

Opinion

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Netherlands' Jerdy Schouten in action with England's Jude Bellingham at the Euro 2024

Doing just enough a virtue in tournaments

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

ENGLAND WERE MERELY seconds away from an inglorious ouster at the hands of humble Slovakia, but here they are — in the final of the European football championship. Had it not been for Jude Bellingham's last-gasp audacious overhead kick in injury time, a fresh round of recrimination and post-mortem would have started, with manager Gareth Southgate's position becoming untenable. But at Euro 2024, England seemed to have made a habit of engineering escapes.

Bukayo Saka smashed home a long-range equaliser in the 80th minute of the quarterfinal against Switzerland, while they also had to come from behind in the semi-final against The Netherlands. Ollie Watkins netted the winner in the 90th minute. It proves that whatever may be their shortcomings on the technical or tactical side of things, England are not lacking in spirit and attitude. Lack of form or rhythm doesn't come in the way of fighting till the final whistle. If captain and star striker Harry Kane has been struggling, there have been other avenues for goals.

Doing just enough is a good quality to have in tournament football. But England, in its first major championship final away from home, will do well not to get too far behind in the final against Spain, the best team in the tournament so far. After wins over Italy, Germany, and France, their pedigree can't be questioned despite several youngsters in their line-up. In fact, these rookies — if they could be called so — are the reason Spain have an all-win record going into the title clash, without having to go to a penalty shootout. A record of seven goals in six games shows that finding the net hasn't been too easy for England. In comparison, Spain have scored 13, none of which are from the penalty spot, with as many as nine players getting on the sheet. Lamine Yamal, just turning 17, has shown that he can go on to be one of the leading lights of the game in years to come.

His equalising goal in the semi-final against France will be talked about for years to come. Nico Williams has been a phenomenon on the wing, while Dani Olmo has scored in every knockout round so far, confirming himself as a player for the big occasion. In the form of Rodri and Alvaro Morata, they are not short of experience. Real Madrid stalwart Dani Carvajal is likely to be back in defence after suspension, along with Aymeric Laporte, Robin Le Normand, and Marc Cucurella. Coach Luis de la Fuente has options like Ferran Torres, Mikel Merino, and Fabian Ruiz on the bench if the needs to change things up.

A large base

Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Atletico Madrid are the three big guns in Spanish club football, but the number of players in the national squad goes outside the 'big 3' attests to the depth of talent they have. First-choice goalkeeper Unai Simon plies his trade at Athletic Bilbao and there are a whole host of players in the squad from less-celebrated clubs like Real Sociedad and RB Leipzig.

Aston Villa striker Watkins's goal took England into the final and there's a

sizable Crystal Palace contingent in the squad, but when it comes to his first-choice starting XI, Southgate has largely trusted players from bigger clubs. Goalkeeper Jordan Pickford plays for Everton, but otherwise, the first XI is largely made up of players from Manchester City, Manchester United, and Arsenal, apart from Bayern Munich's Kane and Real's Bellingham. The play to have Kieran Trippier in defence hasn't quite worked, so Palace's Marc Guehi may get the nod for the final.

The likes of Ezri Konsa, Conor Gallagher, Cole Palmer, Ivan Toney, and Eberechi Eze are options but are often brought into action as a last resort. The final could be decided by how well England deal with the wing-play of Yamal and Williams. Saka will look to use the flanks for England. The battle in midfield between Declan Rice-Luke Shaw-Kobbie Mainoo and Rodri-Ruiz-Olimow would be crucial to the outcome.

And then there is the big-match expertise of Bellingham who, despite recently turning 21, has made a habit of making decisive interventions in the biggest of matches, be it for club or country.

High-quality fare

Midway through the tournament, there was much talk about matches at Euro 2024 being 'boring' without much exciting, goalmouth action. It was compared unfavourably to the Copa America taking place across the Atlantic. Even though most of the matches haven't been high-scoring, the tactical and technical battles, often one-on-one contests have been a fascinating watch. Games don't need to have a tennis scoreline to generate interest. The fact remains that the overall level of European football is ridiculously high.

When the top teams face off in knockout rounds, there's very little to choose between them. The Spain-Germany quarterfinal was one of the best matches in recent times, even though the final score was just 2-1. The overall quality on display at the Copa certainly isn't comparable as the general level on sides there isn't that high. That's what may have prompted Kylian Mbappe to argue that winning the Euros is tougher than winning the World Cup. Even the so-called smaller teams have been quite hard to break down. A goals-per-match figure of 2.28 is nothing fancy, but when the best teams in the world face off with so much at stake, it would be quite unrealistic to expect goal-fests. As it is, most of the best players in the sport were coming off bruising seasons for their clubs and may have been a bit jaded. It may explain that no player has scored more than three goals in the tournament.

But that has been compensated by the emergence of some breakthrough stars, headlined by Yamal and Williams. Germany's Jamal Musiala and Florian Wirtz have also caught the eye, while Turkey's Arda Güler, all of 19, is already a Real Madrid player. Xavi Simons, one of the key players for The Netherlands, turns out for Paris Saint-Germain and is a look out for. Switzerland's Ruben Vargas has also impressed. As far as defenders are concerned, France's Jules Kounde contributed to one of the meanest backlines in the tournament. The 25-year-old was pretty adept at bombing down the flank and putting in crosses as well. Whichever team comes out on top in the final will have the satisfaction of beating a field of the highest quality.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



There are many more questions. Which is the platform to ask the questions and receive answers? No one in the government has answered the questions so far, but the questions will not go away. Yet the laws that are most fundamental to the administration of criminal justice in the country have 'come into force' — an example of government by some people and for some people

AFTER A DEBATE that the Opposition boycotted in both Houses of Parliament (for good reasons), three Bills to replace (and re-enact) the Indian Penal Code, 1860, the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 were passed. The new Bills carried names in Hindi (for Sanskrit) even in the English versions of the Bills. The President gave her assent to the Bills and the government notified that the new laws will come into force on July 1, 2024.

There is stiff opposition to the new laws from many quarters. The government has dismissed the grounds of opposition as irrelevant and motivated. The government's ram-through approach has not deterred the opposition to the laws. On the contrary, two state governments have declared that they will bring certain amendments in the state legislatures concerned. Tamil Nadu has appointed a one-person committee to suggest the changes within a month. Karnataka and other state governments may adopt the same route. It is therefore necessary to place the facts and the issues before the public and ask the citizens to arrive at their own conclusions.

'Criminal law' is a subject in the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Both Parliament and state legislatures are empowered to make laws on the subject. Undoubtedly, if a law made by Parliament and a law made by a state legislature are *repugnant*, Article 254 of the Constitution will be attracted. However, that is an issue that will arise after the state legislatures made a law, there was repugnancy, and the President did not give her assent to the law passed by the state legislature.

Meanwhile, the questions raised by those opposing the new laws must be heard and answered. Unfortunately, the central government has refused to answer in Parliament or outside. Here are the questions:

1. Is it correct that the bulk of the



The criminal laws replacing the colonial-era Indian Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure and Indian Evidence Act came into effect on July 1

Who will answer the questions?

provisions of the three new laws have been 'copied and pasted' from the three laws that were replaced? Is it correct that 90-95% of the IPC and the CrPC and 95-99% of the Evidence Act have been retained in the new laws and every section re-numbered? If a few additions, deletions and changes were required in the existing laws, could the same outcome not have been achieved through *amendments*? Is not the claim that the government has thrown out the 'colonial legacy' a hollow claim?

2. If the intention was a thorough revision and overhaul of the criminal laws, why was the time-honoured practice to make a reference to the Law Commission not followed? Was not the Law Commission the most suitable body to consult all stakeholders and submit its recommendations, together with draft Bills, for the consideration of the government and Parliament? Why was the Law Commission by-passed and the task entrusted to a Committee that consisted of part-time members who, save one, were employed as full-time professors in various Universities?

3. Are the new laws consistent with the modern principles of criminal jurisprudence? Have the new laws recognised and incorporated the progressive principles laid down by the Supreme Court in landmark judgments delivered in the last 10 years? Are several provisions of the new laws contrary to the Constitution of India as inter-

preted by the Supreme Court?

4. Why has the new law retained 'death penalty' that has been abolished in many democratic countries? Why has the cruel and dehumanising punishment of 'solitary confinement' been introduced? Why has the offence of 'adultery' been brought back into the criminal law? Was it necessary to retain 'defamation' as a criminal offence? Was it not necessary to stipulate a period of limitation to lodge a criminal complaint of 'defamation'? Why is same-sex relationship *without* the consent of the other person no longer an offence? Was it not necessary to define the punishment of 'community service' or, at least, give illustrations of community service?

5. Why has the offence of 'sedition' been enlarged and retained? Why has the offence of 'terrorism' been brought into the general criminal law when there is a special Act called Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act? Why have 'electoral offences' been included in the new law when there are special laws called Representation of the People Act, 1950 and Representation of the People Act, 1951?

6. Have the new laws given greater latitude to the police to arrest a person and seek the person's police custody? Have the new laws ignored the dictum of the Supreme Court that the power to arrest does not mean the necessity to arrest? Is not it necessary to explic-

itly provide in the law that 'bail is the rule, jail is the exception'? Was it not necessary to oblige a Magistrate to examine the *legality* of the arrest and the *need* to arrest? Do the provisions for bail effectively require the Magistrate to deny bail for 40/60 days after the arrest?

7. Is the provision that enables an FIR to be registered in any police station of the country, irrespective of the place of the offence, constitutional? Is the provision that empowers the police of that State to arrest the accused and investigate the offence unconstitutional in view of 'Police' being a subject in the State List? Are the said provisions contrary to the principle of 'federalism' which is a basic feature of the Constitution?

There are many more questions. Which is the platform to ask the questions and receive answers? No one in the government has answered the questions so far, but the questions will not go away. Yet the laws that are most fundamental to the administration of criminal justice in the country have 'come into force' — an example of government by some people and for some people.

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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Incomplete enquiry

THE TASK FORCE of 40 BJP UP incumbents that came up with predictable reasons for the party's setback in the state in the recent Lok Sabha polls — from party infighting to caste equations and non-cooperation of government employees, UP CM Yogi Adityanath transferred 12 MPs immediately after the report, since the committee's inference was that he did not exercise sufficient control over government employees.

But the genesis of the UP defeat needs more introspection. The investigation should have started with the BJP's central election committee meeting on February 29, when the names of some 50 of the 80 UP seats were cleared. The committee members, including Adityanath, waited for over two hours since Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and J P Nadda first met informally at Lok Kalyan Marg, where a short list of 50 BJP Lok Sabha candidates was drawn up. At the official meeting, general secretary (organisation) B L Santhosh

read out the names and few interjected. The common refrain was "whatever the party thinks appropriate". The names from UP were cleared in barely 20 minutes and some 65% were sitting MPs, since the party seemed confident that UP's formidable 'double engine *ki sarkar*' would ensure their victory. Adityanath's reported suggestion to change the names of 35 sitting MPs was ignored. Eventually, 27 BJP incumbents lost the polls.

Incidentally, the BJP won all the Lok Sabha seats around Gorakhpur, Adityanath's stronghold but lost in parliamentary seats around Varanasi, the PM's constituency. Varanasi and Lucknow were the only two constituencies the task force did not visit. If they had travelled to Varanasi, they would have discovered the considerable resentment over contracts for major projects in and around the city being awarded not to local UP contractors, but to those from western India. Indicative of divisions in the UP BJP was the fact that Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya remained mostly in Delhi for almost a month after the election results.

Unprecedented seating

At the swearing-in of the Modi 3.0 cabinet last week, the Rashtrapati Bhavan staff and Delhi police were swamped by too many important people flashing invitation cards and

demanding premier seating. In the bargain, the carefully drawn up warrant of precedent was thrown to the wind. The most glaring breach of protocol was billionaire Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani ending up in the second row with Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan. A group of *sadhus* was in the front row, while J&K Governor Manoj Sinha, Adityanath and CMs from the North-East were relegated to the third row.

The biggest faux pas was that CDS General Anil Chauhan and outgoing Army chief General Manoj Pande were seated in the sixth row. Security personnel cannot alone be blamed, the President's Military Secretary and her ADCs should have earmarked seats for the respective chiefs of the Armed forces.

Mumbai royals

Even the British royal family, who have conducted their marital ceremonies with pomp and circumstance, and much public interest for centuries, could perhaps learn a lesson from the Ambani's family in attracting the maximum eyeballs on social media. The family's army of event managers has organised parties for the last few months in exotic locations — from an elephant rescue farm and a zoo in Jamnagar to a swinging jet-setting cruise through Italy to celebrate the marriage of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant. They even hijacked the

Indian team's success at the World Cup to stage a felicitation at the Ambani centre in BKC, Mumbai. Nita Ambani, glittering in diamonds, and her equally dressed up wedding guests, felicitated cricket heroes Rohit Sharma, Hardik Patel and Suryakumar Yadav who have all played for the Mumbai Indians IPL team. The trio, looking a tad embarrassed, were toggled out in party attire in similar dark coloured sequined outfits.

Ensuring its 10%

Opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge is skating on thin ice. The Congress strength in the Upper House has fallen to 26 seats after two Rajya Sabha MPs, Deepender Hooda from Haryana and K C Venugopal from Rajasthan, were elected to the Lok Sabha in the recent poll. The Congress needs representation by at least 10% of the total MPs in the Upper House, whose present strength is around 250, if its nominee is to be recognised as the official leader of the Opposition. In a bid to help Congress secure the position, K Keshava Rao of the BRS recently defected to the party. With the Congress in the majority in the Telangana Assembly, the party's RS nominee will automatically win the bye-election. If 85-year-old Rao agrees to step aside, jurist Abhishek Manu Singhvi is waiting eagerly for a Rajya Sabha re-entry.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



REFLECTIONS

[THE BIG PICTURE]

Learning from Delhi-uge:
Cosmetic plans won't do

Citizens have to be made integral to urban planning, by recognising them as stakeholder communities and as co-owners of public projects

It comes every year. And, with it in recent years, so do the floods in Delhi. Earlier, the Yamuna overflowed across the floodplains. Now, pouring rain causes choked stormwater drains to overflow across neighbourhoods, not distinguishing the VIPs from the VOPs (the "very ordinary people").

