

Naturally occurring bile acid can blunt statin-induced diabetes

Vasudevan Mukunth

Administering ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) can stave off the tendency of statins to induce glucose intolerance and diabetes, a study by a group of researchers in China has found.

Statin is prescribed to people with a high risk of cardiovascular disease. They work by blocking the activity of an enzyme involved in the metabolic pathway that produces LDL, or "bad", cholesterol.

Statin is on the World Health Organization's list of essential medicines and among the most sold drugs worldwide.

However, many studies have found statins could increase the risk of developing diabetes.

'Frank diabetes'

"It has been known for a few years now that statins can induce glucose intolerance and even frank diabetes in some people," Dr. V. Mohan, chairman of the Madras Diabetes Research

Foundation, Chennai, told *The Hindu*.

He added that doctors have continued to prescribe them because statins' benefits "far outweigh the risk". Nonetheless, the mechanism by which statins have this effect has been unclear.

In the study, published in February in the journal *Cell Metabolism*, the researchers reported one mechanism through which statins could increase glucose intolerance, involving UDCA, a bile acid.

The team recruited 30 people with atorvastatin and 10 without and tracked their metabolism for four months.

They reported that the faeces of those taking atorvastatin had a reduced abundance of bacteria of the genus *Clostridium* and that these individuals had "altered serum and faecal bile acid profiles" as well.

Gut microbiome

The gut microbiome is a community of bacteria in the gut in a symbiotic relationship with the body.

The researchers found that the *Clostridium*-deficient microbiome inhibited enzymes called hydroxysteroid dehydrogenases and lowered UDCA.

They also verified an idea that "the decreased *Clostridium*-rich microbiota might influence bile acid synthesis and excretion and impair glucose metabolism" in a 12-week study of mice.

To check the role of UDCA, they recruited five participants on statins and ad-

ministered 10-13 mg/kg (of body weight) of UDCA per day. After two months, they found the individuals' HbA1C levels, among others, were "substantially decreased".

They concluded that "UDCA restored impaired glucose homeostasis without limiting the lipid-lowering effect of statin".

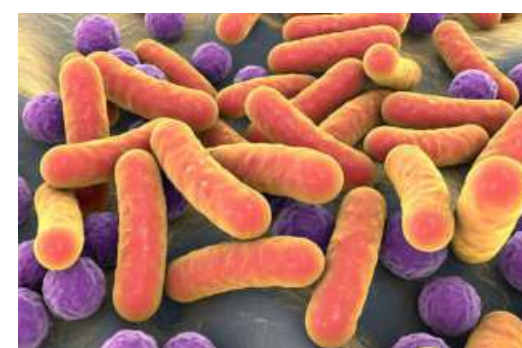
Dr. Mohan called the finding "good news" and "a new angle" but also said the underlying hypothesis will have to be tested in randomised clinical trials.

SNAPSHOTS



Imaging detects hypoxic pockets in the mouse brain

Using a bioluminescent oxygen indicator, scientists discovered a spontaneous, spatially defined occurrence of "hypoxic pockets" in the mouse brain. Their technique offers a way to learn more about brain oxygen tension (pO₂), a measure of oxygen delivery and demand in brain tissue that changes dynamically but is not well understood. The findings could have implications for how rest and exercise affect pO₂ in the human brain, including the role of these activities in conditions such as dementia.



Microbes may seed an autoimmune kidney disease

A member of the gut microbiome may help spark an autoimmune disease in the kidneys by leaking antigens that trigger the immune system, experiments on mice and samples from 118 people showed. Gut microbiomes of 33 patients with the disorder were skewed toward bacterial species that degrade mucin. The bacterium modified IgA1 and converted it into the deglycosylated form associated with IgA nephropathy. This created antigens that crossed from the intestines to the glomeruli region.



4 mpox vaccines in animals reveal correlates of protection

Scientists have made new discoveries about the effectiveness of four vaccines for the mpox virus – and have uncovered potential signs of immune activity that correlate with protection. Their head-to-head comparison could inform further research into safer and improved vaccines for mpox. All four vaccines protected the macaques from infections when exposed to the current outbreak strain of mpox. However, one vaccine provided almost complete protection.

Tropical cyclones of higher intensity demand a new category

Tropical cyclones with peak wind speeds far exceeding category 5 scale of 252 km/hour are increasingly seen due to global warming, making a case for introducing category 6 for wind speed above 309 km/hour

Madhavan Nair Rajeevan

Tropical cyclones are powerful and destructive weather systems that form over warm tropical ocean basins, where sea surface temperatures are above 26.5 degree C. These storms are characterised by strong winds, heavy precipitation and storm surges and can cause significant damage to coastal communities and infrastructure.

Climatologically, tropical cyclones form mainly in the North Atlantic, East Pacific, West Pacific, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Out of 85 tropical storms that develop annually over the warm tropical oceans, more than half (45) of them intensify into tropical cyclones. The Western Pacific basin is the most active region for tropical cyclones and accounts for about a third of the world's tropical cyclones. The North Indian basin accounts for only about 4% of the global total, although it is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the effects of such cyclones.

The Saffir-Simpson (SS) hurricane wind scale, introduced in the early 1970s, is the most widely used metric for warning the public about the dangers of tropical cyclones. The SS hurricane wind scales are categorised by the maximum sustained wind speed at a height of 10 metres. Although most tropical cyclone-related deaths are caused by storm surge and heavy rainfall, wind hazard remains an important metric for communicating risk to the public and a critical metric

Global warming intensifies tropical cyclones

Tropical cyclones form mainly in the North Atlantic, East Pacific, West Pacific, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean

■ Saffir-Simpson (SS) hurricane wind scale introduced in the early 1970s has five categories. Wind speed exceeding 252 km/hour fall under category 5

■ Long-term data indicate that the frequency of intense tropical cyclones is

Increasing occurrence: Five tropical storms with wind speeds over 309 km/hour occurred in the last nine years.

increasing in the large ocean basins

■ For every degree of warming, an increase in wind speed of 12% is observed in the strongest cyclones

■ Tropical cyclones with wind speed far exceeding category 5 are becoming common. A new category 6 scale for wind speed over 309 km/hour may be required

■ The Western Pacific

basin is the most active region for tropical cyclones, and accounts for about a third of all tropical cyclones. The north Indian basin accounts for about 4%

■ At present, the north Indian Ocean is not very vulnerable to category 6 storms. As global warming continues, category 6 storms may occur here in near future

■ There is a need to revisit India's disaster management strategy for tropical cyclones and the early warning systems

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



for measuring the impact of these cyclones. There are five categories on the SS hurricane wind scale – category 1 to category 5 – with category 5 wind speed exceeding 252 km/hour. The combined effects of wind, storm surge, and rainfall in a category 5 impact would completely raze any structure.

The sharp rise in man-made greenhouse gas emissions has led to global warming of the order of 1.10 degree C since pre-industrial times. The warming can be observed not only at the sea surface, but also in the depths of the ocean, which increases the heat content of the ocean and thus favours the intensification of tropical cy-

clones. Long-term data indicate that the frequency of intense tropical cyclones is increasing in the large ocean basins. For every degree of warming, an increase in wind speed of 12% is observed in the strongest cyclones, which corresponds to a 40% increase in destructive potential. As warm waters extend further poleward, cyclones are shifting poleward, with more storms forming at higher latitudes than in the past. A warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture, leading to heavier rainfall when tropical cyclones make landfall. As the oceans warm, cyclones also strengthen faster and spend more lifetime over the oceans. In 2023, tropi-

cal cyclone Freddy spent 37 days over the oceans, making it the longest-lived cyclones ever recorded.

Category 5

In a recent research paper published in the *Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences*, the authors document that storms are occurring at intensities well above Category 5 and that record wind speeds are likely to continue as the planet continues to warm. At the time of its introduction, the SS wind scale did not foresee the need for a tropical cyclone-beyond category 5. However, due to global warming, there is now a need to define a category 6 cyclone. The authors therefore proposed to

introduce a hypothetical modification of the SS wind scale to tie category 5 to peak wind speeds between 252-309 km/hour and to include an additional category 6 above 309 km/hour.

Observations indicate that of the 197 tropical cyclones categorised as category 5 in the 42-year period from 1980 to 2021, half occurred in the last 17 years of the period. Five of these storms which exceeded the hypothetical category 6 (with wind speeds of over 309 km/hour). Simulations of future climate change suggest that the annual exceedance of the category 6 threshold will increase even more in the regions where intense tropical cyclones currently occur. It is expected that the proposed 6th category of the SS wind scale could raise awareness of the dangers of the increased risk of large cyclones due to global warming.

At present, the North Indian Ocean is not as vulnerable to category 6 storms. However, as global warming continues unabated, there is a good chance that a category 6 storm with maximum wind speeds of over 309 km/hour may occur over the North Indian Ocean in the near future. Therefore, there is a need to revisit India's disaster management strategy for tropical cyclones and the early warning systems. (Madhavan Nair Rajeevan was former secretary to the Government of India and presently the Vice Chancellor, Atria University, Bengaluru)

Sprouting a sandalwood sapling



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Sandalwood hardly needs an introduction to the readers of *The Hindu*. It has been valued for many centuries, for its fragrant oil, its prized wood, and the many medicinal uses it has been put to. The tree that all this comes from, however, is not all that familiar. Growing in deciduous forests, it is a partial, or hemiparasite that needs four or five other trees growing around it. Under the ground, sandalwood roots form a haustorium that forms an octopus-like hold on the host tree's roots, from where water

and nutrients are taken.

The sandalwood fruit is probably even more unfamiliar. About 1.5 cm in diameter, the fleshy fruit is a shiny purplish black when ripe. The one seed inside is a hard, dry kernel, not the usual tough seed coat protecting a fleshy interior. This makes it difficult for the seed to survive beyond one season.

Both the above properties – the need for other trees in the early growth phase, and the seeds, which are short-lived and cannot be stored, have added to the overexploited tree's difficulties. This has led to a drastic fall in the number of sandalwood trees in the forests of South India. The IUCN has classified sandalwood as a vulnerable species. It is not surprising that Australia is



Ideal way: Passage through the digestive system of birds is good for the seeds as they have better chances of maturing into trees.

now the world's largest supplier of sandalwood and its oil.

Dispersal by birds

The fruit is bitter, and not to human tastes. But it is loved by birds. About 10 species, such as the Asian Koel, and the Gray Hornbill

swallow the fruit whole, and over time drop the seeds at great distances from the tree they feasted on. These birds are among India's larger frugivores, or eaters of fruit. The sandalwood tree's fruit is just right for the koels and hornbills. It has been esta-

blished that sandalwood trees that produce larger seeds usually end up with the seeds close by. Although the large seeds are better equipped for germination, birds cannot swallow those large seeds, and drop them off after pecking away at the flesh.

The passage through the digestive system is good for the seeds. The seeds now germinate very quickly and have better chances of maturing into trees. This is the reason why forests, and not plantations, are where we get to see a few mature sandalwood trees. Sadly, the thinning of forests has reduced bird populations, and therefore the chances of proper seed dispersal.

Can humans try to emulate birds? Researchers at the Kerala Agricultural University in Thrissur, work-

ing with European colleagues have tried various ways of priming sandalwood seeds for germination (*Forests*, 14:1076, 2023). Best results were obtained when they soaked freshly collected sandalwood tree seeds in a 5% solution of polyethylene glycol-6000 for two days. This interesting synthetic substance induces osmotic pressure on the cells of the seed and pushes the germination process forward. This is called osmopriming, and when done correctly is more effective than soaking in just water. The sprouting rate was 79% compared to 45% when just planting the seed.

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



Question Corner

Tooth decay

When did an uptick in dental cavities in humans begin?

Researchers have recovered remarkably preserved microbiomes from two teeth dating back 4,000 years, found in an Irish limestone cave. Genetic analyses of these microbiomes reveal major changes in the oral microenvironment from the Bronze Age to today. The authors identified several bacteria linked to gum disease and provided the first high-quality ancient genome of *Streptococcus mutans*, the major culprit behind tooth decay. While *S. mutans* is very common in modern

mouths, it is exceptionally rare in the ancient genomic record. One reason for this may be the acid-producing nature of the species. This acid decays the tooth, but also destroys DNA and stops plaque from fossilising. While most ancient oral microbiomes are retrieved from fossilised plaque, this study targeted the tooth directly. Another reason for the scarcity of *S. mutans* in ancient mouths may be the lack of favourable habitats for this sugar-loving species.

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

What happened to the bridge in Baltimore?

Could the Baltimore bridge disaster have been prevented? What happens when a ship's generators fail?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

On March 26, a container vessel ran into the pillar of a bridge on the Patapsco River in Baltimore, bringing a part of the structure crashing down together with some people and cars on the bridge. By late March 27, the U.S. Coast Guard had concluded its search in the river for the bodies of the six people who fell. The vessel had an all-Indian crew.

What is the timeline of events?

