

# FAQ

## Why is China probing the far side of the moon?

What is the latest in its ambitious space odyssey? How did China's other moon missions fare?

Vasudevan Mukunth

### The story so far:

In the pre-dawn hours (IST) of June 4, a small spacecraft bearing lunar samples took off from the moon's far side, headed for an orbit that would bring it in contact with an orbiter waiting for it. There, the spacecraft 'handed over' the samples to a capsule on the returner, which will bring the samples back to the earth in a two-week journey. Scientists will thus finally have access to pieces of moon soil and rocks from its far side. This is China's ambitious and ongoing Chang'e 6 mission.

### What are the Chang'e missions?

China's moon missions are called Chang'e, named for the goddess of the moon in Chinese mythology. The Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA) launched the Chinese Lunar Exploration Programme (CLEP) in 2003, and the first Chang'e mission happened in 2007. Chang'e 1 created a map of the moon's surface.

With Chang'e 2, CLEP launched phase I of its moon missions, and equipped the orbiter with a better camera. Its images were used to prepare the Chang'e 3 mission's lander and rover for their descent on the moon, which they successfully achieved on December 14, 2013, starting CLEP's phase II missions.

In 2019, Chang'e 4 carried the first lander and the rover to descend on the moon's far side and

Chang'e 6 is attempting to replicate its predecessor's feat but from the moon's far side. This time, the scientific goal is to understand why the far side is so different from the near side

which, after collecting and stowing some lunar soil samples, launched itself into orbit. There, an orbiter collected the samples, transferred them to a returner, which brought them to the earth.

Chang'e 6 is attempting to replicate its predecessor's feat but from the moon's far side. The scientific goal here is to understand why the far side is so different from the near side.

### What is the far side?

The moon is tidally locked to the earth: the lunar hemisphere facing the earth will always face the earth, and the hemisphere facing away (far side) will always face away. The far side has rockier terrain and fewer smooth plains.

Thus, it's harder to land a spacecraft on the far side – more so since it's impossible to communicate directly from the earth with a spacecraft here: there's no line of sight. A workaround is to have a second spacecraft in space that relays signals between ground stations on the earth and the surface spacecraft. This makes the mission more complex.

The far side is expected to be a good place to install large telescopes, which would have a view of the universe unobstructed by the earth. ISRO and scientists at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru, are currently working on such a device, called PRATUSH.

### What is the status of Chang'e 6?

CNSA launched the 8.3-tonne Chang'e 6 orbiter-lander assembly on May 3 and it entered a lunar orbit on May 8. On May 30, the lander complex split from the orbiter and descended over a large crater called Apollo on June 1.

CLEP scientists coordinated this part of the mission with help from the Queqiao 2 relay satellite, which the CNSA launched in February this year into an elliptical orbit around the moon. Once within Apollo, a drill plunged into the soil, and with help from a scoop extracted about 2 kg of material, and transferred it to the ascender. On June 4, the ascender took off for moon orbit. There, it rendezvoused with the orbiter and transferred the samples to a capsule in the returner on June 6.

The returner is expected to bring them to the earth on June 25.

### What might the samples reveal?

Since Chang'e 6 is a Chinese mission, the 'what' depends on the samples as much as 'by whom' and 'when'.

CNSA hasn't been sharing periodic and detailed updates, as has been expected from other moon missions.

Once CNSA retrieves the sample-bearing capsule, Chinese scientists will have first crack at it before sharing access with foreign research groups based on their proposals. It's unknown whether any Indian research groups have applied for access.

Scientifically, the far-side samples are expected to inform insights about why the moon is the way it is and the formation of planets. For example, scientists believe the terrain asymmetry between the two lunar hemispheres is because of heat released by the earth when the moon was forming and thermochemical characteristics near the moon's surface.

(The details in this article are as of 4 pm on June 8, 2024.)

## Why did several exit polls go off the mark?

What methodology should be followed for accuracy? How do we know that a survey has done its homework? What are the red flags? When are exit polls conducted? Do respondents open up on their choice? In a close election, is it more difficult to get seats and voter shares right?

Srinivasan Ramani

### The story so far:

Several exit polls predicted the return of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power, with a tally of more than 300 seats for the BJP alone. One pollster, Today's Chanakya, predicted 400 seats (plus or minus 15) for the NDA, and another, Axis MyIndia, said the NDA would win an average of 381 seats. All these polls were way off the mark, as results showed.

### What were the vote share projections?

The CSDS-Lokniti post-poll predicted that the NDA would receive a vote share of 46% while that of the INDIA bloc (excluding the Left, Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and AAP in Punjab) would be 35%. The error margin was 3.08% points. The results show that the NDA had bagged 292 seats (43.63% vote share) and the INDIA bloc 205 seats (excluding the Trinamool Congress which won 29 seats) with a vote share of 37%. CSDS-Lokniti did not project seats for the alliances but predicted that the NDA would return with a majority. Its vote share figures were within the error margins but were 2.5 points higher for the NDA. Axis My India projected 47% for the NDA and 39% for the INDIA bloc and the results showed that the projections overestimated the NDA vote share beyond error margins. C-Voter projected a seat tally of 353 to 383 seats for the NDA, with a vote share of 45.3% and 38.9% for the BJP alone, which was 2.3 points higher than the actual vote share for the party – 36.56%. Its figures for the INDIA bloc were also roughly 2.4 points lower than the actual mark. While the vote shares were within error margins nationally, its seat tallies were way off across several States.

### What are exit polls?

Opinion polls are sample surveys where a cross



Close contest: A man watching television waits for the release of exit polls at an appliance store in Ajmer on June 1. AFP

Whether a polling agency has done a good survey is clear from what it reveals in its methodology

section of the electorate is randomly chosen and interviewed about their choice of party or candidates. These polls could either be conducted in-person or over devices as is the case with telephonic surveys. Exit polls ask voters about their choice right after they have exercised their mandate, sometimes outside the polling booth. Some pollsters prefer to do "post-poll surveys" which are conducted at the residence of the voters after voting. CSDS-Lokniti's poll is a "post-poll survey". Other surveys such as Axis MyIndia's were "exit polls".

### Did methodology matter in the way exit polls got the numbers wrong?

For exit polls to be accurate, certain factors have to be kept in mind like the sample size of the survey, the selection process of the sample, the manner in which the survey is conducted, and the weighting of the sample according to estimates of the population.

The size of the sample has to be representative and the largeness of the sample is immaterial as long as it is significant enough to statistically predict the winner. If the sample is randomly chosen and the size of the sample is enough to accurately predict the possibility of a certain candidate winning more than 40-45% of the vote – which is generally the case with Indian elections – then even a representative sample of around 20,000-odd respondents is enough to predict winners in a country of a voting population of close to 100 crore. One can conduct larger surveys with more than 20,000 respondents or even with lakhs of respondents but the key is to get good representation. CSDS Lokniti's total sample size was 19,663 across 23 States and 193 parliamentary constituencies while that of Axis MyIndia's was 5,82,574 across all the 543 constituencies. But the former got its vote share predictions within the error margins while the latter didn't.

For good representation, the samples have to be chosen randomly (so as to avoid bias) and also be chosen in a stratified manner (so as to avoid missing out on any section of the population). The most ideal way of choosing a random, but stratified sample, is to use electoral rolls for identifying respondents. Once sampling is done and the list of respondents are identified, they need to be weighted on the basis of the representation of sections in the population – the percentage of women, Dalits, minorities, majority population, and urban vs rural voters. After a representative sample has been prepared, interviews are conducted. Ideally, a face-to-face interview works better, and in the same language as the respondent.

### Do respondents reveal their choice?

There is a high probability that many respondents, especially those from marginalised

sections, either do not reveal their voting preferences or require a measure of trust with the surveyor before opening up on their choices. There is a possibility that the pollsters who got this election wrong either under-sampled marginalised voters or their surveyors were not trusted by the respondents to reveal the right answer or were misled by them.

### What happens after the surveys?

Once the survey is done, the results should be matched with the estimated demographic information. If there are 12 respondents among Dalits whose choices are recorded in a population of 100 and the actual proportion of Dalits in that population is 15, then the weighting can be uniformly done for the 15 based on the 12 respondents. But if only 39 women in a population of 100 are interviewed, extrapolating the views of the 39 to that of 48 women (the possible actual estimate of the women population) would be problematic as women do not vote as a single category. This could be one reason why the Axis MyIndia poll got its estimates wrong. The men-women representation in the poll's sample was 69 to 31.

Most of the pollsters, who had tied up with TV channels, used their surveys to predict seat shares – CSDS Lokniti didn't. Vote share to seat share conversions can be done in different ways. The most commonly used method is by assessing the swing in vote share for a particular party from previous elections, either in a State or to be more accurate, in a particular region and to be more precise, if the sampling allows the pollster to do so, in a particular constituency. The swing for or against a party as against the same for its opponent(s) can provide the basis for whether an incumbent will be returned from a particular constituency or whether a party can retain a certain number of seats in a region of a State or a State as a whole.

As veteran psephologist and media personality Prannoy Roy points out in his book, *The Verdict*, written with Dorab R. Sopariwala, some pollsters look at swings from previous polls and the "index of opposition unity" to determine the margin of victory for a particular candidate and predict seat share from vote shares. None of the pollsters who tied up with major television channels got their vote to seat shares right. Since none of them have revealed what they consider their "secret sauce" – the conversion process – it is difficult to ascertain why they got it wrong.

### Is a close election difficult to predict?

It is evident that pollsters in India mostly get the winner of an election and the seat shares closer to reality when the outcome is decisive. When elections are this close, pollsters rarely tend to be accurate on vote and seat shares. Whether a polling agency has done a good survey is clear from what it reveals in its methodology – the sample size, the mode of survey, the representation of the sample, and inbuilt error margins. If a survey doesn't reveal these, it should not be considered serious enough.

## What is the National Health Claim Exchange?

Will the platform help patients access healthcare easily? Will it bring about transparency in the healthcare claims ecosystem? What are the hurdles to the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India's objective of achieving 'Insurance for All by 2047'?

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

### The story so far:

The Health Ministry along with the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) are working on measures aimed at allowing patients to access quality healthcare swiftly and with reduced out-of-pocket expenditure. The Ministry and IRDAI are launching the National Health Claim Exchange (NHCCX), a digital platform which will bring together insurance companies, healthcare sector service providers and government insurance scheme administrators.

### How is the NHCCX expected to work?

The NHCCX will serve as a gateway for exchanging claims-related information among various stakeholders in the healthcare and health insurance ecosystem. The integration with NHCCX is expected to enable seamless interoperability of health claims processing, enhancing efficiency and transparency in the insurance industry, benefiting policyholders and patients, said the Health Ministry.

'The primary challenge in health insurance lies in improving the relationship between hospitals and insurance companies'

Asked if the system will help to accommodate the dynamic and diverse healthcare system of India, S. Prakash, MD & CEO designate, Galaxy Health and Allied Insurance Company Limited, said the healthcare landscape has been evolving to align with IRDAI's objective of achieving 'Insurance for All by 2047'. "The insurance industry is poised to support the implementation of this system by facilitating streamlined interactions between hospitals and insurers, establishing a seamless, paperless, and secure contractual framework. Acting as a centralised hub for all health claims, the NHCCX will significantly alleviate the administrative burden on hospitals, which currently contend with multiple portals for various insurers," he explained. Twelve insurance companies and one TPA (Third Party Administrator) have completed the NHCCX integration.

### What about cashless claims?

A timeline has been fixed for insurance claims of cashless claims. The insurance authority has said that all cashless claims have to be processed within three hours of the receipt of discharge authorisation from the hospital. The insurance regulator has set the insurance provider a deadline of July 31 to put systems and processes in place to ensure the smooth facilitation of this latest directive.

### What are some other incentives on offer?

To encourage adoption of digital health transactions and digitisation of patient health records in the country, the National Health Authority had announced financial incentives under the Digital Health Incentive Scheme (DHIS) from January 2023. Under the DHIS, there is a provision that for every insurance claim transaction through NHCCX, financial incentives of ₹500 per claim or 10% of the claim amount, whichever is lower, would be given to hospitals, according to a Health Ministry note.

### Why is NHCCX being brought in?

A paper titled, 'Health Insurance Coverage in

India: Insights for National Health Protection Scheme', noted that health insurance is an important policy strategy to provide health care services as well as reduce high out-of-pocket expenditure which burden individuals. It points out that for all India, the hospitalisation cases are highest when insured from private purchase (54.4 per 1,00,000 persons). In urban areas, cases for inpatient care are observed to be highest for those covered by government-funded schemes (60.4 cases per 1,00,000 persons). On the contrary, in rural areas, in-patient cases are substantially higher for those purchasing private insurance (73.5 cases per 1,00,000 persons). Also, overall in-patient cases are higher for urban areas compared to rural areas.

Arguing for the NHCCX, the Health Ministry states that the platform will help in standardisation and interoperability of health claims and will bring in seamless exchange of data, documents and images between payer (insurance company/TPA/government scheme administrator) and provider (hospital/lab/poly clinic). Industry experts also note that the platform, through uniform data presentation and centralised validation of claims data, could bring in a more standardised approach to healthcare pricing.

### What are the challenges?

Health insurance contributes to approximately 29% of the total general insurance premium income in India. The primary hurdle in health insurance today lies in improving the relationship between hospitals and insurance companies, said Dr. Prakash, adding that the push towards digitisation requires active involvement from both parties, necessitating upgrades to current IT systems and enhanced workforce training. "Issues such as discharge delays and miscommunication between hospitals and insurers further complicate matters. Building trust among policyholders hinges on delivering efficient services. The NHCCX portal aims to streamline the claims process by bringing all stakeholders onto one platform, reducing claim times and standardising procedures. While challenges like data breaches are being effectively tackled, the NHCCX stands as an ongoing benefit for all involved, facilitating smoother operations within the healthcare space," he said.



GETTY IMAGES

# PROFILES

## Return of the kingmaker

**N. Chandrababu Naidu**

The 'CEO of Andhra Pradesh' is back in power in the State with a resounding mandate and emerged as a key player at the Centre as his Telugu Desam Party is the second largest constituent in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance

### Appaji Reddem

For Nara Chandrababu Naidu, the 74-year-old Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo, the 2024 elections brought a double victory. His party captured power in Andhra Pradesh by winning 135 seats in the 175-member Assembly, and emerged as the second largest party in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) by securing 16 Lok Sabha seats (out of the 25 in the State).

With the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) falling short of the halfway mark in Parliament by 32 seats, Mr. Naidu has emerged as a kingmaker. The BJP is also banking on the Janata Dal (United), led by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, which won 12 Lok Sabha seats, and other smaller NDA partners, to form the next government at the Centre.

Post elections, there were rumours that the Congress and the INDIA alliance had offered the special category status to Andhra Pradesh and key portfolios to the TDP in return for the party's support, but Mr. Naidu, who flew to Delhi to join an NDA meeting after the results were announced, made it clear that he would stay with the BJP-led alliance.

Prime Minister Modi thanked Mr. Naidu for extending the TDP's support for the NDA. And Mr. Naidu said Mr. Modi is the right leader for India at the right time, adding that balancing regional aspirations with national interests is a must for India, while ensuring the holistic development for all sections of society.

For record, Mr. Naidu played a key role in national politics in 1996 and 2014 when he was the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. He extended his support from outside to the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. In 2014, when Mr. Modi came to power at the Centre, he was part of the NDA, but the alliance fell apart in 2018 as the demand for the special category status (SCS) for the bifurcated Andhra Pradesh was not met. The TDP high command then asked its Ministers in the Union Cabinet – Ashok Gajapathi Raju and Sujana Chowdary – to quit.

Cut to 2024: Mr. Naidu has extended "unconditional" support to the NDA.

The TDP's emergence as a key ally of the BJP in a coalition government is a timely opportunity for Mr. Naidu. He has already made it clear that the TDP will be a part of the Union Cabinet and he may bargain for plum portfolios.

His immediate goal is to finish the incomplete task of rebuilding the bifurcated A.P. and, especially, Amaravati as the capital city – his brain child.

He fought the 2024 polls in an alliance with the BJP and Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP). Explaining the logic behind the alliance, he stated that "without the Centre's support, it is not possible to rebuild the bifurcated A.P."

Mr. Naidu may also revive his demand for the SCS for the State, which was promised by the former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in the Rajya Sabha, in 2014 when A.P. was bifurcated to carve out Telangana. While the then ruling Congress offered the SCS to AP for five years, the BJP had endorsed the same to be extended for 10 years. This apart, Mr. Naidu is expected to seek the Centre's support for completing the long-pending Polavaram Multipurpose Irrigation Project, say TDP leaders.