In monsoonal India, water has always been a boon—and a challenge. Over 3,000 years ago, in Dholavira, systems had been worked out to store precious rainwater for months. Around 200 years ago, the training model to manage the distribution of water was institutionalised in British India. Now, hydrological engineers turn away from employment in poorly paid government jobs and move to careers bidding on MBAs. Poorly paid, oppressed local planners agree to support weak proposals for gross densification or hard paving. So, what do we see? Impassioned engineers and urban planners, bored or voiceless archaeologists, ignored environmentalists and architects—in a land with a 5,000-year history of technology and construction, where the "punchable" smit, confident of their skills and sense of aesthetics, were buoyed up by appreciation, even if the lesser mortals who admired the beauty often could not appreciate the skill—just

as the world knows Leonardo da Vinci the painter, but few know da Vinci the engineer. Can we look for systemic solutions to bring back the sense of vocation, respect and reward for professionals like government engineers and planners—so that they attract our best talent? Their actions have such multiplicative effects on the lives of all citizens, so much more than political representatives.

Annual floods have been occurring south Delhi since the 1990s because of the neglect of our historic canals. Once our nahars were labelled naflats, the rupture was total. Even more violence is being done since 2010—600-year-old nahars are being covered to serve as car parks, and artificial dams are being built, in the form of underground metros, underpasses, and multiple basements. All these are yet more examples of the "expedient" ignoring the city, when an "event" is glamourised at the cost of the long-term. Let acronyms, speeches and bouquets cannot by themselves make a functioning city. Not gimmicks, but well-run cities are the best testimonial to a healthy nation. A well-run city is a beautiful city.

Beauty has nothing to do with cosmetic flourishes or with monumentality. The charm of old cities is from attitudes—the respect for the small spaces much as for the monumental, for forces of nature as the establishment's regular needs, among other things. The "city beautiful" was one of the features of the European Enlightenment, and there are echoes of

Shah Jahan's Lahore and Delhi in Frederick's Potsdam and Paris. But the industrial towns—Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow—retained their vitality even as they made industrial slums a thing of the past. Our own Surat and Indore have in recent years achieved miracles. And they allow the rest of us to hope.

Could we not link the spirit of the past to present challenges, equipped with all the sciences can teach us? Can't we dream of a happy city?

Delhi's climatic crises of the last 50 years are easily explained by top-heavy governance, with officials taking shelter behind obfuscation. The urban (rich) minority see the majority much as did the bourgeois of Paris in the 19th century as "les classes dangereuses et dangereuses", wanting their labour but not their presence. A privileged fraction of urban inhabitants living in gated ghettos does not translate into civic improvements.

From the mid-20th century, India's homegrown cadre of engineers and architects became part of an international fraternity. Delhi's Master Plan of 1962 incorporated best practices from other countries, if not from India's own history. It emulated London—a "green belt" around the city, large city-level areas reserved for city forests, every locality planned around big and small parks like the squares of central London, and even the establishment of the Delhi Development Authority to create affordable housing including for the poor.

What is worrying is that cities like



Narayani Gupta



Narayan Moorthy



Well-run cities are the best testimonial to a healthy nation. A well-run city is a beautiful city

HP PHOTO

Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Pune and Bangalore, which were good examples of urban living, changed course in the 1980s. They chose to favour densification, narrow roads in tortuous organic networks, the filling up of both natural and medieval man-made water bodies to maximise profit, and handing over whole precincts to developers.

All citizens need to be recognised as stakeholders in public projects—whether a public road or an auditorium—and given some degree of say over "public land" and "public funds". We need to learn from the practice in local councils in Britain, where the local residents, the local school principal, the head of a local institution (a museum within the precinct, for example) are mandatory members of the local council—thus reflecting local needs, realities and aspirations—instead of just the politician, cautious bureaucrat or hapless government planner. These are not client-patron situations—the work should be necessarily collaborative to involve the stakeholder citizen and the officials who will be able to formalise it. Those who toil in the heat and the rain should know too that they are contributing to a worthwhile project.

What a price we pay otherwise, when we navigate literally the flooded new technical tunnels and potholed roads! Slipshod work, papered over for immediate effect, public funds squandered on shoddily built projects with no thought to long-term environmental impact, or to the harassed pedestrian, the street hawker, the domestic help. The disdain for regular

upkeep and maintenance, of never looking at appropriate micro-interventions but only at grand massive scale developments. The health problems will surface later: the sense of alienation, insidiously.

All may not be lost if we learn from our own history as much as by observing other nations. We need to eschew the showcasting and valorisation of a false notion of "heritage"—making it a pleasant leisure activity for many, a viable source of income for a few. The past is a foreign country. We live in today. Delhi can't be pushed back, and the agenda for all of us beckons, to work for a happy equitable city that can hold up its head with pride.

Narayani Gupta is a historian of Delhi and Narayan Moorthy is an architect. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY SENTIMENTS]

Karan Thapar

Three lessons for Indian politics from British polls

For nearly a decade, we grovel accustomed to viewing Britain in terms of its falling economy, faltering politicians, crumbling infrastructure and steadily diminishing status. We weren't wrong. But now there's an opportunity to see Blighty differently. And this time we, in India, can learn a few invaluable lessons from the British.

The United Kingdom is arguably the most multicultural society in the world. It has had a prime minister (PM) of Indian origin, several chancellors, foreign secretaries and home secretaries who are either Black or Asian as well as heads of Scotland, Wales and London. I can't think of another country with a similar record.

Thirteen per cent of the MP's recently elected to the House of Commons are of Black/Asian or ethnic minority origin,

compared to 10% in the previous House; 29 are people of Indian origin (15 of Pakistani origin). Twelve are Sikhs. Yet Asians are only 8% of the population and Blacks 4%. People of Indian origin are 3.1% of Pakistanis and 2.7%.

In comparison, Muslims are nearly 15% of India's population and in proportionate terms there should be 74 Muslim MPs in the Lok Sabha. There are just 24. In 2019 it was 26. In 2014, 23. We don't have a Muslim chief minister in any of our 28 states. In 15 there's a Muslim minister, in 10 there's just one.

More tellingly, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party doesn't have a single Muslim Lok Sabha MP. In Uttar Pradesh, with nearly 30% Muslims, the party doesn't have a single Muslim member of the legislative assembly. That was also the case in 2017. In

Gujarat, it hasn't fielded a Muslim candidate in any Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha election since 1998. That's a quarter-century of deliberate distancing although 9% of the state are Muslims.

There's a second and very different lesson we could also learn. How to respond when you've led your party to its worst-ever defeat.

In Britain, the outgoing prime minister, Rishi Sunak resigned. He did so before 12 hours had lapsed. In fact, before the results were fully out. The Conservatives had started to publicly debate what sort of party they needed to become if they're to return to power. In the weeks and months ahead, that will intensify. And the entire country will participate in the process. The media will question and provoke. MPs will quarrel and bicker, and aspirants will step forward and drop out. It will often be embarrassing for the party while several individual reputations could shatter. But in the end, a new party will emerge.

Now consider what happened after the Congress plummeted to its worst-ever defeat in 2014. No one resigned. The party did not debate its future. Sonia Gandhi continued as president for three more years, eventually making way for her son. An election to choose a leader from outside the Gandhi family did not take place till 2022 and Shashi Tharoor's candidature

was frowned upon. Even today, a decade later, the Gandhis remain in effective control. Mallikarjun Kharge may be president but Rahul Gandhi is the man who matters. Sonia Gandhi, though old, wise and essentially unwilling to speak in Parliament, remains chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

There's a third lesson too but I'll only mention it briefly. Sunak drove to Buckingham Palace to resign in the prime minister's official car. He left in a private car from a side gate. An hour later, Rishi Sunak arrived in the leader of the opposition's car. After his appointment as prime minister, he left for Downing Street in the PM's official limousine. By the time he got there the Sunak family's belongings had been packed and removed. No 10 was ready to receive the new head of government.

All of this happened within hours of the results becoming clear. The constitutional process was not paused for five days to arrange a spectacular swearing-in. The election over, the job of governance began immediately. Whilst new prime ministers claim they'll start work at once, the British do so.

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

Poet and policeman:
Art of Keki Daruwalla

Earlier this week, the Sahitya Akademi published a *House of Words-Festschrift: In Honour of Keki D. Daruwalla*, and organised a discussion on the poet, one of the most significant voices in Indian writing in English. I caught up with German mens "celebration writing". The many significant poets who attended the online conference spoke warmly about Keki, his poetry, his compassion, his openness, or "Keki's heart" as they called them and how he was always empathetic towards younger poets.

Keki and I were born in the same year in two countries that were once part of India. In Yangon and in Lahore, I worked with him in the same intelligence department since 1978, sometimes at different locations but always keeping in touch. He had joined earlier, after working as assistant superintendent of police in Uttar Pradesh from 1959 and a spell with the elite Special Service Bureau till 1965, between 1979 and 1980, he worked as the special assistant to then prime minister Charan Singh. In 1980-81, he was at Oxford University on study leave as a Queen Elizabeth II House Fellow. From then on, he was continuously with the Cabinet Secretariat, with a spell as senior diplomat, doing national intelligence work till he retired in 2005 as chairman, Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), which had the ultimate responsibility of integrating and interpreting strategic intelligence for the Cabinet. Post retirement, he was appointed as a member of the National Commission of Minorities from 2011 to 2014 when he had to undertake visits to different parts of the country to investigate cases of injustice against minorities. In between these heavy responsibilities, he wrote 17 books of poetry and fiction, many of which have been translated into Spanish, Swedish, Magyar (Hungarian), German and Russian.

How did a "multi-rather" police-intelligence man like Keki, now 87 years old, become a renowned poet at a young age? He won the Sahitya Akademi award for his collection of poems, *The Keeper of The Dead*, forty years ago. Another book of poems, *Landscapes*, won him the Commonwealth Poetry Award (Asia) in 1987. His first novel, *For Pepper and Christ*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Fiction Prize in 2010.

It is said that sometimes creative writers prove to be good intelligence officers since both need to observe, observe, imagine, and understand intelligence to find answers. One finds that in abundance in Keki's writings. In *Diagnosis with a Third Voice* (1970), he asks "How long must I scribble the books to be read ... lost in some vague, aesthetic future?" On rare occasions, the poet clashes with the policeman and professional analyst. Ravi-ram (1971) poem, describes the scene of police firing and concludes: "Depressed and weary we march back to the lines." Five decades later, in *Suavity and Fronds*, describing the tragic death of Father Shan Swamy in prison, he writes: "If you had no me, you would be left to fate no bull, more jail." In between his official work, Keki would take time off, go into isolation in his own house and produce these gems.

One of his ways to recharge his creative mind was by holding general murkies in his palm and gently shaking them!

Off his books, my favourite is *For Pepper and Christ* (2009), a fictional account of Vasco da Gama's voyage to new horizons. Imaginative, I was amazed at how he could describe the 16th-century Calicut (Kozhikode) with such precision. He told me that he used to do research for the book at the American University library in Calicut while he was visiting his younger daughter, Roshan. Let me conclude with an excerpt from his poem, *Map-Malar* (2002): "Perhaps I'll wake up on some alien shore in the shimmer of an aurora blinding, to find the sea tailing to itself and rummaging among the lines I've drawn looking for something, a vagrant perhaps, graced as a thorn tree in whose loving hands, those map lines of mine, some harbours, will wake and pulse and turn to shorelines, sand".

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Vappala Balachandran

A Biden-sized problem for the US Democrats

With the 2024 presidential election less than four months away, the Democrats now face a political schism. President Joe Biden's startlingly unforced debate performance against Donald Trump leaves party officials, and many of the Democrats' likeliest voters, calling for a change of the top of the ticket.

A few weeks ago, backing Biden was thought to be the Democrats' best hope. After all, it's not easy to beat a president seeking reelection. Since 1932, only Jimmy Carter, the elder George Bush, and Donald Trump have failed. A Biden retirement or a credible primary challenge seemed needlessly dangerous.

The decisions of Democrats Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson not to seek re-election powered Republicans Dwight Eisenhower (1952) and Richard Nixon (1968) respectively to victory. Senator Edward Kennedy's primary challenge in 1980 helped cripple Jimmy Carter's re-election campaign and move Ronald Reagan into the White House. It was much safer, most Democrats believed, to stick with Biden, a man who has already beaten Donald Trump once—and no Democrat who wants to be president one day wants to be the one to hobble an already vulnerable incumbent.

But growing worries about Biden's age—he is 81 now and would be 88 at the end of a second term—have become the central issue of the campaign, even as Trump faces scrutiny on felony fraud charges. (There's a good indicator of just how dysfunctional America's politics has become) Following Biden's debate debacle, the edi-

torial board of the *New York Times*, the centre-left establishment paper of record, urged the president to drop out, and recent polls signal that about half of Democratic Party voters agree.

Unless Biden decides to leave the race, the odds of replacing him are virtually zero. Over the course of Biden's sweep through the primary election season, he looked in the support of the delegates needed for his nomination at the party's August convention in Chicago. These delegates are pledged to back Biden unless he releases them. Even if the party could easily replace him, who would be the Democrats' new nominee? Poll after poll shows that Vice President Kamala Harris is no more popular than Biden, and pushing her aside for another contender risks alienating large numbers of women and minority voters.

