cannot ignore

LAST WEEK India faced censure that we need to take seriously. The US Secretary of State while releasing the Report on International Religious Freedom for 2023 said that some of the things that were happening to people belonging to minority religions in India were disturbing. Anthony Blinken's words as reported in this newspaper were, "In India we see a concerning increase in anti-conversion laws, hate speech, demolitions of homes and places of worship for members of minority faith communities." Usually, when India faces criticism from foreigners the reaction from high officials in the Government of India is to show fake disdain and fake bravado.

This is not a confident response from the 'mother of democracy'. None of the things that Mr. Blinken said are untrue. There are anti-conversion laws in ten out of twenty-eight states, says the report And we do not need anyone to remind us of hate speeches that have called for genocide and bulldozers that somehow only find Muslim houses to demolish Bulldozer justice worries me personally to such a degree that I have often written against it in this column. Every time the general reaction in the digital public square has been to berate me for not realising that the demolished homes and mosques were built illegally on government land. They ignore the horrible truth that bulldozers only arrive after there has been violence of some kind.

Demonising those of other faiths, especially Muslims, has become so routine in the past ten years that incidents of yet another 'cattle smuggler' being lynched now barely make the news. The tragic reality is that the killers are almost never brought to justice and always remain faceless. Now that there is a powerful opposition in Parliament, we must hope that this changes as do a few other practices that have given India a bad name.

Dissidents in the past decade have been regularly arrested under laws that were made for terrorists. It is beyond belief that Umar Khalid, a student leader, has spent four years in jail without being brought to trial. If the government has a good case against him, he should be tried in a court of law instead of being allowed to rot in a jail cell indefinitely. The laws under which dissidents like him are arrested are such that make it impossible to get bail, so officials get away with lying that it is for the courts to decide who and when someone should be given bail. Judges have no choice but to deny bail if the law has no provision for it.

The latest dissident against whom

charges have been brought is Arundhati Roy. This is a lady I have known for many years, and I have never agreed with her political views. But she is not a terrorist. She is a rebel and often a rebel for any old cause. She is given to making reckless speeches. So, she once said that in her view the Indian Army had been more brutal with the Indian people than the Pakistani army had with that country's civilian population. Arundhati had clearly not heard of Baluchistan or noticed that the Pakistani Army executed an elected prime minister. It was not this speech that she could soon be put on trial for but a speech she made more than a decade ago in which she said that Kashmir had never been an integral part of India. She was obviously referring to 1947 and not Kashmir's ancient Hindu past. In any case it was a stupid remark. But

this does not make her a terrorist.

One of the greatest achievements of

India is that we have managed somehow to remain a liberal democracy amid countries that have been always ruled by military and Marxist dictators. In the old days when relations were better between India and Pakistan, I remember that every time I returned from the Islamist republic next door, I had this sense of suddenly being able to breathe again. Repression and religion so filled the Pakistani air (and still do) that it was difficult to do the most ordinary things. We need to be grateful that this has not happened in India yet, but I can report that I was part of a panel discussion on Kashmir at the Kasauli Literary Festival some years ago and a BJP busybody reported me to the local police station along with a fellow panelist. He disagreed with our views.

happen in a democracy. Especially not when as the Prime Minister said last week, we must resolve to never allow another Emergency of the kind that Indira Gandhi imposed. It made me happy to hear him say this. But I feel the need to remind him that the only time, other than then, that I have seen foreign correspondents kicked out of India has been in the past ten years. The two French journalists who have recently been expelled had not just lived here for years but were married to Indian citizens. So, their families face being torn apart. When journalists, writers and dissidents are expelled, it damages India's democratic credentials.

These are not things that can or should

Now that the Prime Minister has won a third term and there is a solid opposition block in the Lok Sabha, it is my fervent hope that we can go back to those days when India was confident enough to not be afraid of foreign correspondents or Indian dissidents.



EMERGENCY RERUNS

LAST WEEK, the anniversary of Indira Gandhi's draconian Emergency was commemorated in Parliament. But the outpouring of condemnation from the ruling party seemed more about scoring political points than genuine concern over the real issues involved. Having written a book on Emergency, I am often asked about my firsthand experiences. I always find it ironic that many of those who commemorate June 26 and regret the horrors of suppression of the media and fundamental rights, seem oblivious that a dark cloud still hangs over freedom of expression and liberty even today. For instance, in the last Lok Sabha session parliamentary correspondents were never so ruthlessly restricted, except during the Emergency. The difference today is in the style of operation, but not the basic effect.

All rulers want to control the narrative. Indira, despite her liberal upbringing, used sledgehammer tactics, announcing upfront that she was suspending fundamental rights and introducing censorship. Subsequent governments have resorted to less in-your-face methods. Strong-arming individuals and groups funding the media, unjustly applying laws concerning terrorism and corruption, raiding media offices and arresting scribes without following due process, denying visas to foreign journalists, using the CBI and the ED to settle scores are some of the more draconian methods of media regulation of late. But control of news emanation can even be effected by simply shutting out legitimate sources of information. Scribes who don't toe the line are cut out from the loop of newsgathering, like background briefings, interviews, and entry to Parliament and government offices. The media starts introspecting less than it should on official claims. How, for instance, did so many scribes get it wrong in the recent poll results?

STRONG GOVTS VS WEAK ONES

Politicians tend to lump the media into two categories: those who are with them and those who are against them. Unhappily, the middle ground of objectivity in journalism has practically disappeared. I personally believe the thumb rule generally is that the stronger the government, the more overbearing it is, both in state or at the Centre. The media is far more free and fearless under unstable governments. PM Modi and Indira were similar in terms of mass appeal, unilateralism and a deep suspicion of newsgathers. Some may question my theory, citing the example of Rajiv Gandhi who, despite his huge majority, was unable to suppress the Bofors exposé that led to the fall of his government. But that may have been less due to lack of intent than because his media controllers were ham-handed and some newspapers remained defiant. Also, a hostile President Zail Singh was in the Rashtrapati Bhavan for much of his tenure. I recall first-hand back in 1989, when a shell-shocked Vijaypat Singhania was ordered by a Rajiv aide to shut down his newly started newspaper, Indian Post, where I worked then, because a damaging lead story had appeared against one of the PM's close friends. Earlier, then editor-in-chief Vinod Mehta was provided a list of people who were not to be written about negatively, which he shared sheepishly with me.

Past governments far more tolerant of a free press included those of Morarji Desai and Deve Gowda. But perhaps their laissezfaire attitude was more because they lacked a clear majority and many from within their own ranks were plotting their downfall.

Can't control THE NARRATIVE

Despite total censorship, with a few courageous exceptions like The Indian Express, Indira lost the 1977 elections because news of her regime's excesses spread throughout the country by word of mouth. In 2024, the age of social media, aspersions were cast on 'godi' and 'pappu' scribes in traditional media, but the most effective counter to government propaganda may have came from irreverent YouTubers and influencers, curiously some of whom started out as travel writers and bodybuilders. The new entrants attracted millions of viewers. And thousands of aspiring writers dashed off disrespectful WhatsApp campaign messages that went viral. The Modi 3.0 regime should learn from Emergency — that you cannot control the narrative, particularly in the 21st century. Devising new IT laws to monitor the Internet and earning international opprobrium is definitely not the answer, but Rabindranath Tagore's powerful poem, 'Where the mind is without fear' is the soundest advice. If PM Modi were to restrain some of his overzealous media advisers (unofficial censors), it would go a long way in restoring goodwill and confidence in his image as a benevolent, strong ruler. Indira learnt this lesson the hard way, with her ignominious Emergency defeat.

CHAKSHUROY



Delhi churns every five years. The general election results decide the political fate of incumbent Members of Parliament (MPs), and there are new public representatives and their ideas for the country. Besides its broader impact on

Parliament and governance, this churning has a personal dimension. Electoral loss means vacating the official housing that outgoing MPs lived in during their time in Parliament. For MPs who were ministers or had longer tenures in the national legisla-

tures, it means looking back at politics and their time in bungalows with spacious gardens, open verandahs and high ceilings. The incoming parliamentarians then start jostling for the most coveted housing in the heart of Delhi, these Lutyens bungalows.

The term 'Lutyens bungalow' is a misnomer. Contrary to popular belief, architect Edwin Lutyens did not design them. In the newly established capital city of Delhi, architects like Robert Russell, W H Nicholls, C G Blomfield, Walter Sykes George and Herbert Baker designed the residences of the colonial government officials. The allocation of these residences was straightforward — the higher an individual's position in the British government, the larger and closer their accommodation to the Viceroy's House. For instance, Teen Murti Bhawan, the residence of the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, was the largest and the closest.

During this time, the question of official housing for parliamentarians was not a significant issue. The Central Legislative Assembly, which started functioning in 1921, had 145 members and met for less than three months, splitting its time between Delhi and Shimla. Some assembly members also had official responsibilities in the colonial government and were entitled to government accommodation. The government also constructed smaller bungalows closer to Parliament House to house the other elected members. Some members, like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had the means to buy their bungalows. The first elected President (as the Speaker was known then) of the central assembly, Vithalbhai Patel, was allocated the bungalow on 20 Akbar Road as his official residence. And nearly 100 years later, it continues to be the official residence of the Speaker of Lok Sabha.

How Lutyens Delhi became a home for MPs



A multi-storey apartment for MPs in New Delhi. Praveen Khanna

In 1946, the legislature secretariat faced the problem of accommodating almost 300 Constituent Assembly members tasked with drafting the Constitution of India. The end of the Second World War provided an opportunity in this regard. A barracks complex close to Parliament House, which had housed American armed forces personnel was now vacant and available. The assembly secretariat requisitioned these barracks, and the building was renamed Constitution House.

The secretariat ensured each unit had telephones and members had access to European and Indian food. Most Constituent Assembly members stayed in these barracks during their time in Delhi. Members also had the option to stay in private hotels like the Imperial and Maidens, where room charges were higher than those of Constitution House. The barracks and its dining hall became the forum for discussion on constitutional matters, and active members like Hari Vishnu Kamath and Shibban Lal Saxena exchanged notes on their amendments with their colleagues. By the end of 1946, a club for members called the Constitution Club started near these barracks and became another venue for these discussions.

However, not all Constituent Assembly members resided in the Constitution House. Rajendra Prasad lived on Queen Victoria Road (now named after him),

Jawaharlal Nehru's official residence during his time in the Constituent Assembly was on York Road (now Motilal Nehru Road), Vallabhbhai Patel on Aurangzeb Road (now APJ Abdul Kalam Road), etc. Post-independence, the government constructed houses closer to the Parliament House complex to cater to 400 plus MPs.

In 1952, Parliament also established procedures for allocating houses to MPs and set up a House committee to deal with these matters. The government also divided the different types of bungalows in Delhi into pools, such as those for ministers and officials, Lok Sabha, and Rajya Sabha members. The two houses' committees now decided on the housing allocation for their members. They use criteria like the number of tenures in Parliament, previous positions like ministers in state or union, etc., to decide whether an MP gets a large bungalow or a smaller residence. The presiding officers of the two Houses can also intervene to get an MP an accommodation higher than their entitlement. Contrary to public opinion, most MPs now live in single and multi-storey apartment complexes closer to Parliament.

Over the years, MPs have used and abused their housing privileges. Using official accommodation also means that members had to vacate the premises when they left public office. In the beginning, members were quite prompt in doing so. When B R Ambedkar resigned as law minister, he quickly vacated his bungalow. However, with time, former members and ministers started occupying these premises for long periods after leaving office and paying minimal or no rent.