### Grandiose plan

As the first CM of bifurcated A.P. in 2014, Mr. Naidu came up with a grandiose plan to build Amaravati with the help of a Singapore consortium, which submitted a master plan. He could gather over 34,000 acres from thousands of farmers in 29 villages through a land pooling plan for Amaravati.

But he could not complete the project as he was voted out in 2019 and Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR Congress party came to power.

The YSR Congress government came up with a three-capital plan: Amaravati as legislative capital; Visakhapatnam as executive capital and Kurnool as judiciary capital, to ensure decentralised development of the State. But the plan did not take off either within the five-year term of Mr. Jagan's government.

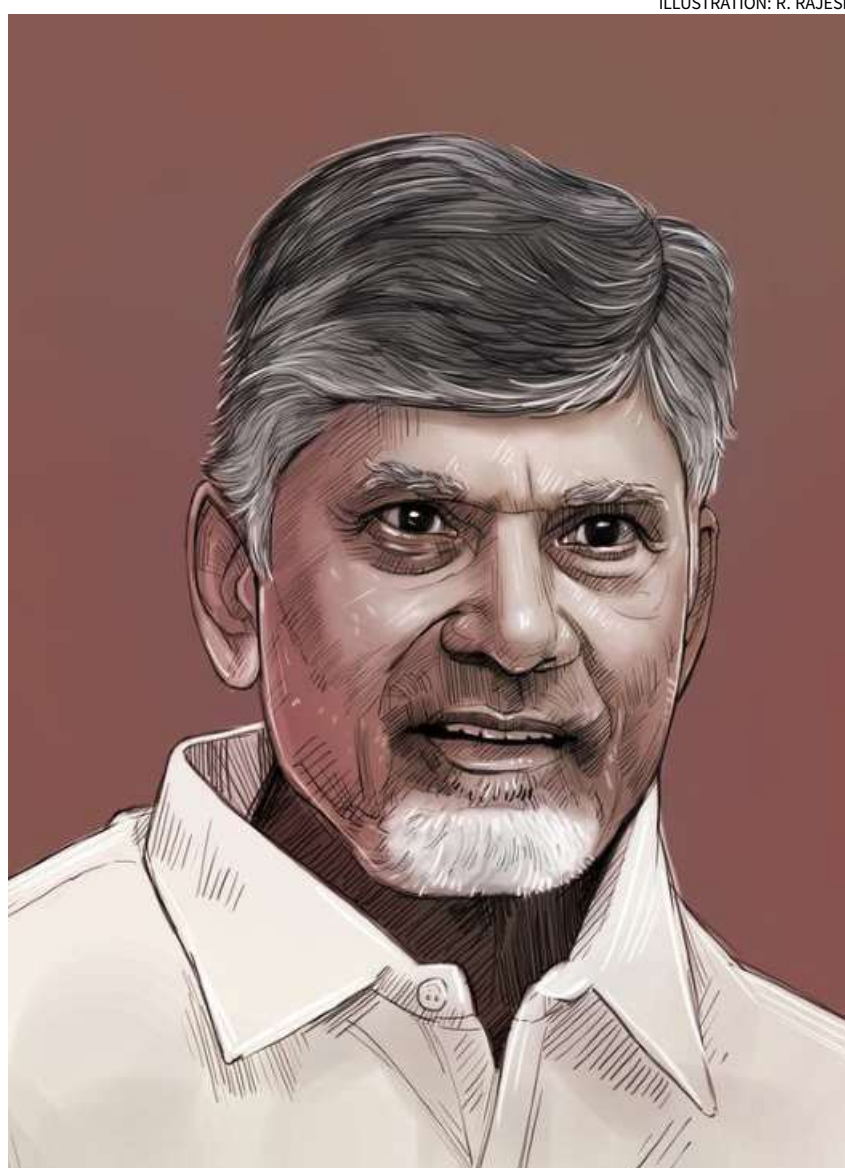


ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

Mr. Naidu started his political career right from his student years in Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, where he did MA in Economics. Hailing from Naravari Palli in Chittoor district, he joined the Congress party. He became an MLA at the age of 28 and a Minister at the age of 30. Mr. Naidu served as the Minister for Cinematography, Technical Education, Irrigation and Archives during T. Anjaiah's government between 1980 and 1983.

Later he married Bhuvanawari, daughter of the late N.T. Rama Rao, the

founder of the TDP and a doyen of Telugu cinema. Later Mr. Naidu switched to the TDP and became Chief Minister in 1995 in united A.P. after a revolt against his father-in-law and Chief Minister NTR. During his 10-year tenure, Mr. Naidu created a space for Hyderabad in the global map as a favourite IT destination.

During this time, Mr. Naidu was termed the CEO of A.P. as he promoted high-tech and transparent governance. He convinced Bill Gates to set up the Microsoft India Development Centre in Hyderabad,

which at that time was the biggest Microsoft facility outside the U.S. Later, several global corporations, mostly IT firms made a beeline to set up shop in Hyderabad.

However, in the 2004 polls, Mr. Naidu lost power to the Congress party. There were criticisms that his high-tech governance overlooked the economic conditions in the rural areas.

Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy of the Congress won two consecutive terms and remained the CM till he died in a helicopter accident in 2009. Mr. Naidu was back as CM post bifurcation of the State in 2014. During this term, he promised to build Amaravati like he once transformed Hyderabad. Now that he is back in power, his pet project is in the limelight again.

### Jail term

After his 2019 defeat, Mr. Naidu faced multiple cases and was arrested in September 2023 in a multicore scam related to the Skill Development Corporation. He spent 53 days in jail. It was a low point in his political career. But it was at this time, actor-turned-politician and Jana Sena Party leader Pawan Kalyan announced his support for the TDP after meeting Mr. Naidu in Rajahmundry jail. Mr. Kalyan also said he would work towards bringing the JSP, the TDP and the BJP together to form an alliance. The trio fought the 2024 election together, and the rest is history.

"It's a wonderful result and such huge majorities became possible only due to the combined efforts of the TDP, the Jana Sena and the BJP," said TDP State president K. Atchannaaidu.

"The victory has enhanced our responsibility manifold. The State is sabotaged, systems failed and the YSRCP has thrown the State into a financial crisis. But still, I'm very confident that the State is under the able and experienced leadership of Nara Chandrababu Naidu and a stalwart like Narendra Modi ji is the PM; we will bring the State back on the right track. And we will live up to the responsibility given to us by people," he said. "I bow to the five crore Telugu people in the State who gave us such a great victory."

### THE GIST

Chandrababu Naidu became Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh for the first time in 1995 after a revolt against his father-in-law and the then Chief Minister, N.T. Rama Rao

While in power, Naidu was hailed as the 'CEO of A.P.' as he promoted high-tech and transparent governance

However, in the 2004 polls, Naidu lost power to the Congress party. There were criticisms that his high-tech governance overlooked the economic conditions in the rural areas

## The Dalit commander

**Chandrashekhar Azad**

The leader of the Azad Samaj Party, who won from U.P.'s Nagina, says his work will be for Dalits, tribals, Muslims, youth and women, and it will always be against injustice

ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

### Abhinav Lakshman

Sitting in his room at the Western Court MP Hostel along Janpath, Chandrashekhar Azad fields calls on a phone that does not stop ringing. Two Uttar Pradesh Police personnel are sitting on the couch next to him. There is a beeline of journalists, fellow MPs, politicians, and political workers waiting to meet him.

Among them is Manoj Kumar, the newly-elected Congress MP from Bihar's Sasaram – one of the 19 SC seats the INDIA bloc flipped from the BJP during this Lok Sabha election. After an endearing embrace, Mr. Azad introduces him to the room: "He used to be a state unit president of Azad Samaj Party (the party Mr. Azad founded) – a Majboot Chamar." Then he turns to Mr. Kumar, "This is our moment. So what if we are from different parties, we are stepping into Parliament together now."

Mr. Kumar replies, "What can I say? *Iss baar Chamaron ne Samvidhaan bacha diya hai bhai saab* (This time the Chamar people have rescued the Constitution)."

"This is what has happened in this election," Mr. Chandrashekhar, 37, tells *The Hindu* as he tries to prepare his schedule for the next few weeks after having won a decisive vic-



tory in Uttar Pradesh's Nagina constituency – a traditional bastion of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Mr. Chandrashekhar's victory by a margin of over 1.5 lakh votes on a seat like Nagina, put together with the BSP's abysmal performance this year (the party drew a blank), is now giving more credence to the argument that the fire-brand leader has occupied a special place among Dalit voters in the region.

An Ambedkarite activist and lawyer by education, Mr. Chandrashekhar's politics is built on a visible assertion of his Dalit, specifically Chamar, identity. As an activist, his initial focus was on bringing volunteer-run schools to the people of his community.

One of the early instances that catapulted Mr. Chandrashekhar and his organisation, the Bhim Army, into the spotlight was the installation of a board in 2015 on a private land in Gharkauli, proclaiming, "The Great Chamar: Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Vil-

lage, Gharkauli welcomes you", which triggered objection from Thakurs.

Ever since, the Bhim Army and its members have worked hard to become the first port of call for the people of their community – whether it is about atrocities by upper caste folk or police brutality or about protecting Ambedkar statues from bulldozers.

The Bhim Army has also organised protests demanding government action against atrocities on Dalits and arranged legal help to the victims. As the conversation in Mr. Azad's Western Court quarters continues, he says, "Now you see what they are doing with the Ambedkar statue's relocation in Parliament complex. I am not going to let that go."

### Dalit-Muslim unity

A significant part of Mr. Azad's politics over the years has also been to build Dalit-Muslim unity, which was buoyed by his participation in the anti-

CAA protests that had erupted across the country in December 2019. His protests in front of the Delhi Police headquarters and at Jama Masjid won him an almost cult-like status.

Following the prominence his politics gained after this, Mr. Azad registered his party – the Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) – and immediately started preparing to build his political organisation. In 2021, *TIME* magazine put him on a list of 100 "emerging leaders who are shaping the future".

Now, as he prepares to take oath as a member of the 18th Lok Sabha, Mr. Azad is clear about his priorities – "My work will be for the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, backward classes, Muslims, youth and women and it will always be against injustice," he says, without getting into the specifics except one thing – the need for a Caste Census.

At the same time, when asked if he thought the vote for his politics was one rejecting Hindutva, Mr. Azad was cautious in his response. "Religion is a personal thing. It should not be brought into politics. So I won't say this was a rejection of anything, but I will say this: BJP leaders repeatedly talking about making a theocratic nation and their arrogance has upset the people and they have spoken accordingly."

## The giant killer

**Geniben Thakor**

The Congress leader denied the BJP a hat-trick clean sweep of Gujarat by winning the Banaskantha constituency

### Mahesh Langa

For the first time in a decade, the Congress will have a member in the Lok Sabha from Gujarat. In the 2014 and 2019 elections, the BJP had swept the home State of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, winning all 26 Lok Sabha seats.

However, in the just concluded national polls, Geniben Thakor, the 49-year-old Congress candidate from Banaskantha in North Gujarat denied a hat-trick sweep to the BJP, by defeating the ruling party's Rekha Chaudhary.

"Geniben has become a giant killer not just for defeating the BJP candidate but also for smashing the BJP's giant ego that Gujarat was theirs," said Gulabsinh Rajput, a former Congress legislator who played a key role in Ms. Thakor's victory from Banaskantha, a rural district where large number of residents are dependent on dairy farming and animal husbandry. The local Banas Dairy is the largest among over a dozen district milk unions that make up the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, which markets dairy products under the Amul brand. It was in Banaskantha, where, during the campaign, Prime Minister Modi said, "if you had two buffaloes, the Congress would take away one if it is voted to power."



Ms. Thakor comes from a lower middle-class family in Banaskantha. Thakors in Gujarat are spread in the North and Central regions and are called OBC Kshatriya. They are mainly engaged in agriculture with small holdings or are labourers in the farms.

A student of the Jain Vishva Bharti Institute in neighbouring Rajasthan, Ms. Thakor joined the Congress as a grassroots worker. In 2012, she contested the Assembly elections from Vav constituency but lost. Five years later, she defeated the BJP's strongman Shankar Chaudhary, who was a Minister and chairman of the Banas Dairy and Banaskantha District Cooperative Bank. In December 2022, she won again even when the Congress suffered a huge defeat in the State, winning only 17 out of 182.

In the parliamentary polls, the Congress decided to field her from Banaskantha, a seat the party last won in 2009, given her popularity and fighting spi-

rit. Known for her rustic speech and aggressive style and seen as an approachable leader who attends social gatherings frequently, Ms. Thakor caught the fancy of her community.

### Daunting challenge

Notwithstanding her popularity and the community support she enjoyed, the challenge of fighting a Lok Sabha poll was daunting on several counts. First, she hardly had any financial support to take on the BJP's resources. Second, neither she nor the Congress party had a network of workers and leaders to match the BJP's well-oiled election machinery.

"It was a fight between Banas Ni Ben (Sister of Banas) vs Banas Bank & Dairy. Everyone in the district knows how the BJP misused the two institutes [the dairy and bank cooperatives] to win the polls and yet, the people of Banas have blessed their sister," Ms. Thakor said.

Though Rekhaben

Chaudhary was her rival, for all practical purposes, the election was between Ms. Thakor and local strongman Shankar Chaudhary, who is now the Gujarat Assembly Speaker and the head of the Banas Dairy, which has an annual turnover of over ₹15,000, and vice chairman of the Gujarat State Cooperative Bank. In Gujarat, Chaudharys are a dominant caste spread in the northern districts such as Banaskantha, Mehsana and Sabarkantha and wield considerable clout in local dairies.

To garner financial resources, Ms. Thakor crowdfunded her election, urging the public to contribute to her campaign, which she said would democratise her contest and make it participatory. "Obviously, I had to ask people to support me not only with their votes but also with their monetary contribution because the sky was the limit on the other side with the bank and dairy coffers," she said, adding that she had urged people to make small contributions like ₹111.

"Her victory is huge considering that she was fighting not only against the BJP, but also against the state machinery, bootleggers supported by the police and cooperative institutions," said Congress leader Jignesh Mevani, who is also a legislator from Banaskantha district.



## REFLECTIONS

## { INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



## In a tale of two nations, a case of shared values

Legacy and contemporary pragmatism can and must combine in South Africa. There are lessons for India as well

“India-South Africa: Two struggles, one freedom.” This was a slogan about India and South Africa I heard with joy and repeated with zeal during the little under two years that I was privileged to work in India’s High Commission in Pretoria (1996-1997). Those were Mandela years. The great man, freshly released from his 27-year-long captivity under the apartheid regime, had won for his party, the African National Congress (ANC), a spectacular majority in the first multi-racial general elections of April 27, 1994. Having got to my new station just after one of our general elections, I augmented the magnetic slogan to say “India-South Africa: Two nations, one democracy”.

Though in the election his ANC had obtained a majority of seats in the National Assembly and was fully within its rights to form the government on its own, Nelson Mandela set up a government of national unity. He asked the party of the apartheid era, the National Party (NP) and the ANC’s

rival in KwaZulu Natal, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), to join the cabinet, disregarding their poor numbers in the National Assembly.

One of Mandela’s legacies was trust. He wanted to start off the republic trusting people, especially those on “the other side”. He reposed in politicians of ideologies different from his own, like his apartheid NP predecessor FW de Klerk, whom he made deputy president and Inkatha chief Buthelezi to whom he gave the ministry of home affairs.

From among those on his “own” side, notable was the presence of many Indian South Africans in the Parliament elected on ANC tickets and many cabinet ministers. Not surprisingly, Mandela was told by African colleagues in his party, “There are so many Indians holding high positions in the new South Africa...More than proportionate to their numbers...” The response was classic Mandela: “The number of Indians in high positions (in the new South Africa) is not proportionate to their population but proportionate to their contribution to the struggle (for our liberation).” Valuations politics cannot go further than that.

And so Mandela’s government was a coalition but much more than one. It was a confluence of colours but also a reservoir of values, the principles coming out of a passion for inclusivity and for the sake of his ethical satisfaction.

Time does not stand still. In the three dec-

ades since the 1994 elections, with senior leadership fading away, the ANC’s sway with its deliriously loyal mass base changed, its vote share dropping from 70% in 2004 to 59% in 2019 to 40.18% now. Thirty years after Mandela’s first election victory, nearly two-thirds of black South Africans steeped in poverty and reeling under a 32% unemployment rate have made the role of President Cyril Ramaphosa unenviable. In the just concluded elections, the people of South Africa have not voted the ANC out but have said to it: “The struggle that brought you to office answered the hunger of our souls, what we now need is something that answers the hunger in our stomachs.”