After departing from the port of Baltimore at 12.28 a.m. local time, the 300-metre-long vessel *Dali* was headed for Colombo, Sri Lanka, with several containers of oil and some hazardous material. Less than an hour after its departure, people nearby reported the *Dali's* lights flickering. Two minutes later, the ship's course also started to angle towards two of the bridge's pillars in the river. At 1.27 a.m. local time, the *Dali* mowed into the pillar and brought down a segment of the bridge.

A U.S. Coast Guard report said, the *Dali's* crew had broadcast a mayday signal seeking help to control the vessel. This signal alerted the Coast Guard as well as prompted local authorities to close the bridge for further traffic. A part of the bridge's superstructure also fell on the vessel, smashing some containers and leaving them balanced precariously on the vessel.

The Coast Guard suggested the vessel's engine failed. In this scenario, it would have lost its lights and other facilities and, sans mechanical power, deprived its pilots of the ability to steer the vessel.

Maryland governor Wes Moore later declared a state of emergency. With inputs from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, federal officials had by March 28 also virtually ruled out deliberate intent to cause the collision.

The *Dali* belongs to the Danish shipping giant Maersk and flies a Singapore flag. It is managed by the Synergy Marine Group, headed by Rajesh Unni.

What were the casualties?

The Synergy Marine Group said in statements that all crew members were safe.

The bridge's collapse dropped eight people through 50 feet into the Patapsco River. While two people were fished out soon after, the Coast Guard postponed the search for the other six because of the river's depth, temperature, lack of light, the presence of sharp objects in the water, and the risk of more parts of the bridge and/or the containers falling in.

Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath told reporters on March 28 that the team no longer expected to find the six people alive.

What happened to the ship?

The *Dali* is propelled by a nine-cylinder two-stroke diesel engine. In the two-stroke cycle, fuel is pumped into the combustion chamber, where a spark plug causes the fuel-air mixture to explode. The energy release pushes a piston up, rotating the crankshaft. The explosion's residue (exhaust) is then pumped out of the engine to bring the piston down in the second stroke. Once the engine transfers mechanical power to the crankshaft, it can be further transferred to the propeller directly, via a gearbox or electric motors. It is also coupled with an alternator that converts the mechanical power to electric to supply appliances on the vessel, including lighting. The Coast Guard recorded a statement that at least one of *Dali's* engines "coughed" and that "the smell of burned fuel was everywhere in the engine room", suggesting the vessel's engine failed. In this scenario, the vessel would have lost its lights and other facilities and, sans mechanical power, deprived its pilots of the ability to steer the vessel. Onlookers reported the vessel's lights flickering on later which experts have attributed to a backup generator.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board said it would be checking whether the fuel used in the *Dali's* engine was contaminated.

In 2023, Chilean authorities reported issues with *Dali's* propulsion, although Singaporean ones said it had cleared two inspections at foreign ports the same year.

Could the collision have been prevented?

The Francis Scott Key Bridge – the structure in question – was built in the mid-1970s. Colin Caprani, a civil engineer at Monash University, Melbourne, wrote that the protective shielding around the pillars into which the ship moved wasn't designed to withstand the impact of such a large vessel. Together with the vessel's speed at the time of the collision, around 15 km/hr, he estimated the impact force to be equivalent to 20,000 tonnes. In 2016, Panama Canal authorities upgraded its locks to allow larger ships to pass through. The *Dali's* design was subsequently modified to increase its container capacity by 10%. Before this, *Financial Times* reported, vessels of this size seldom made port along the U.S. east coast – nor did bridges over waterways here have to contend with them.

Why is unemployment high among the youth?

What has the India Employment Report 2024, prepared by the Institute for Human Development and the International Labour Organization, found? Why are educated youth also not getting jobs? Why is women participation in the labour force low? What are some of the correctives suggested?

A. M. Jigeesh

The story so far:

The India Employment Report 2024, prepared jointly by the Institute of Human Development (IHD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and released on March 26, revolves around "youth employment, education and skills." It has analysed trends and patterns of the Indian labour market for two decades, including the COVID-19 years, and listed the "emerging characteristics of the employment challenges now confronting the economy as well as the impact of growth on employment."

What are the key findings?

The report's authors note that the proportion of India's working-age population (aged 15-59) increased from 61% in 2011 to 64% in 2021 and is projected to reach 65% in 2036. About 7-8 million young people are added each year to the labour force. Though the proportion of youth getting an education increased from 18% in 2000 to 35% in 2022, the percentage of youth involved in economic activities decreased from 52% to 37% during the same period.

The authors warn that unemployment in the country is "predominantly a problem among youth", especially those with a secondary level of education or higher, and that it has intensified over time.

"In 2022, the share of unemployed youth in the total unemployed population was 82.9%," they noted, adding that the share of educated youth among all unemployed people also increased, from 54.2% in 2000 to 65.7% in 2022. Also, among the educated (secondary level or higher) unemployed youth, women accounted

The report pointed out that most jobs in 2023 were in the informal sector; and that about half the jobs in the formal sector were also of an informal nature

for a larger share (76.7%) than men (62.2%).

Is the crisis the result of a lack of jobs?

Santosh Mehrotra whose studies have been cited in several chapters in the report, told *The Hindu* that it's a question of both lack of opportunities and unemployability of educated youth due to poor quality of education. He urged the government to ensure that the development of skills was separated from formal education. The ILO and IHD said the share of technically qualified youth was low in India: 15.62% youth had vocational training in 2022, but out of them only 4.09% had formal vocational training. According to Mr. Mehrotra, the fact that employment in the agriculture sector has increased after 2019 is because of the lack of quality education among the youth, making it difficult for them to get jobs in other sectors. The report's authors pointed out that most jobs in 2023 (90.4%) were in the informal sector; and that around half the jobs in the formal sector (45.2%) were also of an informal nature. Mr. Mehrotra stressed the importance of creating more jobs in the formal sector, pointing out that the unemployment rate among youth had tripled between 2012 and 2018.

What is the quality of employment?

The ILO and IHD stated that the jobs remained low-productive and low-earning. Real wages and earnings showed a decline or had stagnated. A large proportion of regular workers (40.8%) and casual workers (51.9%) did not receive the average daily minimum wage prescribed for unskilled workers. The government-prescribed rate is ₹480 per day.

Central trade unions and the Samyukt Kisan Morcha are concerned about the report's findings. According to senior trade union leader Amarjeet Kaur, the ILO report flags the "wage depression" prevalent in the country, especially when food inflation is not under control. She adds that formal employment is merely 9% of total employment and that most of the workforce is kept out of any social security net. "This itself adds to unemployment and underemployment as workers without formal employment may not be able to build a base of education and skill enhancement for the next generation," she observes.

The report's authors said as individuals attain higher levels of education, they are more likely to have access to more secure and formal employment options, leading to higher average returns. Youth residing in the southern, western and north-eastern regions had greater probabilities of being in formal employment, they noted, also flagging the larger presence of

socially marginalised youth in informal jobs.

Why are jobs scarce in the formal sector?

Trade unions contend that thousands of posts have not been filled for years and the policy of letting one-third of the vacancies lapse after retirements have resulted in the decrease of formal employment. The trend of contractual appointments and clamour for consultancies are also blamed for the dip in formal jobs.

What about the gender gap?

There is a significant gender gap in the labour market, with low rates of female labour force participation. The gender gap in the LFPR has remained almost consistent over the past two decades, the report's authors observed.

In 2022, the LFPR of young men (at 61.2%) was almost three times higher than that of young women (at 21.7%), and the gender gap was similar in both rural and urban areas. The report's authors have noted that there is a large proportion of young persons, particularly women, who are not in education, employment or training. Between 2012 and 2019, there was an alarming increase in unemployment because of the decrease in women participation in the workforce, a trend which has been slightly reversed post 2019. "Young women are more likely to engage in agriculture than young men," they said.

What has the report recommended?

India was expected to have a sustained economic growth of 5-6% in the next 15 years or so, the report's authors noted. "Rapid technological changes and high growth have increased the gap between skill supply and demand," they said, urging policymakers to take adequate steps to ensure rapid integration of youth into the labour market through well-targeted supply and demand measures.

The report's authors have recommended "five missions" to address the challenges: Make production and growth more employment-intensive; improve the quality of jobs; overcome labour market inequalities; make systems for skills training and active labour market policies more effective; bridge the deficits in knowledge on labour market patterns and youth employment. They have recommended measures such as integrating employment creation with macro and other economic policies to boost productive non-farm employment. They also said micro, small and medium-sized enterprises must be supported and decentralised.

The report's authors have urged the government to take steps to increase agriculture productivity, create more non-farm jobs and promote entrepreneurship. Calling for a focus on policies that boost women's participation in the labour force, they also sought a minimum quality of employment and basic rights of workers across all sectors.



Crisis time: The trend of contractual appointments and clamour for consultancies are also blamed for the dip in formal jobs. AFP

Will global forest expansion hit tribals?

What are the concerns about the Global Biodiversity Framework which aims to increase areas under forest cover, inland water, coastal and marine areas to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area? What is the situation in India?

Rahul Karmakar

The story so far:

A symposium on the rights of indigenous people organised by the University of Arizona on March 21-22 put the spotlight on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and how, in conjunction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act of 2023, it will hit India's tribes the hardest. Many at the symposium foresaw doom for the country's indigenous communities already affected by the establishment of national parks.

What is the Kunming-Montreal GBF?

This framework was adopted during the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022 following a four-year consultation and negotiation process. It claims to support the achievement of sustainable development goals and build on previous strategic plans, paving "an ambitious pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050." Accordingly, four goals were set for 2050 and 23 targets for 2030 toward planning, monitoring, reporting and reviewing implementation, organising finance, and drawing up strategies for capacity development, technical and scientific cooperation, and an agreement on digital

Activists say meeting the GBF targets will threaten the existence of indigenous populations

sequence information on genetic resources. In adopting the GBF, all parties have committees to set national targets to implement it. Participating at the event, New Delhi-based rights activist Suhass Chakma drew the attention of environmentalists and leaders of indigenous communities to Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal GBF, which aims to "increase terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services" to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area. At present, protected areas (PAs) cover about 16%.

What are its implications?

Participants at the 'Symposium on Conservation, Racism, and Indigenous Peoples Human Rights' felt that the seemingly benign goals of the GBF tilt the scale in favour of corporate houses eyeing forest resources at the expense of the indigenous communities living with nature. Indigenous peoples have been denied the right to housing, health, education, electricity, and security in Indonesia's Ujungkulon National Park while Heng Saphen, an indigenous leader living inside the Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary of Cambodia was convicted by a kangaroo court for cultivating on her own land. About 18% of Cambodia's Botum Sakor National Park stands protected after much of its land was sold off to private firms, the participants said. Involving the private sector in forest conservation is a bad idea and India has taken a step in that direction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act to 2023 to include zoos, safaris, ecotourism facilities, etc., as forest activities, Mr. Chakma pointed out. The UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, said the PAs were initially created "as recreational opportunities, hunting grounds for western colonial elites". The concept, the participants pointed out, has not changed much with ecotourism or sustainable ecotourism projects reducing the indigenous peoples to animals in a zoo, made to sit in "model replicas" of traditional houses wearing traditional dresses and ornaments, and playing traditional musical instruments.

What would GBF mean for India?

About 84% of India's national parks (89 out of a total of 106) were established in areas inhabited by the indigenous peoples and meeting the GBF targets will threaten their existence, the activists said. For instance, the initiative to upgrade the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan to a tiger reserve will affect 162 tribal villages located inside and outside the sanctuary while the expansion of the Nauradehi Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh is set to affect 62 villages of mostly tribal people. In Assam, the June 19, 2022, notification for the Barak Bhuban Wildlife Sanctuary will affect the indigenous groups. The gazette notification states that the sanctuary "is free from encroachment as per record, there are no rights and concessions of any person in the area" but the Khasis possess documents showing they have been living in the area since 1914.

What can be done to protect the tribal lands?

Mr. Chakma said a multilateral agreement like the Kunming-Montreal GBF cannot be amended but the government of India needs to change its policy.

First, it has to recognise the right to free, prior, and informed consent as guaranteed under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and make further amendments to the laws to make the tribals custodians of the PAs as nature has largely been protected because of their special relations with the forests and their denizens. Secondly, the government of India should not only target the tribal areas simply because they do not matter electorally.

"That Uttar Pradesh and Bihar only have one national park each – Dudhwa inhabited by the indigenous Tharu people and Valmiki inhabited by the Tharus, Oraons, Mundas, etc. – speaks for itself. If tiger reserves can be created in areas where there are no tigers such as Sahyadri (Maharashtra), Satkosia (Odisha), Kamlang (Arunachal Pradesh), Kawal (Telangana), and Dampa (Mizoram), there is no reason why PAs cannot be created in non-tribal areas," he said. Finally, India ought to address human rights violations in the PAs seriously.

Human rights issues of these people such as access to education, healthcare, and housing cannot be left to the Wildlife or Forest Department. Thousands of indigenous people living within the PAs must be respected and recognised for preserving the biodiversity and the ecosystem and not punished, he said.