In addition, other possible replacements—California Governor Gavin Newsom, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg and others—are untethered on the national stage. To understand how quickly an unproven candidate might founder, look no further than Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and his hotly anticipated and disastrous attempt to take down Trump in this year's Republican primary in Florida.

Biden has so far shown no indication that his plans are in doubt. He has publicly declared his intention to remain in the race. The public shows of support from former presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton demonstrate a determination to move forward. And the president might still beat Donald Trump. In America's



The decision on Biden's future rests with the president himself

hyper-polarised political environment, millions of people who tell pollsters that Biden is too old to serve a second term will still vote for him, if only to keep Donald Trump out of the White House. Both sides in this race believe the future of American democracy is at stake in this election, and voter turnout will likely be high for both parties.

But the bill Biden must climb will be made steeper in the coming weeks by the steady stream of anonymous Democratic officials warning in the media that Biden must go. At least until the party's convention, that problem will weigh on the president's ability to turn the page. Speculation that the Democrats might advance the date on which Biden is formally nominated will suggest he's packing, even if he isn't. All this happens at a time when the Biden campaign hoped to keep media attention on Trump's many liabilities.

For now, the Democratic Party is paralysed. Outing a sitting president would be an enormous political gamble, sticking with a stumbling incumbent might carry even more risk. Trump, meanwhile, has enjoyed a charmed few weeks of good

news. Almost all his legal headaches have been postponed until after the election. Sentencing has been delayed in his conviction in New York in the so-called hush money case. Recent Supreme Court rulings have lessened fears that Trump faces jail time and reminded conservative voters that Trump made the court more conservative and might do it again if he wins in November. The media is more focused now on Trump's choice of a vice-presidential running mate than on his own erratic behaviour.

The decision on Biden's future rests with the president himself, and it's impossible to know for sure what he'll do. For now, he appears intent on staying the course and trying to change the subject. But with each passing day, the pressure for a change at the top of the Democratic Party's presidential campaign is growing. An unprecedented environment for a uniquely dysfunctional United States presidential election.

Ian Bremmer is the founder and board president of Eurasia Group Foundation. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY LETTERS]

Guru Dutt's lasting imprint on cinema

This is with reference to "In Guru Dutt's life and art, frames of attachment" by Anurag Ganguly (July 7). Dutt's films reflect the disillusionment he found in the masses of a newly freed nation. His movies, especially *Pyaasa* and *Kagaz Ke Phool* are lessons in direction as well as acting.

Samuel Quadri

Raising the bar for Parliament

This is with reference to "A charter for Parliament to approve its functioning" by Karan Thapar (July 7). The ruling dispensation and the Opposition should enable the smooth functioning of Parliament. At risk is India's status as the mother of democracy.

M Gopinath

Address concerns of women voters

This is with reference to "Parties must fulfil poll promises to women" by Lalita Panicker (July 7). With women increasingly using the electoral process to voice their expectations, no party can afford to ignore their issues.

Sampada Srivastava

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM
 Minister, Panchayats
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There are many more questions. Which is the platform to ask the questions and receive answers? No one in the government has answered the questions so far, but the questions will not go away. Yet the laws that are most fundamental to the administration of criminal justice in the country have 'come into force' — an example of government by some people and for some people

AFTER debate that the Opposition boycotted in both Houses of Parliament (for good reasons), three Bills to replace (and re-enact) the Indian Penal Code, 1860, the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 were passed. The new Bills carried names in Hindi (or Sanskrit) even in the English versions of the Bills. The President gave her assent to the Bills and the government notified that the new laws will come into force on July 1, 2024.

There is stiff opposition to the new laws from many quarters. The government has dismissed the grounds of opposition as irrelevant and motivated. The government's ram-through approach has not deterred the opposition to the laws. On the contrary, two state governments have declared that they will bring certain amendments in the state legislatures concerned. Tamil Nadu has appointed a one-person committee to suggest the changes within a month. Karnataka and other state governments may adopt the same route. It is therefore necessary to place the facts and the issues before the public and ask the citizens to arrive at their own conclusions.

'Criminal law' is a subject in the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Both Parliament and state legislatures are competent to make laws on the subject. Undoubtedly, if a law made by Parliament and a law made by a state legislature are repugnant, Article 254 of the Constitution will be attracted. However,

that is an issue that will arise after the state legislature made a law, there was repugnancy, and the President did not give her assent to the law passed by the state legislature.

Meanwhile, the questions raised by those opposing the new laws must be heard and answered. Unfortunately, the central government has refused to answer in Parliament or outside. Here are the questions:

1. Is it correct that the bulk of the provisions of the three new laws have been 'copied and pasted' from the three laws that were replaced? Is it correct that 90-95 per cent of the IPC and the CrPc and 95-99 per cent of the Evidence Act have been retained in the new laws and every section re-numbered? If a few additions, deletions and changes were required in the existing laws, could the same outcome not have been achieved through amendments? Is not the claim that the government has thrown out the 'colonial legacy' a hollow claim?

2. If the intention was a thorough revision and overhaul of the criminal laws, why was the time-honoured practice to make a reference to the Law Commission not followed? Was not the Law Commission the most suitable body to consult all stakeholders and submit its recommendations, together with draft Bills, for the consideration of the government and Parliament? Why was the Law Commission by-passed and the task entrusted to a Committee that consisted of part-time members who, save one, were

employed as full-time professors in various Universities?

3. Are the new laws consistent with the modern principles of criminal jurisprudence? Have the new laws recognised and incorporated the progressive principles laid down by the Supreme Court in landmark judgments delivered in the last 10 years? Are several provisions of the new laws contrary to the Constitution of India as interpreted by the Supreme Court?

4. Why has the new law retained 'death penalty' that has been abolished in many democratic countries? Why has the cruel and dehumanising punishment of 'solitary confinement' been introduced? Why has the offence of 'adultery' been brought back into the criminal law? Was it necessary to retain 'defamation' as a criminal offence? Was it not necessary to stipulate a period of limitation to lodge a criminal complaint of 'defamation'? Why is same-sex relationship without the consent of the other person no longer an offence? Was it not necessary to define the punishment of 'community service' or, at least, give illustrations of community service?

5. Why has the offence of 'sedition' been enlarged and retained? Why has the offence of 'terrorism' been brought into the general criminal law when there is a special Act called Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act? Why have 'electoral offences' been included in the new law when there are special laws called Representation of the People Act, 1950

and Representation of the People Act, 1951?

6. Have the new laws given greater latitude to the police to arrest a person and seek the person's police custody? Have the new laws ignored the dictum of the Supreme Court that the power to arrest does not mean the necessity to arrest? Was it not necessary to explicitly provide in the law that 'bail is the rule, jail is the exception'? Was it not necessary to oblige a Magistrate to examine the legality of the arrest and the need to arrest? Do the provisions for bail effectively require the Magistrate to deny bail for 40-60 days after the arrest?

7. Is the provision that enables an FIR to be registered in any police station of the country, irrespective of the place of the offence, constitutional? Is the provision that empowers the police of that State to arrest the accused and investigate the offence unconstitutional in view of 'Police' being a subject in the State List? Are the said provisions contrary to the principle of 'federalism' which is a basic feature of the Constitution?

There are many more questions. Which is the platform to ask the questions and receive answers? No one in the government has answered the questions so far, but the questions will not go away. Yet the laws that are most fundamental to the administration of criminal justice in the country have 'come into force' — an example of government by some people and for some people.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH
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Why did Modi go to Russia?

IT DID NOT look good for the Prime Minister. Or for India. There he was smiling and hugging Vladimir Putin on the day that the Russian dictator bombed a children's hospital in Israel. Then came more moments of bonhomie and friendship as they travelled together in a golf cart and spent the evening in the dictator's dacha. The next day Modi himself seemed to realise that a mistake had been made and of the absurdity of how it broke his heart when children were killed in times of war. Then his spin doctors got into the act and leaked stories to the Indian media about how our Prime Minister had once more told Putin that the way forward was through diplomacy and dialogue and not on the battlefield. But the damage had been done.

I spent some time last week trying to get an American view on Modi's visit and failed. I need not have bothered. The Indian ambassador in Delhi said it all. He warned that Modi's visit was a 'strategic autonomy' in times of conflict and warned that friendship between two countries was better than ever before but should not be taken for granted. "The more we insist on a kind of cynical calculation in the place of a trusted relationship the less we will get..."

In fairness to Modi, he has worked harder to bring us out of the clutches of the Russians than any other Indian prime minister. He has also brought us closer to the United States but in a country in which generations have been brought up on anti-Americanism more must be done, which is why this visit to Russia was a bad idea. We need the Russians for more reasons than can be listed here and cheap Russian oil has been most useful but was there really any need for the Prime Minister to accept Russia's highest civilian award at a time when Putin is, without question, the most hated dictator in the world?

What Putin has done in Ukraine is the equivalent of China's invasion of Arunachal Pradesh or Ladakh. And why would this not happen in the future? China has made clear more than once that it does not consider Arunachal to be a part of India and has often objected officially to Indian prime ministers visiting the state. So, what is to stop Xi Jinping from turning his attention to Arunachal when he is done with Taiwan? If this happens, will Putin be on our side or on the side of China? Before he invaded Ukraine, he had that very public meeting with the Chinese President in which they declared that they were best friends forever.

For me personally, as I have said before in this column, there are no two sides to the invasion of Ukraine. It had every right to want to be a democratic country like all that is all that is in the world when the Russian dictator decided that democracy was too dangerous to be allowed to flourish so close to his own totalitarian country. Putin is in every sense a vile dictator. He publicly kills opposition leaders in his own country and in foreign countries. Or torturing them to death in jail cells as happened so tragically with Alexei Navalny. Putin jails journalists on flimsy charges and refuses them a fair trial. It might be in India's national interest to work with Putin but it is not in our best interests that it seemed on this visit?

There are other things that the men who handle India's foreign policy need to keep in mind. The world order is going through a transformation in which there is now an open clash of interests between democracies and totalitarian countries. In the totalitarian camp, led by China, there are countries like Iran and North Korea who have no time for such things as human rights and freedom. In the other camp, led by the United States, are democratic countries whose foundational values are liberty, equality and freedom.

They have come together to openly condemn Putin's invasion of Ukraine and to help that country survive this horrible war and become a full democracy. India has so far refused to take sides because of our old friendship with Russia and because in the India in which I grew up, to be on the American side was to risk being called a CIA agent. Of course, to be called a KGB agent was a badge of honour.

The bureaucrats who surround Modi grew up in that same milieu and appear to still believe that the United States can never ever be India's trusted friend. Why they believe that Russia is our forever friend is truly a puzzle. Putin is so dependent on China now that he is virtually forced to kowtow to Xi Jinping. China is without doubt the biggest threat to India's security so how is this relationship going to work going forward?

The irony is that to the average young Indian, it is the United States that is that shining city on a hill. It is to American universities they long to go and it is in the United States that they seek to build their lives when they do not find them opportunities and jobs. This is something that the Prime Minister needs to keep in mind before going down that broken diplomatic path laid down by the Congress Party.

inside TRACK

COOMIKAPOOR



INCOMPLETE REUNION

THE TASK force of 40 BJP UP members has come up with predictable reasons for the party's setback in the state in the recent Lok Sabha polls — from party infighting to caste equations and non-cooperation of government employees. UP CM Yogi Adityanath transferred 12 MPs immediately after the report, since the committee's inference was that he did not exercise sufficient control over government employees.

But the genesis of the UP defeat needs more introspection. The investigation should have started with the BJP's central election committee meeting on February 29, when the names of some 50 of the 80 UP seats were cleared. The committee members, including Adityanath, waited for over two hours since Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and J P Nadda first met informally at Lok Kalyan Marg where a short list of 50 BJP Lok Sabha candidates was drawn up. At the official meeting, general secretary (organisation) B L Santhosh read out the names and few interjections. The common refrain was "whatever the party thinks appropriate". The names from UP were cleared in barely 20 minutes and some 65% were sitting MPs, since the party seemed confident that UP's formidable 'double engine ki sarkar' would ensure their victory. Adityanath's reported suggestion to change the names of 35 sitting MPs was ignored. Eventually, 27 BJP incumbents lost the polls.

Incidentally, the BJP won all the Lok Sabha seats around Gorakhpur, Adityanath's stronghold but lost in parliamentary seats around Varanasi, the PM's constituency. Varanasi and Lucknow were the only two constituencies the task force did not visit. If they had travelled to Varanasi, they would have discovered the considerable resentment over contracts for major projects in and around the city being awarded not to local UP contractors, but to those from western India. Indicative of divisions in the UP BJP was the fact that Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya remained mostly in Delhi for almost a month after the election results.

UNPRECEDENTED SEATING

At the swearing-in of the Modi 3.0 cabinet last month, the Rashtrapati Bhavan staff and Delhi police were swamped by two

many important people flashing invitation cards and demanding premier seating. In the bargain, the carefully drawn up warrant of precedent was thrown to the wind. The most glaring breach of protocol was when Ministers Mulesh Ambani and Gautam Adani ending up in the second row with Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan. A group of sadhus was in the front row, while J&K Governor Manoj Sinha, Adityanath and Chief Minister of North-East, Meghalaya, were seated in the third row. The biggest faux pas was that CDS General Anil Chauhan and outgoing Army chief General Manoj Pandey were seated in the sixth row. Security personnel cannot alone be blamed, the President's Military Secretary and her ADCs should have earmarked seats for the respective chiefs of the Armed Forces.