Lubna Nadvi, senior lecturer at the School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu Natal, in a communication to this writer, says tellingly: “While some may have managed to improve their lives due to access to a good education, decent employment, good healthcare and other social benefits, it has become abundantly clear that the majority of citizens have not benefited from the transition to democracy. They still languish in poverty and continue to face many of the same struggles they did during the years of apartheid. In addition, various other social ills such as crime, gender based violence, corruption and state capture have reached almost epidemic proportions in the last three decades.” And she adds: “The rainbow nation is now more of a distant memory than a cur-



Though in the election his ANC had obtained a majority of seats in the National Assembly and was fully within its rights to form the government on its own, Nelson Mandela set up a government of national unity

GETTY IMAGES

rent reality.”

The current electoral reality will require Ramaphosa to form a coalition that will not appear like a rainbow on an applauding sky and come, in fact, not from any firmament at all but from terra firma. Finding coalition partners from either the Right-wing Democratic Alliance, which is now the second largest party after the ANC or from the uMkhonto weSizwe or MK Party, the Left-wing outfit formed last year by former President Jacob Zuma, whom Ramaphosa replaced, will be an exacting operation for him. Elinor Sisulu, author and daughter-in-law of the great anti-apartheid leader Walter Sisulu, in an assessment of the post-election scene, says: “The ANC has to rely on coalition partners, yet to be identified. For coalitions to work, leaders must transcend political divides in the interest of the nation. There is no indication so far that this will be the case.” So, does that mean goodbye for the politics

that made Mandela opt for a coalition and later, leave office when he need not have, Walter Sisulu to stay off it when he need not have, Desmond Tutu embark on a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Judge Chaskalson head a constitutional court when that was supremely problematic? Does that mean that golden moments like Mandela’s rollback of South Africa’s nuclear weapons programme and of the death penalty may never again be expected of post-2024 South Africa?

The genocide case brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on December 29, 2023 by Ramaphosa’s South Africa against Israel regarding its conduct in the Gaza Strip as part of the Israel-Hamas war tells me, South Africa will find a way to do right by its people’s quotidian entitlements and its legacy of principled politics. South Africa’s voters can never want their leaders to bid goodbye to the personal attributes of Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Man-

dela and Sisulu.

Let no drums be sounded for the funeral of something that has not died. Valuations politics will not die in South Africa. It is one thing to concede that the era of idealism in South Africa has given way to realism, but quite another to say that South Africa has orbited out of the cosmos of values.

Legacy and contemporary pragmatism can and must combine in South Africa. And perhaps Ramaphosa, who stayed off power for decades after liberation, may startle the world by saying his people, not he, wield power. If he were to form a composite ministry of national unity with the self-denying legacy of trust Mandela showed in 1994, he will coin a new slogan valid for both South Africa and India post their elections: India-South Africa: Two republics, one ethics.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator and diplomat. The views expressed are personal

## { SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## The old order changeth, yielding place to new?

No doubt you’ve heard this aphorism before but that’s because it’s undeniably true. The marvel of democracy is that the collective wisdom of the voters can resolve seemingly intractable situations. It happened in 1977. It’s happened again on June 4. And although many were hoping for the outcome, few actually thought it would materialise.

No doubt Narendra Modi has been restored to office but in circumstances that are dramatically different to what he envisaged. The BJP has ended up with its worst election result in a decade. It is 32 short of a majority. To form a government it needs support from allies whose loyalty will always be questionable. They’ve deserted the BJP on earlier occasions and

you cannot rule out their doing so again.

This raises several questions about Modi’s third spell as Prime Minister (PM). As yet we don’t have the answers. Very possibly, even Modi doesn’t know them. But the questions delineate the challenge he faces. Their answers will reveal a lot about him. They also spell out the risks or, at least, the issues awaiting India.

Modi began by predicting the BJP would win 370 seats. After the fifth round of polling, he said the party had already crossed 272. It ended up with just 240, way short of a majority. So, today, is he an embarrassed man or thick-skinned enough to brush it off? What about his personal performance in Varanasi? In 2019, he had a 4.8 lakh majority. It’s been slashed to just 1.5 lakh. How will a man

who last month claimed “Ma Ganga ne mujhe god le liya hai” (My mother Ganga has adopted me) handle this very personal reversal?

However, the key question is can Modi, temperamentally and psychologically, adjust to the very different circumstances he now faces as PM? Or is he ill-equipped to handle a coalition government, where he needs to reach out to his allies, often give in to them and always keep them content and satisfied?

Remember, for 13 years as chief minister of Gujarat and 13 more as Prime Minister of India he did not need to do this. Instead, his wish was everyone’s command. He ran a centralised government where ministers did what the Prime Minister’s office required. None dared to demur.

What about his attitude to autonomous institutions like Parliament, the judiciary and the media? The old Modi often ignored Parliament, was dismissive of the media, and his government held up judicial appointments. But now the weaker Modi will need to adopt a more consensual approach. Or he could annoy his allies and endanger his alliance. Is he willing to do that?

And then there’s his attitude to criticism and dissent. It’s no secret the old Modi disliked both. The new Modi must

learn not just to tolerate and accept but to live with both. How easy will that be?

The questions, of course, go further. Some have to do with his recent pronouncements. He may hope they’re forgotten but I doubt they will be. Not in the political climate that prevails.

For a start, there are things he said during the campaign that could haunt him unless he learns to smile and deflect. But is that what he’ll do when claims of his non-biological birth are thrown at him as taunts? And mark my words, they will be. When that happens will he bristle?

More importantly, can he resist the temptation to demonise Muslims? His allies are unlikely to accept further occasions when Muslims are called infiltrators or accused of benefiting from reservations snatched from OBCs, SCs and STs. But if such language comes to him instinctively can he resist it? Remember, it’s been part of his rhetoric since 2001.

The truth is everything I’ve raised can be reduced to one simple question: can old Mr Modi become new Mr Modi? His government depends on it. Our governance depends on it. So, too, does his political future. But what’s the answer?

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

## { ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## Mediation matters: A need for more women

Now that the elections are behind us, it’s time for political parties that relied heavily on the women’s vote to find ways to involve women in decision-making, not just as recipients of welfare schemes. Recently, Indian Army Major Radhika Sen received the United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the Year award from the UN Secretary-General. “A gender perspective in UN peacekeeping is essential for an effective, inclusive, and sustained peace process. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict, facing increased risk and abuse. The need is to mainstream women in nation-building, particularly in security and governance,” Sen said on receiving the award.

Against the backdrop of conflicts abroad (Ukraine, Gaza) and at home (Manipur), we need to look at the role women can play in peacemaking, not just peacekeeping, given outsized adverse impact conflicts have on women. In this context, UNSCR 1325 has been instrumental in providing a platform to nurture peace, emphasising the crucial role of women in peace-making. This resolution underscores the importance of women’s participation in all aspects of peace-building and conflict resolution. India, given its efforts to integrate women into peacekeeping, has the potential to bring more women into peacemaking. There has been a noticeable absence of women in peace talks in Gaza, Ukraine, and Manipur. India should create a cadre of mediators with strong women’s representation to address the complexities of today’s conflicts, and promote collaborative and proactive conflict resolution.

Meenakshi Gopinath, director of Women in Security, Conflict Management, and Peace (WISCOMP), said, “While the discussion around mediation has gained momentum in India, around the globe several women’s networks for mediation have created new bonds of solidarity and opportunities for co-learning. Of the 24 members of the Mediation Support Network, one of the most active global networks of NGOs supporting mediation, only eight are located outside

Western Europe and North America. There is a need to reinforce the idea based on the perspectives and experiences of the Global South, which offers a rich canvas of traditional and contemporary practices in mediation.” Susan Ferguson, country representative, UN Women, India, adds, “Women are often instrumental in bringing about peace at the grassroots level during conflicts, but then not involved in formal peace negotiations. We need women in both these tracks, as men alone cannot find durable peace solutions.”

At a recent WISCOMP-IIC dialogue on Conversations in Mediation, Neha Sanghrakha, senior conflict sensitivity advisor at the United Nations and senior advisor at the Geneva Centre for Security, said, “Women have played a significant role in mediation through networks. Wherever they have participated, they have utilised these networks to foster collaboration and support among women mediators. These networks are crucial in creating an environment conducive to peace and conflict resolution.”

Mediation can only work if it is aligned with the local environment and must involve a risk mitigation strategy. To its credit, the UN has made several efforts to get more women to the negotiation table. India’s new government can learn from global best practices, particularly from Africa, where the number of women in peace-making talks has risen substantially.

The new government must eliminate institutional barriers for women mediators. A key step is ensuring adequate funding and training. If India can raise an effective cadre of women mediators, it would not only benefit the country but also serve as a resource for other nations facing conflicts. Using the NGO and grassroots network of women’s groups, the government should strengthen women mediators’ capacities and areas of expertise. This would be the next step following the accolades Indian women peacekeepers have earned worldwide.

The views expressed are personal

## Why Big Cats matter for biodiversity and climate

Imagine having the ability to sleep out in the open at minus 40 degrees and jump 50 feet over steep cliffs, or run at 120 kilometres per hour in searing heat across open grasslands. Meet the snow leopard, inhabiting the mountains in some of the harshest conditions on the planet, and the cheetah, the fastest animal on land. Big cats are known for their formidable presence in a wide range of ecosystems. This group includes seven species: the tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, puma, jaguar, and cheetah, spread across 95 countries. They inhabit a diverse range of landscapes including grasslands, savannas, rainforests, mangroves, mountains and deserts.

As “apex predators”, their hunting keeps herbivore populations in check, keeping ecosystems healthy. Tigers prey on deer and wild boar, preventing them from overeating fruits and nuts, which are crucial for seed dispersal and forest regeneration. Lions, cheetahs and snow leopards hunt in landscapes with sparse vegetation, ensuring the survival of the limited plant and smaller animal species that can survive in harsh environments.

Big cats also play a vital role in fighting the climate crisis. Ecosystems like forests, grasslands and mangroves are important carbon sinks. These areas store carbon in the form of biomass and also absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, which helps control global warming. By keeping these ecosystems healthy, big cats ensure their optimum capacity to store carbon.

Their roar and purr reverberates across our economies as well. It is estimated that nearly half of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or \$44 trillion, depends on nature. Sectors like agriculture, food and beverages, and construction that rely on

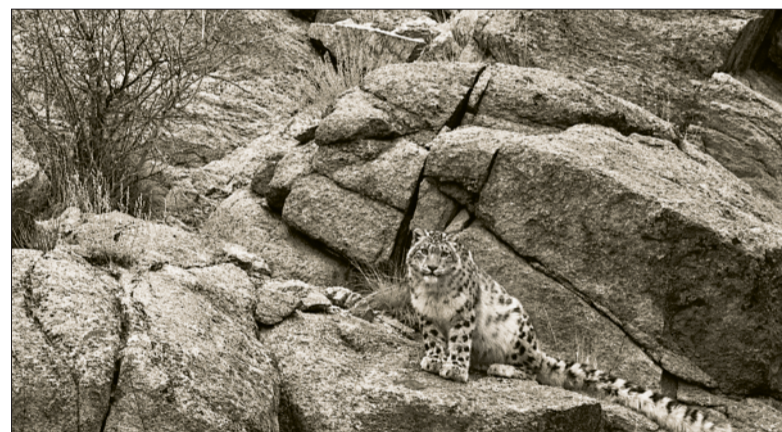
direct extraction of natural resources or the provision of ecosystem services such as healthy soils, clean water and pollination need thriving biodiversity, which depends on big cats, “keystone species” whose populations are an important indicator of the health of their entire habitats.

Local communities around the world have a close relationship with big cat habitats and species themselves. Tourism is a major draw, with big cat safaris generating

revenue through park fees, accommodation, guides and other ancillary activities. Artisans benefit by selling souvenirs featuring these animals. Beyond tourism, big cat presence can indirectly support livelihoods through non-timber forest products. Healthy ecosystems, maintained by big cats, can provide communities with essential resources like medicinal plants besides benefits from carbon sequestration.

Today, their survival creatures are threatened by habitat loss, poaching, illegal trade in wildlife and human-wildlife conflict, leading to a significant decline in big cat populations, with many species on the brink of extinction. Six out of the seven big cat species are classified as either endangered, near endangered or vulnerable in the IUCN Red List.

Global cooperation is imperative to reverse this alarming trend. It allows for the creation of transboundary conservation zones, ensuring safe corridors for big cat movement and minimising habitat fragmentation. Sharing knowledge and expertise is another crucial aspect. Countries with successful conservation programmes can guide others, sharing best practices in areas like monitoring, habitat restoration, community engagement and resource mobilisation among others.



Meet the snow leopard, inhabiting the mountains in some of the harshest conditions on the planet

PRATIK CHARGE/HT ARCHIVE

India, home to five of the seven big cat species, has been continually setting new benchmarks in their conservation. Project Tiger, which completed 50 years in 2023, revived the population of the Royal Bengal Tiger from around 1,411 in 2006 to more than 3,600 today. The success of the initiative is reflected in the fact that India is now home to more than 70% of the total wild tiger population in the world. Through Project Cheetah, India set another milestone with the world’s first inter-continental carnivore translocation, working to revive the population of cheetahs which went extinct in the country in 1952. In two years, the project has achieved four out of its six short-term success criteria including survival of translocated animals, establishment of home ranges and contribution to community livelihoods.

Building on the success of such initiatives, India has launched the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) to create a global network on big cat conservation, bringing together the 96 range countries as well as non-range countries, conservation organisations, research institutions, private sector, civil society and local communities.

The forum will serve as a platform to catalyse technical and financial cooperation, resource mobilisation and project implementation across borders. As the majority of the big cat countries belong to the Global

South, it will add an important facet to the South-South Cooperation agenda, especially in areas like research and technology transfer, capacity building, joint patrolling and trans-boundary conservation areas.

UNDP has been actively working with the government towards big cat conservation, leveraging community participation, nature-based livelihoods and technology to demonstrate innovative pilots that can be adapted and scaled within the country and globally. The SECURE Himalaya initiative in partnership with the Global Environment Facility supported the first-ever scientific estimation of snow leopard population in the country, training scientists and community volunteers to undertake this exercise. Models for habitat restoration and community-driven ecotourism are being implemented in tiger and leopard landscapes that can be replicated across other big cat landscapes.

By protecting big cats, we don’t just save these predators but also safeguard the intricate web of biodiversity within their ecosystems, ensuring the survival of countless other species and maintaining a healthy balance in the natural world.

Caitlin Wiesen is former resident representative a.i., UNDP India, and SP Yadav is director general (Interim), International Big Cat Alliance. The views expressed are personal.

## { SUNDAY LETTERS }

## Responsible reportage is key

This is with reference to ‘Forget those vaccine fears, time to move on’ by Anand Krishnan (June 2). The study by BHU on the adverse effects of Covaxin and the resulting reportage by the media should be a cause of concern. Responsible media reporting is crucial to avoid unnecessary alarm.

Kiran Sharma

## Spies who came in from the cold

This is with reference to ‘Brotherhood of lapsed spies turned chroniclers’ by Karan Thapar (June 2). The book, *Covert*, shines a spotlight on the lives of spies. In an era of frosty India-Pakistan ties, the book is a reassuring reminder of continuing dialogue between the nations.

Atul Kislay

## Class hypocrisies should be examined

This is with reference to ‘In Pune crash, a mirror to our class hypocrisies’ by Pavan K Varma (June 2). While nobody can condone the family’s behaviour to get their *laddu* out of trouble, it is the economical status of the culprit that gets our goat.

Anthony Henriques

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

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM  
Website: pchidambaram.in  
Twitter: @Pchidambaram\_IN

and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts."  
— William Shakespeare

WHEN YOU read this column on June 9, 2024, Mr Narendra Modi would be the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India for the third time — but it will not be the same Mr Modi. It will be Exit, Mr Modi, the authoritarian prime minister of a single-party government and Enter, Mr Modi, the prime minister of a coalition of many parties with barely a 20-seat majority (of which TDP has 16 MPs and JDU 12 MPs). It will be a wholly new experience for him. Mr Modi did not prepare for this role in his nearly 55 years of public life as a *pracharak*, general secretary of BJP, chief minister of Gujarat and prime minister of India. He will play in a game with which he is unfamiliar.

DEMOCRACY PARTIALLY RESTORED

In the just concluded Lok Sabha elections, the people of India achieved many things that were considered nearly impossible until a few weeks ago:  
■ the two Houses will be run according to the Rules and the consensus of the House, and not at the discretion of the Presiding Officer and the Leader of the House;

The people have spoken. They value freedom, right to speech and expression, right to privacy, and right to protest. The government must give up its penchant for filing spurious cases for 'sedition' and 'defamation'. 'Encounter' and 'bulldozer justice' must be abandoned (a lesson especially to Mr Adityanath, chief minister of U.P.). The Ram Temple is beyond politics and should never again be invoked for political purposes...