The charm of the Lutyens bungalow has enabled the government to dangle it as a carrot to political leaders to win their support. Over the years, public angst against housing privileges has grown, prompting Tavleen Singh to comment, "...more privileged Members of Parliament live at taxpayers' expense in a style to which they should never have been allowed to grow accustomed. No modern democratic country pays through its nose to accommodate its officials and elected representatives in homes that only billionaires can afford".

> The writer looks at issues through a legislative lens and works at PRS Legislative Research

When three isn't a crowd



THE PRACTICE of polygamy (more than two people consensually in a marriage) has made a tumultuous debut on Bigg Boss OTT 3, where popular YouTuber Armaan Malik is a contestant, along with his "wives" Payal Malik and Kritika Malik. "Behind every successful man there is a woman," quipped the host Anil Kapoor, "And sometimes there are two!" The women, onscreen at least, seemed to be on easy, good terms, and the nonplussed husband laughed alongside them. Of course, that they've decided to out their lifestyle on Bigg Boss suggests a canny plan of creating a stir; we know that on reality TV nothing succeeds like shock value.

Sure enough, outraged reactions on Twitter

at this "gross, illegal and filthy" trio, blamed the producers for lack of ideas that lead them to focus on a "trashy" ménage à trois for entertainment.

It's a thought that because many of the users tend to be older, the Twitter landscape no longer accurately reflects the headspace of India's urban 20 to 35-year-olds. Young singles, it turns out, are less enamoured of old fashioned commitment, which is increasingly seen as not a one-size-fits-all model. A new generation is aware they needn't follow the same drill, the beaten path of school, college, job and marriage, the bane of Indian existence so far. Online dating has opened up a range of possibilities that subtly challenge traditional, Indian middle class ambitions of owning a flat, a

car and having two children. A quick glance through Tinder India's

website reveals that in 2023 they introduced a new feature called "Relationship Types" to allow users to be specific about what they're looking for. Choices include 'monogamy', 'ethical non-monogamy', 'polyamory' and 'open to exploring'. A significantly large proportion, 41% of users, are open to or are seeking non-monogamous relationships and multiple romantic connections, simultaneously. So, the data suggests the Malik family arrangement isn't quite that unusual; there are plenty of people out there disregarding conventional goals and redefining their romantic futures based on their individual needs.

Is this a cultural shift unfolding (in no small part due to cynicism about the myth of marital bliss), or are the youth today enjoying themselves so much they prefer to prolong this extended, responsibility-free

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adolescence? Most likely, it's just a phase to notch up some life experience that will come in handy at the point of negotiating the complications within real relationships. The upside of financial security is having the freedom to choose, the only danger being dating apps are like a buffet at a five-star coffee shop: you want to try everything because it all looks sumptuous but nothing tastes especially good. The paradox of choice is that as options increase so does the difficulty of knowing what's best. But old habits die hard. In time, the majority will get around to marrying. At least, there is much more acceptance for the idea that there is no universally correct way to live. Pressures of timelines and labels have lost relevance. The Tinder tagline, 'It starts with a swipe', has captured imaginations and postponed the breathless hurtling towards the altar that Indians have always favoured.

Interestingly, stories about couples in unconventional arrangements are an enduring theme on OTT platforms currently: in Couple to Throuple (Jio Cinema) single people become the third wheel to couples after a messy and long-winded process. In Couples Therapy, intense conversations between real couples in crisis features a polyamorous trio whose home lives are exactly as difficult as anybody in a fraught marriage. It makes one wonder whether the unforgettable stories of romantic love, dreamy sagas like Doctor Zhivago and Gone with the Wind are somewhat dated; a thing of the past, to be consigned to history. Alas, the novel of love will have to change dramatically to reflect the postmodern world of

no-strings-attached and total freedom. The writer is director, Hutkay Films **FE SUNDAY** WWW.FINANCIALEXPRESS.COM

SUNDAY, JUNE 30, 2024



Sport thrives on underdog stories



Tushar Bhaduri

BIG STARS AND marquee names drive the sports industry, which is why they are the darlings of sports administrators. But the most memorable sports stories often are of underdogs prevailing over more fancied opponents, fighting against the odds.

The T20 World Cup and the ongoing European football championship have provided several heart-warming moments, even if they may not be to the wholehearted approval of the marketing personnel.

Afghanistan was widely acknowledged as a dangerous cricket team that could do some damage on their day if conditions were to their advantage. But in the Caribbean, they can rightly claim to have come of age having made their way to the semifinals, even toppling the all-conquering Australians. They can now genuinely claim to be the secondbest Asian team behind India, at least in the 20-over format, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh enduring a bit of a tough time of late.

In Rashid Khan, they have an inspirational leader who seems to rise to the big occasion. He had always been recognised as a quality leg-spinner but in the shortest format, a few hits to and over the boundary in the closing stages of an innings could make a vital difference.

Significantly, Afghanistan now also have a robust opening pair in Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran, who can hold their own against the best of bowling attacks. Young Azmatullah Omarzai showed what he is capable of at the 50-over World Cup and along with Mohammad Nabi and Gulbadin Naib, gave the team all-round depth.

For a team largely reliant on their spinners, it was heartening to see them getting wickets with the new ball through left-arm pacer Fazalfaq Farooqi and the feisty Naveen-ul-Haq. Finishing among the top four at a World Cup could just be the fillip for Afghanistan to take their game to the next level in terms of consistency and depth. For an emerging team such as them, it's vital that they seize the moment and not let the opportunity go by.

Cricket has been just a fringe sport in the United States over the decades, played largely by expatriates, but till the next big event is staged in the country or India comes to play a few games, it will be the US team that has to carry the baton to ensure the sport occupies a foothold in the market.

Towards that end, the performances of the co-hosts were an unexpected breath of fresh air, making it to the Super Eight stage at the expense of Pakistan. They were always expected to struggle there in the company of England, South Africa, and West Indies, but if the cricket administrators hope to have a few players in the team who do not have roots in traditional cricketing countries, they have to ensure that the sport is played at the grassroots, in schools and colleges.

Nepal and Scotland also caught the eye in the tournament and were close to scalping major teams in this competition. They have the advantage of close proximity to major cricket hubs, and it's important that they don't have to wait till they make it to their next big ICC



Underdogs bite back

International football has largely been dominated by the traditional powerhouses, but upsets are more likely in The Beautiful Game than in cricket, where individual class and quality can often make the difference. In football, a well-coached, disciplined, and committed team can frustrate an amalgamation of more talented individuals. That's what has been on display at the Euros.

Other than a handful of players, the Austrian squad doesn't boast of many household names outside their country. But they topped a group featuring France and the Netherlands, a big credit to manager Ralf Rangnick. They are fast starters and press the opposition high up the pitch. Their results in the group stage will ensure that they fear no team.

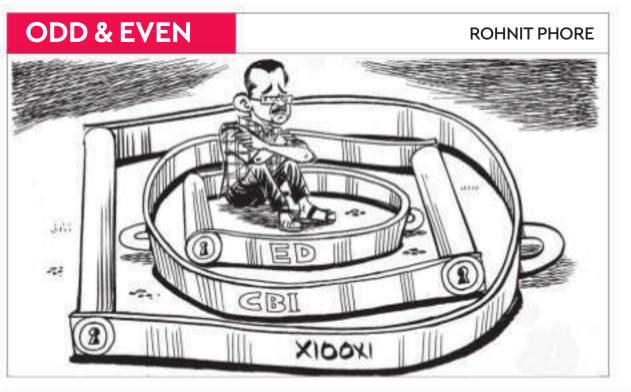
As far as feel-good stories, not much can top Georgia and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. The team is the lowestranked outfit at the Euros, but that didn't prevent them from beating Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal in their final group game to seal their passage to the knockout rounds. Kvaratskhelia scored in that game, a significant event in itself, as a picture from 2013 soon emerged showing the then 12-year-old in the same picture frame with Ronaldo when the Portuguese superstar, already acknowledged as an alltime great of the game, visited the Dinamo Tbilisi Academy in Georgia, where Kvaratskhelia developed his game in his formative years.

Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia when they were crowned European champions in 1976, but as a separate nation have had few team successes to celebrate — till they beat World No. 3 Belgium in their opening match of Euro 2024. Adrawagainst Romania got them to the next stage and a meeting with England. Slovenia, part of erstwhile Yugoslavia — a region that was a perennial source of high-quality football talent — emerged unbeaten from a group featuring high-profile England, Denmark, and Serbia.

These results attest to the competitive nature and all-round quality of European football and show that there's some substance to Kylian Mbappe's claim that winning the Euros is, in some respects, tougher than winning the World Cup. Upsets are more likely and even if there has been a lack of too many high-scoring games, there's no chance that any of the matches will be taken lightly by any fancied side.

Big guns dominate

In comparison, across the Atlantic, Brazil's goalless draw with Costa Rica in the Copa America was considered almost a disaster by supporters of the five-time world champions. That's because apart from Brazil and Argentina, none of the teams from that continent have been a major factor at recent World Cups and are expected to sail through their initial Copa games without much trouble. Argentina are the current world champions, but that was the first for South America in two decades. The match timings in the United States are not finalised keeping in mind Indian viewers — in contrast to the T20 World Cup — but even with Lionel Messi in the tournament, the lack of relative competitiveness is also a big factor making the Copa America a less attractive option than the Euros for casual football fans.





There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The **National Testing Agency** imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir...

THE BJP-LED GOVERNMENT under the Hon'ble Mr Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9, 2024. It did not have a happy start. Mr Modi had to share the head table with the leaders of the TDP and JD(U) and allot portfolios to them and other allies. In the election of the Speaker he had to go through the motions of consultation. Both were unusual experiences for Mr Modi in his 22 years as head of government.

Several setbacks

There have been several setbacks in the 20 days since the government was formed. The National Testing Agency imploded and the raging fire consumed the aspirations of lakhs of students. There was a horrific train accident in Jalpaiguri. Terrorist attacks continued in Jammu & Kashmir. The prices of tomato, potato and onion increased, year on year, by 39, 41 and 43%, respectively. The Sensex and Nifty soared to historic highs while the dollar-rupee exchange rate plunged to a historic low. Toll tax on highways was raised by 15%. In an apparent censure, Mr Mohan Bhagwat, the sarsanghchalak of RSS, admonished those who displayed "arrogance"; the BJP's leadership squirmed but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Local mutinies broke out in several state units of the BJP.

In the first session of Parliament, save the election of the Speaker and the President's Address, there was no substantive business. But even the routine business had its share of controversies. By convention, the member of Parliament who has been elected most times to the Lok Sabha would be nominated the *pro-tem* Speaker to preside over taking the oath by elected members. That person, undisputedly, was Mr K Suresh (Congress-Kerala) who has been elected for the 8th time, though with a break. However, the government nominated Mr B Mahtab (BJP-Odisha) for the office although he has been elected only 7 times (six times on the BJD ticket and, after he crossed over, the 7th time on the



The BJP-led government under PM Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9

wanted to signal that the results of the LS elections have not dented its supreme leader's way of doing things, namely, 'it's my way or highway'. Another answer could be that the controversy-courting Mr K. Rijiju, the new minister of parliamentary affairs, wanted to signal his arrival. The most plausible answer is that the nomination was a reward for Mr Mahtab's defection from the BJD to the BJP and to encourage more MPs to defect to the BJP.

Stale assurances

Although the election of the Speaker concluded on a sour note, the rest of the session need not have been affected. But the Hon'ble Speaker added more bitterness when he moved a resolution from the Chair excoriating the Congress for the imposition of Emergency 49 years ago (yes, 49 years, not 50)! Next, Parliament may'teach' other history lessons by condemning Pakistan for the invasion of Kashmir in 1947, China for the war in 1962 and the United States for sending an aircraft carrier to intimidate India in 1971. The resolution was an unwarranted provocation.