GETTY IMAGES

PROFILES

The dissident vocalist

T.M. Krishna

The Carnatic singer, whose musical genius and reformist activism won him both plaudits and condemnation, has kicked up a storm in the music world after he got this year's Sangita Kalanidhi award

Ramya Kannan

If two hypothetical roads diverged in the mature Carnatic woods, T.M. Krishna took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference. India is no stranger to controversies about awards that are given for meritorious achievement, and yet, seldom have we seen as much flap as was witnessed after the Music Academy in Chennai announced that, this year, it would confer its top honour – the Sangita Kalanidhi award – on the Carnatic vocalist.

The award has always been widely considered to be the 'highest accolade in Carnatic music'. Conferred by an institution that has been in existence for nearly a century, at the annual conference in Chennai's most salubrious season in Margazhi, artistes have accepted it with a Bhakti akin to what they might employ on a Thyagaraja *kriti*.

To understand the opposition to Krishna, comprehending the cultural and historical context is essential.

The idea of a Music Academy originally emerged as an offshoot of the All India Congress Session held in Madras in December 1927 as an institution that would set the standards for Carnatic music. It was inaugurated the next year. In 1929, it started hosting annual conferences on music, which in turn spawned the December music festival of Madras, known popularly as the *Kutchery* season. The format is a series of concerts across the city conducted in an intensive month-long festival that attracts both the cognoscenti and the common people, drinking in the performances, ticketed or free based on economic capacity, equally possessive of their own fest in their own backyard.

Was this feeling of possession truly universal? Or was this an esoteric stratosphere that, through deliberate plan and design, kept some out? It was here that Krishna, a prodigy who gave his first Carnatic concert at the age of 12 at a noon slot in the Music Academy, branched out on the path that has brought him both awards/plaudits and condemnation, in possibly equal measure.

Krishna himself was born in this crucible of culture, in Madras, 48 years ago, and was educated at The School, run by the Krishnamurti Foundation, with a liberal pedagogical outlook, that urges students to "learn and grow in mindful relatedness".

Initially, he got a hand up from his grand uncle T.T. Krishnamachari, industrialist and former Finance Minister, who was then a member at the Academy. A privilege that he acknowledged as his now famous awakening dawned, and one he sought to question, even counter, shaking at the roots of the system he was a symbiotic part of.

In retrospect, his grooming and education set him on this inevitable path of introspection. But some critics believe it was prep work on his books that set him askew. His first book *Voices Within* (2007), with singer Bombay Jayashri, was a coffee table book on Carnatic music maestros. It was his second book *A Southern Music: The Carnatic Story* (2013) that first hinted at the schisms in Carnatic music that Krishna was beginning to see.

It shows him standing dissatisfied at the edge of that yellow wood, peering at the divergent path. In this clearly polemical book, he strikes the first discordant note: "The environment that pervades Karnatik music makes it very difficult for an atheist to function within its world. There may be a few, but they will find it very difficult to come out in the open and articulate an atheistic narrative for Karnatik music." Later in an interview to *The Hindu*, he clarified: "The music – its form, history, integrity – is what I treasure. What we are stuck with is the *kutchery*. As far as the *kutchery* is concerned, I am willing to give it up. Because, after a point, I think the *kutchery* has not looked at the music but got stuck in its own success story."

Thorny paths

With *Sebastian and Sons*, Krishna was stridently in the other path, as he questioned what he called caste discrimination ingrained in, this time, percussion music.

Critics and colleagues, particularly the purists among them, were outraged. His questions went deeper,



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

beyond form and content, further rocking the foundation that all had found comfort in. No one was truly surprised by what he said, that Carnatic music was in the preserve of one community – the Brahmins. However, to express discomfort with that so openly and with judgement as Krishna did, was inexplicable. Was the innate performer in him at play even as he struck out, craving a different kind of attention? It could be said that reformers tread thorny paths; to shock and shake is the play of someone who wants to usher in change. His unvarnished opinion, nevertheless,

ruffled many feathers.

It is also what he did later that seems to have built up this bulwark of opposition. Refusing to participate in the Margazhi season in 2015, could well have been harakiri in that world. Krishna said: "I feel that the music season today has reached a point where music has almost disappeared from it. Perhaps I should say music has fled from it, because of the noise that pervades it." He also alleged corruption and hijacking of the sabhas by certain people. What a dissonance this might have seemed to them.

The Carnatic community perceived

his activism as arising from an intrinsic anti-Brahmanism, and was further scandalised by his growing, well-articulated fondness for the Dravidian ideologue Periyar, who was stridently against the Brahmin hegemony of his times. Krishna also performed non-ticketed concerts, besides going out to beaches and streets to take music to the people. In association with the progressive writer Perumal Murugan, he set Periyar's writing, and ancient Tamil texts to Carnatic music.

The Periyar connection

In the letter that was to muddy the waters, vocalist duo Ranjani and Gayathri (RaGa) invoked Krishna's Periyar connection, calling the latter a promoter of Brahmin "genocide", notably not questioning his ability as a musician. Others who pilloried Krishna subsequently too invoked 'dharma' and Hinduism. Even as they disagreed with the politics of Krishna, they allowed that to colour their perception of his musical genius, though Music Academy president N. Murali attested in a note that the choice was "based on his excellence in music over a long career".

In response, some sophistry followed: RaGa claimed they had not questioned the institution's prerogative to award someone, they had chosen not to perform at an event that the awardee would preside over. Inadvertently, his detractors advanced Krishna's own narrative. In their second letter, RaGa said, "It will be the happiest day for us and for millions of people to see star performers emerge from underprivileged communities and dominate the stage..." reserving their attack, for the Academy this time, calling for reform to start at the top.

In the 1981 Oscar winning movie *Mephisto*, the protagonist, an actor famed for playing the demon Mephistopheles, is shown signing a Faustian pact with the Nazi Party of Germany to advance his own career. He ignores the moral compromises his decision forces on him, but seeks to justify it: "I'm just an actor." Krishna is an artiste who has reached the opposite end of that spectrum, he long stopped being "just a singer".

THE GIST

▼ Krishna was born in Madras, 48 years ago, and was educated at The School, run by the Krishnamurti Foundation, with a liberal pedagogical outlook

▼ Initially, he got a hand up from his grand uncle T.T. Krishnamachari, industrialist and former Finance Minister, who was then a member at the Music Academy

▼ Krishna, who gave his first Carnatic concert at the age of 12 at a noon slot in the Music Academy, branched out on a different path that has brought him both awards/plaudits and condemnation, in possibly equal measure

Israel's Minister of offence

Yoav Gallant

The Likud leader and member of Netanyahu's war Cabinet threatens to continue and expand the military operations despite a UNSC demand for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Priyali Prakash

When the U.S. finally abstained from vetoing a UN Security Council resolution demanding for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza on March 25, it prompted a slew of angry remarks from Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a delegation [which was eventually reinstated] to Washington to express his disappointment, which meant that his Defence Minister Yoav Gallant was left alone in the U.S. to deal with the immediate aftermath of the significant update.

Mr. Gallant, a member of Israel's three-member war Cabinet who famously likened Palestinians to "human animals" while ordering a complete siege of Gaza after the October 7 Hamas attack, has been instrumental in leading the war on the enclave. A former soldier himself, Mr. Gallant has not always had it easy with Israel's top brass. He was believed to be not particularly close to Mr. Netanyahu previously, who had cancelled his appointment as the Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in 2011 due to allegations related to seizure of public lands for personal use.

In 2023, Mr. Netanyahu fired him from the post of Defence Minister after he



warned the administration of a security threat due to a proposed judicial overhaul. Mr. Gallant was, however, reinstated following public outrage. A member of the Prime Minister's right-wing Likud Party, Mr. Gallant was among the first senior leaders who spoke against the judicial overhaul which proposed limiting the Supreme Court's powers.

Born to a Holocaust-survivor mother who arrived in Israel onboard the *SS Exodus* and a father with military roots, Mr. Gallant began his military career as a naval commando with the 13th Flotilla, also called Shayetet 13, which specialises in operating in the sea, on land, and in the air. He spent six years with the unit, before taking a break from the armed forces. Like many Israeli soldiers who travel overseas after their military service periods, Mr. Gallant went to Alaska and worked as a lumberjack for two years before returning to Israel.

He first rejoined the Navy before transferring to the IDF.

Mr. Gallant was appointed the military secretary of late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and was promoted to Major General – setting him up for his future roles within the IDF as well as Israeli politics.

During his tenure with the IDF, he moved up to serve with the Gaza Division. He commanded the 2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in which around 1,400 Palestinians were killed in 22 days. The operation put him in the 2011 race for the IDF Chief of Staff, even as a UN report accused Israel of committing war crimes during the offensive.

Political entry

In 2015, Mr. Gallant moved to politics after over 35 years with the armed forces. He joined the newly formed Kulanu Party, and was elected to the Knesset (Parliament) after the party won 10 seats. He was ap-

pointed the Minister of Construction.

By 2019, Mr. Gallant had crossed over to the Likud Party and was appointed the Minister of Education. As the Education Minister, he attempted to cancel the award of Israel Prize to Oded Goldreich, a scientist at the Weizmann Institute, who reportedly supported the "anti-Zionist" Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Mr. Gallant became the Defence Minister in 2022.

In January 2024, he outlined his vision for the future of Gaza, which, according to him, would be an enclave run by a Palestinian body under overall Israeli control. Since the October 7 Hamas attack in which at least 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 240 taken as hostages, Israel has killed more than 32,000 Palestinians in its offensive in Gaza and forced most of the strip's population out of their homes amid continuous bombings. After the U.S. abstained from vetoing the UNSC resolution on March 25, Mr. Gallant has proactively met with leaders in Washington, sometimes referring to supporters as "true friends of Israel" in an apparent dig at U.S. President Joe Biden. And now, he is back in Israel, and is threatening to expand operations against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon.

The TikTok Taoiseach

Simon Harris

The Fine Gael leader is set to become the youngest Irish Premier at a time when the country is faced with an acute housing crisis and the ruling party is battling dwindling popularity

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Joan Sony Cherian

"This is a moment for Fine Gael to reset," said Simon Harris after he was appointed the new leader of the Fine Gael, the centre-right party leading Ireland's ruling coalition, after the shock resignation of Prime Minister Leo Varadkar on March 20. At 37, Mr. Harris is set to become the youngest ever Taoiseach when the Dail (Irish parliament) reconvenes in April. He is determined to let the government run its full term until elections next year.

Mr. Harris was introduced to politics at the very young age of 16 when he, frustrated by the lack of information and guidance for people with autism like his brother, called for a public meeting in his neighbourhood on the issue which led to a lobby/support group for people and children with autism. Even though he calls himself an 'accidental politician', Mr. Harris seems to have paved his way in politics well in advance when one looks at how he rose through the ranks.

Dropping out of college to make his mark in politics, Mr. Harris, at the age of 22, was elected councillor of Wicklow in 2009. He then became a member of parliament at 24, a junior Minister at 27 and held his



first ever Cabinet position at 29 as Minister for Health in 2016. From 2020 onwards, he held the post of Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. His strong online presence has earned him the moniker, the 'TikTok Taoiseach'.

Mr. Harris oversaw the beginning of safety and quarantine precautions when COVID-19 first hit the country. He was applauded for his foresight in mandating necessary safeguards and ordering a total closure of schools and colleges almost a fortnight before the U.K. Another feather in his cap as Health Minister was bringing in the 36th amendment of the Constitution, which came out of the 2018 referendum that called for an upturn of Ireland's near-total ban on abortion.

However, it has not all been smooth-sailing for Mr. Harris. In February, 2019, he faced a no-confidence motion moved by

the Sinn Fein, the opposition political party, over the cost-overruns at the new national children's hospital. The hospital, one of the government's biggest construction projects, which was to be built at an estimated cost of €800 million in 2014, rose to almost €1.43 billion by 2019. The opposition called the project a financial mismanagement. Mr. Harris survived the motion and went on to state that the government would build the hospital and "get to the bottom of what has gone wrong".

It was also under his tenure that the cervical cancer smear test scandal broke out. In April 2018, Vicky Phelan, a 43-year old woman, accused the Irish government's health authority of misdiagnosing a routine pap smear she underwent in 2011, which later turned out to be positive for cervical cancer. Many more women (over 200) then came forward sharing stories of how their state-run pap smear tests

were given as negative when it should have been flagged as positive, thus depriving these women of an early diagnosis and another chance at life.

Challenges ahead

Mr. Harris was quick to take a dig at the Opposition when he stated in his appointment speech that the "Sinn Féin cannot bear to look back over what Fine Gael has achieved since pulling our economy back from the brink...they cannot handle the truth." Mr. Harris said his party supports small businesses and education, and is committed to making "work pay".