MUMBAI ROYALS

Even the British royal family, who have witnessed their marital ceremonies with pomp and circumstance, and much public interest for centuries, could perhaps learn a lesson from the Ambanis' social media in attracting the maximum eyeballs on family in India. The family's army of event managers has organised parties for the last few years in exotic locations — from an elephant rescue farm and a zoo in Jamnagar to a swinging jet-setting cruise through Italy to celebrate the marriage of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant. They even hijacked the Indian team's success at the World Cup to stage a celebration at the Ambani Centre in BKC, Mumbai. Nita Ambani, glittering in diamonds, and her equally dressed up wedding guests, felicitated cricket heroes Rohit Sharma, Hardik Patel and Suryakumar Yadav, who have all played for the Mumbai Indians. In India, looking a tad embarrassed, were trotted out in party attire in similar dark coloured sequined outfits.

ENSURING ITS 10%

Opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge is skating on thin ice. The Congress strength in the Upper House has fallen to 26 seats after two Rajya Sabha MPs, Deepender Hooda from Haryana and K Venugopal from Rajasthan, were elected to the Lok Sabha in the recent poll. The Congress needs representation by at least 10% of the total MPs in the Upper House, whose present strength is around 250, if its nominee is to be recognised as the official leader of the Opposition. In a bid to help Congress secure the position, K Keshava Rao of the IRS recently declined to the party. With the Congress in the majority in the Telangana Assembly, the party's RS nominee will automatically win by-election. If 85-year-old Rao agrees to step aside, jurist Abhishek Manu Singhvi is waiting eagerly for a Rajya Sabha re-entry.

History HEADLINE

ABHINAV SEKHRI



THE UNEXPURGATED edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D H Lawrence might well hold the distinction of having spurred reforms around obscenity laws around the globe. In India, it was the subject of the Supreme Court's first judgment on whether obscenity came within the contours of the "decency or morality" restriction to the fundamental freedom of speech.

My concern here is not the Supreme Court's 1964 judgment in *Ranjit D Udeshi v State of Maharashtra*, or the finer points in the 1969 amendments to Section 292 of the now-repealed IPC (retained in Section 295A of the CrPc). Rather, it is the story of the "prosecution" of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in India that features bogus purchasers to trap booksellers, literature-review style judicial orders and decisive interventions by PM Jawaharlal Nehru himself.

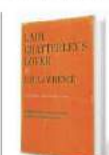
With a note dated October 24, 1959, R N Misra forwarded two copies of the unpurgated editions "available at several bookshops... in Connaught Circus" to a colleague at the Directorate of Inspection, Customs. The colleague replied that their department "should urgently" consult the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), a part of conventions on placing import bans on books or pamphlets.

There was a ban in place already since 1943, but the Customs Department still referred the matter to the Home Ministry. Not because of monumental changes in Indian law during the interregnum, but because courts in the US had ruled in favour of *Chatterley*. Since the Constitution found no mention in the dismissive notes by the MHA Undersecretary either who, with executive powers, passed the file on to the Law Ministry on November 17, 1959.

It landed on the desk of Deputy Law Adviser D B Kulkarni, who issued a six-page memo on March 18, 1960, concluding that the book was obscene, a view "in consonance with our heritage, traditions, and the prevailing standards of our civilisation". The note was approved by the Law Secretary and the file reached Deputy Minister R M Hajamavis who, in a memo dated April 7, 1960, dissenting note. He referred to K J Karanjia, UK law and Penguin Books' victory in its trial for publishing *Chatterley* in November 1959, but not the Constitution. Since the Law Minister was away, he sent the papers to PM Nehru.

This was Nehru's second high-stakes intervention in a year to decide the fate of a controversial novel for Indian readers, the first being Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*.

Of laws new and old, and the debate over obscenity



The 1959 unpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Wikipedia

first being Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, 1960, says, "I am clear that this book *Lady Chatterley's Lover* should be banned. In case our order is challenged in a court of law, the matter can be faced." He was probably aware that a court would soon decide whether the unpurgated *Chatterley* was obscene.

On December 12, 1959, bogus customers with marked money were sent by Bombay Police CID to 'Causeway Book Stall' and 'Happy Book Stall' with instructions to purchase copies of the unpurgated *Chatterley*. Once buyers struck the deal, the police stormed the shops and seized the novels. Those on the spot, and the distributor, were arrested. After the raid, seven persons were sent for trial in April, 1960. At some point, the seven leaders of the Bombay Police, who exhibited 35 passages flagged as obscene as evidence, while the defence sought to demonstrate the book's literary merit by calling upon celebrity witnesses like screenwriter K A Abbas and author Mulk Raj Anand. On May 31, 1961, the court pronounced the four accused guilty.

The judgment was far from a ringing endorsement of the antiquated Hicklin test, which the prosecution built its case upon, under which merely flagging certain passages as having a "tendency" to corrupt the vulnerable in the society could spell doom for a book. Rather, what was obscene was the overall theme of *Chatterley*, which venerated adultery and "struck" at the very roots of the institution of "marriage", and was in "direct conflict with the ideals of Indian civilisation, which are based on devotion, love and sacrifice". Its impact on society would be devastating, and to think that this book was there at a "modest little book stall at Colaba Causeway" simply would not do.

Though the Magistrate imposed a token

fine of Rs 20 on the convicts, they filed a review plea before the Bombay HC. On February 6, 1962, a Division Bench dismissed the plea, taking a very different view of the law. It doubled down on the Hicklin formulation, using it to distinguish Indian law from the progressive verdicts recently delivered in the US, where bans on *Chatterley* had been lifted. While this meant that the HC was satisfied with obscene passages and did not deal much with the book's theme to conclude that it was obscene, it did join the issue with the Magistrate about who the unpurgated *Chatterley* might mislead Indian women.

The Supreme Court's 1964 judgment in *Udeshi's* appeal, one of the convicted priorors of Happy Book Stall, was perhaps the only time that the constitutional issues posed by *Chatterley's* censorship appear at the forefront in this story. By assailing the constitutional validity of Section 292 IPC, the case reached the Supreme Court's Constitution Bench. *Udeshi* contended that while the penal provision may be a valid restriction on the freedom of speech, its application using the Hicklin approach took it outside the scope of permissible limits upon speech. Justice Hidayatullah disagreed and one may read scholarly works to grasp the legal nuances of his interesting verdict.

Writing about Penguin's trial for publishing the unpurgated *Chatterley*, Thomas Gray has shown how the case made a difference. That Penguin itself courted prosecution was crucial. Unlike cases where booksellers were successfully prosecuted before magistrates, its case was tried by a jury of 12 ordinary people who Raj Anand had convinced that the book was without literary merit.

One cannot help but draw a parallel with the Indian experience, which is a tale about vesting censorship powers in the hands of a few. Everyone deciding that *Chatterley* remains off the shelves did so by making arbitrary value judgments on behalf of ordinary readers and gave differing and remarkably paradoxical reasons to support their views. Perhaps, consulting the ordinary reader or purveyor of such works might have provided surer insight of whether the law was pursuing a legitimate goal, or whether, in the words of Dickens, the law was being "an ass".

Abhinav Sekhri is a lawyer practising in Delhi. The article is based on research done for a paper available on SSRN

On the LOOSE

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LAST YEAR, an 80-year-old enthusiastically participated in the Tata Mumbai Marathon. Clad in a sari and sneakers, octogenarian Bharti Jitendra Pathak ran the 7km, covering 4.2 km in 51 minutes. Pathak may be an aberration among Indian women, but Instagram is full of admirable gossams posting their videos lifting kettlebells and doing push-ups. The somewhat aggravating term, "ageing gracefully", has evolved from meaning sinking quietly into oblivion to making the most of life by living well. It isn't about trying to look 25 but, like that proverbial bottle of fine wine, to get better at doing things as you age. How old is too old to do

The question of age

something? Who decides? It's a pertinent question because the world's focus is on the upcoming US elections, where both candidates seem ravaged by wrinkle.

If the aim is for the top job on earth, sure, the standards are different. Optics matter. A frail 80-something in a youth-obsessed society isn't particularly inspiring. However, seen another way, everyone is ageing and ageing gracefully has important lessons to impart. When you're a child, each year that passes feels exciting because of the looming prospect of adulthood, which, for dreamy young minds, translates to romantic visions of independence and freedom. As it's another matter altogether that reaching middle age evokes severe nostalgia for childhood, which one realises in retrospect is the only time one is actually free,

Having said that, from the point of view of the slightly less agonising 40s, youth is overrated. Parents rule, you have no say in many things. The teen years are ridden with panicky insecurities, perhaps a necessary rite of passage to figuring out one's path ahead. The 20s are generally about work-hard, play-hard and fly-by in a whirl of activity. By one's late 30s, some sense of inner calm and steady state, whatever the journey, one philosophically accepts, life goes on.

So, reading all the scathing pieces about US President Joe Biden stubbornly digging his heels in, his state of mind seems perfectly clear — he's mining the greatest benefit of old age, that you simply don't care about what other people think you should do. So much of our lives are spent wrapped up in responsibilities and

in meeting the expectations of others. If there's one thing to recommend old age, it's this — that all forms of validation cease to matter. For many, reaching this headspace is especially liberating because the dominant discourse is that our value declines as we age. We're inundated with images of perfectly crafted and remade bodies, so much so it's often difficult to tell what anyone of any age is supposed to look like any more. It's a binary choice, hanging on to youthfulness by the many surgical means possible (and, thereby, risking being a joke) or being written off for not caring enough to do anything about gravitational forces.

On the *What We* podcast that decodes fashion and style, the svelte and shapely 50-year-old influencer Gabrielle Union-Wade talked about the un-

savory comments she received for posting photos of herself in a bikini. It doesn't cost to have an opinion, so there's no dearth of people sermonising arbitrarily on the alleged age cut-off for a certain kind of swimsuit and mini skirt. Union-Wade's tart response was that she might just don a bikini in her coffin. Dealing with spite, too, gets easier with age. The understanding deepens that we're here to enjoy ourselves not pander to becoming what the culture says we should be. It's easier to develop a low view of events. Finally, you can pursue interests without thinking about competition and the pressure of needing to excel, that plagues our youth. Life isn't over till it's over, and it's long, with many opportunities for do-overs.

The writer is director, Huklay Films

"Do not dwell in the past,
do not dream of the
future, concentrate the
mind on the present
moment"
— Buddha



DEHRADUN MOURNING THE LOST SIGHTS

The once lush and serene Dehradun has undergone drastic changes with rapid urbanisation, changing the appearance and characteristics of the city. As high-rise buildings replace traditional housing, the environment and lifestyle here have undergone change, which may have brought profit for some, but long-term benefit for none, write **SIDHARTH MISHRA** and **PARITOSH KIMOTHI**

"Dehra Dehra Dun, Dehra Dehra Dun"

Many roads can take you there, many different ways
One direction takes you years, another takes you days
Dehra Dehra Dun...
Many people on the roads looking at the sights
Many others with their troubles looking for their rights
Dehra Dehra Dun...
See them move along the road in search of life divine
...beggars in a goldmine
Dehra Dehra Dun...
Many roads can take you there, many different ways
One direction takes you years, another takes you days
Dehra Dehra Dun..." - Beatles

The legendary members of band Beatles stayed at the ashram of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh in the spring 1968. The old timers recall that during their stay in Rishikesh, the Beatles came to Dehradun on two occasions. Something struck them about the beautiful town and they went onto to compose the extremely hummable song.

Almost five decades later, this song has become the hymn to mourn the demise and death of the much loved Dehra of Doon. Dehradun was once an idyllic city with colonial bungalows surrounded by sprawling gardens. There were three arterial roads, one going to Mussoorie, the other to Chakrata and the third to Haridwar. All the three roads merged at Clock Tower, from where a fourth road took you inside the legendary Paltan Bazaar.

On the Chakrata side you had the sprawling paddy fields, home to the famed Dehraduni basmati rice. The other two roads had the forests and the fruit orchards. Rajpur Road, the one which went to Mussoorie, had the bakeries and the bookshops. No wonder, Beatles said, "Many roads can take you there, many different ways. One direction takes you years, another takes you days".

Two decades later in the year 2000, the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh became a separate state called Uttarakhand (later rechristened as Uttarakhand) with Dehradun as the temporary Capital. Quarter of a century later, Dehradun continues to be the seat of the government losing its gloss on a daily basis in the dust and pollution kicked by 'development'. Rapid urbanisation and large scale constructions have changed the very character of the city. In recent years multi-storeyed buildings have become a sight as common as the homes with expansive gardens were once. Large orchards and homes with greens have been demolished to build high rise apartments, commercial complexes and malls.

Does Dehradun, capital of a state which is seeing a large exodus of its population in search of employment



Photos: Mangesh Kumar/Pioneer

elsewhere, need multi-storeyed buildings. Multi-storeyed buildings first came up in India in Mumbai mainly to accommodate the flocks which arrived looking for jobs. Industrial and commercial activities attracted a large workforce of people. Chawls (labour colonies) were initially constructed and they were followed by the construction of flats to provide housing for the people who came to work in the nation's commercial capital. Similarly, multi-storeyed buildings were constructed in Delhi, Noida, Gurugram and Ghaziabad to provide housing for the growing working force which settled in these locations.

However, Dehradun city has insignificant employment generation comparable to these cities. Yet the sprawling gardens and the lychee orchards the city was once famous for have been cut to build multi-storeyed buildings. In many cases, units in apartments and townships remain vacant as the owners are residents of Delhi-NCR, who have bought the property to spend the winter in Doon to get away from pollution. Some may view this as a sign of development but there are many who disagree.

Anoop Nautiyal, the founder of Social Development for Communities (SDC) Foundation says, "There is a design in facilitation of such unplanned urbanisation. Though the draft master plan 2041 prepared by the Mussoorie

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RAPID URBANISATION
AND LARGE SCALE
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COMMERCIAL
COMPLEXES AND MALLS
”

Dehradun Development Authority (MDDA) mentions the seismic fault lines passing through this region, the construction activities here display a sense of bravado and a cavalier attitude."