"All the world's a stage ..."

- the composition of the various House Committees will be more balanced and the Chairs more evenly distributed among the political parties;
- there will be a recognized Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha with a sufficient number of MPs in the Opposition;
- the Constitution of India cannot be amended unless there is a consensus among the Treasury benches and the Opposition benches in Parliament;
- meetings of the Cabinet or the Council of Ministers will no longer be a formal endorsement of decisions taken by the prime minister and, in many cases, already implemented — for example, the Cabinet will no more be only 'informed' of a drastic step like demonetization;
- the rights of states will be acknowledged and better safeguarded;
- devolution of funds to the states and allocation of funds to ministries/departments and schemes will be less arbitrary and to the satisfaction of the constituent parties of the coalition;
- the prime minister may be obliged to be present in the Houses more often, answer questions and participate in important debates.

LEARNING FROM MANDATE

The people have spoken. They value freedom, right to speech and expression, right to privacy, and right to protest. The

government must give up its penchant for filing spurious cases for 'sedition' and 'defamation'. 'Encounter' and 'bulldozer justice' must be abandoned (a lesson especially to Mr Adityanath, chief minister of U.P.). The Ram Temple is beyond politics and should never again be invoked for political purposes (ask 77-year-old Mr Awadhesh Prasad of Samajwadi Party elected from Faizabad constituency and Mr Saket Misra, son of Mr Nripendra Misra, former principal secretary to prime minister and Head of the Temple Construction Trust, defeated in Shrivasti constituency). The people want a truly free media: no more manufactured exit polls; no more dozing (and boring) coverage of every twitch of the eyebrow of the prime minister; no more questions tailored to pre-scripted answers; and no more obedient reading from the handouts of ED and CBI. The people want regional parties to be true to their core beliefs and not show one face in Delhi and another face in the state capital. Such parties will be punished as in the cases of AGP, SAD, JJP, BRS and JD(S) or severely warned as in the cases of BJD and YSRCP. There is a lesson for TDP and JDU.

OPPOSITION MUST PRESS AGENDA

The Opposition has an opportunity, after 10 years, to behave like a parliamentary opposition. It must press its agenda inside Parliament and outside. Here are

some ideas that captured the imagination of the people and elected a number of I.N.D.I.A. bloc candidates:

- conduct a socio-economic and caste survey.
- implement forthwith the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act and provide one-third reservation for women in elected legislatures beginning 2025.
- implement a minimum wage of Rs 400 per day for every kind of employment, including under MGNREGS.
- appoint a permanent commission on agricultural indebtedness and waive agricultural debt according to its recommendations.
- fill the 30 lakh vacancies in the government and government-controlled bodies.
- modify, if necessary, and implement forthwith the Apprentices Act to compel every qualified business establishment to appoint apprentices and share the burden of stipends.
- scrap the *Agriveer* scheme.
- suspend the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act until its constitutionality is decided by the Supreme Court.
- bring the investigation agencies (CBI, ED, NIA, SPIO, NCB, etc.) under the oversight of a joint parliamentary committee.

A NEW GAME

A new game will begin on June 9. New players will be in the forefront. Watch the exits and entrances.



Fifth COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH  
Twitter: @tavleen\_singh

We deserve better leaders

THE REAL winner in this Lok Sabha election was democracy. And, personally I could not be more delighted. On both sides of the divide was a campaign that sought to diminish democracy. From the INDIA lot we never heard the end of how unfair the election was and how the Election Commission and the EVMs were going to ensure another spectacular victory for Narendra Modi. He for his part campaigned as if he was no ordinary politician seeking a mandate, but a man sent by God to save India. The choice before voters was to choose between bad and worse.

On the evening of the results when the Prime Minister appeared, as he usually does, to address his party workers at BJP headquarters, they went through the usual motions of garlanding him in a massive garland of orchids. And, showering him with rose petals as he walked to the stage and he himself tried to pretend that he had made history by becoming only the second man to win a third consecutive term. But there was something in his body language that had changed. He seemed diminished as did Amit Shah and J P Nadda as they sat behind him on the stage trying to look cheerful.

The shock of what happened was so great that the BJP's vicious social media trolls were momentarily speechless. And party spokesmen who appeared on TV seemed chastened and humbled. This is good. The BJP was flying too high and there was too much talk of one nation, one leader, one people from Modi who should know that this kind of talk is alright in an autocracy but not in a democracy. Hopefully, when he gets sworn in for the third time this evening, he will remember that he did not really win.

If, on the other side, we had a choice between real leaders, it would have been heartening. But what we have is a collection of what Prashant Kishor calls 'potted plants' because they have all inherited their political careers from Daddy or Mummy. They are an uninspiring bunch. And, too filled with grievances that seek always to demean Indian democracy. Rahul Gandhi has been saying for months on international public platforms that democracy is dead in India. And there has been that endless whining about EVM manipulation which ended as soon as they discovered that they had done better than expected.

What this election has proved is that the voters of India are wiser than our leaders. They deserve better. They deserve leaders who do not try to divide them into categories of caste, and they deserve better than being told by BJP leaders that Muslims are a plague that must be eradicated. In his second term in office Modi showed that he was more interested in projecting himself as India's saviour than in saving India. Somehow everything that he did was always about him. It was because of him that 80 crore Indians were being given free rations every month. It was because of him that people were being given houses and clean drinking water (not quite true yet) and because of him that rural Indians now had toilets in their homes.

His problem was that he surrounded himself with sycophantic ministers who lied to him about what was really being done. They did not tell him that at the bottom of the pyramid were millions of desperately poor Indians who struggled to find two meals a day and did not understand why instead of someone bothering to help them there were huge amounts of money being spent on roads, airports and the mighty temple in Ayodhya. These are things that appeal to middle class Indians and rich Indians, but the problem is that to win an election with a full majority you need the support of those at the bottom who have nothing.

In the many analyses I have read of the election results I have not heard anyone mention the migrants who were forced to walk home for hundreds of kilometres because of Modi's sudden and brutal lockdown. I have not heard anyone mention that horrible COVID summer when people were dying in hospitals because there was not enough oxygen. Or that the Government of India had failed to order the vaccinations that were needed for us to protect us from the pandemic. Modi is a skilled politician, so he managed to turn this to his advantage by offering free vaccinations on a massive scale with his photo on the certificates. Polls done by powerful magazines all report that people believe that the vaccination programme was the best thing that the Modi government did.

Which people? That really is the question. If those people had been polled who had to bury their dead in the sands of the Ganga, they may not have said that dealing with COVID was a huge success. When he gets sworn in for the third time as prime minister Modi would do well to remember the real people of this country. He would do well to remember a few other things. He must stop making everything into a Hindu-Muslim issue — it has not worked. And he must step out of the circle of sycophants that surrounds him and remember that he is not a Messiah but an ordinary politician. If he does, he could be a better prime minister this time than he has been.

INDIA must now safeguard the Constitution for Bahujans

Dalitology SURESH MANE



IN THE recently concluded Lok Sabha elections, the world witnessed BJP's victory. The party relied on well-organised strategies, electoral bonds and a "Godi" media campaign to cross the 400-seat mark. The "400 Paar" slogan was overloaded by the aggressive Hindutva nationalism demolishing the fabric of secular India. In contrast, when it announced "Save Constitution, Save Democracy", INDIA bloc went back to Dr Ambedkar's socio-political discourse, which includes redistribution of national resources. INDIA bloc parties also carried copies of the Constitution.

Also raised was the slogan of "Jitni abadi utna haq" (rights should be proportionate to communities' population)". It was first coined by Kanshi Ram, the man who redefined Ambedkarite-Bahujan politics nationally. This was a well-designed plan by the INDIA bloc for two reasons: To safeguard India's Constitutionalism and democracy, and to regain the lost political space among the Bahujans since upper caste votes had been completely monopolised by the BJP.

Apart from burning issues like unemployment, agrarian crisis, rural distress, etc., the slogan of 'Save Constitution, Save Democracy' had a nationwide impact on non-Hindutva Bahujan voters. At the cost of the marginalisation of their political voices, like the BSP, it resulted in their en masse voting for the INDIA bloc. In fact, INDIA bloc's campaign reminded us that the Bahujan agenda was missing since Ambedkar's death in 1956 and Kanshi Ram's ill health in 2003. In 2000, when the Vajpayee government proposed a review of the Constitution, Kanshi Ram asked the government to clarify which parts required a review and the reasons behind it.

Sensing an "anti-Constitutional" intent, he took to the streets, arranged nationwide jeep marches, directed his MPs to stall the functioning of Parliament, and also conducted seminars and people's parliaments across India. His efforts led to the closure of the Constitution review project. His message 24 years ago was clear: save the Constitution, which is "Ambedkar's heritage". He also never relied on other parties

to defend or protect the Constitution.

In fact, Bahujans voting for INDIA blocs in contrast to the radical discourse of Jyotirao Phule, Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram and others. Ambedkar's first political move before the Southborough Commission in 1919 was the demand for the right to vote and a separate representation electorate. His warning in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949 — that "the down-trodden classes are tired of being governed" — speaks volumes about the strength of political power. Against this backdrop, how the Bahujans will secure their share in the national wealth is a million-dollar question.

The track record of governments is not encouraging. Then there are some political parties in the INDIA bloc with feudal-casteist mindsets and a history of anti-Constitutional culture. These parties have refused to acknowledge Ambedkar's contribution to the constitutional revolution. Still, putting national needs above all and keeping their agenda of acquiring political power in cold storage for the time being, the Bahujans wholeheartedly voted to save democracy. Now, it is now the duty of the INDIA bloc to rise to the challenge.

Missionary activists and Bahujan youth now have a few choices. They should heed Ambedkar's warnings — that "you need a power to destroy the power on the other side" and "political power is the master key" — to resolve the manifold structural problems of the Bahujans. This was taken further by Kanshi Ram's slogan of "Vote hamara, raj tumhara? Nahi chalega, nahi chalega (Our vote, your rule? This will not do)". Both Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram advised people to wage a relentless struggle to regain lost rights and to not depend on others for their rights, share and welfare.

Nearly all Bahujan revolts in India were to reconstruct Indian society. Therefore, political power was a weapon to achieve that and not the ultimate goal. If we have to achieve a complete transformation of society by establishing liberty, equality, fraternity and justice, how long is the movement going to depend on other political parties? The Bahujans love the Constitution and are proud of it. They consider it the only protective umbrella after Ambedkar. However, they hardly make any consistent efforts to become the executives of the Constitution.

Suresh Mane is the president of the Bahujan Republican Socialist Party and the former BSP general secretary. Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitology, has returned to Harvard University

history HEADLINE CHAKSHUROOY



IN THE recently concluded general elections, voters did not give the Bharatiya Janata Party a complete majority. The BJP, with its 240 Lok Sabha seats, is forming the government along with its coalition partners of the National Democratic Alliance.

Coalitions at the national level came to public attention in 1977 when Morarji Desai formed the first non-Congress coalition government. His government, a testament to the evolving political landscape, included ministers like Charan Singh, L K Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Biju Patnaik, Parkash Singh Badal, George Fernandes and Shanti Bhushan.

Unbridled ambition, political machinations and factionalism marred the tenure of the Morarji government. Law minister Bhushan recounted how bad things had become by 1978. He wrote, "I was convinced that if the prime minister was waiting for the death of his two senior most colleagues and one of them in turn was waiting for the death of the prime minister, it was impossible for such a government to last." The Morarji government fell in 1979, having lasted over two years.

A coalition government involves more than one political party or individuals working together, sometimes with differing viewpoints. Looking back, we find that 1977 was not the country's first brush with a national coalition. The 1946 interim government just before Independence and the first government formed after Independence in 1947 were both coalitions.

The 1946 interim government was responsible for steering India to independence. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was at the helm of this government. It had Congress stalwarts Vallabhbhai Patel (Home), Rajendra Prasad (Food and Agriculture) and Jagjivan Ram (Labour). The government also had Sardar Baldev Singh (Defence) from the Akali Dal and experts like John Matthai (Finance), a well-regarded economist. Cooverji Hormusji Bhabha (Commerce), a Parsi businessman with interests in banking and insurance companies, enriched the government with his insights.

However, selecting these ministers (known as members) was sometimes controversial. For example, Maulana Azad and Vallabhbhai Patel disagreed on including Bhabha. Azad felt that Bhabha was not a leader or a true representative of the Parsi community. When the Muslim League decided to join the interim government, Patel

When Nehru headed a national coalition govt



Jawaharlal Nehru with members of the interim government in 1946. Wikipedia

and Azad differed on Congress's offering of the Finance portfolio to the League.

Azad believed that losing control of a critical portfolio would create difficulties for the government. The League accepted the offer, and Liaquat Ali Khan took charge of the Finance portfolio from Matthai. According to Azad, when Liaquat became the Finance Member, he obtained the keys to the Government and not even a chaprasi could be appointed without his approval.

BEYOND POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS

Nehru followed the coalition template in independent India's first council of ministers. He repeated over half of the interim government ministers and brought in new ministers such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (Health) and NV Gadgil (Works, Mines and Power). Nehru became the Prime Minister and Patel the Deputy PM. Historian Ramachandra Guha wrote that in putting together this Cabinet, Nehru followed the advice of Mahatma Gandhi and reached beyond Congress to include the best minds, regardless of political affiliations. As a result, not being a Congressman was not a bar to joining the Cabinet. It led to additions like Dr B R Ambedkar (Law), businessman RK Shanmukham Chetty (Finance), and Dr Syama Prasad Mukherjee (Industry and Supply) of the Jan Sangh.

In his book *The Government and Politics of India*, Prof Morris Jones highlighted, "The chosen fortress-holders of 1947 included many with little or no connection with Congress. It was a coalition government in

two senses. First and foremost, it contained a strikingly careful selection of representatives of communities and regions ... Secondly, it was a policy coalition also, though not by virtue of containing a balance of opinions: on the contrary, the non-Congress opinions represented was all (with the possible exception of Ambedkar) in some sense markedly conservative."

This first Cabinet faced overwhelming challenges. Lesser-known Cabinet members like Bhabha contributed extensively to pressing issues like the refugee crisis and technical ones like the framing of the company law. Matthai, who lost two opportunities to handle the Finance portfolio, finally took charge of the ministry in 1948 and guided the nation through a difficult period.

The coalition government also underwent a churn. In 1948, Chetty, the first finance minister, resigned under a cloud after his ministry dropped the names of some individuals who had to be investigated by Income Tax authorities. Later, Mukherjee (1950) and Ambedkar (1951) resigned due to policy differences.

Mukherjee resigned because he disagreed with the government's approach to the treatment of Hindus in Pakistan, especially in East Bengal. Explaining his resignation (in this context), he said, "It is a mighty task ... and between the Government and its critics there will always be ample room for co-operation in facing a problem which concerns the peace and happiness of millions of people and of the advancement of the entire nation."

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

She SAID PRACHI BANSAL



WE WERE nearing the end of semester for my third-year undergraduate students of economics. One lecture on gender inequality in India was pending in an elective course I teach, titled 'Economics of Poverty and Inequality'. I began my preparation by collecting various statistics on the usual metrics on women: low workforce participation, gender wage gap, etc.

Since these were well-known issues, I realised that I was cooking a boring lecture. While researching for new dimensions of gender inequality, I found a book titled *Data feminism*. The book provided thought-provoking examples of how data science has been used to "discriminate, police, and surveil". The few pages I read changed the di-

AI is sexist. Here's how

rection of my lecture completely.

I remember an article published long back on how large language models, aka a type of Artificial Intelligence (AI), can be sexist. However, since this information was publicly available, I assumed that this sexism would not be easy to capture and would have been corrected in updated versions of these AI tools. Boy, was I wrong.

In front of my students, I gave a prompt to ChatGPT to generate letters of recommendation for two students, one male and one female, but both with equal marks (35 out of 40) in my class on poverty and inequality. When I got the two letters, I realised why a recruiter would pick the male candidate over the female one. The male student was described using adjectives like "confident", "outstanding", "technical", whereas the female student was described as "good for collaborative activities", "cor-

dial", "good asset to the company", "empathetic" and "compassionate". This demonstration generated a furious reaction from the class. They very own trusted AI, whose help they very often took to draft emails, polish their assignments or resumes or applications for jobs or college was biased.

After the lecture, I generated a couple more prompts that evening. I asked ChatGPT to recommend jobs for my students. While posts recommended for male students included financial analyst, investment banker, data analyst, market research analyst and policy analyst, women students were seen as a better fit as financial planners, development consultants and environment economists. Multiple experiments showed that ChatGPT thought the men were overwhelmingly suited for jobs that require rigour in quantitative subjects, mathematics, finance and the like but in-

vestment banking or financial analysis did not figure in the top-five jobs for a female graduate in economics.