The President's Address to the joint session of both Houses was an opportunity to restore civility after false starts, but the opportunity was missed. The speech could have recognised the changed com-

ity by 32 seats, that the prime minister was the *primus inter pares* of a *coalition* government and that, after 10 years, there would be a Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Disappointingly, the President's Address made no reference to the altered circumstances. The speech was a litany of claims made

by the BJP before and during the elections. The claims were rebuffed by the vast majority of the people. The new government is not a BJP government but a *coali*tion government. The BJP has refused to acknowledge the bittersweet fact and the President echoed that view. The word *'coalition'*, did not occur in the speech. Other words that were conspicuous by their absence included 'consensus', 'inflation', and 'parliamentary committee'. There were references to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes but all others — especially the minority communities — were clubbed in the catch-all phrase 'social and religious groups'. There was no reference to the tragedy of Manipur. As a small mercy there was no reference to 'Agniveer' or *'Uniform Civil Code'*. Finally, India is no longera Vishwa Guru, and is content to be a *Vishwa Bandhu*!

More of the sameness

Apparently, in the view of the BJP, nothing has changed, not even the mood of the people.

that the stronger the government, the

ministers, the key ministers hold the same portfolios, the same Speaker, the same principal secretary to the prime minister, the same National Security Adviser, the same chief of the Intelligence Bureau, the same government law officers, and many others remaining in the same positions. Besides, I am told that the social media is full of the same paid trolls who are semi-literate, diversionary, proficient in the science of scatology, and obvious losers. That, I am afraid, is con-

> despite the verdict of the people! In the run-up to the Budget, the top concerns of the people remain (1) unemployment and (2) inflation. According to,the CSDS'post-poll survey (The Hindu dated June 25, 2024), 'price rise/inflation' and 'growing unemployment' got 29% and 27% as the most 'disliked' work of the BJP government. On addressing the top two concerns, the formation of the Cabinet and the Presi dent's Address let down the people. Will the Budget for 2024-25, due in July, awaken the Modi government? Parliamentary etiquette requires that we keep our fingers crossed.

clusive proof that nothing has changed

Hence, it is the same Cabinet, the same

FILE PHOTO: PTI



Website: pchidambaram.in Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

INSIDE TRACK COOMI KAPOOR

Emergency reruns

LASTWEEK, THE anniversary of Indira Gandhi's draconian Emergency was commemorated in Parliament. But the outpouring of condemnation from the ruling party seemed more about scoring political points than genuine concern over the real issues involved. Having written a book on Emergency, I am often asked about my first-hand experiences. I always find it ironic that many of those who commemorate June 26 and regret the horrors of suppression of the media and fundamental rights, seem oblivious that a dark cloud still hangs over freedom of expression and liberty even today. For instance, in the last Lok Sabha session, parliamentary correspondents were never so ruthlessly restricted, except during the Emergency. The difference today is in the style of operation, but not the basic effect.

All rulers want to control the narrative. Indira, despite her liberal upbringing, used sledgehammer

tactics, announcing upfront that she was suspending fundamental rights and introducing censorship. Subsequent governments have resorted to less in-your-face methods. Strong-arming individuals and groups funding the media, unjustly applying laws concerning terrorism and corruption, raiding media offices and arresting scribes without following due process, denying visas to foreign journalists, using the CBI and the ED to settle scores are some of the more draconian methods of media regulation of late. But control of news emanation can even be effected by simply shutting out legitimate sources of information. Scribes who don't toe the line are cut out from the loop of newsgathering, like background briefings, interviews, and entry to Parliament and government offices. The media starts introspecting less than it should on official claims. How, for instance, did so many scribes get it wrong in the recent poll results?

Strong govts vs weak ones

Politicians tend to lump the media into two categories: those who are with them and those who are against them. Unhappily, the middle ground of objectivity in journalism has practically disappeared. I personally believe the thumb rule generally is

more overbearing it is, both in state or at the Centre. The media is far more free and fearless under unstable governments. PM Modi and Indira were similar in terms of mass appeal, unilateralism and a deep suspicion of newsgathers. Some may question my theory, citing the example of Rajiv Gandhi who, despite his huge majority, was unable to suppress the Bofors exposé that led to the fall of his government. But that may have been less due to lack of intent than because his media controllers were hamhanded and some newspapers remained defiant. Also, a hostile President Zail Singh was in the Rashtrapati Bhavan for much of his tenure. I recall first-hand back in 1989, when a shell-shocked Vijaypat Singhania was ordered by a Rajiv aide to shut down his newly started newspaper, Indian Post, where I worked then, because a damaging lead story had appeared against one of the PM's close friends. Earlier, then editorin-chief Vinod Mehta was provided a list of people who were not to be written about negatively, which he shared sheepishly with me.

Past governments far more tolerant of a free press included those of Morarji Desai and Deve Gowda. But perhaps their *laissez-faire* attitude was more because they lacked a clear majority and many from within their own ranks were plotting their downfall.

New Delhi

Can't control the narrative

Despite total censorship, with a few courageous exceptions like *The Indian Express*, Indira lost the 1977 elections because news of her regime's excesses spread throughout the country by word of mouth. In 2024, the age of social media, aspersions were cast on 'godi' and *'pappu'* scribes in traditional media, but the most effective counter to government propaganda may have came from irreverent YouTubers and influencers, curiously some of whom started out as travel writers and bodybuilders. The new entrants attracted millions of viewers. And thousands of aspiring writers dashed off disrespectful WhatsApp campaign messages that went viral. The Modi 3.0 regime should learn from Emergency that you cannot control the narrative, particularly in the 21st century. Devising new IT laws to monitor the Internet and earning international opprobrium is definitely not the answer, but Rabindranath Tagore's powerful poem, 'Where the mind is without fear' is the soundest advice. If PM Modi were to restrain some of his overzealous media advisers (unofficial censors), it would go a long way in restoring goodwill and confidence in his image as a benevolent, strong ruler. Indira learnt this lesson the hard way, with her ignominious Emergency defeat.

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The Democrats say government will make you smarter, taller, richer... The Republicans say government doesn't work, and then they get elected and prove it

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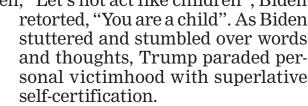
P J O'Rourke

TRUMP-BIDEN **GERONTOCRACY AND** THE WORLD ORDER

HEY say age is just a number. Not if you are in politics. This April, at a conference in Washington, Gordon Brown, the former chancellor and prime minister of the UK now in his early seventies, introduced himself as someone too old for European politics and too young to be an American politician. The point made only half in jest triggered some laughs and the hiss of resigned sighs.

On Thursday, the sighs of dismay were amplified as they resonated across the United States and the world as folks watched an 81-year-old in a face-off with a 78-year-old in the first presidential debate. The Thursday hustle between Joseph Robinette Biden and Donald J Trump was a validation of the worst fears— America's future and that of the world order was now hostage to oneupmanship in the race of geriatrics.

The 90-minute spectacle of rant and ramble was scarcely a debate and hardly presidential. Juvenile jibes chased coarse charges of the unverifiable variety. Try this for flavour. At one point Trump chided Biden, "Let's not act like children"; Biden



Fact-checkers had a field day—apparently, Trump had 30 lies while Biden had nine. Each called the other the worst president. Trump coined a new epithet as he called Biden a "bad Palestinian". Biden paid in kind, saying Trump had the morals of an "alley cat". Issues worrying folks, ranging from inflation and immigration to abortion, from tariffs to taxes, got cluster-bombed by puerile name-calling. Trump was coherent in marketing his claims and

lies, while Biden was incoherent in presenting his facts. Post the debate, the spin doctors went into overdrive. Trump Republicans rushed to declare victory since the ex-president didn't go rogue. Biden found comfort in orchestrated applause at an event where the banners said, "Let's go, Joe." Kamala Harris stepped in to argue the contest was about 40 months, and not 90 minutes. The calls asking Biden to step down have been coun-

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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tered—for now—by Barack Obama, but the angst is real. It was verily an exposition of the state of American politics reflected in candidature. Trump faces multiple cases, has been impeached and was recently convicted in a felony case. Biden carries the legacy of u-turns and must bear the burden of his son Hunter Biden's actions and recent conviction. It is true that both Trump and Biden are being chosen by the process. It is equally true that this is a rematch people do not want—an ABC poll shows 59 percent of voters believe both Biden and Trump are too old, and a Pew report states nearly half the voters would like the candidates on the ballot changed.

Yet, people in the world's oldest democracy must suffer a nochoice race. The fact that neither candidate moved the needle on undecided voters underlines the pathos. In one of his last interviews, Henry Kissinger worried about the state of American politics and the extreme theory of 'America first'. The choice of contestants is worrying allies in Europe and Asia. Biden's brand of protectionism, the stalling of Nippon Steel's takeover of US Steel and Trump's threat to impose tariffs on all imports are manifestations.

History is witness to the split-screen American hypocrisy in the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and in the rushed abandonment of Afghanistan. In February 2021, Biden declared, "America is back"—but US influence is waning. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, an Israeli prime minister has ignored and defied a US president and leaders in West Asia shied away from meeting Biden in Jordan. The 'what if' question about China's move on

Taiwan is blowing in the wind. The US has conveniently switched from its evangelism of the power of example, quoted by Biden in his November 2020 acceptance speech, to practise the example of power. Whether it is through tariffs or treaties, allies in the western hemisphere are crafting policies to Trump-proof their economies and geopolitics. Elsewhere, those wedded to the idea of strategic autonomy—for instance, India and some other emerging economies—

would no doubt seek to double down on maintaining neutrality. Soon after the debate, a news anchor asked in dismay, "How did we get here?" The question morphs into viral memes on the other side of the world. Minutes after the debate, X owner Elon Musk tweeted, "Tonight was a clear victory ... for memes." One of the memes had Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un laughing on a conference call. In the real world, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman in the Kremlin, mocked with a cryptic line, "Putin didn't set his alarm to watch the debate." Farther east,

the Chinese media found "the debate was very entertaining". There is no question the rules-based world order is unravelling. China and Russia, collaborators in the propagation of a competing new world order, were front and centre in the questions on geopolitics. Did candidates Trump and Biden debate and deliver answers on geopolitics, on the usage of disruptive technology, on the climate crisis? The answer is a deafening NO.

Neither the choice of candidates nor the debate served as a beacon of inspiration for the concept of democracy. The question American people and politicians must ponder over is if this is the best the United States of America can present for what they proudly define as 'leader of the free world'!

THE RISE, FALL AND RISE OF RAGA



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

picture is worth a thousand words. A photograph is worth a powerful phrase: rigorous reinvention. The snapshot in question is a *mise-en-scene* of political theatre: the new Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi

shaking hands with Speaker Om Birla, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju stand behind him. Modi and Rahul together had escorted Birla to the Speaker's chair—a convention followed since 1950, though there is nothing conventional about either leader.

So, do the tea leaves foretell the return of Gandhi? It took over two decades in politics for Rahul to make it to the front bench of the opposition. The Bharat Jodo Yatra tee and chinos were gone. Rahul wore a formal, white kurtapyjama on Day One of the new Lok Sabha. DNA matters—father Rajiv Gandhi and mother Sonia were also LoPs, the latter for almost five years during the Vajpayee government.