The draft master plan recommended no development activities within 50 metres from the centre of the fault lines. The plan marks 35 fault lines, including three major ones - the Main Boundary Thrust (MBT), the Himalayan Frontal Fault (HFF) and the Main Central Thrust (MTC) that pass through the Doon Valley. Dehradun city is located in seismic zone IV which is a high risk zone of earthquake occurrence. This notification was brought to preserve the unique and sensitive nature of the Doon Valley and to save Dehradun and Mussoorie from indiscriminate limestone quarrying. Social activist Reenu Paul mentions, "The Doon Valley Notification prevented construction of high rise buildings in the northern part of the valley and regulated other activities in the region. Diluting the

notification constructions has been carried out doing irreparable environmental damage in the valley." She adds, "The foothill policy too is being violated as hills are being cut for constructions which has led to considerable rise in the frequency of landslides." Paul also expressed concern at the damage caused to the Shivalik range for the construction of the much-touted Delhi-Dehradun expressway. Thus the Dehradun-Mussoorie Road which was once lush and peaceful is now dotted by scores of apartments, commercial buildings and shopping malls. Such areas which were once serene are now crowded by people and vehicular traffic from neighbouring states with noise replacing the sounds of the wind and birds which were once the character of such sites. The building construction bye-laws have provisions like prohibition of any development on sites prone to landslides and which have a local gradient of more than 30 degrees. Such regulations have not

always been enforced as there are many ways to circumvent it. The emergence of apartment complexes has also altered the culture and lifestyle of the city which was once known for its sedated pace of life. The rampant concretisation and infrastructural construction at the cost of the green cover has affected the local environment drastically. A city where even ceiling fans were not common till a few decades ago experienced a record breaking maximum temperature of 43 degrees Celsius this summer.

The multi-storeyed buildings have brought with them a different lifestyle which counts air conditioners, luxury vehicles and SUVs along with recreation dependant on commercial establishments as its essential part. A number of large malls have come up in different parts of the city along with shops selling branded products in various localities.

The suburban areas which were once much more tranquil than the city are now bustling with crowds and noise as newer constructions continue to emerge to occupy what were once large open spaces. In recent times, concerned citizens and public groups have staged protests against the cutting of trees, which the government counters saying that it is for maintaining a balance between the ecology and economy.

"This is misconstrued concept of development. Constructions in Dehradun have brought no benefit to the people of Uttarakhand. A few who had land sold it and left, the builders benefited and those who passed their plans took a share in the profit, completely destroying the character of the city," says Rakesh Tyagi, an NRI entrepreneur with home base in Dehradun.

Mourning development, Bhumi Chandra, who returned to Doon last year to escape pollution of Delhi-NCR, says, "Liquor shops are more frequent to cross by then chemist shops or other essentials. And the jams and traffic, construction, pollution, change in the eco system and weather is so visible. I guess I had the harshest summer in the last 25 years...this time." Seeing Dehradun today, Beatles would have changed lines to say, "Many people on the roads mourning at the lost sights."

(Sidharth Mishra is author & a Doon lover, PARITOSH KIMOTHI is associate editor, The Pioneer, Dehradun Edition)



CHEFS GO DOWN CULINARY LANE TO RELIVE THE JOY OF CHILDHOOD DISHES

SHARMILA CHAND gets on a discovery trail of the heartwarming childhood dishes chefs remember fondly.....

The taste of their home food lingers. It triggers wistful memories. Chefs share how they have recreated these memories, into their signature dishes. Till date every dish they cook is infused with personal experience and a lifetime of memories.

To relive the joy of their home food, let's hear from them as they share some of their heartwarming memories associated with their mother's cooking.

NAWANSHAR KATIRA PHIRNI

BY CHEF GAGAN SIKKA
Chef In-Charge, Loya
Taj Palace, New Delhi



"Nawanshar Katira Phirni, a unique dessert draws inspiration from two of my favorite childhood treats. The first is a beloved family recipe passed down from my grandmothers and mother - a refreshing Custard Phirni that they would often make at home for visiting guests that combined the comforting essence of traditional phirni with a delightful twist of custard, a nod to classic English sweets. My mother would use custard powder and rice and create a luscious blend of instant custard and creamy phirni. Even today, she occasionally makes this nostalgic treat,

transporting us back to those cherished moments. The second inspiration comes from my childhood street-side favorite from Amritsar - the hearty and indulgent Kulfa. Known for its rich, creamy kulfi and silky falooda, this dessert has always held a special place in my heart. In my rendition at Loya, I've created what we call the Nawanshar Katira Phirni. I've replaced the traditional rice with Gond Katira, an ingredient that's currently trending for its incredible cooling properties and unique texture. Gond Katira not only adds a distinctive mouthfeel but also offers health benefits like

boosting immunity, aiding digestion, and promoting healthy skin. And to make the dessert truly unique, I've added a house-churned Gulab Jamun ice cream, drawing inspiration from the Kulfa's sumptuous kulfi and falooda. The dessert is completed with a dollop of Gond Katira, adding a final touch of texture and complexity. This reimaged dessert - the Nawanshar Katira Phirni that echoes all the lovely memories of my favourite Custard Phirni and Kulfa, is not just a treat for the taste buds but a sensory journey through cherished memories and innovative flavours."



BHATT KI CHURKANI

BY HITESH PANT
Executive Chef
Sheraton Grand Bengaluru Whitefield Hotel
& Convention Center

"My culinary journey blossomed from the heartfelt memories woven around my mother's & aunt's (Maasi's) Bhatt Ki Churkani recipe. This cherished delicacy embodies more than just a flavor; it represents a profound connection to my childhood and the love that filled our kitchen during gatherings with friends and relatives. Each time I watched my mother or my Maasi (aunt) meticulously craft this culinary delight, I absorbed more than just the technique. I absorbed the essence of their nurturing spirit and the joy they found in creating something delicious from simple ingredients. Those moments ignited a passion within me, guiding me towards a career where I could share the warmth and comfort of home-cooked meals with others. Bhatt Ki Churkani is a delicious and nutritious lentil dish (Dal) that



originates from the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. It is made with black soybeans also known as Bhatt, which are a rich source of protein, fiber and vitamins and all-time favorite among locals and tourists alike. Bhatt Ki Churkani is a cherished cultural heritage Dal (served with hot rice) of the Kumaon region, representing their traditions and culinary expertise." Today, as I create dishes in my own kitchen, I pay homage to my mother's legacy, infusing every bite with the same love and care that inspired me to pursue my dreams as a chef. Thank you motherhood for your warmth and nourishment you've always provided, both in kitchen and in life - I am forever grateful to call you my mom!

"Bhatt Ki Churkani" is often served in our all-day dining restaurant, Feast during buffet meals & brunches, each bite of which is a heartfelt tribute to my mother's enduring presence and love."

THAI CRAB OMELETTE

BY CHEF RUNGTIWA SORLAE
Thai Cuisine Specialty Chef, InAsia
Sheraton Grand Bengaluru Whitefield Hotel & Convention Center



"My journey through South Thailand immersed me in the vibrant flavors of Thai cuisine. Inspired by my mother's recipes, I perfected the Thai Crab Omelette - a cultural delight now also on our menu and a hot star, I must say. Be it lunch or dinner, my diners ask me to prepare Thai Omelette which I prepare from my heart. Infused with authentic Thai seasonings and crafted with Sheraton Bengaluru Whitefield's finesse, this dish promises a symphony of textures and flavors,



whether made with fresh crab or umami-rich canned varieties. Quick to prepare in just 90 seconds, it combines sautéed crab meat, onions, tomato, and bell pepper with whisked eggs, creating a crispy yet fluffy omelette that embodies my promise & dedication to global culinary excellence. My mother's cherished recipe continues to influence me to create delicious and memorable recipes."

MOTHER'S BANANA CREPES

BY CHEF SAJID PATEL
Executive Chef
Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway



"It is the act of incorporating the emotions of childhood innocence and nostalgia with a spin of modern culinary infusion is what I try to serve my guests. I was in the years of notorious nine and bananas used to be one of my primary foods of distaste. There was something about their yellow peeled, mushy texture that was enough to crumple up my face in disfavor. Until I remember what it was a summer Sunday afternoon and I had just come home from my weekly cricket practice, thirsting for something sweet, like every other naive kid I went in search of my mother who I knew was the only one at that hour who could quench my sweet tooth with yet another of her simple yet ever comforting innovations just like she did that day. With three ingredients that sound ever so simple she played something in front of me that I till date can deem as my soul food and I know I always will further on. She picked up three ripe bananas from the counter and cut them into slices, heated some homemade ghee and added sugar to it to gather a glaze like consistency and went on to add the slices of bananas to have it braised in the glaze, once done



she procured a day old wheat parantha from the casseroles and wrapped the ombre braised bananas in it. She cut it into triangles for me and as I recall that savory afternoon and the child inside me finds solace in the sheer flavours of sweet something out of nothing and innocence. Having given you the background, I have aspired always to give my guests the similar taste of nostalgia and innocence that we carry from our boyhood days. My spin on the rendition of bananas that my mother made me fall in love with would be nothing too different but just a spin on the French dessert, Crepes."



THAP TAWAN SMOKED FISH

BY CHEF ANIL RAWAT
Executive Chef
Le Méridien Khao Lak Resort & Spa
Khao Lak, Thailand



"I am working in Thailand since 2006 and I miss my home food of Uttarakhand a lot. My mother used to cook for us a great BBQ fish which was regularly caught by my maternal grandfather. It was cooked in the house in small clay stove - chulha and I used to watch it with utmost concentration. My mother used several local spices of Garhwali hills to finish the marination including turmeric, cumin, salt, lemon, garam masala, mustard oil, garlic and coriander. I used to love mint chutney which she prepared on sil batta and served along with it. So I have tried to take inspiration from there and serve "Thap Tawan Smoked Fish" in my menu. Thap Tawan is local fisherman village here. We receive fresh

fish on daily basis. I clean and marinate for few hours, then put in slow fire with wood, cook for 20 minutes - squeeze fresh lemon on top and serve hot with mint chutney. I am extremely happy to carry on my home recipe here and get compliments."



DAL MORADABADI

BY CHEF MANISH MEHROTRA
Culinary Director - Indian Accent

"Lentils are a staple of Indian cuisine, and in no other country are they used in so many ways to make such a variety of dishes - stews, fritters, salads, snacks and this chaat. Made with the humble split moong dal, often derided as diet for the sick or elderly, this famous chaat from Moradabad, a small town in northern India, is a favourite of mine. My mother hails from Moradabad, and when we visited my maternal grandparents during vacations, we looked forward to eating Dal Moradabadi, made in our kitchen as well as we excited to have it from the chaat-wala ringing his cycle-bell to announce his arrival on our street. At Indian Accent, I take pride in offering my own version as I temper the boiled dal with a variety of ingredients. Since the dish is thick and pasty, it is accompanied with a chur chur paratha."

INGREDIENTS

- Split moong dal 3 tsp
- Turmeric powder ½ tsp
- Ghee 1 tbsp
- Cumin seeds ½ tsp
- Asafoetida ½ tsp
- Ginger, chopped 1 tsp
- Green chillies, chopped ½ tsp
- Salted butter 1 tsp
- Coriander leaves, chopped 1 tsp
- Cloves 2-3 nos.
- Black salt ½ tsp
- Salt to taste
- Water 300 ml

TO SERVE

- Tamarind chutney 2 tsp
- Green chutney 1 tsp
- Onions, chopped 2 tsp
- Tomatoes, chopped 2 tsp
- Lime juice ½ tsp
- Fried moong dal or chana chut, dal mochi, 1 tbsp or Bombay mix (as garnish)
- Bhuknu masala ½ tsp



METHOD

Clean and thoroughly wash the dal. Soak for at least 1 hour. Boil the soaked dal with turmeric powder in a heavy bottom pan till it is pasty. As the dal boils, stir continuously to avoid it sticking to the bottom of the pan.

Heat ghee in a heavy bottom pan. Crackle some cumin seeds. Add asafoetida. Add chopped ginger and green chillies. Sauté briefly, add cloves, black salt and salt, and then add this tempering to the dal. Cover the pan immediately so that the dal is infused with the tempering. Add butter and chopped coriander. Pour the hot dal into a serving bowl. Drizzle some tamarind and green chutneys over it. Sprinkle chopped onions and tomatoes. Add a dash of lime juice. Garnish with fried moong dal, chana chut, dal mochi, or Bombay mix. Finish with bhuknu masala. A specialty from Unnao in Uttar Pradesh, this is a type of chaat masala with a strong flavour of hing. Bhuknu masala can be substituted with regular chaat masala.

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

NO MONKEY BUSINESS THIS!

Whether you're a food enthusiast, a nightlife aficionado, or simply someone looking for a unique dining experience, Monkey Bar promises an unforgettable adventure. Join **GYANESHWAR DAYAL** as he explores this happening night out

In the heart of Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, lies a vibrant and eclectic haven that beckons to the city's cosmopolitan crowd-Monkey Bar. This charming gastropub effortlessly combines quirky aesthetics with a menu brimming with innovative culinary delights, making it a must-visit destination for both food enthusiasts and nightlife aficionados.

The sky is cast over and my heart is filled with anticipation. As I step into Monkey Bar, I am immediately enveloped in an ambience that's both playful and inviting. The decor is interesting and awe-inspiring at the same time. There are no boring brick walls or a roof for that matter; it is a glass pyramid. And so, you are going to spend your evening in a pyramid with a lot of funky music and very hospitable staff. Monkey Bar is a brainchild of Chetan Rampal and Chef Manu Chandra. They are the owners of the popular gastropub Monkey



Bar. The two met at the Olive Bar & Kitchen in Mumbai and opened their first Monkey Bar in Bengaluru in 2012, and thereafter never looked back, going on to open it in other metropolitan cities.