These results give us food for thought: start writing your own emails, resumes and assignments. Your friend, AI, might generate a bias and make your drafts less proficient. AI-assisted writing takes away the personal relationships we have with our words, vocabulary and language. It makes every piece of writing formal, simpler and standard. The "craft" in the craft of writing, which comes from the hands of craftsmen (or women) is completely lost in the process. Encouraging students to read and write is critical these days, when all writing can be mass-produced.

We, the teachers, can start small. Discourage each email written using AI. Back in the 2000s, when I was in school, SMS language had become popular. "Pls"

replaced "please", and every other term became abbreviated. It was caught easily and corrected by our teachers. While universities are deploying plagiarism tools to check the use of AI in writing and docking students' grades, it is important to understand that the bias generated by AI goes unchecked despite this exercise. We need to embrace the imperfection in written drafts and applications so that a student is not forced to make their work look more "formal" with the help of these AI tools. Looks like it's time to shift gears and make sure we don't lose the craft of writing, as we have lost the habit of reading with time.

Prachi Bansal is an assistant professor, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O P Jindal Global University, Sonapat National Editor Shalini Langer curates the 'She Said' column

# Idea Exchange

SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 2024

**Mihir Vasavda:** Is there a nice way of breaking the news to a player that he won't be in the team for the Olympics? How do you handle emotions?

It's the worst part of the job. When you have a group of guys, you create synergy and trust within your squad. We started with 39 players (in the camp). Then (reduced it to) 29, 27, now it's 24, soon it'll be 19 and then it'll be 16. So it's not easy. That's why the Olympics are the pinnacle of our sport. Not everyone gets to go. It's a bonus if you do well. There are so many variables that can happen. You try to prepare for every single eventuality; injury-wise, tactics-wise, players that get injured in the game, then who can cover and how you can still play your same rhythm, tactics and style even if you lose a player or two. So yeah, it's difficult.

For the World Cup, the selection is of 18 players including two goalkeepers. At the Olympics, it's 15 and one goalkeeper, so 16. Then there are two non-travelling players and one goalkeeper that stay outside the village but you still need to create that family environment. I think 20-30% of the time, players get injured and you need to use either the 17th or 18th player. Seldom does the goalkeeper get used but the other players, definitely. You don't know when it's going to happen but it's possible, so you need them in the right frame of mind to ensure they haven't shut off.

That 17th or 18th player could be the key for a team to be very successful. That happened with Belgium. We were in the World Cup and two players got injured. The stand-bys came in and went all the way and won the tournament. It's a massive part of the success if you can do it right.

**Mihir Vasavda:** Everyone has their insecurities and ambitions, especially at a time like this when the team is getting selected. So how is the mood in the camp?

We are humans, not robots. It's not just about equipping each other with the right tools but also about having a platform where you can open up and say 'I am struggling with this'. We have a circle of trust going around pre-match, and post-competition. If you are struggling with something, speak. From a staff point of view, from a player-to-player point of view, there really needs to be a bridge of trust. It works well. The tour to Australia (in April) was tough and there was feedback post-games there. Paddy (Upton, the sports psychologist) was there and we did some good work in that space. The mood is exciting.

**Sriram Veera:** In your first team meeting, you drew an India map, asked the players where they are from, and you populated that graph accordingly. What was the reasoning beyond the obvious?

(Shows his laptop wallpaper where that graph is). Players come from all over; from Punjab, Manipur, Kerala, and South; it was interesting to work out what was their story, how they got into hockey, who went to the same academy, who has played junior-level hockey together, who hasn't. How did they come into hockey — was it family-based or are you an outlier spotted for your talent?

With that kind of deep information, I can know who connects with whom, the common grounds, the language challenge — who has had to learn Hindi, who speaks naturally. India's strengths are its various cultures, dialects and diversity. If I don't understand that melting pot, I am lesser of a coach. It took time but it was fascinating.

I also had a language challenge with some but we did a value-based exercise — how they wanted to play, how they wanted to be viewed, how they wanted to act in achieving that — it was done in three different languages. Everyone connected with that.

So it was fruitful and interesting not just for me but for them. Someone like Sreejesh was impressive; he comes from Kerala, down in the south — isolated if you consider the regular pockets of hockey in the country. It's interesting how he had to move around, adapt, and be so inspiring to the group.

**Sriram Veera:** You also delved into the castes involved and were curious about learning that early on. What is the reason behind that?

Coming from South Africa, it's a rainbow nation and you can say the same thing about India. I grew up in Apartheid and I didn't even know the details. In '84, when I moved from Zimbabwe to South Africa, I wasn't any wiser about this stuff. When Nelson Mandela was released, I was in high school and played in a tournament when he was released. Growing up in the political system, you learn. We played the 1996 Olympics in Athens and our team was pulled out in 2000 due to political reasons. We had qualified, we were going, and we kept the same team from '96 but we got pulled out as we didn't have enough players of colour. How is that normal? It brought big changes in the country — right or wrong. I was too young to understand. I look at it now: India's caste, South Africa's white-black — it's all human. It was important to understand all this.

But one of the bigger problems in India (hockey) is that of hierarchy. The more junior you are as a player, the less say you have. I don't subscribe to that. If that's the case, you are in a flawed system. I have tried to crack that wide open: of course, you need seniors but you want a safe space where players can share without any wor-

## ON HIERARCHY

**The more junior you are as a player, the less say you have. I have tried to crack that wide open: of course, you need seniors but you want a safe space where players can share without any worries**

ries. That we have achieved from my side and also from seniors, which is great.

**Amit Kamath:** When you first joined Hockey India as coach, what were the things that stood out in contrast to Belgium. Did you spot a difference in the team culture or the way things are done in the two countries? Were there any similarities?

The number one thing that stands out is that there is no league in India. From a collective point of view, Europe is fuelled from a family club environment where clubs are well supported from juniors to

whoever plays in the fifth, sixth, seventh or 20th team or whatever it is. In India, it's quite isolated as the senior squad and the U-21 team train all year round for competitions. There are the National Games or the National Championships. That would be the league environment.

What happened in the past was that Hockey India League came in and helped get that youth into competitions with international players from the rest of the world. I'm glad that's coming back, as it will be helpful for Indian hockey to have more competition outside of just international competition. The legacy that Indian hockey has is very different from the legacy that Belgium hockey has. It's just a different story. For the last 10-12 years, Belgium has put a lot of emphasis on... from not qualifying to being consistent in qualifying for all the Olympics and then going from London 2012 to Rio 2016 and from there to Tokyo 2020. So that was a big improvement. But at the same time, if you look at India's track record, from finishing last in London 2012 to eighth in Rio de Janeiro to medalling in Tokyo 2020, it's been a very impactful period and the investment's been in the right place. The coaching has been done well. The investment in strength and conditioning and training facilities in SAI Bengaluru was done well. That showed on the pitch. We're in that same space. Although India is really fanatical about its hockey, it's taken a while for them to be

competitive in the modern era again because of astroturf and sports science. It takes time to create consistency in any high-performance programme. And you're still not guaranteed a win. Look at Australia. The last time they won a gold medal at the Olympics was in Athens in 2004. They win all the World Cups or they come close to it or they're competing. But they've had a dip. At the same time, they're still very competitive. If you meet them in the quarters of semis, it's still not an easy game. It's tough to be consistent and tough to peak for the Olympics and the World Cups.

**Vinayakk Mohanarangan:** How did you see the 0-5 series defeat in Australia? In four matches, you had your chances to win or draw, but ultimately India didn't win any. Do you detach from results in such cases?

We wanted a tough competition before the Pro League because, otherwise, we're just going to train and play ourselves. That's not going to be helpful. The other thing is we need to build the depth of our squad. So, if we lost a key player in every line, how would we perform? Who would be ready to play and how? We had a squad of 27 over five games. We played everyone and also handed a debut to Bobby (Singh Dhani).

It was more of a focus on squad depth through good competition. And then we would find out more about ourselves, and what we needed to do well while playing

## ON THE MOOD IN THE TEAM

**We are humans, not robots. It's not just about equipping each other with the right tools, it's also about having a platform and saying, 'I am struggling with this'. We have a circle of trust**

against Australia. But if we played Australia, it would help expose some parts of our game that were really good or weren't. I think we got the benefit of both.

Our deep defence was very good. Sometimes, Australia can get the better of you by five, six, seven goals. In the first game, like I said, we weren't there. It was a little bit of a mismatch on the day from our point of view. The other games were good but unfortunately, we couldn't get over the line.

We learned a lot. I was pleased about the competition, but even more pleased about the depth in the squad and covering different positions.

**IDEA EXCHANGE**  
**CRAIG FULTON**  
**HOCKEY COACH, INDIA**

## WHY CRAIG FULTON

The former South African hockey player came to India after turning an almost unknown world hockey team like Ireland into a side that routinely punches above its weight. After being an assistant coach for Belgium, arguably the best team of the last decade, he's taken over an Indian team that returned to the Olympic podium after over four decades. He will now take the team to Paris Olympics, with the hope of repeating — or even improving — the Tokyo Games show



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

# 'One of the bigger problems in India is hierarchy. I don't subscribe to that'

The India hockey coach on preparations for the Paris Olympics, getting the players to share their stories as a part of team-building process and understanding the country's caste system and its impact on individual performances. The session was moderated by Mihir Vasavda, Senior Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*

## ON INDIA'S DIVERSITY

**India's strengths are various cultures, dialects and diversity. If I don't understand that melting pot, I am lesser of a coach. It took time but it was fascinating**

ries. That we have achieved from my side and also from seniors, which is great.

**Amit Kamath:** When you first joined Hockey India as coach, what were the things that stood out in contrast to Belgium. Did you spot a difference in the team culture or the way things are done in the two countries? Were there any similarities?

The number one thing that stands out is that there is no league in India. From a collective point of view, Europe is fuelled from a family club environment where clubs are well supported from juniors to

## ON FUTURE PLANS

**We are looking to connect how the U-21s play compared to how the seniors play. The same terminology, training, drills and then you allow the new U-21 head coach to put his own spin on it. That's the succession plan**

**Vinayakk Mohanarangan:** When India is playing, there seems to be a crucial match-costing mistake around the corner. How do you address that?

You are always one mistake away from conceding a goal? At the same time, you hopefully don't make the last mistake, hopefully creating enough pressure to put the opposition into that situation where they make the last mistake.

And the beauty of it is if we can learn those lessons. And I know that the coach and coaching staff know how to fix it. It's not like it's an impossible fix. The more we can learn that lesson, the more we put it into practice. Once the selection is done and we are playing the chosen team in those different positions, we are really prepared for that situation. Once we've gone through all of this, made a few mistakes, really gone down to our final selection, then we have the players who can deal with those situations. You need good players to win, but you can also lose with good players.

**Tushar Bhaduri:** Does India's hockey medal at the Tokyo Olympics, which came after such a long time, increase the pressure on you?

To be perfectly honest, for any team to win a medal in Covid is an exceptional achievement. It's not normal what everyone went through at that time — preparing for Olympics, the delay of a year, and everything else they went through. So, I won't say it's pressure, it's more about the focus. Realistically, every time we play in a competition, we want to win. That's my philosophy.

But there's also a realistic goal and an ideal goal. The ideal goal is to win gold in every tournament we play. Realistically, it's where you are ranked now, and how you are performing. That's where the next block of Pro League games comes in. We took a knock with the Australia results (India lost the five-match series in Perth 5-0), but that's a different scenario because that wasn't on tournament basis, it was a one-off series.

In this tournament environment that we have now, we have video referrals, we have everything that we would be accustomed to in the Pro League. At the same time, we want to win a medal, we want to play up... We are, I think, ranked fifth or sixth at the moment, so there's a bit of room in getting into the top 3, and we are looking at the next seven weeks and obviously, after this Pro League, to know exactly where we stand and what we need to improve to be very competitive in our pool. So, the bottom line is that we want to do as well as we can, we want to win this competition. But realistically, where are we now? We are a little bit behind, but we have eight games in the Pro League to understand where exactly we stand, and from that point of view, I can answer this question post these eight games.

**Pratyush Raj:** In recent times we have seen our forwards struggling to score goals. Where do you think they can improve?

That's difficult because a lot of the teams are playing lower (block) now. They are putting nine and 10 players in and around the 25 (metre, defensive third). You have less time in the D to turn and shoot because of the zonal elements but that's been there for the past maybe five or six years. The Indian teams have scored goals in those periods. It is just about the chemistry between the players and also the mindset of the players when they are getting into the D, they are full of confidence.

Everyone tries to shoot, everyone tries to connect in the nine-yard area. There is a lot going on in the final third. There are challenges if you are making mistakes at the back in the penalty corner and then upfront if you are making a mistake, it changes the dynamic of the game. The forwards are connected and trying to get as many outcomes as possible and enjoy doing it. We are trying to convert field chances to goals and certain teams play low, certain teams don't. We are trying to get the right combinations that suit all the strikers.

**Nitin Sharma:** What are your thoughts on junior hockey in India? Does the junior hockey system in India need to be in sync with what the head coach thinks?

I think there is a gap between the U-21s and the seniors. We are looking to work with the Indian A team and the reason for that is we have a very strong U-21 group. And if some of those key players cannot come to the senior group, where do they go? They have had three-four years of training with the U-21s. They played in the World Cup and all of these competitions and suddenly there was no space for them. I think they are the next best thing to come into the Indian squad and we don't have that space yet for them with a full coach and system. That's in the plans. We are looking to do that.

And then from the U-16s and U-18s, Indian hockey has done a good job of trying to get them to play the same way. It's been a year since I joined and we are looking out for a new U-21 coach. We are looking to connect how the U-21s play compared to how the seniors play. The same terminology, same training, same drills and then you allow the new U-21 head coach to put his own spin on it in the principle of how we need to play. That's what we are looking to do. And I think that's the succession plan.



The power of a theory is exactly proportional to the diversity of situations it can explain

Elinor Ostrom

## PLACING THREE BIG REFORMS ON NEW GOVT'S TABLE

WHILE political analysts are frothing at the mouth trying to decode the unexpected verdict of the Lok Sabha elections that's a tight slap for the BJP, economic and business analysts are spending sleepless nights worrying about the future of "reforms". The problem is, what reforms are we talking and worrying about? It depends on what your income and educational status is. A poorly-educated-yet-rich trader will be more worried about reforms in an extortionate local machinery. An educated-and-rich corporate professional will be worried about taxes. A poorly educated and poor Indian will wonder what the fuss is all about.

Yet, beyond the rhetoric and polemics, economic reforms matter. It is the much-maligned economic reforms since 1991 that have lifted more than 500 million Indians out of degrading poverty under regimes of various hues. But the task and the process, as almost all sensible economists agree, is far from over. Forget the coalition jostling. The more important question is: what are the most important reforms that need the attention of Modi 3.0? I want to highlight three 'pro-poor' reforms that could further transform India.

One of the biggest failures of Modi 2.0 was its dismal letdown in effectively communicating how farm reform laws would actually help the poor. It first rammed down the farm laws and then abjectly surrendered to street power. I am still convinced the farm laws would immensely benefit small farmers and landless labourers. The fact is that more than 85 percent of farmers in India own less than two hectares. Contract farming, freedom to sell anywhere in the world via digital platforms instead of being hostage to mandi middlemen and pooling land to form cooperatives (it has been a huge success in pockets where attempted, *a la* Amul) may not help rich farmers. But they will be a boon for farmers who are described as marginal.

More important, contract farming *et al* will incentivise large private investors with deep pockets to set up massive cold storage facilities across India that will provide hundreds of thousands of jobs, if not millions. Of course, cold storage investors will make tonnes of money. But so will marginal farmers and landless labourers, who will get jobs they cannot dream of even now. Barely a quarter of the fruits and vegetables produced are processed now. Imagine the spectacular impact on rural incomes when three-fourths are stored and processed. As for the fear that the likes of Adanis will grab the land of poor farmers, it is just hogwash.

Even with this, too many will still depend on agriculture and allied activities for a livelihood (about 50 percent do now). The only solution is for tens of millions of them to move to other sources of livelihood. The only available option is large-scale factories. The solution is in even more emphasis on schemes like production-linked incentive (PLI) that encourage domestic manufacturing. A lot of economists argue that PLI is not just a waste of money, but also fails to create a genuine value-added manufacturing ecosystem. That's a flawed argument at best, if not inspired by Modi Derangement Syndrome. Every country in East and Southeast Asia has created successful manufacturing ecosystems by ruthlessly implementing schemes like PLI that effectively provided massive subsidies to domestic entrepreneurs. You can call it crony capitalism. But fewer citizens in these countries are poor since such schemes kicked in. It is only massive factories that will enable citizens dependent on agriculture to permanently escape the low-productivity-low-income trap.