However, the youngest ever Irish Premier has his work cut out for him. Ireland faces an extreme housing crisis, topped only by concerns over mass immigration and the record number of asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, inheriting a three-party coalition leaves very little room for the incumbent Prime Minister to make any major policy changes.

After almost a decade of Fine Gael rule, Sinn Fein has the support of 28% voters, almost eight percentage points ahead of the ruling party.

Whether it be 'resetting' the party or forming a new Cabinet, it remains to be seen what impact Mr. Harris can have in his short tenure as Prime Minister.

Idea Exchange

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2024

All countries are having to adjust to the nature of China. We have to engage where necessary, for example, climate change. We talk in much greater depth and breadth with the Indian government about how to deal with geopolitical competition



WHY ALEX ELLIS

Alex Ellis, the outgoing British High Commissioner to India, had an eventful tenure between 2021 and 2024. Over the last three years, he witnessed the brutal Delta wave of the Covid pandemic, the India-China border standoff, the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict. He oversaw rapid progress in bilateral ties,

including in health, defence, maritime security, environment and faced challenges in navigating Indian sensitivities with respect to Khalistan separatism on British soil. With the Free Trade Agreement negotiations at an intense stage, Ellis is best placed to talk about the trajectory of the India-UK ties



The UK is a place where things are debated freely... You have legal frameworks about how you go about what is freedom of expression... the limits of it. The attacks on the High Commission were absolutely not okay

Shubhajt Roy: What's your big take-away from this three-year term?

I was sent here to affect a transformation. The UK was just coming out of the transition period of leaving the EU. India was already growing. The Indo-Pacific was becoming the centre of the world. I was sent here on a mission because India was becoming one of the three defining countries that I have seen in my lifetime, alongside the US and China. Secondly, so much is going on in the Indo-Pacific. It's also at the centre of some of the geopolitical competition. Thirdly, because the UK was altering its strategic course, having left the European Union. In S Jaisankar's recent book, he says that by the time Brexit had come, it was time for a reset in the UK-India relationship. And we agreed.

Shubhajt Roy: You were one of the architects of the integrated review, which also had to update itself because of the conflict in Europe. On the strategic side, what has been the collaboration and cooperation between India and the UK?

First of all, the Indo-Pacific tilt is a lot more than just defence and security. We were very clear in the integrated review that it was economic, human, research and technology. On the defence side, there has been a very rapid growth in maritime cooperation. We have gone from having one very unadventurous ship visit a year to six warship visits to Indian ports last year, including very sensitive areas. We had the Indian Army doing probably the most complex exercise it has done to date with the British army.

On the defence industrial space, we're not as big a player as some others. We have some great technology and capabilities. Electric propulsion — we propel most of our ships by electricity, and that works very well. We are one of the three countries in the world that can make very sophisticated jet aircraft engines. And Rolls-Royce has done some excellent work with the Indian government to think about the design of the next generation.

Shubhajt Roy: China's behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the maritime space, has been concerning. Could you give us a sense of whether India and the UK have come together to tackle this belligerence of China in specific concrete terms?

I think all countries are having to adjust to the nature of China. We have to engage where that's necessary, for example, on climate change. There is no doubt we talk in much greater depth and breadth with the Indian government about how to deal with geopolitical competition, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. That is one of the big drivers of increased cooperation.

Shubhajt Roy: Two years after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the sanctions that the West had made didn't have the kind of impact on the Russian regime that they had thought they would; we see Putin just got re-elected.

What you have is a grim war inside Ukraine and one in which people are being killed, including Indian nationals, entirely because of the Russian desire to take over their democratic neighbour. Putin got re-elected. If this is the year of democracy in 2024, I think the election in Russia reminds you of what a sham democracy looks like. It's very important that autocratic might does not prevail, that's why we support Ukraine in many different ways and why others are doing the same.

Shubhajt Roy: The conflict in the West Asian neighbourhood, between Israel and Hamas, has been going on since October last year. India took a very nuanced stance and tried to balance both sides. The UK took a very strong, supportive stance with Israel. Has that shifted in the recent months after the bombing of Gaza?

We were swift to condemn the attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and with good reason. We're in a situation where we must find some kind of sustainable solution in Gaza. Most immediately we have to get the hostages out. We have to get more aid. The UK is a major supplier of humanitarian aid to Gaza but we are very tough with Israelis about allowing more access to humanitarian aid in Gaza, given the conditions there. We want to stop the conflict from escalating across the region, that's why Foreign Secretary

'Both Prime Ministers want a FTA... Aasaan nahi hai, negotiations abhi baaki hai, mere dost'

Outgoing British High Commissioner Alex Ellis on polarised Indian politics getting reflected on British soil, finding peace in Gaza, and why election in Russia is a big sham. The conversation was moderated by Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*



British High Commissioner Alex Ellis (right) in conversation with Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*

David Cameron is constantly in the region to try to reduce the risks of escalation. And also why we push for the long-term Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank and in Gaza and ultimately for a two-state solution.

Shubhajt Roy: The peace process in West didn't take into account the Palestinian stakeholders. In hindsight, do you think that could have made a difference if the Palestinian view was not ignored?

You obviously can't have a sustainable peace in which Hamas is bordering Israel. You absolutely need to bring in the Palestinians and some of the other neighbouring states as well to make sure that you have a sustainable solution. That's a tough thing to imagine at the moment with the situation in Gaza. That's why you have to deal with the immediate humanitarian crisis to prevent the escalation, but also invest in long term peace.

Shubhajt Roy: The Diwali of 2022 was set as the target by both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Boris Johnson for the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Do you think they are anywhere closer to the time that it has been in the past?

Yes, we're most definitely closer. Both Prime Ministers made it clear that they want a FTA. And they spoke only last week to reaffirm that desire for it. It's not a straightforward negotiation because you have two similarly sized economies, but very differently shaped. The Indian economy is much more agriculture-based, obviously much poorer in terms of GDP per capita. The UK economy is much more integrated in its manufacturing and its goods, with the rest of Europe because of the legacy of being a member of the European Union. People on both sides want to have real new market access. The UK-India trade has doubled since 2020. So actually, it's grown a lot, but we can see economic advantage in having a trade deal.

Amrita Nayak Dutta: India and the UK have been in talks about the Electric Propulsion System. Could you tell us the exact status of where it is? Rolls Royce is pitching fighter aircraft engines for the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). India is in talks with the French Safran. Would you pitch aircraft fighter engines to the Indian Air Force in any of its future aircraft programmes?

Both these are examples of where the UK has very good technology and has a great interest in the Indian defence. Most of our ships are driven by electric propulsion, including our aircraft carriers. We have an electric propulsion working group and we spend a lot of time talking with the Indian government and companies on how to go about doing this. On the fast next-generation jet engine, the UK is one of the world's centres of jet technology. We almost always do that in partnership... Rolls-Royce has done some excellent work for the Indian state on how one might go about designing that next-generation engine, and now we'll see what the Indian state wants to do as it moves to the next phase.

Anonna Dutt: What are the areas of research in the health sector that the UK is collaborating with India on? The second thing is about the network that India tried to create during its G20 presidency for local research and development and manufacturing of medicines and pharmaceuticals. There was a lot of resistance from the West and big pharma companies to that. What is the UK's stand on that?

I think the best thing the UK and India have done for each other, for themselves and for the world, is the Covishield vaccine. That's a great example of Indian manufacturing power and distributional capability, alongside UK research and then development by a Swedish-British company, AstraZeneca. The new malaria vaccine and the new Ebola vaccine that has come through are both Serum Institute and UK researcher collaborations. There's actually a lot of pharma investment from India in the UK. Zydus, the

pharma manufacturers in Gujarat, are manufacturing more in the UK. It's actually quite a good collaboration between the two countries in the pharmaceutical sector. Openness is important. During the pandemic, when India stopped its restrictions on the sale of paracetamol, for example. Through the huge recovery trial, which the UK launched almost as soon as Covid started, of which India is one of the main non-British participants. If you look at the data, on what's likely happened to diabetes incidence in the populations of India and the UK, we have a very big shared interest in doing more work together.

Nikhil Ghanekar: Concerning BBC and what happened last year when Indian authorities searched the premises of the BBC in Delhi after a documentary was aired on Prime Minister Modi. How did your office deal with this issue?

Any kind of UK-India relationship will have its ups and its downs. I won't go into the details, we talked a lot to the Indian government, we talked to the BBC, and they most importantly talked to each other about how to find the right way to respect the laws of India and operate as an independent news organisation.

Divya A: I wanted to bring you to the issue of restitution of cultural heritage, something that India attaches a lot of importance to, even taking it to a multilateral forum like G20.

So there are two sides to it. One is the smuggled antiquities, which of course is in the UN convention, there is the legal framework. There is also the ethical issue of the return of antiquities. The issue of restitution touches on India and other

countries as well. That is not a static debate. In the case of the UK, some of the museums... the Glasgow Museum and if I'm not mistaken, the Manchester Museum, have done some restitution of artefacts of other museums around the world... This is part of a much bigger and interesting debate which is going on in the UK about its relationship with its colonial history... it's extraordinary. I really didn't learn any imperial history when I was a history student. I taught history as well. But I think that that is changing. It is part of the product of the great success and the great diversity of the United Kingdom of today.

Divya A: It's almost been a year since the Khalistani attacks on the Indian High Commission in London. How is the investigation going forward?

There are some bits of work which the police have done to make that premises, which is a very, very busy street, more secure. But you have to put that into a broader context. Which is basically a very good story, which is the flow of talented people from India to the UK, and the role which they play in life in the UK more generally. With that flow comes some trickier issues as well. There's a much greater recognition now by the British authorities than there was maybe a few years ago, that we have to deal with all forms of extremism. This is the point our security minister made when he said that Khalistani extremism isn't an India problem, it's a UK problem, we don't want our people to be radicalised.

Now, a lot of the best work for dealing with that is done upstream, not downstream. That's why we have done a lot of work, actually, over the last year in terms of talking to the different communities in the UK, to make sure we continue to have a very harmonious country.

Shubhajt Roy: The issue of separatism which comes about on British soil. Do you think the polarised Indian politics here, because of the huge Indian diaspora, is now getting reflected on British soil?

The UK is a place where things are happily debated very freely. The government's always very clear that it sees India as a very important partner for the long term. So you have legal frameworks about how you go about what is freedom of expression, what are the limits of it. Of course, there will be things said and done... the attacks on the High Commission were absolutely not okay. Sometimes it's clear where a line has been

crossed and then we act accordingly.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: You mentioned that ease of doing business has improved. But then we are seeing Vodafone really struggle in India. So are you looking forward to seeing a different bilateral investment treaty that both countries are discussing?

Vodafone and Cairn Energy have been two examples of economic thorns which we have managed to extract from the collective UK-India foot. One of the things that did happen during my tenure here is that the Indian government did a debt-for-equity swap with Vodafone, so the Indian state has equity in Vodafone-Idea that has given the company a new lease of life. So that they are now busy fundraising at the moment, having approved a strategy in their board meeting last month. Those are stories where the Indian government has decided to kind of grasp a nettle and has acted to enable companies to prosper.

Alongside the FTA, it would be good to have a Bilateral Investment Treaty. That is a treaty which needs to offer protections which are of value to investors. There's a lot of investment between the two countries.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: We had a very crucial window that we missed to sign the free trade agreement because after our elections, UK elections will follow. All the fuss about mobility and concerns around visa, do you see the deal being signed by the end of the year?

Aasaan nahi hai, negotiations abhi baaki hai, mere dost.

Shubhajt Roy: Three years. High points, low points?

Several high points because it's such a great country to live in because of its incredible diversity. You get this great variety of food, and that's something which, you know, I love about India.

Watching England being rolled over in Lucknow in front of 49,998 ecstatic Indians whilst me and my friends watched with our head in our hands as the England batsmen were just knocked over by the brilliant Jasprit Bumrah was perhaps a low moment. All countries have their highs and lows. India, maybe, is a little bit more intense with the highs, a little bit more intense with the lows. Being in a country, which is kind of where we wish the UK's partnership is really maturing, is a great thing. It's been fun — to be at the beginning of a real reset and driving at a different kind of partnership.



Putin got re-elected. If this is the year of democracy in 2024, the election in Russia reminds you of what a sham democracy looks like. It's very important that autocratic might does not prevail

Opinion

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2024



Eleven years after his last win, Matteo Manassero fired a career-best 61 and won the Jonsson Workwear Open earlier this month

INSTAGRAM

Great wide open

A Hero Indian Open weekend can get pretty action packed!

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

CIRCA 2017. A large gallery has gathered on the 10th hole of the DLF Golf & Country Club to follow Italian star Matteo Manassero. The 23-year-old—already a four-time winner on the European Tour—is known for his precision and course strategy. The challenging Gary Player layout—a striking departure from the event's favourite venue (the Delhi Golf Club)—is hosting the national open for the very first time. High winds on the opening day coupled with the exceptionally tricky greens have made things unpredictable and the course draws first blood against Manassero: two strokes on the opening hole. Suitably chastised, Manassero steadies the ship, and drops seven birdies en route to a creditable four-under 68 to lead the field. "You have to be always in play, otherwise, there will be a lot of doubles. It is very easy to lose shots on this course," Manassero remarks after his first competitive outing on the course. Seeking to break a winless streak since his career-defining triumph at the 2013 BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth, Manassero fails to break par again that week and finishes tied third at the 2017 Hero Indian Open. That fifth win will have to wait.