Rahul will have a full entourage and Cabinet minister's rank. He gets a fullyfurnished office in the parliament building. He will be assisted by a phalanx of personal staff including a private secretary. He will be on numerous statutory panels that select the Lok Pal, CBI director, vigilance commissioners, information commissioners and election commissioners. He has the privilege of initiating any debate and responding to the PM's speeches. Like his mother did in 2004, maybe he listened to his inner voice by accepting and not rejecting: "It doesn't matter how much wisdom you have. If you don't have a position, you have nothing. That's the tragedy of India."

THE NEW SUNDAY EXPRESS

Once, this entitled dynast treated parliament as a bagatelle—over two decades of being an MP, just 99 questions, participation in 26 debates, and an attendance record thinner than his own party MPs'. Rahul has mostly been AWOL at budget sessions since 2014, limiting himself to sudden dramatic Zorro-like appearances. The Congress failed to KO Modi because RaGa's nominees were ineffective. This time, the dynasty boy must become his party's buoy in the turbulent waters of parliamentary debate to take on Modi's guile. Will Rahul, like Alaric, become a hero of his people, or a royal wastrel like Bonnie Prince Charlie? Rahul's attitude and aptitude will determine his altitude in politics.

The Congress can't grab power on its own. It has not won

a simple majority since 1984, when Rajiv won 404 seats. After wandering in the political desert for almost eight years, the Congress defeated the BJP in 2004. The credit goes to Sonia Gandhi; again in 2009, when she led her party to cross the 200 mark. Year 2014 was its Waterloo: just 44 MPs. In 2019, it was

up a few notches at 52. Modi decisively decimated the Congress by targeting the Gandhis more than their party.

Rahul must invent a toolkit for the next Gandhi era. He needs the skills of Arjuna and the wiles of Shakuni to bring the bunch of ideologically disparate and ambitious allies to support his cause. He has the advantage of age and social acceptability. All INDIA leaders are age-wise, socially and economically compatible. Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yaday, Supriya Sule, Kanimozhi, Omar Abdullah, Abhishek Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal and Aaditya Thackerey are Rahul's natural allies. DMK and RJD have declared Rahul their PM choice. However, each has their own turf to protect

and expand. Rahul's advantage is that the Congress doesn't have much at stake in many states. He can afford to accept their dominance and make a tactical retreat in the short run. Sonia brought the Congress to power in 2004 by reconciling with former critic Sharad Pawar and giving plum portfolios to UPA allies. There is a lesson there.

Rahul's major political perturbation will be to blunt Modi's mettle in the Lok Sabha. Rahul isn't a forceful speaker. He must master the art of finding faults in Modipolitics, Modinomics and Modiplomacy. Modi has run both state and central governments like an unchallenged monarch. His popularity prevents him from diluting his mantra. Since he has to pander to the avaricious demands of allies, he may either succumb or falter. Rahul can grab that

> crucial moment and can beat Modi only with substance, not style. As the LoP, he would have to meet Modi word for

word, argument by argument, with a narrative that transcends rhetoric. He will need a mainframe of expert researchers and advisors to brief him on economics, politics, government

management, defence, foreign relations and the environment. He needs spin doctors and oration to teach him how to effectively deliver counter-narratives. Is Rahul's untested ideology in sync with grandfather Nehru's? Going by his parliament questions and public speeches on social sectors, it seems he has inherited the Fabian socialist gene. The 'Two Indias' trope is Rahul's idea borrowed from Nehru. Modi's strength comprises mesmerising slogans, big numbers and vertiginous targets. Since both of them would be in a confrontationist mood on a daily basis, Rahul must acquire new political and elocution skills to confront Modi on his own ground.

Every Gandhi built their own new

Congress. Nehru inherited a party overawed by his popular persona and Mahatma Gandhi's benediction. Indira split the Congress and created a Praetorian guard wearing dry-cleaned homespun; some of them became chief ministers and Union ministers. She wasn't eventually insecure because she was bigger than the party. Now Sonia has bequeathed it to her children.

"Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of Bharata," writes Nehru in The Discovery of *India*. The Gandhi family's discovery of India is continuity through tragedy: Rajiv's premiership was the by-product of Sanjay's death followed by his mother's. As the Bofors scandal escalated, Rajiv favourites moved to the BJP, which enticed them with cabinet berths and MP seats. Ironically, most of them were siblings of Congress leaders, and like Rahul, were to the manor born. With Sonia's tactical retreat, Rahul must keep the Congress together and turn it into a battle-ready army. Unlike the BJP, whose mid-level state leadership is still learning the ropes, many Congress leaders are young or just middle-aged, while a few are only in their early sixties. A combo of Sachin Pilot, Revanth Reddy, D K Shivakumar, Gaurav Gogoi, Nana Patole, Deepender Hooda, Shashi Tharoor, Bhupesh Baghel *et al* can individually and collectively deliver electoral success in their regions.

In January 2013, Rahul told reporters in Jaipur: "[The Congress] is a funny party. It is the largest political organisation in the world, but perhaps does not have a single rule or regulation. We create new rules every two minutes and then dump them. Nobody knows the rules in the party." There is only one rule Rahul must follow: channel the lost Gandhi magic. He is just a step away from becoming the next prime minister. His transformation from Pappu to LoP became credible because of his two yatras. Gandhi 5.0 must remember that his cannot be a Congress of the Gandhis, by the Gandhis, for the Gandhis anymore. It has survived so far. But if the Congress has to thrive as well, it must become a Congress of the people.

A MUNDANE WISHLIST FOR MODI 3.0



OPINION ANURADHA GOYAL Author and founder of IndiTales.com Follow her on X @anuradhagoyal



ITH the cacophony of the elections settled, the Modi-led NDA has started its third stint and second decade in power. Let me take this opportunity to ask for some mundane things that seem to have been missed in plain

sight, but would give instant relief to a large section of common Indians.

Make all government websites more secure with an updated security certificate. As a small website owner, I ensure that my site is safe for my visitors even when there is no data collection or financial transactions done. GoI websites are responsible for providing first-hand, authentic information; they also collect crucial and sensitive data. Many of the websites are prone to easy hacks. It seems no one looked into it, else it is something that can be fixed in a day.

Stop official communication from Gmail or other free service providers. Today, most official communication is from personal or so-called 'official Gmail' IDs, including some from army

officers. This can be dangerous and is prone to scams. When I receive such emails, I am not sure if they are authentic. Two, the content is available to a third party in another country to be scraped and used in any fashion.

Use technology to make uploads of Form 26AS or similar documents on the income tax portal instant. The moment a company deducts TDS, it should be uploaded on the IT portal. So much productivity is lost in chasing the upload of this data every summer. It is a primary reason that delays the filing of IT returns. Even the biggest banks are guilty of lastminute uploads. I understand it is more because the authorities allow time, and we are a last-minute nation. We thrive in the chaos created. At least, put a penalty for late uploads or incentivise timely uploads so that people have a reason to act in time. While on income tax, remove double taxation on dividends; it will relieve the small tax payer.

Customer service calls must be trackable and accountable. Today, every such call takes data from customers with no trackability. We do not know who we are speaking to; they can disconnect the call or put you on hold forever. Make it mandatory to take complaints on email, so that there is traceability. Make it easy for the customers to be treated like customers and not lemons that are squeezed and then forgotten.

Strengthen the train network for short-distance travels and deincentivise short-distance flights. This is good for the economy, as well as the ecology.

On a war footing, work on reducing

the pre- and post-flight times spent at airport, including the time spent in travelling to and from the airports. It is good to have swanky airports, but if the buffer time on both sides for a 2-hour flight is 6-8 hours on average, the flights lose their utility. It is also an inconvenience for elderly and unwell people to go through so many steps at airports.

Make some simple canteen like food mandatory at airports. With so many people travelling, you cannot treat airports as luxury-only facilities for the



Some simple things that affect a large section of citizens need attention. They range from making government sites more secure and reviving libraries, to incentivising short-distance travel by train and making airports

more efficient

elite. When we take pride in the fact that those wearing chappals can also fly, we must also cater to their basic needs during the time spent at airports.

I would like to see flexible fares go away, and fixed fares bringing predictability for travellers as well as airlines. At least put an upper limit to the fares for each sector. Stop convenience fees charged for work a customer ends up doing, which the airline staff once did. Do not extend this menace to the railways.

Work on preventive wellness more than building hospitals. It may sound counter-intuitive for the pharma industry, but I think it is time we call it a wellness industry than a disease industry. It is time we incentivised preventive medicine and healthy lifestyles, so that fewer hospitals are required.

I see a lot of focus on the food processing industry, with the argument that it will enhance farmer incomes. But can we push both the Fit India movement and an increased consumption of processed food? Can we focus on local production and local consumption similar to the 'Vocal for local' initiative?

As a bibliophile, can we ask for reviving the state, city, district libraries as vibrant public places? We can also fill them with books that are relevant, that the area's populace wants in their libraries. We need to bring back the days of borrowing libraries and increase read-

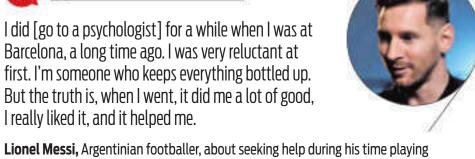
ing in the age of ubiquitous screens. Make roads walkable. It will help reduce traffic and parking woes, especially in urban areas, if people can walk at least a 1-km radius around their homes and offices.

I want to say 'reduce corruption', but one must first acknowledge the problem. It might reduce the lure of sarkari naukri (government employment) and push entrepreneurship.

Finally, as a Bengaluru resident, may I throw a challenge that the Namma Metro's Blue Line be functioning before elections are back in 2028 and 2029? The pace at which the work is happening, it might still be a dreamy promise even then.

QUOTE CORNER

Barcelona, a long time ago. I was very reluctant at first. I'm someone who keeps everything bottled up. But the truth is, when I went, it did me a lot of good, I really liked it, and it helped me.



for Barcelona FC (2004–21)

Mummy kehti hai 'greens khao'... Sun rahe ho na, Team India? (Mom says eat your greens... Are you listening, Team India?)

Delhi Police, on its official X.com handle, referring to the T20 World Cup final with South Africa, a team that wears green jerseys

I've written this moment down and wished for it and dreamt it and worked so hard... Little me would just be beside herself right now.

Dua Lipa, 28-year-old British singer of Albanian origin, at her headline show in the Glastonbury festival, UK, where she voiced support for the Palestinian cause MAILBAU letters@newindianexpress.com **Mocking diversity**

MALIDAC EVENESTE

Ref: Micro racism 2.0 (Jun 29). While youngsters from southern states used to migrate to the north mainly seeking office jobs, it is an irony that the current mass migration from the so-called 'heartland' is mostly for menial jobs. Lampooning the language and culture of others is not limited to northerners. Their southern counterparts are not far behind in laughing at the language and habits of their neighbouring states. It's perhaps an inherent trait of our diversity.

A Kasu, Nemmara

Newfound love

Not many may remember that there was talk of changing the Constitution during the Emergency 50 years ago. Those indulging in this talk were Congressmen, including the then heir apparent, Sanjay Gandhi. Now we find a newfound love for the Constitution among the same people. The Constitution than 100 amendments. Whether these amendments should be considered as 'changing' it is nothing more than indulging in semantics.

is a dynamic document and has gone through more

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Defining vegetarianism

I am based in Washington D C and happened to read C P Surendran's article, 'Debating empathy at the dining table', at a public library in Visakhapatnam on a week's visit. It made my day and I shared it with friends. I liked how it took a humane approach to the question, not viewing it through the lens of caste or creed. Defining vegetarianism as that which produces the greatest pleasure with the least pain is a nice way to frame the topic.