That brings us to the third critical reform: labour laws. Somehow, many Indians reflexively oppose labour law reforms as being anti-labour and a licence to industrialists to exploit workers even more. Once again, that is hogwash. About 90 percent of workers are in the unorganised sector, and they are being ruthlessly exploited anyway. Labour law reforms can do two things. First, they will enable workers to work longer hours and earn more. Second, massive factories will come up only when entrepreneurs have the flexibility to hire based on orders and not be stuck with so-called 'permanent' employees.

I wrote in this paper about the DMK-led government in Tamil Nadu tweaking the law to enable 12-hour work shifts. Workers welcomed this move. But so fierce was the opposition from 'pro-worker' vested interests that the move was abandoned. Massive manufacturing investments will come only when both PLI-like schemes and labour reforms are brought in. Sure, it will enable tycoons to earn billions. But it will also ensure tens of millions of workers to see their family incomes skyrocket. We can argue about income and wealth inequality. But I am convinced the worker whose income goes up from ₹10,000 a month to ₹30,000 doesn't give a damn about inequality.

Can a coalition deliver reforms? One example from the Vajpayee era shows it is possible. The most transformational reform measure of the coalition Vajpayee regime was dropping fixed annual licence fees for mobile telephone operators and moving to a revenue-sharing model. In just about six years, the number of mobile phone subscribers zoomed from about 2 million to more than 100 million. Today, the more-than-a-billion active mobile phone subscriptions are the backbone of the JAM revolution. Back then, the regime was slammed for crony capitalism. If that was crony capitalism, let's have more of it in Modi 3.0.

## A MANDATE FOR CONSTITUTION AND CONSENSUS



### POWER & POLITICS

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

SOME are destroyed by defeat, and some are made small and mean by victory. Greatness lives in one who triumphs equally over defeat and victory. The great American writer John Steinbeck couldn't have imagined how accurate he would be in describing the result of the latest general election in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi created history by becoming the second political leader after Jawaharlal Nehru to be sworn in as prime minister of the world's largest democracy for a third consecutive term. He is the first genuinely non-Congress leader to the enviable feat. He is also the second RSS swayamsevak after Atal Bihari Vajpayee to lead the nation since independence.

Yet, there is an arithmetical distinction between Nehru and Modi. While the Congress under Nehru won the three Lok Sabha elections in 1952, 1957 and 1962 with almost two-thirds majorities, the BJP captured power with the help of its allies—alone, it couldn't conjure up the majority figure of 272 seats on the third attempt. Nevertheless, the hurriedly-stitched pre-poll National Democratic Alliance (NDA) triumphantly returned to Raisina Hill under Modi's leadership with just under 300 seats. Modi's idea of political India has survived, slightly modified by voters. For now, for thriving in the future, he bowed before the Constitution before getting formally elected as the leader of the NDA.

The verdict has, however, delivered an ominous blow to the concept of a single-party majority government, which is seen as essential for political

and economic stability. The electorate has denied a majority to any one party after a decade. India is back to the coalition era that began after Rajiv Gandhi's defeat in 1989 and ended after almost 25 years in 2014 when Modi ensured full majority for the BJP. The BJP won 282 seats in 2014 and 303 in 2019. A decade later, the BJP could secure only 240 seats out of the total of around 430 it contested. It lost 63 seats mostly to its traditional rival Congress. This time it's not Modi 3.0 but NDA 3.0 led by Modi, with the earlier two editions of NDA helmed by Vajpayee. Even in defeat, though, the BJP scored more seats than any ruling party has done in the recent past. The Congress under Rajiv won 404 seats after Indira Gandhi's tragic assassination but was reduced to just 197 five years later. In 2009, the Congress won 206 seats.

For both the prime minister and the ruling party, the electoral outcome has thrown up many questions and has also set the direction for the future model of governance. The party is yet to reconcile to the idea of not achieving its unrealistic target of 370 seats and crossing the 400 mark for the NDA. Party cadres blame the excessive exposure of the prime minister for losing seats in crucial states like UP, Rajasthan and West Bengal. It also didn't gain much in the southern states as the gains made in Telangana and Andhra were offset by losses in Karnataka.

During the two-month-long campaign, the prime minister addressed over 200 meetings and gave around 80 interviews to various media outlets as part of his outreach strategy. But these choreographed interactions didn't erase the opposition-sponsored narrative about the danger to the Constitution and ris-

ing unemployment. In addition, excessive dependence on outside agencies for micro poll management created confusion. It led to a disconnect between the committed workers and the professionals who were hired to design the contours of the campaign. Above all, the minimal involvement of BJP veterans and workers also contributed to the decline in votes. Soon after the 2004 debacle, the then Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani had stated that the BJP lost because it ignored its core constituents.

Skewed economic policies are also partially responsible for BJP's losses. During the past decade, the BJP government has spoken proudly of its pro-business ideology. Modi has promised to make India into the world's third largest economy. He had earlier stated that India would be a \$5-trillion economy soon. The mandate is to deliver good politics and judicious economics. Excessive exposure of market models haven't gone down well with the masses. It is rare that heads of state or senior ministers goad the people to invest in the markets just before the results

are announced. Linking the comprehensive health of the nation with artificially inflated market capitalisation is a deceptive narrative for seeking endorsement of policies. It may, at the most, boost big business behemoths, but rarely brings extra smiles to the masses.

Moreover, leaders must learn from the past to plan for the future. If mesmerising markets could alter political fortunes, then both P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh wouldn't have faced humiliating shellacking at elections. Rao, who formed the first minority government in 1991, was responsible for introducing massive economic reforms. The Sensex registered an elephantine

escalation of over 180 percent during his five-year tenure. The Congress was mauled and Rao was politically martyred after the party was humbled in 1996 because it was perceived as being pro-rich. During Manmohan Singh's tenure from 2004 to 2014, the Sensex ended with a Brodingnagian 400 percent escalation. Despite that market medal, the Congress lost even the status of the main opposition party in the Lok Sabha. It is evident that the Western capitalist models of top-down or trickle-down principles don't work in a democratic country like in India where over 800 million people are still dependent on freebies from the government. Modinomics will have to change to include the Naidu-Nitish social equity model.

Good economics isn't necessarily better politics. It's not the amount of foreign exchange or the number of extra billionnaires created by a regime which gives it durability, credibility and acceptability. The success of any coalition government is tenuously linked with the prime minister's prowess to mould him to handle new arithmetical realities. For the past 22 years, Modi has evolved an administrative model in which he alone plays a decisive role. He collects inputs, yet he isn't used to the concept of collective responsibility. It has helped in taking quick decisions and getting them implemented in a record time. He is a master slogan-smith. From Swachh Bharat to Digital India, he has mesmerised the nation with his generous guarantees.

He has been leading a cabinet in which he has been the first among unequals. But the new numbers would also alter the administrative algorithm which would guide policy formation. Modi still remains the most powerful leader. His invincibility may have taken a hit, but he enjoys the title of the Maximum Leader. For his long-term success and for possibly creating history by completing a full third term, the nation is looking forward to a renewed politics of consensus, and not confrontation. That alone will ensure his greatness. NDA 3.0 needs to follow kindness, and not brute numbers, the commoner's touch, not billionaire handshakes, and delegation, not dictation.



PTI



### OPINION

SUTANU GURU  
Journalist and author,  
Executive Director,  
C Voter Foundation  
(sutanuguru@gmail.com)

## KAUTILYA'S ADVICE ON GOOD GOVERNANCE



### OPINION

NANDITHA KRISHNA  
Historian, environmentalist  
and writer based in Chennai

WAR is a state of extreme violence, destruction and mortality. Several countries have in recent times been ravaged and destroyed by war: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Yemen, and now Ukraine and Gaza. The toll on the people, especially women and children, is immense: displacement, economic devastation, food shortages and insecurity. Wars in ancient India were conducted under strict rules. Fighting from sunrise to sunset only; no hitting below the belt. I am bemused by the Kurukshetra war, where, after fighting each other all day, the Pandavas and senior Kurus would fraternise in the evenings. Arjuna stopped the war to discuss the ethics of fighting with Krishna, who gave us the immortal *Bhagavad Gita* as a result. Bhishma lay on a bed of arrows for 41 nights, at times lecturing Yudhishtira on raj dharma.

Sun Tzu of China saw war as an art. His *The Art of War* is a military work dating back to 500 BCE. For almost 1,500

years, it was the most influential strategy text influencing both East Asian and Western military thinking. The book contains a detailed explanation and analysis of the Chinese military, from weapons, environmental conditions and strategy to rank and discipline, the importance of intelligence operatives and espionage to the war effort. His strategies formed the basis of advanced military training throughout the world.

But Kautilya saw war as a science, adding that "a war should be avoided, for it can be lost as easily as it can be won, and is basically unpredictable and expensive". Dharma, he said, is the root of all happiness, and the root of dharma is good economy and governance, self-restraint, humility and serving the aged. Excellent advice for any ruler to follow.

Kautilya is said to have been Chandragupta Maurya's advisor and mentor, and the genius behind Chandragupta's strategies in politics and war. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is an amazing doctrine on politics and the art of governance, war and diplomacy. He wanted his king to become a world conqueror and analysed which kingdoms were natural allies and which were inevitable enemies. He made treaties he would break, his secret agents killed enemy leaders and sowed discord among them. "Of war, there is open war; concealed war and silent war," wrote Kautilya. He used religion and superstition to bolster his troops, demoralise enemy soldiers, and spread disinformation. But Kautilya's harsh measures were necessary in that situation. Kautilya believed that trusting in fate or relying on superstition was unacceptable.

Kautilya separated politics from religion and claimed that knowledge of the science of politics can conquer the world. A dutiful king who rules according to the law, metes out just punishment, applies the law equally and protects his people could conquer the earth, he said. Greatness, he believed, would come only with dharmic order. Nations act in their political, economic and military self-interest.

*Artha*, meaning prosperity or economic security, is one of the four aims



Unlike Sun Tzu or Machiavelli, Kautilya saw the security and prosperity of the people as the source of a ruler's wealth. His *Arthashastra* describes a welfare state governed by a wise monarch. With good governance, the weak will resist the strong, said Kautilya

of human life in Hinduism. The *Arthashastra* says there are four necessary fields of knowledge: the Vedas, and the sciences of reasoning, government and economics—all other knowledge and wealth is derived from these. The duties of a king, selection of officials and advisors, checks on the government, the cause of poverty and public dissatisfaction, civil and criminal law and the courts, laws governing taxation, marriage, wildlife and forests,

establishment of mines and factories, secret service and information collection, war and foreign policy are all discussed at length in Kautilya's *oeuvre*.

He has been described as Machiavelian but, unlike the Florentine, Kautilya maintained that the security and prosperity of the people are the source of a kingdom's wealth. He advocates the distribution of land belonging to landowners who do not cultivate and giving it to poor farmers who want to cultivate but do not own land, and the execution of public projects like the construction of waterways and forts to mitigate areas devastated by calamities.

His description is of a welfare state governed by a wise monarch, a *raja-rishi* or sage-king. Without governance, the strong will swallow the weak; but with good governance, the weak will resist the strong, said Kautilya. The book is a manual on statecraft and governance developed by a man who had experience to share.

Kautilya gives detailed descriptions on maintaining forests and afforestation. *Arthashastra* contains references to the collection of revenue from timber and non-timber forest products and describes different forest types. Deforestation and illicit tree felling were punished by *deya* (levy) and *atyaya* (fine). The Mauryan emperors had a large forest department to maintain and exploit forests and a superintendent for each zone. The state even supported afforestation.

The Guptas were probably the last students of Kautilya. Later Indian kings forgot Kautilya and his advice on good governance. The rest is history.

### QUOTE CORNER

I have a 9-to-5 job. There is an indoor facility (nets) about one hour's drive from the office. On weekdays, I go there twice or thrice. I practice 7-9 at night. The remaining two days, I hit the gym. We have a fitness app for the 30 probabilities of the national team... We are supposed to follow it wherever we are.

Saurabh Netravalkar, Indian-origin bowler for the US T20 team and software engineer at Oracle who bowled the winning Super Over against Pakistan in the World Cup



The godfathers of climate chaos—the fossil fuel industry—rake in record profits and feast off trillions in taxpayer-funded subsidies.

António Guterres, UN secretary general, calling for a global ban on ads by fossil fuel firms

We imagine a plural, diverse and democratic Mexico. Our duty is and will always be to look after each and every Mexican, without distinction.

Claudia Sheinbaum, after a landslide victory to become Mexico's first female president

### MAILBAG WRITE TO

#### Balanced growth

Narendra Modi has said we would make India the third largest economy. But India is still struggling to remove income disparities between the rich middle class and the poor. In rural areas, families who depend on farming are struggling to get two meals a day. High inflation is affecting middle-income and poor families. Without removing income disparities and high inflation, no government should claim we have grown economically.

B Sundar, Chennai

#### Lower margin

In 2019, Narendra Modi won Varanasi by a margin of over 4 lakh votes. In 2024, he could win only by about 1.5 lakh votes. In normal circumstances, this should be considered a reasonably good margin. But for Modi this is very ordinary, as he was hoping to win by a record margin. If Modi is contemplating contesting in 2029, he should seriously consider a

constituency in his home state of Gujarat.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

#### NOTA note

The 2024 Lok Sabha election will be remembered for a 'silent' feature—for NOTA's victory. The rate of voters opting for 'None of the above' has increased. It shows their dissatisfaction with candidates and parties. The Election Commission has to take measures to decrease the NOTA rate.

Ahmad Bilal, Mangaluru

#### Doctors' duty

The action taken by the vigilance department against private practice by government doctors is a welcome step. This is illegal and strict action should be taken. The second case is of doctors working in public health clinics which come under the directorate of health services. They are not prohibited from private practice outside government premises and beyond duty hours. But these boundaries are crossed too. The association of government doctors is a powerful lobby. Let's hope the government can

make doctors work at hospitals as per duty norms.

Sarit Kumar, email

#### Rough ride

The proposal to increase bus fares in Karnataka is a rude shock. While admitting that the operating cost has gone up in the last few years, one wonders why the government offered free travel to women amid the burdened financial position of the state-run transport company. If it was done to appease women voters following the precedent set by Tamil Nadu, the crisis becomes deeper. These freebies eventually result in dissatisfaction among others.

Sekar, email

#### Trekkers' bravery

My deepest condolences to the families and friends of the nine precious lives lost to a blizzard while trekking in Uttarakashi. It is heartening to know that senior citizen S Sudhakar survived the nature's fury. The governments of Uttarakhand and Karnataka did a commendable job in rescuing 13 others and bringing back home the bodies of the nine deceased.

I request the Karnataka government to honour the bravery of these trekkers.

H S Gopalakrishnacharya, Bengaluru

#### Football legend

Sunil Chhetri retiring from the national team leaves the football fraternity with a lot of emotions. The 39-year-old maestro's journey has reshaped perceptions of this beautiful game in the nation. Since his debut, Chhetri has amassed a multitude of accolades including records for the most appearances and goals for India. No wonder even Croatia's Luka Modric hailed Chhetri as a "legend of the game".

R Sivakumar, Chennai

#### Afghan pride

Afghanistan's remarkable triumph over New Zealand in the T20 World Cup is a testament to their rising prowess. Their outstanding net run rate has put them on the cusp of the playoffs. Their story adds an exciting chapter to the tournament, showcasing the exhilarating nature of T20 cricket.

Mohammad Taukir Rahmani, Mumbai

"If you can reach out and touch and love and be with wildlife, you will forever be changed, and you will want to make the world a better place."  
— Terri Irwin



## INVASIVE SPECIES THREATEN WAYANAD WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Senna spectabilis planted with good intentions has become an ecological nightmare, swiftly overtaking large areas of the sanctuary. Its unchecked growth not only threatens biodiversity but also triggers a chain of ecological and economic repercussions, affecting both wildlife and local communities

Approximately one-fifth of the Earth's surface is threatened by invasive species. These biotic invaders, benefiting from rapid reproduction and a lack of natural predators, outcompete native species for vital resources like food, water, and habitat, posing a significant threat to biodiversity and ecosystem stability.