At the time, no one, least of all Manassero, would have had an inkling just how long that elusive fifth win would take. Over the ensuing years, Manassero's results dried up and the once 25th-ranked player in the world plummeted as far down as 381 in the world rankings. Rock bottom came when he lost his full playing rights on the DP World Tour. Circa 2024. 11 years after his last win, Manassero, now 30 years old, fires a career-best 61 and goes on to win the Jonsson Workwear Open in South Africa. After clawing his way back to the main tour after a season on the second-tier European Challenge Tour, Manassero's comeback is officially on track. Two weeks after what he describes as 'the best day of my life on the golf course,' Manassero finds himself at a familiar place—clubhouse leader after the opening round of the Hero Indian Open at the DLF G&CC. This time around he gives no quarter to the course, compiling a neat seven-under bogey-free round, and then following it up with a four-under 68 to tie tied third going into the weekend trailing Japan's Keita Nakajima by three strokes.

What can one say about Nakajima? The Japanese prodigy who ruled the world amateur rankings for an astonishing 87 weeks, a two-time gold medallist at the Asian Games, and who won the Panasonic Open on the JGTO (Japan Golf Tour) as an amateur, is already a superstar in his country. In his rookie season on the DP World Tour Nakajima has continued to flabbergast not just the gallery but his fellow pros. "I was thinking how good was he playing (for Nakajima) to be six shots clear at one point on the second day) because I have been playing really good and I must have been so far behind. Fair play to him," Manassero said after the second day's play.

Nakajima's best finish on tour has been fourth at the Ras Al Khaimah Championship, but he certainly has plenty of experience closing out tournaments. "I'm comfortable," he said after the second day's play. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

At the time this column is being written, the third round of the 2024 Hero Indian Open is underway. Nakajima and Manassero, playing together, have both picked up three and two strokes to lie at 17-under-par and 13-under-par respectively. At the 2017 Hero Indian Open Manassero couldn't catch SSP Chawrasia who successfully defended his title. That edition was the third consecutive Indian Open won by an Indian (Anirban Lahiri won in 2015). That was also the last time the trophy stayed at home. As things stand now, Veer Ahlawat is leading the local challenge, followed closely by Manu Gandas with Shubhankar Sharma trailing further back. The trio are the only Indians with an outside chance of making a charge.

It's no small testament to the fickle nature of the DLF G&CC that it's nigh impossible to predict how things are going to pan out. More than anything else, it's the fear of shooting a really big number on a hole that has kept most pros (Nakajima being an exception) somewhat tentative and conservative in their play. Consider the curious case of Norwegian Espen Kofstad. After carding a dismal 81 in the first round Kofstad had booked his return flight, realistically not expecting to make it to the weekend. It's a fair conjecture that with the pressure of making the cut gone, Kofstad swung freely and without fear in his second round. In any case, the birdies just kept dropping—three to start with, and six more to get to eight under on the day after 15 holes. Needing one more to break Shubhankar Sharma's course record of 64 Kofstad dropped an eagle on the eighth hole to card an astounding ten-under 62. That's a new course record and his lowest round on Tour by two shots. And that, at a course considered one of the most difficult on the DP World Tour. It really is anyone's game on Sunday. Go figure.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



Next is Operation Lotus, another patented exercise of the BJP: encourage defections and give tickets to the defectors. I am told that the BJP will eventually nominate a little over 400 candidates. Up to 50 candidates will be defectors

THE WARNING SIGNS were clear. The Opposition parties were able to sense what was coming, but pettifogging advisers seem to have held back their leaders. The battle-ready troops were not sent promptly to the battlefield, except in Tamil Nadu. In West Bengal, the INDIA formation was still-born; in Bihar, Mr Nitish Kumar's patented somersault attempted to derail the preparations but failed; in Maharashtra, the allies are debating the sharing of seats while the BJP is busy poaching leaders in the Opposition camps; in Uttar Pradesh, the SP and Congress are united but do not seem to have joined the battle yet; and in Delhi and Jharkhand, while the armies are ready, the generals are behind bars. It is only in Tamil Nadu, the battle between INDIA and the opposing parties has really begun reminding one of the adage 'well begun is half done'.

That accounts for 7 out of 29 states. In the other major battlefields such as Karnataka, Telangana, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, it is a straight fight between the Congress and BJP. By contrast, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh seem like stages for a pre-scripted play, not a genuine warfront.

The arsenal

The BJP has unleashed its full arsenal. On top is the huge pile of money collected through the unconstitutional electoral bonds (EB). The truth about the EB—which I had described as legalised bribery—is now in the open. There are several cases where there was a search/arrest, bonds were bought and donated, bonds were encashed and the cases were buried or favours done (licences, contracts).

The dates tell the story. A simple straight line will connect the dots. The huge war chest has been deployed



Currently, the BJP has 383 MPs in both Houses of Parliament, 1,481 MLAs and 163 MLCs

The final assault on Constitution

through advertisements in newspapers, TV and billboards. BJP is playing on an unlevel playing field.

Next is Operation Lotus, another patented exercise of the BJP: encourage defections and give tickets to the defectors. I am told that the BJP will eventually nominate a little over 400 candidates. Up to 50 candidates will be defectors.

Destabilising state governments

A lethal weapon in the armoury is 'arrest and detention'. Among the targets, there are two chief ministers, one deputy chief minister, several state ministers, family members of chief ministers and other leaders, and leaders belonging to Opposition political parties.

Currently, the BJP has 383 MPs in both Houses of Parliament, 1,481 MLAs and 163 MLCs. These include former non-BJP leaders who were 'white-washed' in the giant laundry machine and became pure and spotless. I do not know if there is a *live* and *current* investigation against any of the 2027 individuals; if there is any, it must be the rare exception and a well-guarded secret.

Governors are being used to disrupt the functioning of state governments. The governor of Tamil Nadu refused to read the speech to the legislative assembly prepared by the state govern-

ment; on one occasion he walked out of the Assembly proceedings. He refused to swear in a person as Minister despite the 'aid and advice' of the chief minister.

The governors of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal get into verbal spats with the chief ministers repeatedly.

The governor of Telangana (cum LG of Puducherry) had practically remained in Tamil Nadu for several months and, on the day the LS election schedule was announced, she lost no time in resigning her posts and declaring her intention to contest as a BJP candidate!

Governors have refused or withheld indefinitely assent to Bills. Such unconstitutional acts do not occur in BJP-ruled states.

Betraying the Constitution

Another weapon is the destabilisation of state governments. The government of NCT Delhi is crippled by the diktat to the All India Service officers to defy the orders of the ministers and the chief minister. Funds have been withheld to state governments such as Kerala and West Bengal on one pretext or other. Borrowing limits of non-BJP state governments have been slashed citing breach of one condition or the other. Disaster relief assistance has been denied to Tamil Nadu on unsuspec-

ified grounds.

The central government insists that UPSC play an important role in the appointment of the director general of police of the state. Between the governor of the state and the University Grants Commission, the authority of the state government to appoint Vice-Chancellors of state-funded universities has been curbed.

As a result, power centres owing allegiance to the central government have emerged in states and challenge the authority of state governments. There is a steady erosion of state autonomy.

The RSS-BJP are driven by an agenda. The leaders of RSS think they have waited long enough and a win in the LS elections should be the launch pad to complete the agenda. The agenda includes: one nation one election, Uniform Civil Code (UCC), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the amendments to the Land Acquisition Act, the Farm laws, and the repeal of the Places of Worship Act. Some more may be revealed in the BJP's election Manifesto. This will be the final assault.



Website: pchidambaram.in

Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

FIFTH COLUMN TAVLEEN SINGH

Surreal reality and reality

IS THERE AN increasingly surreal quality to Indian reality? I ask the question seriously because in recent days I have been on long drives in rural India, and been appalled by the squalor and low quality of life. Then, on returning from these excursions, I have attended glittering conclaves in fancy hotels, where I have heard political leaders declare confidently that India will become a fully developed country by 2047. I love the idea of India rising out of the depths to become a fully developed country. And believe that it is wonderful that we should aspire to making this dream real in just over twenty years. It is better by far to aspire to reaching new, seemingly impossible heights than to continue to whine about poverty, misery, and the injustice of the caste system.

If the polls are right and Narendra Modi wins a third term, it could be because his vision of the future is that of a developed India by 2047. As the general elections approach nearer, he repeats this more and more

because he senses that voters find the idea inspirational.

If Rahul Gandhi looks as if he is unlikely to prevent the Congress Party from losing a third general election, it is because during his recently ended Nyaya Yatra, he has talked mostly about poverty and caste. Indians at the bottom of the heap are those he hopes to appeal to, but they already know more about degradation and poverty than he ever will. What they want to hear more about is how their degradation will end some day in the not too far future.

This is where Modi scores. It is important here to point out that he does this with the unstinting, almost slavish, collusion of our private, supposedly independent, news channels. Last week, when he had his '*chai pe charcha*' with Bill Gates, I was astounded to see that every English news channel covered it live, as if it was the main news story of the day. I happened to be watching because it was just before my deadline, when I usually switch from news channel to news channel to make sure that nothing so big has happened that I would need to rewrite the column.

The only news on offer was the Prime Minister's private tea party with Mr Gates, where they talked about AI and its future in India, and this is when that sense of a surreal reality hit me hard.

Images of those drives through rural India floated before my eyes. The broken roads and squalid vil-

lages. The drab, ugly towns that rose out of clouds of dust and the stench of rotting garbage.

The new highways on which something as fundamental as easily readable signage was absent. The schools in which small, barefoot children sat on raggedy rugs on the floor, glancing with tired eyes through tattered textbooks. The windowless kitchens in which village women sat on grimy floors cooking midday meals. And the dilapidated, unclean toilets that rural schoolchildren are forced to use.

This is the real India. It shows no sign yet of reaching that goal of becoming fully developed by 2047.

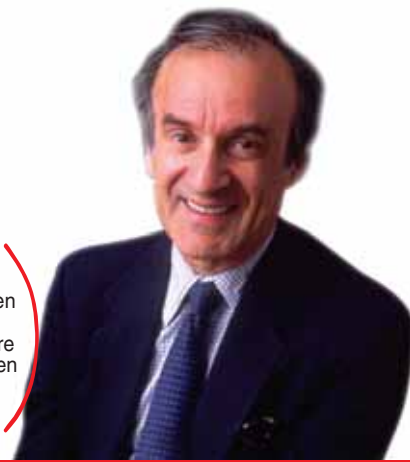
When Raghuram Rajan said last week that Indians must stop believing the 'hype', he came under a fusillade of barbs from Modi's army of social media warriors. He was just a 'parachute economist' they sneered and should mind his own business. What nobody appeared to notice was that he had made an important point that we should pay attention to. The former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, and currently Rahul Gandhi's unofficial economic advisor, said that until more was invested in improving the school system, it was reckless to think of India as a fully developed country in twenty years. He pointed out that more than twenty percent of our schoolchildren dropout before high school and that the literacy rate in tiny Vietnam is higher than India.

In recent years we have lived in a state of hyper-nationalism and paranoid patriotism, so whenever I have drawn attention to how bad India looks in real life, I have been attacked for being 'unpatriotic.' It is a charge that is thrown about casually these days and because it can sometimes get the targeted person into trouble, far too many 'journalists' choose to remain silent. This in my view is being truly unpatriotic. So as someone who believes in real patriotism, I would like to say some things loudly and clearly. We will become a fully developed country one day, but to get there we must not hesitate to confront some harsh truths.

There is no question that in the past ten years we have seen many things happen that should have happened decades ago, but much more needs to change. It is shameful that the average Indian still lacks access to clean water. Shameful that millions of Indians still lack access to sanitation. Shameful that millions of Indian children leave school without learning to read or count. And, shameful that millions of Indians live in windowless hovels in filthy slums and villages.

To achieve the dream of becoming a fully developed country, this is a short list of problems that we will need to acknowledge and change. It is my hope that if Modi wins a third term, as predicted by every poll, he will make the changes India so desperately needs.