Coming to the interior, the large glass panes allow natural light to flood in during the day, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. By night, the space transforms with dim lighting and an energetic vibe, perfect for those looking to unwind after a long day. The interior is a visual treat with colorful murals and an eclectic mix of furniture; it is a perfect setting for the night. The bar area, with its well-stocked shelves, is a focal point,



drawing patrons for both its visual appeal and the promise of expertly crafted cocktails. As a teetotaler, I am, of course, not qualified to comment on the cocktails served, but happy faces around me suggest they are next level. My friends tell me that the bartenders here are true mixologists, crafting drinks that are both visually stunning and tantalizing to the taste buds. I guess they

are right. Monkey Bar has its own signature cocktails-Jalapeno Lassi, VV Corner, Rasam TEQ, and, of course, Down and Dirty. The names are as funky as they could be. My cocktail is surely something I can talk about and recommend. My mojito (without alcohol), called a 'nojitto', has a coconut flavor to it and is refreshing as well. Cozy nooks and communal

tables cater to both intimate gatherings and larger groups, ensuring that everyone feels at home. We have a party going, so the tables are joined, and the best thing about it is that the food is served. Starters are both veg and non-veg. Monkey Bar's menu is a celebration of creativity and flavour, offering a diverse range of dishes that cater to varied palates. The kitchen is

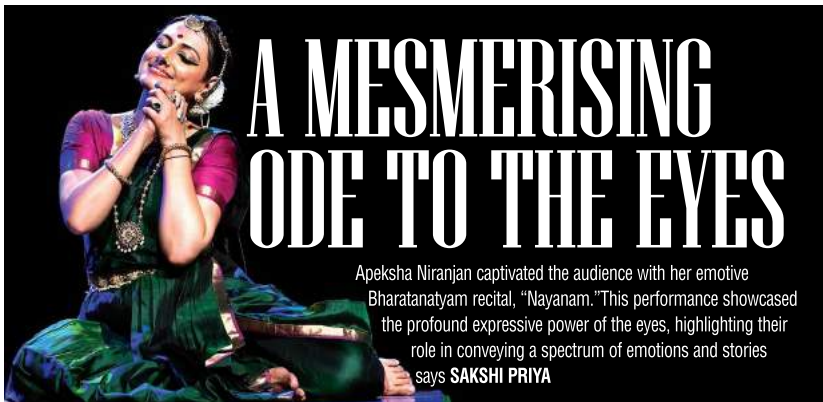


helmed by a talented chef Sumit who is a super-cool young guy, takes your comments seriously, and is eager to make amendments as per your preference. His expertise results in a fusion of Indian and international cuisines, resulting in an array of dishes



that are as exotic as they are delicious. The mixes, courses, like the starters, are well thought out, tantalizing the taste buds. They have an interesting array of dishes for mains: Pulogare Rice and Bhindi Raita, Herb Lemon Chicken, and Country

Mutton Curry. The desserts are Snicker Bar Mobar Sundae Sandwich. One could try it all to feel truly gluttonous. My favourite is, of course, the avocado dish that alone could satiate my appetite, but I try rice and other Indian options, leaving little space for dessert, which I have any way. It is nutty and melts in the mouth. Monkey Bar in Vasant Kunj is more than just a place to eat and drink; it's an experience. The thoughtful blend of ambience, innovative menu, and signature cocktails creates a unique and memorable outing. Whether you're looking to enjoy a casual brunch with friends, a lively evening out, or a romantic dinner, Monkey Bar caters to making it a must-visit destination in New Delhi's bustling nightlife scene. So, next time you find yourself in Vasant Kunj, let the playful vibes and exotic flavors of Monkey Bar sweep you off your feet. As I walk out after the sinful evening, it is drizzling, and I get wet. A little price to pay for a wonderful, sinful evening!



Apeksha Niranjani captivated the audience with her emotive Bharatanatyam recital, "Nayanam." This performance showcased the profound expressive power of the eyes, highlighting their role in conveying a spectrum of emotions and stories
says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In a Magical evening of dance and expression, Bharatanatyam artist Apeksha Niranjani presented her latest production, "Nayanam," at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi. Nayanam, meaning 'eyes' in Sanskrit, delved into the myriad emotions conveyed through the eyes, ranging from joy and love to sorrow and longing. This thematic exploration highlighted the eyes' significance as windows to the soul, showcasing their ability to define beauty, communicate emotions and enhance the storytelling aspect of dance. The Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance form, relies heavily on the eyes as a powerful medium of expression, transcending language, race and culture. Apeksha Niranjani's performance beautifully captured this essence, showcasing how the eyes can communicate the unspoken and tell stories that resonate deeply with the audience. The evening began with an arathi that depicted the various shaped eyes of the gods, setting a spiritual and mystical tone for the recital. Alarippu, traditionally an invocation, was presented with intricate eye movements that conveyed a multitude of divine perspectives. Apeksha's eyes danced with each movement, narrating stories and emotions without uttering a word. Her portrayal of the divine and the human, the sacred and the mundane, was nothing short of enchanting. Apeksha's dedication to her art form was evident as she seamlessly transitioned from one emotion to another, her eyes capturing the essence of each character she portrayed. The audience was immediately drawn into the performance, experiencing the spirituality and depth of the dance. In the Varanam segment, Apeksha explored the complex emotions that

eyes can convey, such as anger, fear, sparkle and joy. Each sentiment was meticulously portrayed through her expressions, making the audience feel the intensity of each emotion. Apeksha's eyes were the protagonists of her performance, embodying every character and narrative with authenticity and grace. The Varanam segment is traditionally the centerpiece of a Bharatanatyam performance, known for its complexity and depth. Apeksha's rendition was a masterclass in emotive storytelling. Through her eyes, she conveyed the myriad facets of human emotions, from the tender glances of a lover to the fierce gaze of a warrior. Her performance illustrated the power of non-verbal communication, proving that sometimes, a single glance can speak volumes. A unique feature of the evening was the special presentation on Polish folk music, where Apeksha depicted a young girl expectantly waiting for her lover. This unexpected fusion of Bharatanatyam with Polish folk music left the audience mesmerised. The applause and never-ending appreciation were a testament to the seamless integration of these two diverse cultures through dance. The Polish folk music piece was a refreshing departure from the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire, yet Apeksha managed to weave it into the narrative effortlessly. Her portrayal of the young girl, filled with anticipation and longing, was both poignant and powerful. The use of Bharatanatyam to express the emotions in Polish folk music showcased Apeksha's versatility as a dancer and her ability to transcend cultural boundaries through

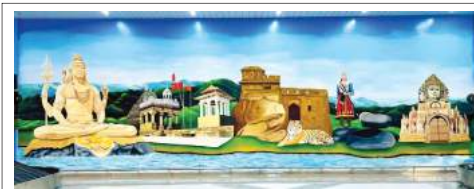
BHARATANATYAM, A CLASSICAL INDIAN DANCE FORM, RELIES HEAVILY ON THE EYES AS A POWERFUL MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION, TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE, RACE AND CULTURE

her art. Apeksha's performance continued to captivate with a segment on the Surdas bhajan, showcasing the love of a bhakt for his lord. Her eyes, reflecting devotion and surrender, brought the bhajan to life, creating a profound spiritual experience for the audience. Each gesture and expression was imbued with deep reverence, highlighting the spiritual connection between the devotee and the divine. The Surdas bhajan segment was a testament to Apeksha's ability to convey complex emotions through her dance. Her portrayal of the bhakt's unwavering devotion and love was deeply moving, resonating with the audience on a spiritual level. Apeksha's eyes, filled with devotion and reverence, were the focal point of this performance, drawing the audience into the spiritual journey of the bhakt. Another remarkable composition was the Vatsalya Padam, where she portrayed a mother searching for her child after a scolding. This piece beautifully captured the nuanced emotions of a mother's love and concern, again through the eloquence of her eyes. Apeksha's performance in this segment was both tender and powerful, showcasing the depth of a mother's love and the emotional turmoil that comes with it. The Vatsalya Padam was a touching portrayal of maternal love and concern. Apeksha's eyes conveyed the mother's desperation, regret and eventual relief upon finding her child. The audience could feel the intensity of the mother's emotions, making this segment one of the highlights of the evening. The recital was not just about dance; it was about preserving and showcasing the rich heritage of classical Indian dance. Apeksha Niranjani's "Nayanam" was a celebration of the language of

the eyes, a tribute to their unparalleled ability to communicate emotions and stories. Through her performance, Apeksha demonstrated the timeless beauty and relevance of Bharatanatyam in today's world.

Niranjani's "Nayanam" was a vivid reminder of how the eyes, with their silent eloquence, can speak volumes. Her performance was a journey through emotions, stories and traditions, all conveyed through the captivating language of the eyes. It was a testament that left an indelible mark on everyone present, reinforcing the timeless adage that the eyes are indeed the windows to the soul. As the curtains drew to a close, the audience was left in awe of Apeksha Niranjani's ability to convey such profound emotions through her dance. "Nayanam" was more than just a performance; it was a celebration of the expressive power of the eyes and the rich heritage of Bharatanatyam. Apeksha's dedication to her craft and her ability to transcend cultural boundaries through her art were truly inspiring. In a world where appreciation for classical arts is dwindling, it is crucial for us to recognise and celebrate the talents that keep our cultural heritage alive. As those who were present can attest, Apeksha Niranjani's performance was a witness to the timeless beauty of Bharatanatyam, a dance form rooted deeply in our culture and heritage. In the words of Apeksha herself, "Jo lafze nahi baya karti wo, aankhein baya karti hain," meaning, "What words cannot express, the eyes do." Her performance was a testament to this truth, leaving the audience with a deeper appreciation for the art of Bharatanatyam and the silent eloquence of the eyes.

Photos: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer



SCULPTING INDIA'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The Artistic Vision of Dr Masooma Rizvi is not just a contributor but a visionary architecture, shaping the way millions of people experience and understand India's cultural richness, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In the vibrant heritage of India's cultural renaissance, Dr Masooma Rizvi emerges as a luminary figure, weaving art, history and modernity into breathtaking narratives that captivate millions. As a preeminent art curator, designer and museologist, Dr Rizvi has become the architect of India's evolving aesthetic identity, transforming public spaces and prestigious institutions into galleries that showcase the nation's rich heritage and contemporary dynamism. From the corridors of power to the gateways of the nation, Dr Rizvi's artistic touch is worldwide. As the art curator for 15 airports under the Airport Authority of India, she has transformed these bustling center points into galleries that showcase India's rich heritage to travelers from around the globe. Her crowning achievement in this realm is perhaps the mesmerising depiction of Lord Ram's return at the Maharishi Valmiki International Airport in Ayodhya Dham, a piece that marries mythology with modernity in a truly magnificent manner. The New Parliament Building of India bears the indelible mark of Dr Rizvi's artistic acumen. As the project's curator, she has infused this symbol of Indian democracy with a visual narrative that echoes the nation's past while embracing its future. Her collaboration with the Culture Ministry for the building's galleries ensures that each carefully selected piece not only beautifies the space but also tells a story of India's diverse cultural and aspirations. Dr Rizvi's expertise shines brightest in her museum projects, where she breathes life into history. Her work on multiple Deendayal Upadhyaya Museums across India, from Mumbai to Noida, demonstrates her unparalleled ability to create immersive experiences that educate, inspire and connect visitors with India's intellectual and cultural heritage. These museums, under her guidance, become more than repositories of artifacts, they are vibrant spaces where the past converses with the present, inspiring future generations. What sets Dr Rizvi apart is her versatility. She moves effortlessly between projects for government ministries, educational institutions and military organisations. Her work for the IIT Delhi campus, focusing on a 'Science and Technology Theme', showcases her ability to adapt her artistic vision to diverse contexts. Internationally, Dr Rizvi has left her mark through projects like the Indo Bahrain Friendship Mural and the Indian Buddhist Temple artwork in China's White Horse Temple Complex.



These projects not only beautify spaces but also serve as cultural bridges, enriching understanding and appreciation between nations. Perhaps most impressively, Dr Rizvi's work has consistently garnered recognition from India's highest offices. Many of her projects have been inaugurated by dignitaries including the Prime Minister, President and various ministers, underscoring the national importance of her contributions. As India continues to evolve and grow on the world stage, Dr Masooma Rizvi stands as a cultural ambassador, using her artistic vision to showcase the nation's rich heritage and contemporary dynamism. Through her work, she not only beautifies spaces but also tells the story of India - its past, present and future in vivid, unforgettable strokes. As India continues to assert its cultural identity on the global stage, Dr Masooma Rizvi stands at the forefront, wielding her artistic vision like a brush that paints the nation's story on the canvas of public consciousness. Her work goes beyond just preserving heritage, national pride and inspiring future generations. Through her work, Dr Masooma Rizvi is not just curating art, she is curating the very essence of India's cultural identity for generations to come. In the grand narrative of Indian art and culture, Dr Masooma Rizvi is not just a contributor but a visionary architect, shaping the way millions of people experience and understand India's cultural richness. Her legacy is etched not just in the artworks she creates, but in the cultural consciousness she helps to mold and elevate.