The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS), nestled in the heart of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), is a biodiversity hotspot, brimming with a rich variety of flora and fauna. The sanctuary serves as a habitat for a substantial population of Asian elephants, along with over 3,700 documented species of plants and animals. Spanning an area of 344.44 km<sup>2</sup>, the sanctuary is comprised of four distinct ranges: Sulthan Bathery, Muthanga, Kurichiat, and Tholpetty. Each range, with its distinct characteristics, adds to the rich tapestry of the WWS, making it a vital and vibrant hub of ecological diversity. However, this ecological paradise is under severe threat from several invasive species, including Senna spectabilis, Lantana camara, and Acacia species. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Senna spectabilis, which has proliferated aggressively throughout the WWS and beyond, affecting the NBR and the corresponding ecological continuum of three southern Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. A decision made in good faith by the forest department in 1986 to plant Senna spectabilis, an ornamental tree with striking yellow flowers, has morphed into an ecological disaster. Little did one know, that this tropical American tree had a notorious history of invading continents, including parts of Asia, Africa, and Australia. By the time the mistake was realized, Senna had stealthily spread into many parts of the sanctuary. It expanded from covering less than 16 km<sup>2</sup> in 2013-2014 to 89 km<sup>2</sup> in 2019 and now stands at a staggering 123.86 km<sup>2</sup>. Considering the total area of the sanctuary is 344.44 km<sup>2</sup>, Senna has already engulfed 35% of it. If this trend is not curbed, the entire sanctuary could be swamped within a decade, turning it into a dense Senna forest.

A 2021 study has revealed that the Asian elephant, a significant inhabitant of the sanctuary, is aiding the spread of the invasive Senna spectabilis. The elephant's dung provides a fertile environment for the Senna seeds to sprout, with a single pile of dung found to contain



BKP SINHA



ARVIND K JHA

A SINGLE SENNA POD HARBOURS OVER A HUNDRED SEEDS, AND A MEDIUM-SIZED TREE CAN YIELD AT LEAST ONE LAKH SEEDS. THE INVASIVE NATURE OF THE SENNA SPECIES HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE LOCAL ECOSYSTEM. IT HAS DISPLACED NATIVE VEGETATION BY MONOPOLIZING THE AREA AND INHIBITING THE GROWTH OF SPECIES LIKE GRASS, BAMBOO AND SEVERAL OTHER MINOR FOREST PRODUCE

approximately 2000 seeds. The study also found other mammals, such as the chital and the Indian crested porcupine, contributing to the spread of Senna. The researchers observed that the fruiting period of Senna trees in the summer coincides with a high concentration of elephants in Wayanad due to their seasonal migration. This synchronicity could potentially expedite the plant's dispersal across the landscape, particularly in micro-habitats commonly inhabited by elephants.

A single Senna pod harbours over a hundred seeds, and a medium-sized tree can yield at least one lakh seeds. The invasive nature of the Senna species has had a significant impact on the local ecosystem. It has displaced native vegetation by monopolizing the area and inhibiting the growth of species like grass, bamboo and several other minor forest produce.

The Senna tree employs a unique method of colonizing its surroundings. It releases specific substances, known as allelochemicals, either directly onto the target plants or indirectly into the surrounding soil. These allelochemicals interfere with the normal growth processes of other plants, providing the Senna tree with a competitive advantage. The dominance of the Senna tree has significant implications for the livelihoods of rural and tribal people who rely on non-timber forest produce, like amla or gooseberry, for sustenance. Many edible items like berries, mushrooms, and wild tubers, which were once a significant part of the tribal diet, are gradually disappearing from the forest.

The bitter leaves and irritating bark of Senna do not find favour with herbivores resulting in a decline in their numbers in the area. This has had a cascading effect on the region's tiger population, which has decreased from 120 in 2018 to 84 in 2023. The scarcity of prey in the Senna-dominated areas is believed to be driving tigers to migrate in search of richer hunting grounds. Similarly, elephants are moving into areas outside the forests in their quest for food and water. Unfortunately, this has led to increased human-elephant conflicts, resulting in a backlash against the preservation efforts of elephants. The ecological disruption has had an unexpected benefit for local communities. With fewer wildlife incursions, settlements near the jungle have seen a significant drop in crop damage and cattle lifting incidents. The data from the past three years shows a downward trend in compensation claims



by farmers for crop raids. In the fiscal year 2021-22, there were 734 cases of crop damage reported in the border agrarian hamlets of WWS. This figure fell to 475 in 2022-23, and in 2023-24, the number has further decreased to just 93 cases. Similarly, cattle lifting cases have also seen a decline, from 83 cases in 2021-22 to a mere 19 in 2023-24. While the decrease in human-wildlife conflict might be viewed as a positive development by those seeking to address this issue, the underlying causes warrant serious concern. Locals like Mr. Stanley Augustine, a member of the Biodiversity Management Committee of Poothadi village, find these changes deeply troubling, particularly from the standpoint of the rural economy. The area is witnessing a worrying decline in agricultural productivity and an increasing trend of farmers abandoning their paddy fields. The forests too are under mounting pressure. The real challenge, therefore, lies in re-establishing equilibrium in the WWS while simultaneously securing the future of the human communities in the area. In response to these challenges, the Forest Department has launched an initiative known as the 'Senna Eradication and Forest Regeneration

Project'. The project, supported by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, has a budget of Rs 5.31 crore. The initiative is currently being implemented in the Kurichiat and Muthanga forest ranges, to eradicate Senna from 1,672 hectares. To further support this initiative, the sanctuary authorities are exploring partnerships with the newsprint industry, taking inspiration from Tamil Nadu. The state government there has allowed the Tamil Nadu Newsprint and Papers Ltd (TNPL) to extract invasive trees like Wattles and Senna for paper production. In return, TNPL compensates the Forest Department and employs various extraction techniques, attempting to turn an ecological challenge into an opportunity for resource utilization. In some areas, invasive plants, including Senna, are being repurposed to manufacture furniture. Senna, in particular, is valued as a timber source for making lightweight furniture and other wooden products. There is hope that policy changes could permit the extraction of Senna from forest areas and its subsequent sale outside. Such changes could potentially motivate the local community to actively participate in clearing the forest of this invasive plant.

The process of removing the Senna tree, however, is fraught with challenges.

Traditional methods such as uprooting, girdling, and herbicide application for eliminating Senna from the area are labour-intensive, costly, and environmentally damaging. Uprooting large Senna trees could disturb the soil, leading to erosion, especially in hilly areas that receive high rainfall. Techniques like girdling and felling can inadvertently harm non-target species. Moreover, the use of herbicides may contaminate water sources and negatively impact the area's biodiversity. Additionally, the resilience of the Senna tree is evident in its ability to regenerate from lateral roots, which complicates its eradication. Given these challenges, it is clear that innovative and sustainable strategies are needed to manage and ultimately remove the Senna species while simultaneously assisting the re-establishment of local species.

As we forge ahead, conservation measures must be holistic, encompassing not only the immediate environs of the sanctuary but also the larger watersheds and catchment areas that feed into the rivers. This holistic approach is particularly significant for Wayanad, the source of the Kabini River. The health of this river is essential for sustaining the lives and livelihoods of communities across Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Notably, initiatives are in progress to increase the flow of the Kabini River—a major tributary of the Kaveri River—to address the issue of water scarcity in Bengaluru.

The situation in Wayanad is a stark reminder of the domino effect triggered by the introduction of invasive species. The ecological and economic ramifications are far-reaching, impacting not just the wildlife within the sanctuary but also the lives and livelihoods of communities dwelling in its vicinity and beyond. The fight to save Wayanad is a race against time. If immediate and decisive action is not taken, the future of this biodiversity hotspot and the well-being of the millions who depend on it hang in the balance. Wayanad's plight serves as a cautionary tale, urging us to prioritize rigorous scientific evaluation before introducing any new species in an area and to act swiftly and collaboratively in the face of ecological threats posed by invasive species.

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



# DISCOVER THE DESERT SERENGETI AND ENCHANTING ISLAND OF BUTTERFLIES

Sharjah creates a 'la African Safari' in the Desert and its commitment to nature shines at Al Noor Island, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

Sharjah, a jewel in the crown of the United Arab Emirates, boasts a captivating terrain that marries the charm of golden deserts with the allure of pristine coastlines along the Arabian Gulf. The landscape is punctuated by rolling sand dunes, tranquil oases, and rugged mountains that rise in the eastern region, creating a picturesque backdrop to its vibrant cityscape. Sharjah's climate is characterized by its arid nature, with hot summers that see temperatures soar, and mild, pleasant winters that offer a refreshing respite. The gentle coastal breeze, coupled with the serene desert air, weaves a unique atmospheric tapestry, making Sharjah a place of both stark beauty and subtle elegance. However, it lacks the lush green vegetation and abundance found in tropical climates. Yet, this absence is masterfully compensated by human ingenuity, as nature is carefully crafted and enhanced through thoughtful intervention.

Sharjah has been a beacon of cultural heritage in the region. However, not many people know its commitment towards nature. In fact, it has one of the rarest treats around the world to showcase which has never tried elsewhere on the large scale. Sharjah's commitment to preserving nature and promoting biodiversity is exemplified through its innovative projects, notably creating Serengeti and Sawana in the heart of the desert and organising the African Safari in the desert. As if that was not enough it also has a full-on nature conservation project at Al Noor Island which hosts thousands of species of plants and birds and has a unique Butterfly House. These initiatives reflect Sharjah's dedication to balancing development with sustainability and fostering a deep respect for the natural world.

## A 'LA AFRICAN SAFARI' IN THE DESERT

Sharjah's African Safari, set against the backdrop of the Arabian Desert, is a testament to the emirate's vision of creating unique and sustainable tourism experiences. This ambitious project recreates the diverse ecosystems of Africa, providing a sanctuary for a wide range of species in an environment that mirrors their natural habitats. The African Safari in Sharjah is not just a tourist attraction; it is a conservation effort aimed at protecting endangered



species and educating the public about wildlife and ecosystems. The park hosts animals such as giraffes, zebras, elephants and various species of antelope, living in conditions that closely resemble their native habitats. This approach ensures that the animals can exhibit natural behaviours, contributing to their well-being and offering visitors an authentic experience. Sharjah's African Safari employs sustainable practices to minimise its environmental footprint. This includes the use of renewable energy sources, water conservation techniques, and eco-friendly infrastructure. The park also engages in breeding programs for

endangered species, playing a crucial role in global conservation efforts. By fostering a connection between visitors and wildlife, the safari park encourages a greater appreciation for the natural world and the importance of its preservation.

## AL NOOR ISLAND: WHERE SERENITY AND ART COME TOGETHER

Nestled in the heart of Khalid Lagoon, Al Noor Island is a testament to Sharjah's vision of blending nature, art, and culture. Since its opening in 2015, this picturesque island has become a beloved destination for both locals and

tourists, offering a serene escape and a feast for the senses. Al Noor Island is more than just a park; it is an embodiment of Sharjah's commitment to enhancing the quality of life through innovative public spaces that foster a connection with nature and the arts. Al Noor Island spans 45,470 square meters and is adorned with a rich variety of flora, creating a verdant oasis in the middle of the city. The island's landscaping features over 70,000 plants and trees from around the world, carefully curated to thrive in the local climate. This lush greenery provides a habitat for diverse wildlife, including numerous bird species that find sanctuary on the island. The meticulously maintained gardens offer visitors a tranquil environment to unwind and connect with nature.

## The Butterfly House

One of the island's crown jewels is the Butterfly House, an architectural marvel that houses over 500 exotic butterflies. The structure itself, designed with intricate latticework inspired by Islamic art, is a sight to behold. Inside, the climate-controlled environment mimics tropical conditions, allowing butterflies to flourish year-round. Visitors can walk among the butterflies, witnessing their delicate beauty up close and learning about their life cycles and ecological importance. The Butterfly House is not only a visual delight but also an educational experience, emphasizing the significance of conservation.

## Art Installations and Sculptures

Al Noor Island is dotted with stunning art installations and sculptures, seamlessly integrating art with nature. These pieces,

created by renowned artists from around the world, add a layer of cultural richness to the island. Notable installations include the "OVO" art sculpture, a glowing egg-shaped structure that symbolizes rebirth and renewal, and the "Torus" sculpture by David Harber, which captures the interplay of light and shadow.

The island caters to visitors of all ages with its well-designed children's playground and exercise facilities. The playground is equipped with safe, modern equipment that encourages imaginative play, while the exercise stations offer adults a chance to stay active in a scenic setting.

## Night Illumination

As the sun sets, Al Noor Island transforms into a magical landscape illuminated by artistic lighting. The island's pathways and installations glow with soft, colourful lights, creating an enchanting atmosphere. This nighttime transformation offers a unique experience, making evening visits to the island particularly memorable. Al Noor Island exemplifies Sharjah's dedication to sustainability and environmental preservation. The island employs eco-friendly practices, such as using solar energy for lighting and maintaining a commitment to water conservation. These efforts ensure that the island remains a green and sustainable haven for future generations.

Al Noor Island also plays a vital role in community engagement and education. It regularly hosts workshops, guided tours, and cultural events that promote environmental awareness and appreciation for the arts. These programs aim to foster a sense of responsibility and connection to the natural world among visitors.

Al Noor Island as its African safari is a shining example of Sharjah's innovative approach to nature conservation with cultural enrichment. This serene oasis offers a retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life, inviting visitors to explore its lush landscapes, admire its art installations, and engage with its diverse flora and fauna. Through Al Noor Island, Sharjah demonstrates its commitment to creating spaces that nurture the soul, inspire the mind, and promote a sustainable future. Whether you're a nature lover, art enthusiast, or simply seeking peace and tranquillity, Al Noor Island is a destination that promises to captivate and inspire.

# Bookmark these boutique destinations for a summer getaway

BY RUPALI DEAN

## STERLING PARK, KALIMPONG

Where? Ringkingpong Rd, Kalimpong, Khasmahal, Kalimpong, West Bengal. Nestled in the scenic mid-range of the Himalayas, at a lofty 4,100 feet above sea level lies Kalimpong—a perfect fusion of serene mountain vistas and vibrant cultural encounters, offering an enchanting getaway for those in search of an unforgettable holiday experience. This cultural hub, blending influences from Indian, Chinese, Nepalese, and Tibetan traditions, provides a captivating and immersive retreat.

Perched atop a hill with a panoramic view of the snow-capped Himalayan peaks, Sterling Park Kalimpong resides in a historic edifice once owned by the Maharaja of Dinajpur, allowing guests a peek into a majestic bygone era. The vistas of Mt Kanchenjunga and other majestic peaks like Pandim and Narsingh, alongside the historic Jelep-la and Nathu-la Passes, resonate with old tales of the Silk Trade Route winding through Lhasa to Tibet. This mountain retreat, situated away from the urban hustle of downtown Kalimpong, exudes an aura of old-world charm with its colonial-era architecture adorned with intricate woodwork, vintage furnishings, and spacious verandahs, transporting guests



back to a nostalgic age. The lavishly appointed rooms and suites boast breath-taking views of the majestic Himalayas, creating a perfect sanctuary for relaxation. Guests can unwind on the cosy patio, indulge in the finest Darjeeling tea, or revel in the tranquillity of the lush courtyard surroundings. The signature restaurant, Kokomendo, beckons visitors with a diverse array of Indian, Continental, Chinese, Nepalese, and Tibetan delicacies. Together with Sterling Park Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok Orange Village, they form a delightful mountain circuit in the Eastern Himalayan foothills, promising an

unforgettable journey for nature and culture enthusiasts alike.

## BAREFOOT BUNGALOW, CHAMBA

Where? Buranskhanda, Chamba-Mussoorie Road, Buranskhanda, Dehradun, Uttarakhand. Set amidst the enchanting Himalayan landscape, Barefoot Bungalow, a luxurious 3-bedroom homestay in Buranskhanda, offers a sublime escape from the routine of daily life. Located just 25 kilometres from the renowned hill station of Mussoorie, this serene refuge captures the essence of tranquillity and natural beauty in the Garhwal Himalayas.



At the heart of Barefoot Bungalow lies a deep commitment to hospitality, where a dedicated team of professionals ensures that guests are pampered and well looked after. This pet-friendly haven features a personal butler and a talented in-house chef named Arjun, who delights guests with delicious home-cooked meals. The cosy wooden interiors create a warm hill station ambiance, perfect for creating memorable evenings by the bonfire, accompanied by live music performances or the inviting glow of an indoor fireplace. Guests at Barefoot Bungalow can indulge in a culinary delight at the glasshouse restaurant, where they

can watch their meals being freshly prepared in a live kitchen setting. The expansive 14,000-square-foot private garden, embellished with ponds and meticulously landscaped, provides a lush sanctuary for relaxation and reflection. And to top it all off, sweeping views of the majestic snow-capped Himalayan range serve as a breath-taking backdrop to this picturesque retreat.