Mohan P K, email

Sengol significance

That the Sengol, a golden sceptre symbolising monarchy, is placed in parliament is significant for the BJP, as its ultimate goal is to achieve a 'One Party, One Leader' system. It is incongruent in a democratic republic. A museum is its right place. The Sengol is also a symbol of righteousness in ruling. A Pandian king died the moment he realised his mistake of having killed an innocent Kovalan. Do we have such great personalities in the House?

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

Probe NTA

Ref: Opposition stalls parliament to make NEET point (Jun 29). It is clear that the National Testing Agency has failed miserably in conducting and upholding the integrity of the prestigious national medical entrance exam. The entire system is mired in corruption and the rot runs deep. It is the duty and right of the opposition to press for a proper investigation. The government's line that the NEET discussion should follow protocols is out of sync with the gravity of the situation.

Biju C Mathew, Thonnakkal

Keep NEET

The government should not dismantle NEET. Reform its terms and conditions so that students can appear for the exam without fear and doubt. But do not hand over the exam to state governments. Aspirants will have to face lot of inconvenience. And the standard of education will go in the drain. Jayamani Atta, Chennai

Principal lessons

Ref: CBI arrests 2 from Jharkhand, says origin of leak established (Jun 29). After the NEET-UG paper leak, the CBI's probe of the likely role of a school principal and vice-principal along with an infamous gang exposes the rot in the education system. It underscores the need to impart moral lessons to schools principals in the first place.

Palicherlu V Prakash. Mumbai

Caste aside

With the leaders of two major castes in Karnataka commenting on the CM. the caste cauldron seems to be on boil again. The country has achieved stupendous progress, but is unable to unshackle itself from the clutches of a deep-rooted caste system. R Sriramprasad, email

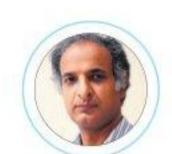
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REFLECTIONS

Dark spots on whites



GOOD SPORT ROHIT MAHAJAN

ANISH MISHRA, his yellowing cricket whites, grimy gloves, pads and bats lying by, grins at you — but no one grins back at him because he's dead. The photograph suggests that he may have been happy once, but he chose the death considered most disgraceful — death by his own hand. He had found the answer to the eternal question — to be or not to be. He wasn't going to be thwarted, so the night he hanged himself, he dragged the bed across

the door in his tiny second-floor room in the

small house he shared with over 20 family

members in Lucknow. Researching stories of

cricketers who'd died by their own hand 15

years ago, Mishra's absolute determination

to defy help struck one as particularly sad -

he didn't want to be saved.

Mishra, you'd never know, was a cricketer who played for Uttar Pradesh. Cricket didn't kill him— he killed himself because of marital discord and poverty and difficulties at work. But cricket defined his life, and he was scarred as a failure, for his talent was good enough for

only a fourth-class job in the Railways.

Did David Johnson, who played two Test
matches for India, think that he'd failed in
cricket? Did he reach the conclusion that
Mishra did in Lucknow? Johnson died after
falling from the balcony of his fourth-floor

apartment in Bengaluru. Police suspect it was suicide; the trigger seems to have been depression, debt, hallucinations, loss of income — but underlying it all seems to be frustration at being a failed cricketer. "Sometimes, he wished he could have played, you know... more... so that we could have had a better life," his wife said. When he 'fell' to his death, Johnson's wife had to borrow money for the ambulance; he had dreamt of a life of a star cricketer and saw genteel penury at the end — own apartment, a pension from BCCI, but with no money at all.

Uttar Pradesh's Obaid Kamal, who came close toplaying for India, swears he was haunted by a 'chudail' when he had fallen into particularly hard times — one night in Chandigarh, outside his window was an old woman: "She was glancing at me, like a mother busy with chores glances at her sleeping child."

Massive gulf between superstars and those who fail is a distinct Indian trait

In his worst days, Kamal contemplated suicide; he was saved by the words his mother had uttered when he was a child — "suicide is 'hamam', a sin that won't be forgiven".

The underbelly of cricket is dirty. Corruption and favouritism mar selection, and players can be destroyed by an antagonistic coach or captain — a batsman can be ordered to play slowly or to attack wildly, and this could later be held against him; a bowler might not be given the ball when the conditions are helpful, and asked to bowl when the batsmen are set — and failure would be held against him. Kamal, for instance, said that when he played for Punjab

and lost the confidence of his coach/captain, he was asked to bowl only from the end which didn't offer pacers such as him assistance. Every cricketer knows there's grave injustice in cricket, every failed cricketer carries a heavy burden of injustice on his soul.

Kamal or Mishra would have given their left hands to play just one Test — but one always wants more, doesn't one? Johnson played two Tests and that's far too few, it's unjust that a player who's deemed good enough to play for the country is dropped after just one match, as Johnsonwas, and that was an abiding complaint.

British writer David Frith, whose seminal book 'The Silence of the Heart' details death by suicide of over 150 cricketers, says that cricket "is unique in its propensity to take over a man's psyche" and, thus, cricketers are more vulnerable to depression than other sportspersons. He writes that the suicide rate among British cricketers is nearly double the national average. Winter gloom could be a factor in Britain; the massive gulf between the superstars and those who've failed is an Indian trait.

Due to the stigma and secrecy, it's difficult to accurately compute figures of Indian cricketers who died by suicide, but many famous ones have said they did contemplate it men such as Parveen Kumar, Mohammed Shami, Robin Uthappa, to name three.

Dodda Ganesh, Johnson's teammate for Karnataka, hit rock bottom after being dropped from the Indian team. Four years ago, he wrote: "I was dropped in 1997. And I did not step out of my house for a month... For me, it was the end of the world... It was a dagger through my heart to see bowlers who'd picked much lesser wickets than me being rewarded with the Indian cap." To those battling depression, Ganesh had some advice: "Live for your loved ones." Mishra and Johnson may have reached the conclusion they had none.

The two pillars of McLeodganj



RAAJA BHASIN

HERE have been repeated moments across history when people have had to leave their homes as a result of manmade scourge. Here is the result of one such. This, by fate, circumstance and event, has also bestowed an aura of sanctity upon a crowded hill.

Long before McLeodganj (Upper Dharamsala) became a smart city and a trash-maker's paradise, NN Nowro-jee had a shop at the entrance to the bazaar. Even in the late 1990s, the shop lived in a world of its own and its owner, the affable Nauzer Nowrojee, carefully preserved a legacy that went back to the mid-19th century.

Placards of JB Mangaram's biscuits, cutouts endorsing Vimto, tins of Craven A cigarettes, all belonged to a time long gone. It was at the end of the Anglo-Sikh wars in 1849 that the lands that were to become the twin towns of Dharamsala and McLeodganj were absorbed into British India. When the Great Uprising of 1857 had come to an end, Nowrojee's ancestors moved up from Punjab to McLeodganj in 1860, with the British army. As the place steadily grew, for close to a century, the establishment of Nowrojee and Son were the primary purveyors of a variety of goods to the residents of the area.

NN Nowrojee belonged to the fifth generation. With the end of the colonial rule in 1947, many of the area's European residents emigrated and most left the keys of their properties with the man they had grown to trust and like. For a couple of decades, Nowrojee kept watch over the bungalows in his charge and was often called the 'unofficial custodian of McLeodganj'.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was compelled to leave Tibet and came to India, he began searching for a place for himself and his people. Seeing something fall into place, Nowrojee supposedly wrote to the Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, and suggested that the Dalai Lama take a look at McLeodganj. Soon after he had sent off that fateful missive, three large Landmaster cars drove up to his shop — and this was a time when a solitary vehicle in McLeodganj would have attracted attention. The men in the cars are believed to have gone up to the now rather nervous Nowrojee. "Did you write a letter to the Prime

Minister?" asked one.
"Yes," replied Nowrojee, as he

recounted to me in 1996. "We are from the government," said

one of the now very-obvious sleuths.

They took a look at McLeodganj and returned to wherever they had come from. Then, the Dalai Lama himself came to inspect the place in 1960 and approved it. His Holiness, thus, became perhaps the most prominent of dignitaries that have made Himachal Pradesh their home.

Next came the issue of security. On July 11, 1963, a comprehensive set of standing orders was prepared by the SP of Kangra. In the normal course of things, a set of these orders was sent to the DIG, CID, of Punjab, as Kangra was still a part of that state.

These standing orders noted that His Holiness had taken up residence at a house known as 'Swarg Ashram' and noted: "In view of the widespread sympathy for the Dalai Lama and the present strained Sino-Indian relations, it is necessary that proper security arrangements for the person of the Dalai Lama should be made."

The basis for these standing orders were the 'Rules and Instructions for the Protection of the Dalai Lama when in Residence and on Tour' that had been formulated by the Intelligence Bureau and had been received by the SP, Kangra, in 1960.

when the Dalai Lama came to India, NN Nowrojee supposedly wrote to PM Nehru and offered the vast estates he was looking after

A noting by hand on the file observed that rooms to be occupied by His Holiness were to be searched by the Private Secretary or by the Confidential Secretary. All mail and parcels were to pass through the hands of the Security Officer before being handed over to the Private Secretary -- who, in turn, was expected to open these before handing them over to His Holiness. A special note was to be made of persons who were granted interviews with His Holiness. Not unexpectedly, the officer was told to be extremely vigilant as once a visitor passed the Enquiry Office, he could move unchallenged right up to the security cordon. An unarmed constable was detailed on duty both day and night by this point.

This section of the file ended with the observation that "it is particularly necessary for the Enquiry Office staff to be polite, courteous and tactful in their dealings with visitors". It added that they should abstain from entering into an argument that could lead to an embarrassing situation. As 'Swarg Ashram' was surrounded on all sides by woods, for safety, an outer cordon was marked on the ground and was divided into four patrolling beats, each with an armed constable.

Today, the issues of security and the world's political contours are somewhat different. Yet, as the years have gone by, in more ways than one, Himachal and McLeodganj have come to be closely associated with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The man who was supposedly responsible for bringing him there, Nauzer Nowrojee, passed away on October 24, 2000. The shop has also gone. His Holiness, the second pillar, constantly challenged yet gently firm, unwaveringly wise and compassionate, still stands tall.

Selecting the first Army Chief



LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)

T the end of World War II, there emerged approximately 20 "native" Indian Army officers in their forties, most of whom had led infantry battalions and a few tank squadrons, with utmost courage and distinction, over seething battlefields in Europe, Africa, Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia. All of them except one were scions of elite feudal families or progeny of royalty, who were granted King's Commission on graduation from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, or the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, both in the UK. But the lone and in time the towering exception was a child of destiny, born into a modest but proud household in the erstwhile Coorg state (present-day Kodagu), who never left the shores of India till drafted for service in WW-II.

On the night of his birth (January 28, 1899), his maternal grandmother had in a dream "heard the sound of horses' thundering hooves and drum beats... She was convinced that the newborn was destined to be a great military man". Be that as it may, the child, KM Cariappa, bornand schooled at Mercara village in Coorg, next joined the Presidency College, Madras. Soon after, he qualified for the first batch of teenagers to enter the Temporary School for Indian Cadets' at Daly College, Indore, in 1918. On grant of Commission as 2nd

Lieutenant in the Indian Army on December 1, 1919, he aggregated two decades of baptism under fire across the wayward North West Frontier. Concomitantly, he also burnt the midnight oil to become the first Indian to graduate from the Defence Service Staff College, Quetta, and by April 1942, on promotion to Lt Colonel, was placed in command of 17 Rajput battalion, becoming yet again the first Indian to attain that benchmark!