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest!”
— Elie Wiesel



SIDHARTH MISHRA delves into the ideological moorings of the Anna Hazare movement and what change, if any, this agitation brought to our social system. It is difficult to find an answer

THE UNGANDHIAN ANNA HAZARE

Come April, come the anniversary of the agitation which was expected to prove to be a game changer in Indian politics, however, as American poet TS Eliot would put it, ‘went down with a whimper’. It all began with the Anti-Corruption Movement launched by Anna Hazare in 2011, and whatever was left of its ideals have been given a firm burial with the arrest of movement’s mainstay Arvind Kejriwal. First at Jantar Mantar in April and thereafter in August, 2011 dawned on historical Ramlila Grounds in Delhi a social reformer from Maharashtra, Kisan Baburao Hazare. He was at the helm of an anti-corruption movement against the Congress governments both at the Centre and in the state. Popular as Anna among his followers, Hazare, a former army truck driver, dressed like an Indian farmer-dhoti (a wrapper), kurta (a tunic) and a cap, popularly called Gandhi Topi (cap), all made in handspun fabric of Khadi. In Anna people saw, though briefly, a reincarnation of Gandhi, and no wonder in effort to identify themselves with Anna they started to wear the Gandhi like cap with these words printed on it “Main Hun Anna” (I am Anna). People who joined the agitation wearing Anna Caps were later to realize that the movement was Gandhian neither in letter nor in spirit but did thrive on Gandhian imageries. The identification with Gandhi, as the events which later unfolded showed, was superficial. This was a successful exercise in the branding of the movement by its clever brand managers led by now incarcerated chief minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal. While Gandhi insisted that his followers wore caps made from handspun fabric, Anna’s followers wore caps from an environmentally degrading synthetic material. The environmentalist in Gandhi would have never approved of use of synthetic material for sewing caps, as he would have not approved of the turn this movement took. Media Event Sold Gandhian Movement Use of Gandhian caps was not the only instance of misuse of the Gandhian image during the Anna Hazare Movement. During the agitation in April 2011 at Jantar Mantar, the highest circulated newspaper of the nation-The Times of India-carried the headline: “INDIA WINS AGAIN.” If culmination of every successful media event was to make India win, yes, the headline was appropriate. But would the newspaper recall its headline now 13 years later, after the arrest of movement’s architect Arvind Kejriwal. One is still to know what was the ideological basis of this movement? The leaders from the movement have gone different ideological ways. What change it brought other than blowing our Constitution to the smithereens and setting up another political party? In this era of publicity, anonymity is tyag (abnegation), a certain Gandhian ideal. Wearing a Gandhi cap and a khadi dhoti-kurta alone doesn’t make one a Gandhian. In what he wore, Mahendra Singh Tikait, the Kisan leader from Muzzafarnagar in Uttar Pradesh was as much a Gandhian as Anna Hazare of Ahmednagar in Maharashtra. In fact, Gandhi decided to wear the cap in the early part of his career to identify with the Indian peasantry, who he rightly realised was integral to the success of the people’s movement.

Hazare was un-Gandhian as far as his leadership of India Against Corruption movement went. The Civil Society, which played the role of catalyst during the movement, largely connotes the creamy layer of our social system with little connect to our social and cultural dynamics. Unlike Anna, Gandhi’s movement was not captive to certain self-acclaimed representatives of the people. The representation was based on a detail electoral process ensuring a true representation of the people in the decision-making process. The AAP grounded the internal democracy in the party a few years after its founding establishing Arvind Kejriwal as its dictator. Anna Hazare too was no different in his world view. If one looks for comparisons for Anna Hazare’s agitation, one can find only one-the public outcry in 1999 against the hijacking of the Indian Airlines IC-814 flight from Kathmandu to Delhi to the Taliban land of Kandhar. The television cameras then too had gone to town over people agitating against “the Government’s failure to save the lives of its citizens.” It brought such pressure on our Government that we had to release the terror vendors, who had been arrested following martyrdom of several Indian soldiers. Till date, the nation is paying a heavy price for releasing the likes of Azhar Masood, who later founded Jaish-i-Mohammed to secure the release of citizens held hostage. An evil plaguing the television media is that in their craving for TRPs they rush to ferret out the imitation as the real. They seldom make an effort to go beyond the superficial. In my initial years as journalist, my first chief reporter would always take me to the task for having an opinion. “Report news, write comments when you have a column to yourself,” he would thunder. In 1999, when the television media cried hoarse on the demand by the citizens to secure release of the hostages of IC-814, little did it realize that it was the Opposition Congress, in a bid to embarrass the Government, which was surreptitiously instigating people? The leader of the agitation was one Shreeram Maggo, a Congress worker from West Delhi. For his services, he was later bequeathed with a ticket to contest the Assembly polls and still later his daughter-in-law became member of the Municipal Council of Delhi on a Congress ticket. In a just case of poetic justice, the Congress-led Government in 2011 suffered at the hands of the same media. The Congress claim of the Opposition elements adding fuel to the Jantar Mantar fire went uncontested as then non-Congress Chief Ministers Narendra Modi and Nitish Kumar openly supported the movement. The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) too released a statement in the support of the cause. There was open sloganeering against Sonia Gandhi’s foreign origin and Manmohan Singh being of not much consequence than a family butler. Non-Gandhian Venue for Protest Another point of difference between Gandhi’s and Anna’s movements was venue of the protest. Gandhi never chose New Delhi as the site for any of his major Satyagraha Movements. New Delhi is best remembered as the site of his assassination. The studio hunters of national Capital would do well to travel to Motihari, where Gandhi launched the Champaran Satyagraha a century ago. Even in this age, a television OB van would find difficult to easily reach Motihari. A century ago Gandhi went



POPULAR AS ANNA AMONG HIS FOLLOWERS, HAZARE, A FORMER ARMY TRUCK DRIVER, DRESSED LIKE AN INDIAN FARMER-DHOTI (A WRAPPER), KURTA (A TUNIC) AND A CAP, POPULARLY CALLED GANDHI TOPI (CAP), ALL MADE IN HANDSPUN FABRIC OF KHADI. IN ANNA PEOPLE SAW, THOUGH BRIEFLY, A REINCARNATION OF GANDHI, AND NO WONDER IN EFFORT TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES WITH ANNA THEY STARTED TO WEAR THE GANDHI LIKE CAP WITH THESE WORDS PRINTED ON IT “MAIN HUN ANNA” (I AM ANNA)

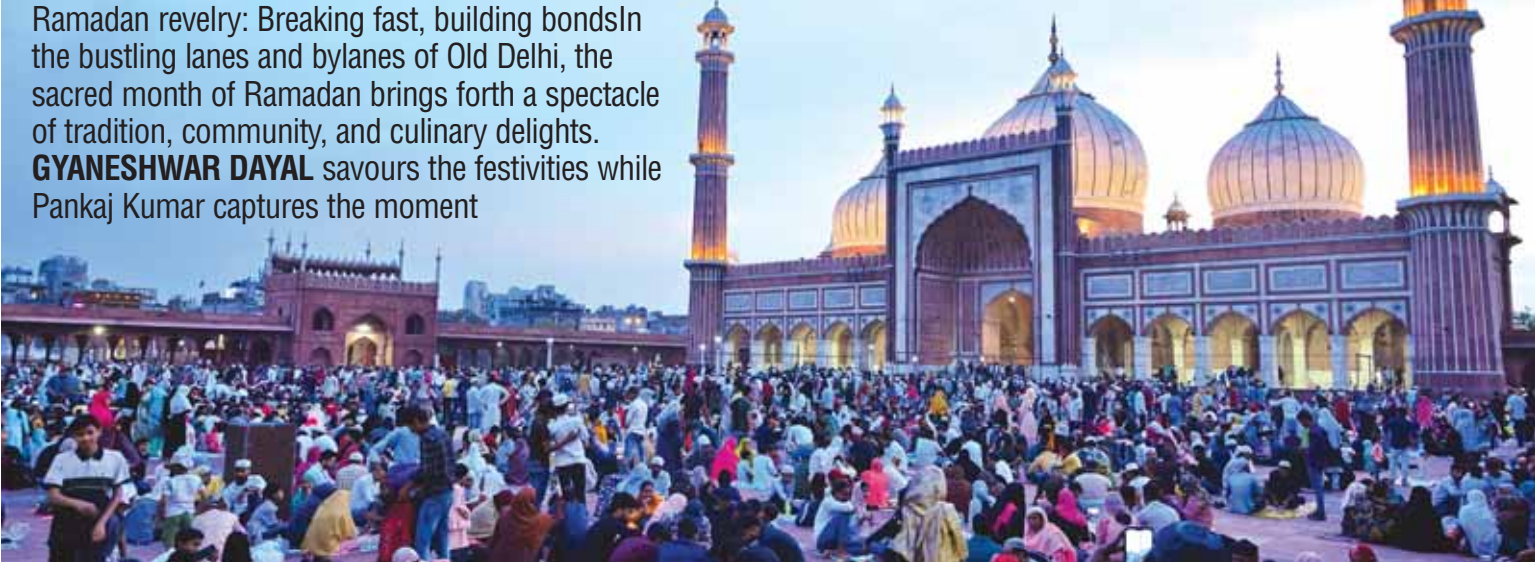
there to launch movement to be with the people and not the Press reporters. Talking of the Press, Gandhi seldom took criticism negatively. Mahatma recounts in My Experiments with Truth an interesting appointment with the editor of The Pioneer, then considered an opponent of Indian aspirations, at Allahabad: “He promised to notice in his paper anything that I might write but added that he could not promise to endorse all the Indian demands, inasmuch as he was bound to understand and give due weight to the viewpoint of the Colonials as well. It was enough that he should study the question and discuss it in his paper.” Unlike the Mahatma, the Anna Gandhians took to lobbying, threat and blackmail to silence voices of criticism. Attempts by probing reporters to question the protagonists of the movement were stonewalled with replies, “What’s the point talking to you people, you are against us.” Mahatma never took decisions in a hurry and never really craved for the crowd and media support when he decided to launch a movement in sustenance of a cause. He in fact walked an extra mile to convince those holding adverse opinion in media and never indulged in McCarthyism as in the case of the pretenders to the Mahatma’s legacy. The similarity between Hazare’s agitation and Gandhi’s movement ended with the images that the organisers tried to create pushing a clueless girl child to offer juice to Anna to end his fast, to recreate the famous image of a young Indira Gandhi offering juice to Mahatma to end his fast in 1924. When the fast by Anna Hazare at Ramlila Maidan ended in August 2011, in a speech, Hazare sermonised on the virtues that every participant of his movement should follow. None followed including its leaders, four of whom are now in jail on corruption charges. Difference in Approach Having discussed matters material, I would once again come back to the question of the ideological moorings of this agitation. What change this agitation brought to our social system? It’s difficult to find an answer. If it failed to bring social change, is it correct to even call Anna’s agitation a public movement, let alone a Gandhian movement. Hazare wore Gandhi cap, increasingly acquired Mahatma’s mannerism (as seen in Richard

Attenborough’s magnum opus) and resorted to some bhajan listening. But unlike the Mahatma, he tore constitutionalism to shreds at the outset. He, through his interlocutors led by Arvind Kejriwal, Prashant Bhushan and Yogender Yadav, held out a threat to the Government at every step of negotiation. Those who reached out to cheer him realised little that in action Hazare was actually eroding the authority of Parliament, something which suited a highly discredited Manmohan Singh Government. It created a committee to draft the Lokpal Bill, denying the Opposition benches the right to debate the provisions of the Bill. The Government then thought that to get the Bill passed, the treasury benches could conveniently deploy the Movement Against Corruption to have its own way. Hazare in a way usurped the space of legitimate Opposition. Gandhi for sure would have never advised to lose faith in our Constitutional mechanism. During their agitation in Ramlila Ground in August 2011 I vividly recall a placard carrying photos of Anna Hazare, Kiran Bedi, Arvind Kejriwal and Prashant Bhushan calling them present day Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Lakshmi Bai and Chandrashekhar Azad respectively. This placard made it abundantly clear that the movement orchestrated by Team Anna did not have a cohesive ideological base. Forget their inspirations even in their practice, the members of the core committee showed very divergent personal worldviews. The only point, on hindsight, which seems to have brought them together was the desire to destabilize the government. They together with the Government representatives-Pranab Mukherjee, P Chidambaram, Kapil Sibal, Salman Khursheed and Veerappa Moily-were initially tasked to give us the Lokpal Bill, which was to act as panacea to all ills related to corruption. One recalls Hazare having rebuffed a media query on how the Opposition was kept out of the law-making process. He said and probably believed also that the Opposition mattered little. Less than six months later, his Team was wooing the Opposition to rescue them, when Government decided a go-slow on the Bill. More shamelessly members of his team went to Haryana campaigning against the Congress and nearly facilitating victory of a tainted and charge-sheeted Ajay Chautala in the assembly bypolls. Earlier in April, when the father of Ajay Chautala, former Haryana Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala had come to pledge support to Hazare at Jantar Mantar, he was shooed away. How quick the change of heart and colour! A quality which the Mahatma never possessed. (THE WRITER IS AN AUTHOR AND PRESIDENT CENTRE FOR REFORMS, DEVELOPMENTS AND JUSTICE)

RAMADAN REVELRY

BREAKING FAST, BUILDING BONDS

Ramadan revelry: Breaking fast, building bonds in the bustling lanes and bylanes of Old Delhi, the sacred month of Ramadan brings forth a spectacle of tradition, community, and culinary delights. **GYANESHWAR DAYAL** savours the festivities while **Pankaj Kumar** captures the moment



Photos: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer

Old Delhi, the pulsating heart of India's capital, holds a special significance during the holy month of Ramadan. Steeped in tradition and vibrant culture, this historic enclave comes alive with fervour as the faithful observe the sacred rituals of fasting and prayer, and experience community dining. At the heart of these celebrations stands the majestic Jama Masjid, serving as a beacon of spiritual unity and culinary delight.