Photos: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer

Exploring Humanity's Connection in Art

Explore the transformative experience of art in the exhibition "The Divine Elements Volume Two", where artist Divyaman Singh merges art and astronomy to explore humanity's profound connection with the universe. This exhibition invites viewers on a transformative journey of introspection and wonder, says **TEAM AGENDA**

In the heart of New Delhi, the India Habitat Center hosts a transformative artistic journey with "The Divine Elements Volume Two", curated by Shahzada Khurram and featuring the visionary artworks of Divyaman Singh. This highly anticipated solo exhibition transcends traditional boundaries, inviting viewers on an immersive exploration of humanity's intricate coexistence with the celestial universe. Building upon the thematic foundation of its predecessor, Volume Two explores deeper into the profound connections between human existence and the cosmos, drawing inspiration from the concept of 'Samavesa' - the harmonious interplay between humanity and divine elements. Through a blend of astronomy and spirituality, Singh's artworks illuminate the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the stars, prompting introspection and wonder among its audiences. The Exhibition, "The Divine Elements Volume Two" is a meticulous fusion of artistic expression and academic inquiry. Each artwork in this collection is more than a visual masterpiece; it is a tribute to Singh's rigorous research



and scholarly approach. Over the course of two years, Singh has meticulously explored themes of cosmic balance and human interconnectedness, culminating in a series of artworks that transcend both visual and aesthetic appeal. One of the exhibition's centerpiece, "Horizon", symbolises the boundary where Earth meets the sky. Through this painting, Singh invites viewers to contemplate the convergence of human perception with cosmic dimensions, highlighting our interconnectedness with celestial forces and natural rhythms. Similarly, "Reflection" employs vibrant hues of red, black and white

to explore the reflection of human existence within the vast universe. This artwork draws inspiration from Vishnu as the cosmic sustainer, emphasising the interconnectedness of every individual soul (jiva) with the cosmic order (dharma). Another striking piece, "Atman - soul", captivates with its depiction of the human soul as inseparable from the cosmic fabric. This artwork symbolises spiritual evolution and liberation, echoing beliefs in interconnectedness across cosmic principles. Themes of balance and harmony resonate throughout the exhibition, as seen in artworks like

"Black Hole" and "Galaxy", which depict the cosmic forces that shape our universe. Beyond the visual allure, Singh's artworks in Volume Two serve as a journey through the stages of academic exploration. Each piece represents a culmination of in-depth research and contemplation, offering viewers a deeper understanding of humanity's place in the cosmic. In a conversation with the artist, Singh shares his inspiration behind the exhibition, rooted in the concept of Vishnu-kuran and the cosmic balance of the universe. He expresses his hope that viewers will

engage not only with the art's visual appeal but also with its underlying academic depth. Volume Two expands upon Volume One's exploration of astronomy and spirituality, aiming to provoke thought and spark conversations about humanity's role within the universe.

In contemporary art, few exhibitions offer such a transformative experience. By bridging the gap between art and academia, Divyaman Singh and Shahzada Khurram have curated more than a just showcase of paintings; they have crafted a narrative that resonates with the

very essence of human existence. As visitors navigate through the galleries, they are not mere observers but participants in a profound dialogue about art, existence and cosmic interconnectedness. "The Divine Elements Volume Two" transcends the boundaries of traditional art exhibitions, offering an immersive experience that merges artistic expression with scholarly inquiry. Through Singh's meticulous artworks, viewers are invited to reflect on their place within the universe, assisting a deeper appreciation for the beauty and mystery that surround us.

In closing, "The Divine Elements Volume Two" stands as an exemplification to the transformative power of art to provoke, inspire and wonder. It leaves an indelible mark on its audience, encouraging them to contemplate the intricate threads that connect humanity with the cosmos. As the exhibition draws to a close, its legacy endures, leaving viewers with a renewed sense of wonder and deeper understanding of our interconnected existence in the vast expanse of the universe.

Photos: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer

Rate Cuts Premature

In the intricacies of economic policy, the relationship between inflation and interest rates is a pivotal one. Signals from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) indicate that the anticipation of a rate cut remains premature. This decision underscores the central bank's cautious approach towards economic stability and its steadfast commitment to achieving its long-term inflation target of 4 per cent. Inflation, the silent eroder of purchasing power, is a metric that central banks around the world vigilantly monitor. For India, maintaining a delicate balance between fostering economic growth and controlling inflation is particularly crucial. The uptick in inflation from 4.75 per cent in May to 5.08 per cent in June is enough to warrant prudence. This is especially true in an environment where global economic uncertainties and domestic challenges persist. The RBI's decision to hold interest rates steady for eight consecutive policy meetings reflects a nuanced understanding of the current economic landscape. Lowering interest rates could potentially stimulate borrowing and investment, theoretically boosting economic activity. However, this comes with the risk of further inflating an already above-target inflation rate. In essence, the central bank is navigating between stimulating growth and preventing runaway inflation. One might argue that a rate cut could provide the necessary impetus for achieving the projected economic growth of 7.2 per cent for the fiscal year ending March 2025. Indeed, such growth would be a remarkable achievement and a testament to India's economic resilience. However, the RBI's cautious stance suggests that the underlying economic fundamentals might not yet fully support such a move. The focus remains on long-term stability rather than short-term gains.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's reiteration that it is "too early to talk about a change in the monetary policy stance" until inflation aligns more closely with the 4 per cent target is a clear signal to markets and policymakers. The central bank's commitment to its inflation target is a cornerstone of its credibility. Any premature deviation could undermine this credibility and destabilise expectations, which are crucial for economic planning and investment. The central bank's study of the neutral interest rate - where inflation is close to target and growth is near its potential - is another layer of its prudent approach. This rate acts as a benchmark for assessing whether current monetary policy is stimulative or restrictive. The findings of this study, expected in the next couple of months, will provide valuable insights into the appropriate policy path forward. India's economic journey is at a critical juncture. With strong growth momentum and ambitious targets, the path ahead requires a careful balancing act. The RBI's current stance reflects a deep understanding of this delicate balance. While the lure of rate cuts as a quick fix for economic stimulation is strong, the central bank's measured approach underscores the importance of long-term stability over short-term expediency.

Biden candidacy

In the whirlwind of American politics, moments of slip-ups and missteps by leaders often become pivotal points in assessing their capability and readiness for office. President Joe Biden's confusion between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump, alongside other verbal gaffes including reference to the Ukrainian head of state as President Putin, has ignited a storm of debate about his fitness for the presidency as he gears up for a re-election bid. Critics argue that these instances of confusion are not just lapses in memory but symptomatic of larger concerns about Mr Biden's mental acuity and ability to lead effectively. Such doubts have only been amplified by internal pressions within his own party, with some Democrats openly questioning whether he should continue his campaign. For them, the stakes are high, especially with the memory of his lackluster debate performance against Mr Trump still fresh. Supporters, on the other hand, contend that Mr Biden's long career in politics, marked by resilience and experience, outweighs occasional verbal misuses. They highlight his successes on the international stage, such as rallying support for Ukraine amid Russian aggression and navigating complex geopolitical tensions with finesse. To them, Mr Biden's ability to steer global alliances and tackle pressing issues like the Israel-Gaza conflict underscore his competence despite verbal slip-ups. The broader implications of Mr Biden's situation extend beyond personal critique. They reflect deeper concerns about the US presidency itself - its demands, its pressures, and the toll it takes on those who occupy the Oval Office. The presidency is a grueling role that demands unwavering focus and mental agility, qualities that voters rightly scrutinise in their leaders. Mr Biden's slip-ups raise legitimate questions about whether he can meet these demanding standards over another four-year term.

In assessing Mr Biden's candidacy, it is crucial to differentiate between policy substance and personal performance. While verbal mistakes can be jarring, they do not necessarily equate to incompetence in governance. The presidency requires not only sharp intellect but also shrewd perceptions of presidential fitness and the standards by which future candidates are judged. In the end, while Mr Biden's recent slip-ups have sparked debate and introspection, they should prompt a deeper conversation about what qualities Americans prioritise in their presidents.

Putin in Vietnam ~ I

Vietnam's conduct of foreign policy finds resonance with that of India. Like India, it has dealt with its relations with Russia, especially the war with Ukraine, deftly by maintaining neutrality, while nurturing its ties with both the US and Russia at the same level. For Vietnam, stress on Asean centrality has helped it in navigating through geopolitical struggle and remain relevant in regional diplomacy. Vietnam is convinced that it needs to adhere to Asean centrality and remain engaged with all major powers



In June, Russian President Vladimir Putin made two significant overseas visits. The first to North Korea where he signed a landmark security treaty with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and then to Vietnam, one of Asia's fastest growing economies and one of the most diplomatically active countries in the 21st century.

All this was before he hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a summit meeting back at home. This article shall discuss the significance of Putin's visit to Vietnam and what it conveyed to the world.

In recent times, Vietnam that was once isolated because of its ideological positioning, is diplomatically very active and has made an impact of relevance to the world.

For a long time, the West had a jaundiced view about Vietnam and saw it as pariah state. But it has leaptfrogged to the position of one of Asia's fastest growing economies and upgraded relations with Japan, Australia and India.

Many of these countries including India have prioritised the bolstering of economic and security cooperation with Hanoi. Hanoi upgraded relations with key global actors such as the US and Japan in 2023, and with Australia in early 2024. This was a clear demonstration of its influence on the world stage has increased.

By welcoming Putin, was Hanoi trying to make a point to endorse the view that it remains a priority to Russia over any other country? The answer to this question can be both Yes and No. The fact is that with its achievements in multilateral relationships and neutral foreign policy and expanding the web of international relations, Hanoi was aiming to bid out Russia from the eyes of the world as a diplomatic pariah state, a perception that has existed since Putin came to power.

What the world noted keen-

ly was that it was Putin's first visit to a Southeast Asian country since the war in Ukraine broke out.

Already under Western sanctions because of military operations in Ukraine and by choosing to visit Vietnam, Putin intended to send a clear message to the West that Russia continues to remain relevant in global affairs and cannot be isolated.

The visit however did not yield any significant agreements for Hanoi. Discussions focused more on expanding economic cooperation rather than on security issues. Viewed differently, with the frayed ties with China over the South China Sea issue, Hanoi choose to lean towards Russia as a counterbalance measure and endorsed Putin a 21-gun salute, thereby endorsing the perception that Russia remains a priority in Vietnam's foreign policy.

One cannot miss the timing and associated symbolism of Putin's decision to visit Vietnam at this time when the world's major powers see Russia with suspicious eyes. Of course, India stands altogether differently and refused to join the sanctions imposed by the West. India has chosen to conduct its relations with Russia keeping in mind its national interests.

After all, India has a special relationship with Russia historically and that cannot be undone easily. Prime Minister Modi's visit further strengthens this time-tested bonding. Russia holds the BRICS chairmanship for 2024 and is going to host the summit meeting in October. Since there are talks about BRICS expansion

and some of the members of the Asean bloc have evinced interest in joining the grouping, Putin was probably keen to send a message of support for Hanoi's potential membership aspirations.

Vietnam has not yet openly expressed keenness to join the BRICS but is now studying the possibilities. It may be noted that prior to Putin's visit, a Vietnamese delegation visited Russia to attend the BRICS Plus dialogue.

Sooner or later, Vietnam will see the advantage for itself if it joins BRICS. Since Vietnam prioritises dealing with multilateral diplomatic institutions and advocates a multipolar world order with a view to strengthening economic

ties with growing economies, joining the BRICS fold shall provide additional lift to its aspiration to be a responsible player in world affairs.

Vietnam's conduct of foreign policy finds resonance with that of India. Like India, it has dealt with its relations with Russia, especially the war with Ukraine, deftly by maintaining neutrality, while nurturing its ties with both the US and Russia at the same level.

For Vietnam, stress on Asean centrality has helped it in navigating through geopolitical struggle and remain relevant in regional diplomacy. Vietnam is convinced that it needs to adhere to Asean centrality and remain engaged with all major powers.

Such an approach will be in compliance with Vietnam's current foreign policy approach in which geopolitical rivalry among major powers can be kept at a distance.

There is a new twist to the

meeting if seen in the context of Vietnam-China tensions over the South China Sea. Putin agreed for Russia-Vietnam joint oil exploration in areas that fall within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), something akin to what India's ONGC's overseas wing has been doing.

As Russian companies operate in Vietnam's EEZ, which lies within Beijing's self-proclaimed 10-dash line, Moscow tacitly supports Vietnam's sovereignty claims in the disputed South China Sea. No wonder, Putin signed more deals to further Russia-Vietnam cooperation on oil and gas exploration, which could irk Beijing. At the same time, a strong message was sent out by expressing a commitment to ensure "security, safety, freedom of navigation and aviation" in and over the South China Sea.

Vietnam is aware that China is not likely to back-track on its position in the South China Sea so easily. Vietnam too is unlikely to yield space easily. Its diplomatic profile has grown and it has friends to back up. So, China runs the risk of remaining isolated and cannot be expected to have an easy ride. Hanoi is aware that China shall remain a top concern because of its hardened position in the South China Sea. For Vietnam, besides its own sovereignty issue, ensuring maritime security remains at the top of its agenda.

Does Putin's visit indicate that Russia will come to Vietnam's rescue if a conflict breaks out between China and Vietnam? That is a million dollar question for which there is no easy answer. In such a situation, while Russia is unlikely to overtly support Vietnam in case a crisis breaks out in the South China Sea, it is not likely to openly confront China. It can potentially play a pacifying role in Chinese-Vietnamese tensions.

(To Be Concluded)

Why AI must be regulated

I visited the Louvre Museum a couple of months ago when legends and mythologies of humankind are preserved. Before the age of scientific reasoning in the 19th century, humankind lived based on beliefs and myths since we could not prove or scientifically reason what someone else observed. What became a legend and then a truth was based on what we wanted to see as a truth from a compelling story told by others. We could record what we see with modern recording technology during the Industrial Revolution. This included photography, filming, audio recording and X-rays. Finally, others could examine whether what someone claims is true or not. Recording technology became the basis of scientific research and journalism. We built scientific institutions and communities to cross-check scientific observations and established journalism to deliver what happened based on recording technologies. With one premise, that the record is authentic and original, we could finally evolve to an era of scientific reasoning, humankind concerning a straightforward thought: "What is true?"