During the course of WW-II, he served in the operational logistics branch, first at HQ 10 Indian Infantry Division in Iraq and Syria, and later at HQ 26 Indian Infantry Division in General Slim's 14th Army in Burma. It was in this latter appointment that he imbibed the spirit of the 14th Army's dictum: 'We shall tackle the impossible immediately, the difficult later!' In recognition of his services, Lt Col Cariappawas Mentioned-in-Dispatches thrice, followed by the Order of the British Empire on April 5, 1945.

In the run-up to Independence, when it was decided to expose one Army officer and three bureaucrats to hone the politico-military duality paradigm of the higher defence stratagem at Imperial Defence College, London, in 1946, here again Brigadier Cariappa was the chosen one. He was to put that learning to good use as shortly the subcontinent was driven into another savage war over J&K in October 1947.

As Pakistan had the advantage of the first mover, the Indian Army's initial response was found inadequate to the challenge and the fall of Ladakh seemed imminent. Maj Gen Cariappa, who at the time was overseeing the Army Reorganisation Committee, was promoted to command the newly created Western Command in January 1948 (once again, the first for an Indian!), charged to conduct the J&K war. As was the General's wont, the very next day he was at Srinagar, providing inspiring leadership with a resolve that "we will not allow Gen Tariq to capture Leh. We have got to stop this and we will stop it... we have decided to take tanks up the Zoji Pass, a kind of operation which has never been done before." The rest is history.

The end of the J&K war on January 5, 1949, provided the much-anticipated moment for the Army to have an Indian C-in-C as the tenure of Gen FR Roy Bucher was about to terminate. The choice appeared obvious as among the distinguished pack of about 20, Lt Gen Cariappa stood out. Yet, "there were two other names that were proposed. The first was Lt Gen Maharaj Rajendrasinhji of the Cavalry, brother of the Jam Sahib of Nawanagar. The second was Lt Gen Thakur Nathu Singh of Dungarpur... That stated, it must go to the eternal credit of both General officers, who insisted that the honour of being India's first C-in-C should rightly be 'Kipper's' because he was the seniormost Indian officer" — this was placed on record by Air Marshal KC Cariappa (retd) in his father's biography.

The Government of India had not been lacking in grace as evidenced from Sardar Patel's letter: "...your record of achievements inspires our confidence in your ability to lead your men at such a critical period of the country's history and I can assure you that we on our part will extend to you all goodwill and cooperation."

So, on January 15, 1949, a ramrod straight man, along with a boy not yet in his teens and a seven-year-old girl were perhaps the first visitors at the Gandhi Samadhi. After dropping his children home, Gen KM Cariappa walked into the appointed high office sans any ceremonial trappings or Guard of Honour!

The Siblings, and their many adventures

KULBHUSHANSINGH SURYAWANSHI

OLITARY, ghostly, shy, alone, hard-to-see, and even lonely, are some of the words that are often used to describe the snow leopard. But, the Siblings, as the two snow leopards of Kibber came to be known, were none of that.

Kibber is an idyllic village tucked on a rocky knoll at an elevation of 4,200m in the Spiti valley. To the north of it is the summit of Mt Kanamo, standing just 5m short of 6,000. To the south of it is the wide 'U-shaped' valley formed by the Spiti river. For the past 25 years, this village has been the epicentre of research on snow leopards and community-ledefforts to conserve this species. Thanks to these efforts, Kibber is today one of the best places in the world to see snow leopards. This year, the stars of the show were the Siblings, or Chunnu and Munnu, as some of the local people and tourists had started calling them.

The first time I saw the siblings was in February last year. That winter was mild, and temperatures barely dipped below -15°C.

There was little snow on the ground. My good friend, Prasenjeet Yadav, was filming for the BBC and I was playing an advisory role, given my 15 years of experience working in the region. The Siblings were then only a year old. We would see them almost every day. They spent most of their days sleeping under an overhanging rock or on a ledge high above a cliff. Their mother, also sleeping nearby, was always vigilant.

One evening, at around 4 pm, the mother and the Siblings twitched their ears, and all the tourists and filmmakers clicked away, which was the most exciting thing that had happened all day. Then, they woke up and stretched like house cats, and excitement builtup in their audience. A cub walked a few steps and hunched down to poop, and only cats can look cute while pooping. I made a mental note to go down to that spot later and get a sample for genetic analysis.

A half-frozen stream flowed past the three snow leopards. We watched them from a cliff high above. Across a bed in the river, on a small grassy meadow, a herd of ibex were grazing in the golden light of the evening sun. We could see the



Two snow leopards, Chunnu and Munnu, and their mother are the stars of Kibber village in Spiti valley

ibex and the snow leopards, but the ibex could not see the snow leopards. The mother, however, seemed to know about the ibex, and she started walking deliberately and carefully towards them. She could not have seen them because of the bend in the cliff along the river. She either heard them or knew that they grazed there at that time. The Siblings followed her with equal care and attention. I was impressed with the discipline the cubs were exhibiting. As they got closer, the mother got into stalking mode, and the cubs followed.

This was the most important thing they would have to learn if they had to survive

in the wild.

Tension built up, and we all watched it from across the bank from an overlooking cliff, as if watching a nail-biting cricket match from the high stands.

Now, the mother was within 30m of three big male ibex. With their scimitar-shaped horns, these goats are formidable prey even for a veteran snow leopard mother. The Siblings stayed back and watched their mother. I wondered how she communicated to them that they need to stay back now.

She got closer, 20m; the cubs were watching, and all of us were holding our breath. The attack could come any moment now. This was going to be more spectacular than the cheetah coursing down an impala in the Serengeti. Now, 5m, and the ibex have still not seen her, she is only one leap away from making a kill. She is being careful to avoid those big horns of the ibex which can cause a serious injury.

And just the moment when we expected her to commit to the leap, the Siblings got impatient and started chasing the rest of the ibex herd in the open meadow which was still 40m away from them. The element of surprise was lost. There was chaos, 25 ibex running around and two year-old snow leopards bounding ungainly after them. The mother sat glum.

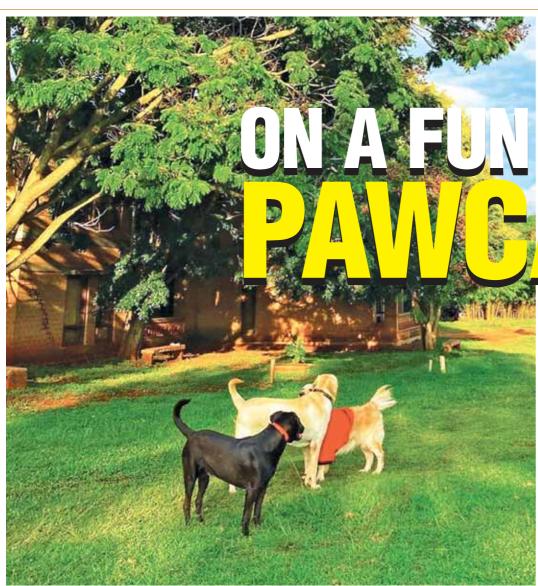
It was outrageous that the cubs had spoilt her hard work because of their impatience. After the dust had settled, the Siblings approached their mother with tentative steps. I was expecting her to reprimand them, but she was their mother after all. She licked them clean and the three walked away into the dusk that was spreading over the mountains.

 The writer is director of the India Programme of the Snow Leopard Trust

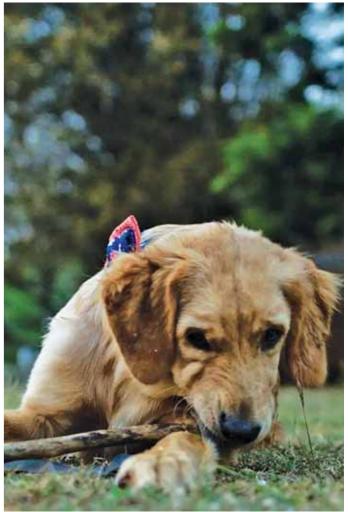
a Continue pioneer Cont

"Disease is an experience of a so-called mortal mind. It is fear made manifest on the body"









Indulge in exciting activities with your pets and make a holiday with them truly special, writes SHARMILA CHAND

hether indulging in gourmet cuisine for your pets, celebrating their birthdays, pampering them with grooming sessions or participating in fun activities, there's something to enrich every experience during a vacation with furry members. There are a range of pet-friendly hotels and resorts that are more than happy to welcome you and your loyal companion. From luxury resorts to cozy retreats, these properties ensure complete comfort and are a haven both for you and your four-legged buddy.

COMFORT MEETS LUXURY AT PRESIDENT, MUMBAI - IHCL SELEOIONS

ooking to celebrate your pet's birthday? Go for a Pawcation at President, Mumbai - IHCL SeleQions.

"We have curated a well thought out pet-friendly vacation concept known as Pawcations," says Afzal Khan, General Manager. "We understand that pets are cherished members of the family, and we strive to create a comfortable and enriching environment for them during their stay. Hence we provide pet-friendly amenities like plush pet beds and bedding, engaging toys, and a gourmet pet menu crafted by our culinary experts."

Embracing a pet-friendly policy, the hotel team makes sure the guests' comfort is enhanced by offering the services of on-call pet caretakers, as per specific requirements. Moreover, if there is any health related issue, there is a specialist veterinarian on call. Not to forget pet grooming services with prior appointments, exclusive pet toiletries, and designated pet-friendly zones. "We not only organize elaborate

"We not only organize elaborate party with delightful high tea and fun outdoor activities for furry birthday boys and girls but also make sure the service is professional with warmth and care. Our team undergoes regular comprehensive training programs to understand animal behavior, hygiene protocols, and proper handling procedures. We also invite external pet trainers and behaviorists to train our staff regularly, ensuring they are wellequipped to interact with pets and provide top-notch service. Hence, we take great pride in being a petfriendly destination," concludes Khan with a smile.



PAMPERING PETS AT 'OUR NATIVE VILLAGE ECO RESORT', BENGALURU

t 'Our Native Village Eco Resort;' nestled in the serene village of Hesaraghatta, guests can indulge in a memorable vacay with the joy of bonding with their beloved pets amidst nature's embrace.

"Whether exploring our sprawling grounds or immersing yourself in our cultural experiences, every moment promises a harmonious blend of luxury, responsible tourism and eco-conscious living, adhering to our pet-friendly policy," tells Antharaj A, The Operations

Manager.
He adds, "We get repeat guests who have enjoyed their staycation in seamless harmony with their furry companions. As a proud pet-friendly establishment, the retreat provides essential amenities, including a variety of dog foods, water bowls, leashes, floor mats, and cozy blankets. The sprawling grounds offer ample space for pets to roam freely amidst lush lawns and village paths, perfect for leisurely strolls and

bonding moments."
Designed with meticulous care, the dedicated pet bathing area combines comfort with rustic charm, ensuring a refreshing bath experience for furry companions. Specially prepared food ensures pets receive nutritious meals, supporting the commitment to sustainability by minimizing environmental impact. "Complete with all necessary amenities, the resort's natural charm

reflects our dedication to pampering pets just as we do for our human guests. While the guests rediscover childhood joys playing village games like gilli danda and kite flying, their pets act as best cheerleaders!" Antharaj says with a smile.

DISCOVER PET-FRIENDLY RETREAT AT MYSA ZINC

JOURNEY BY THE FERN et parents looking to take a break and hit the road with their fur babies, look no further than MYSA Zinc Journey by The Fern, a premier resort located in Nani Devati, Gujarat. Renowned for its serene ambiance and top-notch amenities, this resort stands out as a haven for pet lovers, offering an exceptional blend of comfort, luxury, and pet-friendly hospitality. Naveen Vaishnav, Squad Champion at the Resort says, "Committed to pampering four legged guests, at MYSA Zinc Journey by The Fern, pets are warmly welcomed and cherished. Furthermore, the property offers a range of facilities, making this resort the ideal choice for travellers with pets. The resort offers 24 elegantly designed rooms and villas, each providing ample space for you and your pets to relax? Spread across 9 acres within the scenic Glade One Golf Resort, the resort features beautifully landscaped gardens and open spaces perfect for the four legged to explore and enjoy. For a leisurely stroll or a brisk walk, the serene pathways and green expanses offer a perfect retreat for pets and their owners.