As the sun sets over the labyrinthine lanes of Old Delhi, a palpable sense of anticipation fills the air. Families, friends, and strangers alike converge upon the centuries-old Jama Masjid, drawn by the allure of the iftar, the evening meal that breaks the day-long fast. The sprawling courtyard of the mosque transforms into a bustling hub of activity, teeming with worshippers and diners eager to partake in the age-old tradition.

The scene is one of camaraderie and kinship, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and class. As Azaan, a call to prayer, resonates through the air, a hush descends upon the gathered throng, signalling the end of the day's fast. With a collective sigh of relief and gratitude, the faithful begin their iftar, breaking their fast with dates and water by Islamic tradition. But it is the community iftar spread that truly captures the essence of Ramadan in Old Delhi. Long rows of intricately woven mats are laid out on the mosque's courtyard, adorned with an array of delectable dishes that showcase the rich culinary heritage of the region. Fragrant biryanis, succulent kebabs, piping hot samosas,



and decadent sweets vie for attention, tantalising the taste buds and igniting the senses. Roohafza sharbat is everywhere. This year, it's being referred to as 'mohabbat ka sharbat' or the 'love potion.' Amidst the aromatic symphony of spices and flavours, a spirit of generosity and abundance prevails. Strangers become friends as they pass around plates heaped with delicacies, sharing laughter, stories, and blessings. The boundaries between rich and poor blur as all partake in the community feast, reaffirming their shared humanity and solidarity. The iftar meal is not just a physical nourishment but a spiritual rejuvenation, a time for reflection, gratitude, and connection with the divine. As the faithful break bread together, they are reminded of the importance of empathy, compassion, and gratitude in their lives. It is a time to seek forgiveness, to mend broken relationships, and to strengthen bonds of love and fellowship. As the night deepens and the festivities continue, the spirit of Ramadan permeates every



corner of Old Delhi. The narrow streets come alive with the hustle and bustle of shoppers, vendors, and well-wishers, creating a kaleidoscope of sights, sounds,



and smells. The twinkling fairy lights cast a magical spell over the ancient city, evoking a sense of wonder and enchantment. Jama Masjid is the same but wears a different look. Constructed by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan between 1644 and 1656, Jama Masjid stands as an architectural masterpiece and a symbol of India's rich cultural heritage. Situated in the heart of Old Delhi, it was designed by the renowned architect of that time, Ustad Khalil, Jama Masjid is characterised by its imposing red sandstone and marble structure, adorned with intricate carvings, towering minarets, and three

majestic domes. Serving as a beacon of Islamic faith, Jama Masjid has witnessed centuries of history, from Mughal grandeur to colonial rule and beyond, remaining a revered landmark and a testament to India's pluralistic ethos. It thus aptly serves as the focal point of Ramadan and Eid celebrations. Amid this joyous chaos, the true essence of Ramadan shines through – a time of spiritual renewal, communal harmony, and boundless compassion. In Old Delhi, as in countless cities and towns across the world, Ramadan is not just a religious observance but a celebration of the human spirit, a testament to the power of faith, love, and unity to transcend all barriers and divisions. As the dawn approaches and the faithful prepare to begin another day of fasting, the echoes of laughter and prayer linger in the air, a poignant reminder of the enduring legacy of Ramadan in Old Delhi – a timeless tradition of faith, fellowship, and feasting that continues to inspire and uplift all who partake in its blessings.



SOUTHERN COMFORT

From Mathura to Chennai, Hema's Kitchen and **CHEF ANJALI GUPTA** have a unique culinary narrative to tell. **SHOBORI GANGULI** got the opportunity to delve into her lavish South Indian spread recently at Lodi Hotel's Elan. Photographs by **PANKAJ KUMAR**

YEARS ago, a young woman from a traditional Hindu family from Mathura got married into a Mathura-based family in Chennai. This is the incredible journey of Chef Anjali Gupta whose signature menu was showcased recently by Lodi Hotel's Elan. She has a rich lineage of South Indian cooking spanning three generations. The finely curated menu from Hema's Kitchen, founded by her mother, was literally a voyage of discovery.

On another note, it is indeed heartwarming to see that starred hotels and restaurants across the board are providing their patrons a taste of India, sourcing the secret flavours of traditional Indian regional kitchens and placing their myriad cuisines on the fine dining table.

I must admit that the surname Gupta did inject a bit of skepticism in my mind. To be then informed that her family hails from Mathura raised further doubts. But then Chef Gupta sat down to narrate her fascinating family history. Her grandfather founded the legendary Ratna Café in Chennai back in 1948. It is now being run by the fourth generation Guptas.

Born and brought up in Chennai Chef Gupta's Hema's Kitchen broke barriers never imagined. Meat and fish gently crawled into the Gupta kitchen down South, much to the horror and dismay of the extended family up North. It's nothing less than revolutionary for a non onion or garlic eating Gupta household to experiment and innovate with South Indian cuisine, and non vegetarian at that.

As we sat at the table in Elan, Chef Gupta could be seen energetically pacing



up and down in the kitchen to send across some delectable dishes, generic South Indian food but with the special Gupta ingredient twist to each one of them.

The appetizers were enough to launch us on a grand gourmet sojourn. First up were Raw Banana Fries tossed with black salt and served with spicy beetroot and peanut chutneys. Alongside came crunchy Prawns fried in a crumb of homemade *malgopodi* (a spice mix of lentils and dry chillies; each home kitchen has its own version), this one from Hema's Kitchen. This was plated with the world famous sundried Guntur chillies, not for the faint hearted, but I simply loved it. The prawns were served with tamarind chutney.

Chef Gupta followed this up with Steamed Kottu Parottas wrapped in Banana leaves. This dish particularly stood out for me. A famous Sri Lankan and Tamil dish, this is basically crushed Parottas and shredded chicken wrapped in curry masala and steamed in banana leaves, served with tomato salna (a rich tomato curry).

As we wandered into the main course came Kerala's famous Chicken Ishtew, a subtle amalgamation of chicken, potatoes, spring and baby onions cooked in coconut milk with a curry leaves garnish. The Malabari Fish Curry was delectable, fresh Surmai fillets steeped in a tangy tomato curry.

For me, the winner was Chef Gupta's signature dish, the Andhra Shredded Mutton Pepper Masala with the perfect balance of spices for the black pepper to stand out. I can still sense the richness and aroma of that preparation.

All the dishes were accompanied by Appams (the English could not pronounce it so in Sri Lanka to this day so they are called Hoppers). While the rice Appam was good, the sunny side up Egg Appam, sprinkled with Chef Gupta's secret spices, the famous gunpowder, was delicious to slice into. The surprise innovation was of course the stout Ragi Millet Appam (steamed with a mix of ragi millets, rice, lentils and coconut), a real challenge for a cook to achieve the right consistency.

We could not end our meal without the gamous South Indian filter coffee. On a sweeter note was the Ananas Kesari Bath (fresh pieces of pineapple cooked with brown sugar and ghee). For one so careful in keeping health and indulgence in balance we signed off with Chef Gupta's Coastal Paan. I expected a paan (betel leaf) as we in North India know it. But this was a digestive of freshly chopped betel leaves, rose petals, tossed in freshly grated coconut and saunf. Never tasted a crushed paan, so I was truly impressed.

May Delhi get to see more of our rich and diverse culinary heritage in days to come.

Shangri-La is renowned for its commitment to providing exceptional guest experiences. How do you ensure that this commitment is consistently met across all aspects of the hotel?

At Shangri-La Eros New Delhi, every aspect of the guest experience is meticulously crafted to exceed expectations and create indelible memories. Through rigorous staff training and active feedback, we provide personalised service tailored to individual preferences. Meticulous attention to detail ensures every aspect of the guest experience exceeds expectations, including innovative dining options like Le Petit Chef, India's first 3-D immersive dining experience. We pride ourselves on curating memorable experiences for special occasions, such as Christmas, New Year, Valentine's Day and festive celebrations like Diwali and Holi. In addition to our commitment to service excellence, we offer diverse dining options and comprehensive wellness amenities. Guests can enjoy award-winning Italian cuisine at Sorrento, modern Indian street food at Mister Chai, an array of global flavours at Tamra's lunch buffet, Shangastic Dimsum lunch at Shang Palace, and cocktail concoctions at Grappa along with the Moonlight brunch 2.0. Exciting pop-ups with renowned chefs throughout the year add to the culinary excitement for the guests.

For ultimate relaxation, Chi, The Spa provides guests with rejuvenating Asian-inspired treatments, while our state-of-

PARADISE ON EARTH

In a candid interview the **ABHISHEK SAHOO**, General Manager, Shangri-La talks about his work, life and "Paradise on Earth" that is Shangri-La Eros, Delhi

the-art Health Club ensures that guests can uphold their wellness regimens effortlessly. With our exceptional offerings, we ensure that every stay is memorable at Shangri-La, leaving the guests with At Shangri-La Eros New Delhi, our dedication to delivering exceptional guest experiences encompasses personalized service, innovative dining options, memorable celebrations, and rejuvenating wellness amenities, all meticulously designed to leave an enduring impression on our guests

The hospitality industry is dynamic and ever-evolving. How do you stay updated on industry trends, and how do you incorporate innovation into the operations of Shangri-La Hotel?

In the fast-paced and dynamic landscape of the hospitality industry, staying ahead of trends is of paramount importance to me. I prioritise continuous learning and information gathering through participation in industry conferences, forums, and networking events. Engaging with industry associations, subscribing to relevant publications, and maintaining open lines of communication

with industry peers help me stay informed about emerging trends and best practices. Regular brainstorming sessions and collaboration with our dedicated team ensure that innovative ideas are not only identified but seamlessly integrated into our operations, maintaining my position as a trailblazer in the ever-evolving hospitality landscape.

How does the hotel contribute to the local community, and how do you keep staff motivated and encourage staff participation in such initiatives?

To ensure our staff stays motivated and engaged, we prioritise communication and education on sustainability's importance. This involves regular training sessions, recognizing and rewarding staff contributions and offering professional development opportunities in this field. By fostering a sustainability culture, we empower our team to positively impact the local community while maintaining our leadership in environmental stewardship. Our commitment to the local community is demonstrated through our "Rooted in Nature" campaign. This initiative showcases our



dedication to sustainability by incorporating locally sourced produce into our menu, supporting local farmers and reducing our carbon footprint. As a part of Rooted in Nature, we have incorporated Baby Spinach, Avocado, and Beetroot Salad, Pasture-Raised Grilled Chicken at Sorrento and Shang Palace's menu now features new additions such as Free Range Chicken Clear Soup, Stir-Fried Hydroponic Pokchoy, and Kale. This culinary evolution caters to diverse tastes and adds an extra layer of excitement to

our guests' dining experiences.

Are there emerging opportunities or trends that you believe will shape the future of the hotel industry, and how is Shangri-La positioned to leverage them?

The hotel industry is currently undergoing significant transformations, presenting us with exciting opportunities and trends which we are eagerly embracing. One notable trend is the rising demand for personalised and distinctive

experiences. To capitalise on this, we've introduced our pioneering initiative, the Le Petit Chef experience, which has been the first 3-D immersive digital dining experience in India. Le Petit Chef offers guests an unforgettable culinary journey that seamlessly blends cutting-edge technology with gourmet cuisine.

Furthermore, we recognize the pivotal opportunity in integrating technology into our services. Therefore, we are committed to investing in advanced systems that facilitate seamless and contactless experiences, including digital concierge services and smart room technologies.

Moreover, our esteemed Shang Palace, the 39th of its kind globally, has been a beacon of excellence since its establishment, epitomising our dedication to celebrating the elegance, richness, and dynamism of Cantonese cuisine. In an increasingly globalised world, authentic and culturally rich dining experiences like those offered at Shang Palace resonate deeply with discerning travellers seeking genuine cultural immersion.

Can you briefly describe your professional journey and how you ascended to the position of General Manager at Shangri-La Hotel?

Embarking on my journey in the world of hospitality, I dedicated myself to mastering diverse operational roles, instilling in me a deep-seated commitment to excellence. My Shangri-La adventure has been a dynamic progression through various departments, each contributing to the success of different properties within the Shangri-La family. This journey reached its pinnacle as I assumed the role of General Manager at Shangri-La Eros, New Delhi. This ascent symbolises not just a career trajectory but also my unwavering dedication to providing unparalleled hospitality. It is a journey fueled by the collaborative efforts of a talented team and grounded in the Shangri-La ethos, where guest satisfaction and innovation take precedence. In my current role as General Manager, I am privileged to lead a team dedicated to elevating the guest experience and upholding the highest standards of service, making each guest's stay at Shangri-La Eros, New Delhi, truly exceptional.