## ONENESS, RISHIKESH

Where? Rishikesh, Badrinath Highway, Byasi, Uttarakhand. Cocooned within a Lower Shivalik mountain valley, 30 kilometres away from Rishikesh, this resort is

a harmonious blend of river, flora, and fauna, inviting guests to embark on a mesmerizing journey where nature's wild beauty takes centre stage and showcases a diverse array of Sal, Haldu, Figs, and Mulberry trees, forming a biodiverse sanctuary. This lively mountain retreat encourages visitors to immerse themselves in the wilderness, surrounded by monkeys, langurs, wild cats, the elusive Black Bear, and the captivating Scarlet Minivet. Its commitment to ecology shines through in the careful planting of 30,000 saplings of over 50 medicinal plants, fostering a flourishing ecosystem that embodies the ethos of the resort.

As the Ganges flows below, resonating with the sacred energy of Devprayag, spirituality becomes intricately woven into the fabric of Oneness. Guests can luxuriate in unparalleled comfort within the Luxury Cottages, each intricately designed to provide a unique and immersive stay. From the spacious and finely appointed rooms to the breath-taking views of the gardens and mountains, every aspect has been thoughtfully curated to offer an unforgettable escape. Beyond being just a resort, on offer is an immersive journey.

Engage in a variety of inclusive activities, ranging from leisurely beach moments to captivating stargazing sessions. For our younger guests, an array of kid's activities awaits. Furthermore, optional activities such as Fun Family Float and Memory Plantation present distinctive and memorable experiences. Go for an adventure intertwined with the allure of unspoiled wilderness. Your expedition commences with experienced guides guiding you through a brief hike, unveiling the untouched beauty of the Lower Shivalik mountains. The path then seamlessly transitions to a unique river crossing experience via a raft, adding a touch of thrill to your sojourn.

(Awarded the 'Best food writer in the country' by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the Ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean writes on food and travel)



**GAJRAJ RAO**, the Newgen method actor, redefines the cinematic experience by performing even non-descript roles with élan. This journey explores the nuances of his method acting, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

# THE METHOD HIS MADNESS

Gajraj Rao, a name that resonates with authenticity and a deep understanding of character portrayal, has carved a niche for himself in the Indian film industry through a blend of meticulous method acting and a rich repertoire of roles. Rao's journey from the sidelines to the spotlight is a testament to his dedication, perseverance, and exceptional talent. Gajraj Rao's foray into acting was marked by a series of small but significant roles that gradually built his reputation as a reliable character actor. Born in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, Rao's initial years in the industry were filled with struggles and uncredited roles. His career began in the late 1990s, with minor roles in films and television. However, his ability to imbue even the smallest roles with depth and realism did not go unnoticed. Rao's breakthrough came with the 2018 film *Badhaai Ho*, where he played Jeetender Kaushik, a middle-aged man who discovers his wife's unexpected pregnancy. The film's success catapulted Rao into the limelight, earning him critical acclaim and several awards. His portrayal of Jeetender Kaushik was lauded for its warmth, subtlety, and humor, marking a significant shift in the perception of middle-aged characters in Indian cinema.

What sets Gajraj Rao apart is his approach to method acting. Rao's dedication to his craft involves deep immersion into his characters. He often spends extensive time understanding the background, motivations, and nuances of the roles he portrays. This approach allows him to deliver performances that are both authentic and relatable. Method acting, a technique pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski and later popularized by Lee Strasberg, emphasizes the psychological and emotional aspects of character development. Rao's use

of this technique involves drawing from his own experiences and emotions to bring a character to life. His preparation often includes detailed research, observing people with similar backgrounds to his characters, and even adopting their mannerisms and speech patterns. Rao's impact on modern Indian cinema extends beyond his performances. He represents a shift towards more realistic and nuanced storytelling in Bollywood. Films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Lootcase* further showcase his versatility, moving away from stereotypical depictions to more layered and authentic characters. In contemporary cinema, method actors like Gajraj Rao are redefining the narrative. They are moving away from the star-centric approach to one that values story and character depth. This trend is visible in the rise of content-driven films and web series that focus on everyday stories and real-life issues. And the time is ripe for such experiments. "Twenty years back I, Pankaj Tripathi, Nawazuddin Siddiqui and many others could not imagine of getting a significant role. Hindi cinema is more democratic and character

driven and gives chance to everyone," says Rao. Method actors today are increasingly collaborating with directors and writers to develop well-rounded characters. They are involved in the creative process from the early stages, contributing to script development and character arcs. This collaborative approach results in performances that are not just believable but also deeply engaging. While method acting is rewarding, it is also challenging. The emotional toll of deeply immersing oneself in a character can be significant. For Rao, balancing the intense preparation required for his roles with his personal life is a constant challenge. However, his passion for acting and his commitment to his craft continue to drive him forward. "I have theatre background where script is very important which all of us cherish. Then we prepare for the role meticulously. What viewers see on the screen is culmination of that preparation." Looking ahead, Gajraj Rao's journey seems poised for further success. With the increasing popularity of OTT platforms and a growing

audience for nuanced storytelling, actors like Rao are likely to find even more opportunities to showcase their talent. His upcoming projects are eagerly awaited by fans and critics alike, who expect nothing short of brilliance from this seasoned actor. Gajraj Rao's journey as an actor is an inspiring tale of perseverance, talent, and the power of method acting. His contributions to Indian cinema have paved the way for more realistic and relatable storytelling. As he continues to explore new horizons, Rao remains a beacon of authenticity and excellence in the world of acting, embodying the transformative power of method acting in modern cinema. In the film *Maidaan*, Gajraj Rao excels in his role by bringing a nuanced depth and authenticity that enhances the movie's historical and emotional landscape. The film, directed by Amit Ravindernath Sharma, chronicles the golden era of Indian football from 1952 to 1962, focusing on the life of Syed Abdul Rahim, the coach who led the Indian team to remarkable victories. Rao portrays a pivotal character whose support and conflict with the protagonist add layers to the narrative, showcasing his ability to seamlessly blend into the historical setting while delivering a performance that is both compelling and resonant. His meticulous approach to embodying his character contributes significantly to the film's overall impact, making *Maidaan* a captivating tribute to a lesser-known yet glorious chapter of Indian sports history.

WHAT SETS GAJRAJ RAO APART IS HIS APPROACH TO METHOD ACTING. RAO'S DEDICATION TO HIS CRAFT INVOLVES DEEP IMMERSION INTO HIS CHARACTERS. HE OFTEN SPENDS EXTENSIVE TIME UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND, MOTIVATIONS, AND NUANCES OF THE ROLES HE PORTRAYS. THIS APPROACH ALLOWS HIM TO DELIVER PERFORMANCES THAT ARE BOTH AUTHENTIC AND RELATABLE

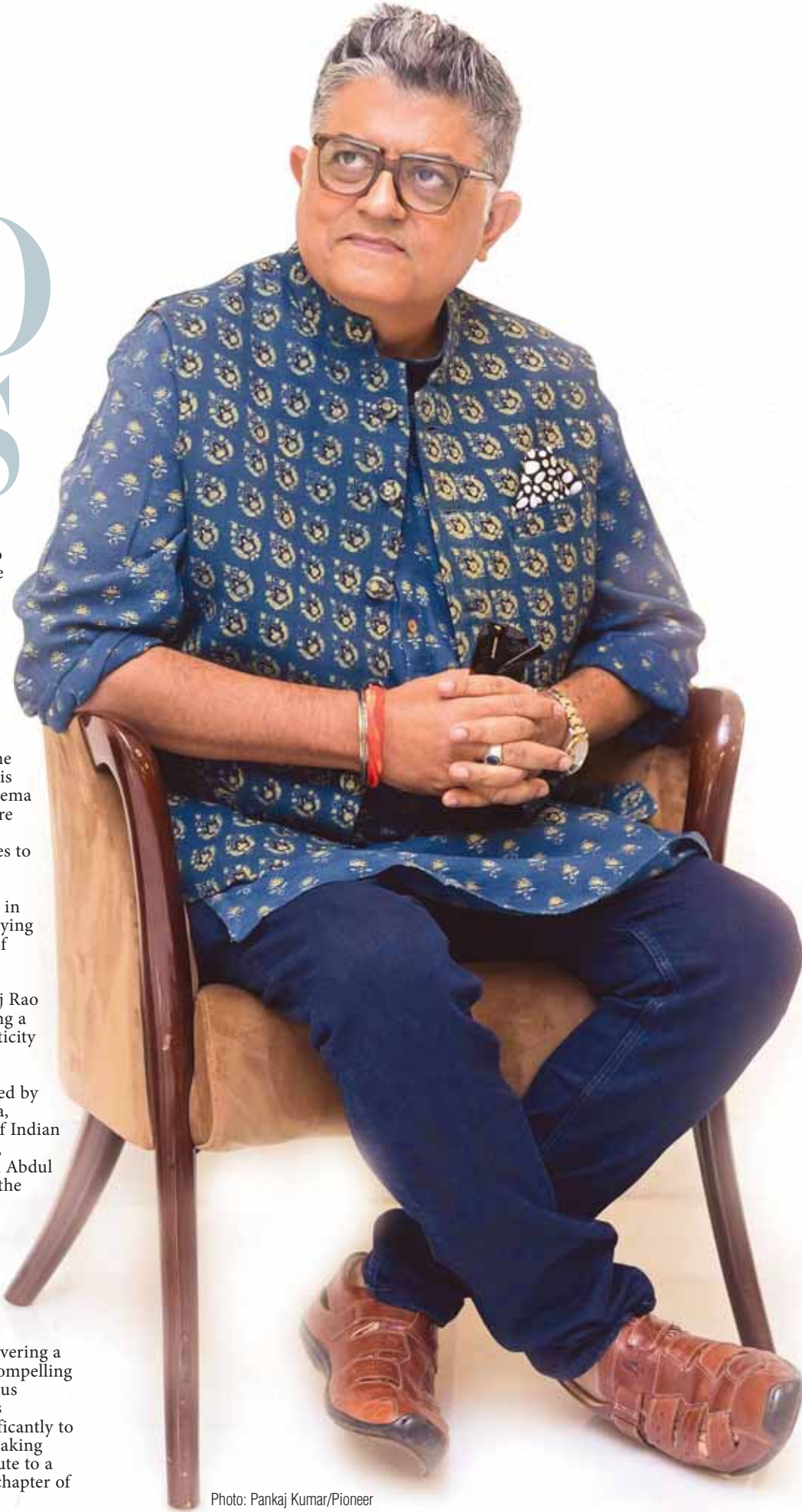


Photo: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer

## Reflections on Acting, Challenges and Audience Influence

**MAHESH THAKUR** shares insights into his illustrious acting career, spanning television and cinema. From memorable roles to industry evolution, he reflects on the challenges and successes that have shaped him as an artist. In a conversation with **SAKSHI PRIYA**, he also opens up about his recent show *Aangan Aapno Kaa*, shedding light on his experience playing a father's role in this heartwarming project

**What motivates you to continue acting and how do you view the role of the audience in your career?**

I get the audience's love and reaction. Being an actor means experiencing the audience's reactions, which keep me going. They encourage me to do better. I would say it is the audience that inspires me to act.

**Among the numerous characters you've portrayed, which role has been the most memorable for you and why?**

I think a role that is very different from my personality would be Tej Singh Oberoi from *Ishqbaaz*. That character is nothing like me and I had to create a persona that was really nasty, cunning and thought differently. It's a really interesting character that I played, so I would definitely give credit to that role. Generally, the roles I play are similar to my personality and I feel that's not very challenging but the role in *Ishqbaaz* was challenging. Playing the honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi was also challenging because it is difficult to embody a character who is very much in the public eye. Another challenging role was playing Sadhu Vaswani. All these characters are memorable because they are different from who I am.

**You've often played positive characters. Did you relish the opportunity to portray a villain in *Ishqbaaz*, and how did you approach that transformation?**

First of all, in television, we have very different ways of working. The episodes and scripts come on set, so we don't have time to

do much homework. My basic approach in the initial days when I worked on any television character, which is very different from the rest, is to do a lot of reading. I read one to six episodes, and once I am done with reading, I try to get into the character and experiment with different voice modulations in my own space. I try taking pauses when delivering dialogues and ensure that I don't repeat certain expressions. In *Ishqbaaz*, my character was so negative that I didn't want my kids to watch it, as they were very young at that time.

**What have been some of the biggest challenges and successes in your acting career and how have they shaped you as an artist?**

One of the biggest challenges in my acting career was transitioning to television. When I started doing daily soaps, I realised that you put in just as much hard work as you do in films but it's for one telecast. After that, it's gone and often forgotten. As actors, we used to be very particular about giving a fantastic shot, striving for perfection. However, in television, you don't have much time. You get only a few minutes and maybe 4 to 5 takes to get the shot right. No matter how perfect a shot I gave, there was always room for improvement, but in television, it often goes unnoticed because it airs only once and then it's long gone. This was a learning experience for me, helping me understand that, at the end of the day, actors are a product of the writing and direction. It's not just about the actor. Many actors in the

industry think it's all about them, believing that their performance alone makes a movie or show a hit. But that's not true. It's teamwork that makes a project successful. TV has taught me humility as an actor. It made me realise that while an actor might attract the audience for the initial viewing, it's the combined effort of the entire team that makes a lasting impact.

**You've seen the television industry evolve over the years. How do you think it has changed, and what are your thoughts on the current trends in TV shows and content?**

Yes, definitely. The sensibility has changed. Audiences are now more open to rich subjects and they have a say in what they want to see. You can't disregard the audience today. You have to be very careful. People always try to bifurcate between whether a film is for villagers, town people or two-tier towns. I think that divide is disappearing. We have to ensure that the content generated is not just to cater to one segment, as the divide is reducing between these three categories, thanks to the internet. Everyone now has access to all sorts of content. So, as a content creator, you have to keep everyone in mind, not just a single type of audience.

**Looking back on your time working with Sridevi, is there a specific scene or moment from *Malini Iyer* that stands out in your memory?**

Sridevi Ma'am was and will always be a legend because she was one of the first heroines where movies were made if she said yes to a project, like



*Chandni, Lamhe*, and all these beautiful films she was a part of. No matter how much I say about her or praise her, it will always be less.

**Recently, you are working on a project, *Aangan Aapno Kaa*. How has your experience been playing the father's role in this project?**

I am playing the character of a dad, and it's great. As I said, you need a good team of actors, and we have a very good team here,

especially my daughter, with whom I am very close and interact with often. There are always lots of hugging scenes, giving love, and treating them like babies, so we have to get into a very comfortable zone. Even on the set, they call me Papa instead of Mahesh Ji, and I am good with that. They are very sweet co-actors.

**What was your experience like working on *Dil, Dosti Dilemma*, especially considering the**

**fantastic team of women involved, from the director to the producer?**

*Dil, Dosti Dilemma* was great fun because we had a fantastic team filled with women, from the director to the producer. It was nice seeing all the women coming into action and working so brilliantly as a team. I enjoyed my time in *Dil, Dosti Dilemma*, and it was shot beautifully. The story was one of the simplest out there on the streaming platform. You can watch it and have a great time with your loved ones. It was an extremely sweet story, and I just loved working on the project.

**How do you approach acting in different mediums like films, television and web series? Do you have a preference among these mediums?**

An actor is always an actor; they should not choose any medium. The only difference between TV and film is not that much. The major difference between working in front of the camera and on stage is significant. When you go on stage, there is a difference in working in front of the camera. In front of the camera, you have to take care of lights, know which dialogue to say and when and work with the cameraman, co-actors and director, so there are lots of things happening in one shot. It's pretty complicated for a person who starts straight in TV and film because lots are happening on sets. When you do a stage, it's all about you. You forget your line, you're supposed to carry on; you are not supposed to stand blank on the stage because you have a live audience watching you. So, that's more challenging,

I feel, for actors working on stage because it's all about dialogue delivery, trying to work on body language, so much is happening on stage that it's more of a challenge rather than working in the medium of TV and film. Acting on TV and film is also challenging but not as challenging as the stage. Also, if you're good on stage, it doesn't mean you can be good in front of the TV and camera because you have to control your expression and not go too loud because TV is a subtle medium. One thing I learned about the theatre is that in theatre, you have to pronounce your words; you cannot speak loudly. The last person sitting on the back bench in the auditorium should be able to listen to you. It's not about raising your voice; it's literally pronunciation which goes right up to the end.

**Many actors look up to your career. What piece of advice would you give to someone just starting out in television acting?**

To all the new actors, hang in there. Hanging in doesn't mean losing your patience, balance or giving up. This is one of the most difficult professions you could choose. If you have multiple choices, I would say let acting be the last one you go for. But if you are going for it, then be resilient. You have to be there because you never know when the right break will happen for you and when things will start working in your favor. Don't give up. If you are an actor, you should think about it as always being an actor; otherwise, you will never get anywhere. So, choose your profession wisely.