"At the resort we offer dedicated services and facilities that include comfortable bedding and special dietary options for your furry friends. Our chefs cook as per pets' liking and specifications, we don't have printed menus as we believe in curating for them. While your pets enjoy the outdoors, you can indulge in a variety of resort activities. From the challenging 9-hole Gary Player-designed golf course to rejuvenating spa treatments and a sparkling swimming pool, here is the unique blend of luxury and pet-friendly hospitality. Located just a short drive from Ahmedabad, this resort provides a tranquil retreat where you and your pets can relax and rejuvenate," adds Vaishnav.

BONDING IN A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

restled amids

landscapes of Taj Fort Aguada Resort & Spa, Taj Holiday Village Resort & Spa and The Yellow House, lies a haven not just for humans but also for their beloved furry companions. Embracing the bond between pets and their owners, we proudly declare ourselves a petfriendly resort, where wagging tails and happy barks are as much a part of the atmosphere as the rustling of leaves and gentle lapping of waves. "As the pet's comfort is paramount, we provide cozy & comfortable beddings to ensure their good night's sleep. Offering a range of soothing amenities such as gentle shampoo, conditioner, and nourishing paw and nose butter - these products are carefully chosen to keep your pet looking and feeling their best throughout their stay. Beyond physical comfort, we cultivate a nurturing environment where every aspect of your pet's experience is thoughtfully considered. Our dedicated staff is trained to provide attentive care and ensure that all pets receive personalized attention and affection, says Sanchita Banerjee Rodrigues, MarCom for North Goa Resorts.

Fitness is of utmost importance. Whether it's a leisurely morning walk or an evening romp under the setting sun, the scenic surroundings provide the perfect backdrop for the pets to stay active and happy. "Understanding that pets thrive

"Understanding that pets thrive when they can engage in physical activities, we offer a variety of opportunities for them to stay active and happy amidst our scenic

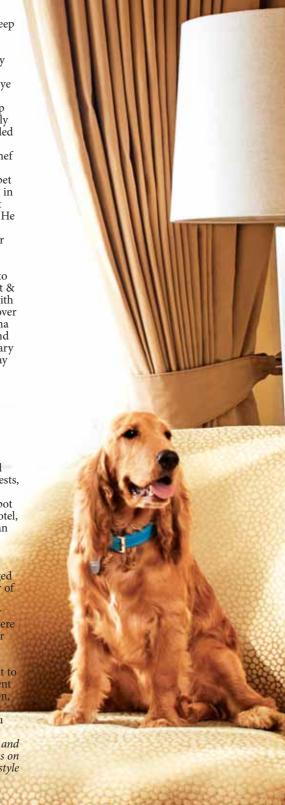
surroundings. Whether it's a leisurely morning walk along our lush trails or an energetic romp during the enchanting sunset hours, every moment outdoors is tailored to keep pets healthy and stimulated. Providing designated areas where they can engage in interactive play and socialize with other furry companions under the watchful every companions under the watchful eye of our attentive staff. These supervised activities not only keep pets physically fit but also mentally stimulated, ensuring a well-rounded experience during their stay." When it comes to pets' dining, Chef Nishant Diwakar Executive Sous Chef of Taj Fort Aguada being a pet parent himself takes keen interest in designing and planning of the pet menus of Taj North Goa Resorts. He firmly believes as important a balanced diet is to us humans, our furry friends require the s amount of attention. We provide specially curated menu for them to get the perfect amount of nutrient & tasty treat. From dishes made with bacon & chicken bones to drool over to waffles made of yoghurt, banana & pumpkin. The team goes beyond basic sustenance to provide culinary experiences that enhance their stay and contribute to their overall enjoyment.

A PERFECT GETAWAY WITH

At Bengaluru Marriott Hotel Whitefield, there are special pet fiestas and brunches that create memorable moments for pets and owners alike. For long-staying guests, there is a unique touch of companionship-a small fish in a pot to keep them company. "At our hotel, we pride ourselves on providing an immersive experience with cozy beds, engaging toys, and meticulously sanitized play areas, creating a haven for our four-legged guests," tells Anjali Naik, Director of Sales and Marketing. She adds, "Pets have access to our dining outlets and lush lawns, where they can relax and play freely. Our exclusive pet menu offers healthcentric, salt-free options for their dining pleasure. Our commitment to creating a pet-friendly environment goes beyond mere accommodation offering a truly immersive and delightful experience for both you

and your beloved companion."

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







It is important to note that Neerada is as much a Nature poet as she is a people's poet, says SWATI PAL

ow many of us have had to be admonished for things not being aligned? The books in our book case in the days when books were bought and read? The clothes in our cupboard? The shoes in the closet? How many of us were ticked off at school perhaps for the tie being askew or the pair of socks not climbing up at the same place on each leg? Or the writing in our notebooks being asymmetrical? For the better part of my childhood and those of my friends, there was a constant, relentless push and shove towards alignment and well, we certainly rebelled at it as young people! A part of me still does and thus when I chance upon a poppy flower for example, in a neat bed of

chrysanthemums in the college gardens, I cannot deny that my heart lights up with joy at this break in the order of

So when I was invited to read and speak on this utterly delightful collection of poems called 'Alignment' by Neerada Suresh, I cannot deny that my interest was instantly piqued by the title and I immediately read the title poem. Rohan Kaul's home and his partner, Promilla simply came alive by the word picture painted by Neerada Suresh in her rib tickling comparisons between the state of the house in the absence and presence of Rohan. There is a certain glee in the air when Rohan is away as things lie unaligned and unfettered; the same things, to quote, But when Rohan Kaul is in, Newspapers stand stacked, Compressed, breathing in. Shoes align themselves

Awed, open mouthed. Paintings, curtains, Cushions, sofas All tell a tamed tale. The fact is that while alignment is not

only, politically speaking an important may have its merits, alignment can often come at great cost. It may be the cost of freedom, it may be about being 'tamed' as Neerada put it; it may leave us in gaping fear and thus 'open mouthed'. The hope perhaps lies in Promilla who, as the poem ends with

A certain kind of alignment.

Don't let the light and bubbling language deceive you, this poem has far greater implications if we read it closely and it is this deceptive mirth that the

poem has which makes the poem, like many others by her, such a joy to read. Neerada is a grounded soul. Her poems reflect that and she makes poetry out of the ordinary quirky eccentricities and foibles that fill all of our lives. A poem that really clicked with me is *Of Lists*. It has that elegant humour that seems to be a characteristic trait of Neerada's, the wonderful ability to laugh at one's self. It begins with the declaration I am one

And then, with great good humour she narrates how fishing out her list from her bag full of things makes the list redundant as she involuntarily lists from memory and then she swears,

Under my breath Now to list down A set of instructions How not to forget Getting across The list you make.

sunday magazine the pioneer de la contraction de

I cannot recall the uncountable times that I have had to strip my entire bag to find a list and then found it much later. It is such a relatable experience and that is what endears the reader to Neerada's poetry, the sheer relatability of the experiences.

Life and the times as we live them are the focus of Neerada's poetry. We talk for example about how communication between people now is held ransom by the cell phone. Neerada converts our trite conversations into a poem which she entitles, The New Normal. New normal is

Sitting side by side On a sofa With no eye contact

Chatting of this and that These are the first few lines and the poem ends with the sad fact that the new normal is:

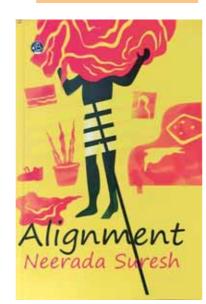
And at all times Not facing each other On the mobile through Inane vicarious clips Of far and near ones And total strangers Never once glancing Directly or even sideways

Smiling at each other. Modes of communication or rather the language of communication comes up again in another poem called Version 3.0 where the poet talks about her journey from the deep south up north

'travelling light with nothing/more than

ALIGNMENT Author: Neerada Suresh Publisher: DC Books

Price: ₹199



a bilingual tongue'. Subtlely yet strongly commenting upon the Rashtrabhasha issue, she says,

At the workplace, monolingual, mute Biding time mastering a language National though notional, Opening floodgates of ecstasy mouthing My own tongue, my mother tongue,

At regional gatherings. This is such striking comment upon the way in which so much in our relationships with people , so much of determined by the fluency with which we speak different languages. But are we accepted because we speak the required language or do we remain strangers divided by our regional differences, not explicitly stated but always there? Do we, in turn, become one with the region of our profession or adoption or do we still dream of lands we associate most with the tongue that comes easiest and naturally to us, our mother tongue?

These are questions to think about.

Neerada makes you think.

She makes you laugh and cry as well, sometimes together. One such poem is When my brother fell sick in which the poet describes her brother who was bedridden after a botched up eye surgery. She writes about his courage, He still smiles as always. Not once did he

Lament this plight, foul mouth The surgeon or contemplate Suing. Resigned at once To a possible, partial vision In his bad eye, pacified His wife, my raging sisier in law. His expressive eyes Now inscrutable

Behind the dark glasses. But his smile had the same texture and

tinge
Of the smile he sported
When Mother died
And he lingered by her one last time. The poem is such a beautiful reminder that warriors are not found only on the battlefield; there are many who soldier on heroically confronted by the vicissitudes of life. The brother you read about will surely capture your heart and

become your hero. One of the characteristics of Neerada's poems in 'Alignment' is that there is a lot said through implication which is sometimes sensuous and can get your heart beating a bit faster. For example, in the poem *Delete*, the poet writes

about Your unsolicited Picture on FB And she goes on to say, The familiar contours Of your face Traced out a trillion times Through summer and winter Stood out embossed On my finger tips. The best option now For the photo shopped version, Press delete

Of dormant memories Off my fingertips. This is a brilliant use of synesthetic imagery and one can literally feel the tingling in the tips of one's fingers. A poem that ends with a delightful twist is *Chrysnathemums* where the unnamed 'he' always came when the

chrysanthemums bloomed and he always asked if they were dahlias or marigolds, and the poet says Too polite to correct

Her lashes lowered and The chyrsanthemums paled Into insignificance. The evening Stretched to its elastic limits

Catapulted into night. What she didn't know was That he had always known They were chrysanthemums. There is the sweetness of romance in these lines that is unmistakable and so appealing; one can almost imagine the whole scene played out in one's head. Tea 1 carries the same fragrance of

romance very delicately framed, implied through such lines as While I made tea On a rusty stove He stood watching

Leaning by the door Aand then said, I like the cut of your dress As though it were a cue To turn the stive on to sim And let the simmering within

Come to a boil. Coming back to the pictorial quality of the poems, a reason why many of the poems in fact can be almost dramatically played out in the imagination is the kind of detailing that

Neerada works into her poems. Take the poem Of Haystacks. This entire poem is literally painted with an eye for the minutest of details and it reads The cotton tree stood In its slender trunk With its bursting pods Of parachuting blobs

As the turbaned, earth hued Cart man, cushioned On bales and bales Of golden yellow straw Came swaying, swinging Whistling to the orchestra of The hoof clicking clap dance Of the ambling bullocks.