What motivated you to pursue a career in the hospitality industry, and how has your background contributed to your success in this role?

As a passionate hotelier, my journey in the hospitality industry was driven by a deep-seated desire to create memorable experiences and genuine connections with people from all walks of life.

From a young age, I was drawn to the dynamic nature of the hospitality sector, where every day presents new challenges and opportunities to delight guests and exceed their expectations. My background, steeped in education from IHM Business School and practical training at the Institute of Hotel Management, laid a solid foundation for my career in hospitality. The rigorous curriculum and hands-on experiences equipped me with the essential skills and knowledge needed to navigate the complexities of this industry with confidence. Throughout my career, I've had the privilege of serving in various capacities, from Resident Manager to Director of Operations, honing my expertise in Operations, Sales and Marketing, Revenue Management, Finance, Renovation, and loyalty marketing along the way. Each role has provided me with invaluable insights and experiences that have shaped my approach to leadership and management.

I firmly believe in leading by example and fostering a culture of innovation, collaboration, and service excellence within my team. Moreover, my ability to adapt to changing market dynamics and leverage emerging trends has been instrumental in driving the success of Shangri-La Eros New Delhi. By staying abreast of industry developments and constantly striving for improvement, I've been able to position the hotel as a premier destination for luxury hospitality.



SUMIT KAUSHIK

Decoding Modi's North East Story

As history's dust clears, an extraordinary story unfolds—one of India's North East transformed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visionary leadership. At its core is a once-marginalized region now rejuvenated through comprehensive development and social unity efforts

A recent literary contribution, "Modi's North East Story," penned by Tuhin A. Sinha, the BJP's national spokesperson, and Aditya Pittie, an experienced entrepreneur and angel investor, serves as a beacon illuminating this transformative journey. This literary work isn't just gaining traction within India but is resonating deeply among the Indian diasporas. It's a testament to the emergence of 4.7 crore citizens of Northeast India as the vanguard of Bharat's resurgence. What struck me most upon reading this narrative was the realisation of the Northeast's immense potential. Blessed with unparalleled natural beauty, extraordinary biodiversity, and a skilled workforce, the region had languished in obscurity for far too long. However, under the dynamic leadership of PM Narendra Modi, a new dawn has emerged for the Northeast.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND TRANSFORMATION

The eight states of the Northeast—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—share borders with neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. This geographic location has historically endowed the region with a rich tapestry of social and cultural connections, often referred to as 'Suvannabhumi' (land of gold) in ancient texts.

However, delving into the pages of this enlightening tome, one confronts the stark reality of neglect endured by the Northeast under previous regimes. This grim scenario changed when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government came to power in 2014 and took landmark steps to promote social harmony and peace in the region. The government has shown respect and sensitivity towards the culture, identity, and dignity of the people of the region and has engaged in dialogue, development, and democracy to address the grievances and aspirations of the people. The government has made efforts for the surrender of militants through various peace talks and accords, the rehabilitation of surrendered insurgents, the creation of several autonomous councils for different tribal groups, the removal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) from several districts, and the reduction of border conflicts, among many other measures. The signing of the Karbi Peace Accord,



the Assam Adivasi Peace Accord, the Dimas Peace Accord, and the Bodo Peace Accord are examples of how the government has made a lasting difference.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND CONNECTIVITY

Underpinned by the twin pillars of peace and development and manifested in unprecedented infrastructure creation and an increase in connectivity, the Northeast is witnessing an exponential leap in its quality of life today. The sheer magnitude of the all-round transformation of the Northeastern states in the last decade under PM Narendra Modi's dynamic leadership is a case study for all scholars of social sciences and public administration. The speed of infrastructure projects undertaken in border areas has boosted the standard of living in far-flung districts. Northeast India witnessed an unprecedented jump in the number of airports in the North Eastern Region (NER), which rose from nine to 16, and the numbers of flights have increased from about 900 to 1,900 post-2014. Some Northeastern states have made their way onto India's railway

map for the first time, and efforts are being made to expand the waterways too. At the same time, the restoration of age-old conflicts and improved law and order situations have led to record tourist footfalls in the region. Under PM Modi's visionary leadership, the Northeast has emerged as an important reservoir for India's growth in the decades to come.

THE 'ACT EAST POLICY' AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

When Narendra Modi became the PM of India in 2014, he had a vision of transforming India. He put the Northeast at the heart of his vision. He changed the 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy' and took a holistic approach to tackle the challenges of the region. PM Modi's vision for the Northeast extends beyond mere economic development. It encompasses a holistic approach that embraces the region's cultural diversity and heritage. The launch of the 'Act East Policy' has opened new avenues for trade and collaboration, positioning the Northeast as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Central to this narrative is PM Modi's 'Act East Policy', which reimagines the Northeast as India's gateway to

Southeast Asia. Through enhanced connectivity and strategic collaborations, the region emerges as a pivotal player in fostering regional integration and economic growth. After 2014, a major impetus was given to further strengthen this relationship between the Indian Northeast and Southeast Asia. Modi envisaged the Northeastern states as India's gateway to Southeast Asia. To realise this potential, work is resolutely underway on projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT Highway) and the Agartala-Akhaura rail project. Once complete, these would be complete game changers for the region. When the outlook changes, the rest of the changes are mere formalities.

LEADERSHIP AND PEOPLE-CENTRIC GOVERNANCE

Unlike most PMs in the past who handled the Northeast from a distance, PM Modi has visited the Northeast around 60 times in nine years, which is perhaps more than the total number of visits by all his predecessors put together. The result is a miraculous transformation in the region, with the Northeast being cited all over as

the Modi government's development model.

INCLUSIVITY AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

It may be noted that in the last few years, the Northeast has witnessed many firsts that should actually have happened long, long ago. Almost 60 years after Nagaland attained statehood, the national anthem was played inside the Nagaland Assembly for the first time on February 21, 2021. Similarly, the Tripura Assembly played the national anthem for the first time on March 23, 2018, after the BJP government was sworn in the state. For the first time since our independence, under PM Modi, our most farflung villages on the border have been given top priority for development and employment generation under the recently launched Vibrant Village Programme. These endeavours epitomise a commitment to inclusivity and progress, reflective of PM Modi's mantra of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'.

ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

While infrastructure and economic development are

crucial, the preservation and promotion of the unique cultural heritage of the Northeast have not been overlooked. Prime Minister Modi's dedication to nurturing and celebrating the diverse traditions, languages, and customs of the region has not only strengthened the social fabric but has also projected the Northeast onto the global stage. Since then, on his nearly 60 visits to the Northeast, he has inaugurated many projects, held rallies and roadshows, and attended swearing-in ceremonies. of North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) governments. Yet, beyond the realm of infrastructure lies a concerted effort to preserve and celebrate the Northeast's rich cultural heritage. Prime Minister Modi's unwavering dedication to this cause not only strengthens the social fabric but also elevates the region onto the global stage. This transformation didn't materialise overnight. It's the culmination of relentless engagement, dialogue, and empowerment—markers of PM Modi's leadership since 2014. His unprecedented visits to the Northeast, coupled with strategic

initiatives, have sown the seeds of progress and prosperity. Economic indicators underscore this remarkable turnaround, with the Northeast witnessing a surge in GDP and trade, coupled with a decline in insurgency and enhanced connectivity. The cumulative GDP of the Northeastern states has more than doubled from 2.97 lakh crore to 6.81 lakh crore, and their share of the Indian GDP has increased from 2.6 percent in 2013-14 to 2.9 percent in 2021-22. The Northeast has undergone a tremendous economic transformation under the Modi government.

CONCLUSION

In a world often beset by cynicism, the Northeast stands as a beacon of possibility—a testament to the transformative power of visionary leadership and collective endeavor. The progressive journey continues, fueled by the promise of a brighter tomorrow for all.

In decoding Modi's Northeast Story, we unearth not just a tale of development but a narrative of resilience, renewal, and the promise of a brighter future for all. As we celebrate the Northeast's resurgence, let us continue to amplify these voices and pave the way for a more inclusive and prosperous India. Unlike most Indian PMs who did not challenge the status quo, PM Modi thrives on taking the uncharted route. Social justice and historical course correction are always high priorities of the Modi government, be it about individuals or a region. Northeast India today has the highest-ever representation in the Union Council of Ministers, wherein there are two cabinet ministers and three ministers of state. For the first time, a Member of Parliament (MP) from Tripura has found a place in the Council of Ministers. Over the years, Nagaland's biggest annual cultural extravaganza, the Hornbill Festival, and Manipur's Sangai Festival have been attracting visitors from all parts of the country.

As we navigate through the labyrinthine corridors of change, it's imperative to acknowledge the voices and narratives that animate this saga. "Modi's North East Story" serves as a conduit, amplifying the voices of facilitators, executors, researchers, and witnesses, democratising this tale of hope and empowerment.

(The writer is a PhD Candidate and impact consultant; views are personal)

We are far away from the 2030 goal of gender equality

Globally, 60 per cent or about 1.12 billion women of reproductive age, live where abortion is broadly legal, while, 40 per cent or 753 million under restrictive laws

On the eve of the International Women's Day, France enshrined abortion rights in its constitution. While, addressing the French lawmakers, the French Prime Minister said that the country had 'a moral debt to women', and the lawmakers 'a chance to change history'. In the aftermath of the SC decision in the USA, overriding the 1973 verdict in Roe v. Wade, eliminating the constitutional right to an abortion, abortion laws have once again come to spotlight. Earlier, Poland, had effectively banned it, while, Hungary imposed several bureaucratic hurdles for women. In India, the test of 'foetal viability' may prove to be a handicap for many women. While, in 2022, Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA, asserted that 'women's bodily autonomy is the foundation for gender equality'. Globally, 60%, or about 1.12 billion women of reproductive age, live where abortion is broadly legal, while, 40% or 753 million under restrictive laws. In today's world of growing violence, physical, emotional or sexual, against women and girls, especially, by husbands or intimate partners, is becoming a cause for concern. In 2021, one woman was killed in every 11 minutes by a relative, while, a quarter of people worldwide believe, it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife. New forms of violence against women



are also emerging online, fuelled by digital tools like deepfakes and by misogynistic influencers, forcing women out of digital spaces (UNDP, 2024).

Even though the world is committed to promoting women's economic justice and closing gender gaps in the world of work (SDG-10), one in every 10 women is living in extreme poverty, and if the current trends continue by

2030, an estimated 8 per cent of the world's female population, 342.4 million women and girls - will still be living on less than \$2.15 a day, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Close to one in four, and will experience moderate or severe food insecurity. An estimated 73.5 per cent of women in wage employment do not have access to social protection. Only 61.4 per cent of prime working age women

are in the labour force, compared to 90 per cent of men. More than 2.7 billion women in 69 economies are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men, and 43 economies have no laws on sexual harassment in the workplaces. There is a wide wage disparity as well, with each dollar a man earns in labour, a woman only 51 cents. Women spend about 16.4 billion hours on

unpaid care work every day, three times more than men, and at this rate, it would exceed up to 40 per cent of GDP in some countries by 2050. While, the closure in gender gap in labour force participation could give a raise of USD 7 trillion to the global economy and an average 20% higher GDP per capita. Sadly, halfway through the gender equality goal (SDG-5), not a single indicator for SDG-5 (gender equality and empowerment) has been met, or even almost met, with only 15.4 per cent of indicators are 'on track', 61.5 per cent at a moderate distance and 23.1 per cent are far or very far off track from 2030 targets. It is estimated to take at least 300 years to end child marriage, 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws, 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments (UN). There is a need for an additional USD 360 billion per year to achieve gender equality and failure to prioritise it, could not only jeopardise the entire 2030 Agenda for SDGs, but, 'the very foundation of a fair society, a goal upon which all other goals must stand' (UN DESA). Now, one of the key challenges is lack of financing. There is a staggering USD 360 billion annual

deficit in spending on gender-equality measures (UNWomen). The rising costs of conflicts and fuel and food prices, forced almost 143 countries in undertaking policy measures that undermined their capacity of spending on public services and social protection. A recent study called for alternative economic models shifting towards a green economy and care society for amplifying women's voices, and achieving feminist climate justice, as the impending climate crisis is likely to push up to 158.3 million more women and girls into poverty. As the conflicts proliferate across the globe, women face more challenges with increased maternal mortality and morbidity, lack of healthcare, and girls being deprived of school education. The 2024 Women's Day has rightly focused on investing in women for accelerating all round progress. Now, it is imperative for nations to redouble their efforts in realising the committed goals, to ensure women and girls get access to healthcare, education and capacity building, opportunities for power-sharing and economic participation, and end gender-based violence by breaking the stranglehold of normative behaviour and stereotypes.

(The author is former Director General, Doordarshan & All India Radio, views are personal)



ARCHANA DATTA