Colour, sound, movement all seemed played out on the printed page. And of course the symbolism, the personification is discernible, as is the use of alliteration in the swaying swinging, cart cushioned, clicking clap. This lends a wonderful rhythmic motion to the scene and has been really

cleverly used. Again, in The Breadfruit Tree, the poet describes the tree, We didn't make much

Of the breadfruit tree That stood sentry like By the boundary wall Spilling its bickering spread Over the neighbour's roof Dropping yellow leaves Plopping crow eaten messy fruits Like I said, the tree, pretty much like the haystacks in the previous poem, comes to life in the mind's eye.

If brevity is the soul of wit, Neerada really aces it in her short poems, two of which are Absence and Sorrows.

Absence, Distance Were surefire **Terminators** Of whatever was Between us I thought, But they Like rings in trees Add girth, depth Linking the past With the present, Casting shadows Of decay *Into the future*

Direct and simple, the simile is so apt and new- the rings on the trees and the passage of time. It's important to note that Neerada is as much a Nature poet as she is a people's poet. In Sorrows she says,

Sorrows Like a newborn Arranged itself In my arms Purring in content As if to say Never let me go For the reward Of great truths To be reaped And revealed *In the future.*

Those who carry their sorrows with them will feel that the poem is made for them. But that's the magic of Neerada's pen, she will make her readers feel that experiences are theirs that she writes

Read her, you will feel at home.

Swati Pal, Professor and Principal, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, has been a Charles Wallace; John McGrath Theatre Studies and Fulbright Nehru fellowship, scholar. She has published on theatre, creative and academic writing, education and translates from Hindi to English. In Absentia is a collection of her poems

Journey to an expanded self awareness

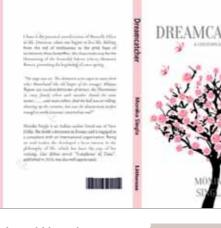
The book opens in the present-day scenario, where a rather unsure Loveena of mid-thirties is boarding a train to Pathankot. Her already raw senses are over burdened by the onslaught of experience of a train station environment. Yet her insecurities are deep seated in her psyche and are result of the generational trauma she endured during her growing up years by the hands of her equally tormented mother Neena, reviews **DEEPAK KUMAR JHA**

("Dreamcatcher") is the story of Loveena, the protagonist of the book who is a sensitive soul. It beautifully narrates the journey through her trials and tribulations, her realisations, her pains and her metamorphosis and an ultimate 'coming of age' which leaves her in a state of expanded awareness of self as well as her surroundings and people there in. Author Monika has orchestrated her sound knowledge of literature, language and the subject & object to bring on paper the story of a child Loveena, till she finds solace passing through life's labyrinth, unfortunately all nurtured in close walls of her family. The just published book revolves around Loveena's mother Neena who attained motherhood through Loveena after a long wait of ten years. Neena's intensity

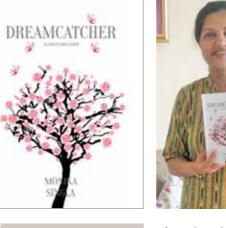
thus shifted to being extra protective about her daughter from the negativities of the world. Having brought up in a rather affluent and rich family, she desires nothing less for her daughter. And even though Loveena had both her parents-Neena and her father Dev, it was her mother and mother's stories which were to carve her life and make her the person that she would become. And the story's trajectory thus turns to Loveena's mother Neena's life. victim of his own sense of

Neena's husband Dev was a helplessness for his lack of understanding the business of Neena's father and inability to take it up for posterity, even though he was the sole son-in-law the family had.

His job as an assistant professor of history in the university projected him as most suitable boy for Neena, when a friend of Neena's



father told him about Dev and his docile nature. Quite obviously Neena's father believed it to be the significant trait suitable for her pampered daughter. As Neena entered Dev's life and his house after her wedding, it was bustling with Dev's family. Neena was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer



DREAMCATCHER Author: Monika Singla Publisher: ISPCK family too accepted her into Price: ₹295 their family but without completely absorbing her into their lives. So, even

of people and was unable to adjust to this new environment which was totally unlike her solitary and exclusive upbringing in an affluent household Sensing Neena's hesitation and reservations, Dev's

Neena was married into Dev's family she could never truly become a part of it. Dev's detachment or lack of desire to correct this situation further acerbated the relationships. Troubled relations with in-laws, Dev's indifference clubbed with an anguishing wait of ten years to attain motherhood further fed Neena's sense of mistrust and suspicions and her belief that the world was a dangerously bad place. Loveena who was born as a happy child with a calm, pleasing, innocent disposition was always eager to embrace everybody, never earned approval for her behaviour from her mother. Neena always dismissed

constant companion who

bad place. these traits as incompatible with the ways of world. Thus, growing up, Loveena's world protected by her mother, remained confined within the four walls of the conflict. palatial house with the ĥouse help Babli as a

too gets married leaving behind a void in Loveena's Finally, Loveena finds her suitor in Sanand and her engagement to him was

greeted as the most welcome news by everyone later on which did not worked due to triggers of Neena's fears. For Loveena this incident proved to be the one which augmented her belief in Neena's words that world is a Her father Dev too gone followed by passing of Neena. Loveena finally married, not to start a family but only to drown the haunting hollowness of her soul into joys and laughter. Vikram was a colleague of Loveena and the only thing she knew about him was that he was a divorcee with two grown up kids. Soon this too developed a marital Unable to handle this situation any longer Loveena

decides that she needs to get

She goes looking for solitude in a place away from the chaos of the city, away from the prodding eyes of the Her life's journey takes a new turn as she arrives at Pathankot where she embarks upon a spiritualistic journey. Armed with the strength of her soul and her renewed faith in life and self and the world in general, Loveena finally finds herself ready to go back to place from where she herself had once run away from all her life challenges a long time back. Her tumultuous relationship with Vikram's place was when she had shunned everything to cross over into next phase of her life. She was now ready to go meet Vikram as a new person. But this time she

isn't running away. This time

she is running towards

meeting life head-on.

respite from her choppy life

that and decides to leave the

house and Vikram.

conditions. What remains is the new service levels. Either we will get used to it or start paying them the wages they truly deserve to

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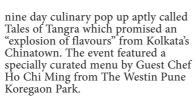
Kolkata, Bengalis the world over, and Tangra, share a very special culinary heritage and culture, going far back in history. SHOBORI GANGULI got to relive the bond at the

TALES

Westin Gurgaon recently ost people familiar with the trademark Chinese cuisine of Kolkata would know about Tangra. An erstwhile tannery on the eastern outskirts of then British Calcutta, soon to become famous as the city's Chinatown, this tiny colony was populated by Hakka origin Chinese folk who came to India to work in the tanneries, their craft and att soon to become symponymous with art soon to become synonymous with the finest leather accessories in the subcontinent. The womenfolk worked home kitchens to supplement meager household incomes. Today, the tanneries are all gone but Tangra has left its signature on a cuisine now globally known as Hakka Chinese. Recently, I had the fortune to relive some childhood memories of some childhood memories of anniversaries and birthdays most often spent at some restaurant or the other in Tangra, wolfing down Golden Fried Prawns, Chicken dimsums, Hakka noodles, prawns sauted in garlic and







Koregaon Park.
By sheer geography, one can easily identify the unique Kolkata-Chinese culinary bond, the two regions in such close physical proximity, underlining the very special nature of the food not be found anywhere else in the world despite Tangra's journey as an Oriental cuisine beyond the frontiers of Bengal. The menu at Westin was indeed meticulously planned by the Chef to capture the essence of this legendary fusion cuisine, tracing its roots back to an era long ago when Chinese immigrants in then Calcutta, blending their traditions with Indian culture to script and create script and create

Chinatown's culinary

prowess. Unfortunately, none of that history now remains, except in the hands of home and professional chefs, who still keep the history of Chinatown resonating with

While Chef Ho did put up a great show with his Scallion Crepes, Homestyle Taro Cakes, Kari Fish Dumplings, Sweet and Sour Prawns, Four Season Green Beans, Crispy Chilli Garlic
Potatoes, Tangra style authentic Hakka
noodles, the menu had a huge vegetarian accent. With the world turning to vegetarianism each passing day, this is only understandable. But

contemporary approaches, and of course, special twists given to recipes long lost.

one fervently hopes that Hakka Chinese seafood will always

have its patrons surviving in some corner or the other in Chef Ho's passion for Asian cuisine was apparent in the innovations he brought to each dish. His approach, affability and commitment to authenticity were truly welcome. Chef Amit Dash, Multi Property Executive Chef for The Westin Gurgaon, New Delhi said, "We are

excited to host Chef Ho Chi Ming and present Tales of Tangra to our patrons. This pop-up is a tribute to the rich cultural tapestry and culinary excellence of Tangra and a testament to our commitment to continue offering our guests diverse and exceptional dining experiences." The soups ranged from Manchow, Assorted Vegetables. Ginger Citantro Assorted Vegetables, Ginger, Cilantro Broth, Hot and Sour soup, non vegetarian bits like prawns and I feel a soup or broth must stew in its original juices and not be relegated to add-ons for a vegetable broth. It makes

food III

New Delhi, June 30, 2024

taste, texture and aromas. All in all, it felt good to taste a bit of Tangra far away from its original shores of Kolkata right in the heart of Delhi. Long live Tangra's signature Hakka cuisine.

a critical culinary difference in terms of

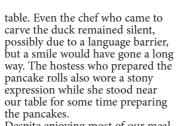
Disappointing Service Mars Fine Dining Experiences



PAWAN SONI ventures to The China Kitchen at Hyatt Regency, New Delhi, famed for its peking Duck. While the star dish impressed, but the experience is marred by inattentive services

recently visited The China Kitchen at Hyatt Regency New Delhi, renowned for its exquisite Peking Duck, which I consider among the best in the National Capital Region. Some might argue that Hakkasan in Mumbai outshines it, but my personal experiences at Hakkasan in Abu Dhabi and a pop-up at Shangri-La Delhi didn't include the duck, so I can't compare. Nonetheless, my recent dining experience at The China Kitchen, despite the superb duck, left me dissatisfied, primarily due to subpar service.

The evening began on a sour note with a lackluster welcome. We received no warm greetings or guidance to our table, and no one offered us menus or water, despite the sweltering Delhi summer. The absence of hospitality was in stark contrast to the standards one expects at a 5-star property. When we ordered our first dish, a gomai salad, I specifically requested extra sesame dressing on the side, a preference I had made clear to the server. However, the salad arrived without the extra dressing and was neither cold nor flavorful, lacking the acidity and vibrant tastes I anticipated. The China Kitchen could learn a thing or two from China Garden, which excels at this dish in the city. Fortunately, the other dishes like chicken shao mai dumplings, edamame dim sum, and honey chilli lotus roots were much better. Yet, the service remained mechanical and impersonal. There were no smiles, no proactive plate changes, and no clearing of the



Despite enjoying most of our meal, we quickly finished and left, paying over Rs18,000 (including a 10% service charge) without any drinks. I contemplated asking for the service charge to be waived but refrained, considering how dependent the staff might be on these tips

I was particularly disappointed when my request for duck salt and pepper was denied because we had ordered only half a duck, a decision that seemed unnecessarily rigid. A little more flexibility and hospitality could have made all the difference, especially when very few order it. Attentive and friendly



birthday party at their all-day service could have transformed our dining experience. Even though the food was largely enjoyable, the lack of warmth and attention overshadowed it. Similar was our experience just a day prior at Pullman hotel where a friend hosted his daughter's took a lot of time or were



completely missed. Something has happened to that smiley and polite star hotel service, especially after COVID. Fresh batches are seeing fewer takers, most experienced staff have either left the industry or are moving



retain deserving candidates.