With generative AI, the premise has collapsed that what we see and hear, seeming to be recorded, should be accurate. The last resort for people to validate facts based on the record will lose credibility, and we will no longer be able to scientifically reason based on facts. What we want to believe as facts becomes truth to us and, ironically, with the most sophisticated technology humankind has created, we will now return to the era of legends and mythology. To prevent humankind from revisiting the clock in history, we need to regulate AI by technologically enforcing disclaimers that it is AI-generated. This requires an immediate international collaborative effort to understand the impact of generative AI on society and the need for globally applicable regulations. This also calls for the establishment of an international organization to govern AI.

The Korea Herald

Health insurance deficit

South Korea's public health system is still mired in a protracted dispute between the government and doctors over the medical school enrolment quota. On top of the current debate, there is a potentially devastating problem that needs more attention from policymakers: the growth of the country's health insurance deficit. According to research submitted to the Korean Association of Health Economics and Policy, the accumulated deficit of Korea's health insurance will top \$43 trillion (US\$408 billion) in 18 years, if the current bloated coverage for medical services continues without a drastic overhaul. The report authored by a team led by Kim Youn-hee, a medical professor at Inha University, the country's health insurance system is expected to record a deficit of around 1 trillion won this year, compared with a gain of 4.1 trillion won in 2023. The report said that the shortfall is likely to accelerate in the coming years: 15 trillion won in 2030, 40 trillion won in 2036, and 81 trillion won in 2042. The cash reserve for the national health insurance, which is managed by the National Health Insurance Service, is projected to completely dry up by 2029, and the cumulative balance is breaching zero to come in at whopping 563 trillion won in deficit in 2042. The country's health insurance balance was in the black for three years in a row until last year, as the government tightened medical coverage.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Growing challenges

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Balanced diplomacy" published today. The war in Ukraine sharpened the renewed great power rivalries and India had significant partnerships with both sides - the traditional relationship with Russia on the one hand, and deepening ties with the US on the other. Two and a half years later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to Russia since the war began shows that New Delhi is getting more adept on the diplomatic treads.

Reacting to the alleged bombing by Russia of a civilian hospital in Kyiv, he said that such an incident was "painful" and "peace talks do not succeed amid bombs, guns and bullets".

The joint statement "noted with appreciation relevant proposals of mediation and good offices aimed at peaceful resolution of the conflict in accordance with international law and on the basis of the UN Charter in its entirety and totality".

These statements mark a

sharpening of the PM's earlier formulation that "this is not an era of war", first made in 2022 and echoed in the G20 New Delhi Declaration.

At the same time, they leave room for India to play the role of a bridge between Russia and the West. Calling Russia an "all-weather friend" is aimed at ensuring that Delhi and Moscow can carry their relations engaged despite the looming China factor and India's deep and growing ties with the US and Europe.

Of course, Delhi's balancing act is growing more demanding in a polarised world. The current scenario is volatile, what happens in the US election later this year has significant ramifications. That's why the way forward for India is to continue to engage with all partners based on its economic and strategic interests. If a partnership with the US, Japan and Australia is necessary to keep China in check in the Indo-Pacific, the relationship with Russia is needed for energy security and

defence. Doing business with a growing India is in the interest of all sides.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 12 July.

EQUAL RIGHTS

SIR, The decision rendered by the Supreme Court on alimony for divorced Muslim women was significant. The court determined that every woman, regardless of faith, has the right to alimony. Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih made independent decisions, but came to the same conclusion. Both indicated that a divorced Muslim woman could file a lawsuit against her husband under Section 125 of the CrPc to receive alimony. From this perspective, the Supreme Court's ruling is admirable and consistent with the duties of a welfare state.

That's why the verdict is identical to the one handed down in the Shah Bano case on 23 April 1985. In fact, before now, alimony for divorced women was determined by the Muslim Personal Law. According to Shariat law, alimony can only be paid to a divorced woman during the duration of

MODI'S VISIT

SIR, This has reference to your report on PM Modi's visit to Moscow and a letter published on 11 July. Despite pressure from the West, PM Modi paid a two-day State visit to Moscow on 8-9 July 2024. The bold decision by Modi deserves praise. India's friendship with Russia is not limited to the EU countries and other countries of the Western bloc including the US.

The EU Parliament's resolution adopted a few months ago condemning incidents in Manipur and some US organisations' condemnation of the lack of religious freedom in India have pushed India to lean more and more towards Russia. Russia is our all-weather friend and we have one of the biggest military cooperations with them. Dmitry Peskov, the Russian President's Press Secretary said that Modi's visit had made the US and the EU jealous. This time PM's visit created a huge euphoria among the Russians as it is linked with the balance of world power and Russia's growing influence. PM Modi was well received by President Putin and was awarded the highest civilian award in Russia.

Yours, etc., Amit Kumar Sarkar, Kolkata, 12 July.

iddat. Iddat refers to the three-month time during which a woman cannot marry anyone else. However, the Supreme Court declared Section 125 of the Indian Penal Code to be equally applicable to all women, allowing women to claim alimony even after iddat. In reality, most women in Indian society are still dependent on their husbands after marriage. It is tough to sus-

tain them if their husband abandons them. Women who are responsible for raising their children encounter a mountain of challenges. Many divorced Muslim women do not remarry, therefore collecting alimony merely during the iddat period does not resolve their issues. Every woman, as a citizen, deserves equal rights.

Yours, etc., Abhijit Roy, Jamshedpur, 11 July.

No Viksit Bharat without overhaul of education

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AYIAR

Prime Minister Modi's Viksit Bharat vision of India becoming a high-income country by 2047 is ambitious. It implies that Indians will become educated and skilled enough to merit high incomes by global standards.

However, the 2023 Annual Survey of Education Report is dismal. About a quarter of all youth (14-18 years) cannot read a class 2 text fluently in their regional language. Only 43% can solve simple division sums. ASER is a rural survey, and hopefully urban schools are better, but the bulk of the population is rural.

India has some world-class schools and colleges producing world-class graduates. But below this veneer, education is rotten. In a country of 1.4 billion, even a thin layer of millions of people who have achieved eminence in India and abroad, but got schools in states are mostly pathetic. ASER reports show hardly any improvement in the last ten years.

By contrast, the Centre's Kendriya Vidyalayas are good schools. They are designed for children of civil servants, and this elite has the clout to ensure quality education.

I helped my driver's two children, Saurabh and Lavely Khatri, get into Kendriya Vidyalaya through the minister's discretionary quota. After graduation and college, Saurabh was hired by TCS and is currently shifting to a new IT company. Lavely works in Cognizant, another IT company. In one leap, they have moved from the bottom to top of the social ladder. That needs repetition a million fold for India to become a high-income country.

But education is a state subject, and state govt schools are usually terrible. Their entire ecosystem is faulty. Teachers are absent or not teaching in half the schools, according to a well-known survey. In rural schools, many children come for mid-day meals rather than food for learning. Single-teacher schools with dozens of students of different grades cannot produce decent results.

Many teachers are politically oriented and come from political parties, and this can ruin discipline. State govt schools are not only for teaching but for managing elections, censuses, and other tasks (one teacher was asked to be a stand-in pujari at a temple). Teachers' unions are powerful and resist any change. Many teachers, in both schools and colleges, say their careers depend on political connections more than the results of their students.

When an entire ecosystem is rotten, change is



NEW MODEL: Instead of crumbling govt schools like this one in Patna, we need a few Shiksha Kendras, centres of excellence to create a new ecosystem

difficult. Breaking the mould meets huge resistance. What is the way forward?

The best approach is to start with a few Shiksha Kendras — centres of excellence — in substandard states and expand these in stages. That can gradually create a new ecosystem to displace the old. The effort will take decades, so an immediate start is needed.

One feasible solution, Model A, is to start Shiksha Kendras as joint ventures between Kendriya Vidyalayas and state schools. These can be funded jointly by the centre and states, in the proportion of say 70:30. These Kendras should be protected from political interference. Some teachers can be permanent employees, but others should be staff from state schools who will work in the excellent schools for five years and then revert to the state system to try and spread the new ecosystem. Many can later join new Shiksha Kendras as the project expands. This will not meet the resistance that a total overhaul would, so it is politically non-disruptive.

Many states may oppose what they see as the Centre encroaching on their turf, despite the sweetener of majority funding by the Centre. So, we also need alternative ideas for non-interference reform.

Model B, the simplest and cost-effective path lies in your own house. RSS runs over 12,000 Vidya Bharati schools with 3.4 million students. These schools focus on promoting knowledge of and pride in Hindu traditions. But it also admits Muslim and Christian children, of whom one topped the class 10 exam in Assam in 2016.

Most of these elementary schools up to class 5. Surely, in search of Viksit Bharat, your top priority should be to upgrade Vidya Bharati schools to the level of Kendriya Vidyalayas. This means upgrading all class 5 schools to class 12 level and producing graduates who will get admission to the top colleges.

You will face no political interference for captive schools, and no shortage of funds. Industrialists will happily fund such excellent ventures.

RSS also runs some intermediate schools and regular colleges. These too need to be upgraded, striving ultimately for equivalence with St Stephen's College, Delhi, or Presidency College, Kolkata. This will take decades. But by pushing your own schools and colleges to excellence, you can create a new educational ecosystem that will rub off on the states. ■

Remarkable that French players like Mbappe spoke out against Le Pen

Bestselling writer and Financial Times columnist

Simon Kuper has a new podcast as well as a memoir of Paris, the city he moved to 22 years ago to escape pricey London. In an interview with Neelam Raaj, he spoke about political 'wolves' and footballing heroes

■ You've spent decades in Paris, so let's start with the French election verdict. The wolf, as you called the far right, failed to turn the door knob this time but the threat is far from over, is it?

The far-right threat might actually be over. I'm not sure. The scenario that everyone talks about is that French anger keeps rising, and the far right vote with it, and eventually Marine Le Pen (the wolf) is elected president, perhaps in 2027. That might happen.

But let's consider another scenario. There's a French tradition of voters talking radical but acting conservative. They expect the elite to pay in hand-to-hand suits to win, they quietly want it to happen, and then they can spend five years killing against him. Look at the polls last week. The far-right were predicted to win. They finished third. I suspect a lot of their so-called supporters don't really want them to win.

■ Politics' ran headline: Marine Le Pen: 6. Nylan Mbappe: 1. Did he really impact the vote? You've also met him. To borrow from the name of your podcast, did he turn the door knob, tell us about the human rather than the hero?

It's impossible to say whether an athlete or anyone else speaking out moved the vote in any way. But it was remarkable that several French players, not just Mbappe, took the risk of speaking out against France's biggest party. That really impressed me. I can't remember leading footballers taking a communal position on politics. I think it was the first time since Zidane and another French international spoke out against Marine Le Pen's father, Jean Marie Le Pen in the 2002 French elections.

Our podcast is called Heroes & Humans, because we try to understand these heroes as human beings. I interviewed Mbappe when he was 22, and he was one of the most intelligent, well-spoken footballers I've ever met. Really clever guy, learned fluent English

and Spanish, his parents made sure he passed the French high school exams, his mum's dream for him was to go to the country's top business school. It wasn't a dream for him to become a top pro. There's a question we always ask at the end of the podcast: "What would he have been if he couldn't play football?" I decided, if Mbappe hadn't been a footballer, he'd have been a wonderful teacher in a school in the Paris suburbs. He and his mum are now actually trying to found a school.

■ Coming back to your podcast co-hosted with journalist Mehreen Khan, what is the story you most enjoyed telling?

I grew up in Holland. I had got a job there in 1976, so we moved there from London when I was an impressionable seven-year-old, during the golden age of Dutch football. That's where I fell for football, and my hero is Johan Cruyff. He wasn't just a brilliant footballer. He was the most brilliant thinker about football there probably has ever been. He's the guy who in the late 1970s, at what was then semi-pro Ajax in Amsterdam, essentially invented the pressing football of the 2020s, the game played now by Manchester City and Liverpool. He later coached Pep Guardiola at Barcelona and was Pep's greatest influence. He's the spiritual father of the leading coach of our generation. So, our podcast on Cruyff was the one that means most to me. We released it last week because it was exactly 27 years since Cruyff's brilliant Dutch team somehow lost the 1974 World Cup final to West Germany. It's a wonderful story, featuring the German tabloid headline: Just before the final, Cruyff, Champagne and Naked Girls. That headline almost destroyed his marriage, but it destroyed him. Years later I met

Cruyff, and it was lovely until we fell out horribly. If anyone has had a worse experience with their childhood hero, I can't bear to hear it.

■ Your book 'Chums' highlighted the hold of 'Oxford Brahmins' on power. Keir Starmer's cabinet is being described as the most diverse ever since most members went to state schools. Is that strugglehold breaking?

The Conservative Party is traditionally more public school than Labour. I think the heredity lefts have taken a setback that might prove lasting, because Boris Johnson, the prime minister who embodied the lazy unceremonious entitlement of their class, was such a disastrous and mendacious PM. The Conservatives have left Britain in a dreadful state after 14 years in power. So, yes, I think the public-school boys have had their day in power for a while. I describe in 'Chums' how Oxford and Cambridge have changed their admissions system to make it harder for public school boys to get in. On the other hand, the Education Secretary, a former member of the British power structure, and I don't think he's just going to vanish forever.

■ You've published a memoir on Paris. Despite its problems, you're quite upbeat about the city. Can you explain why?

Mostly because Paris is at the start of a dramatic transformation — probably the biggest since Baron Haussmann began building the modern city in the 1830s. The thing about Paris is that the gorgeous city — the picture-postcard place of the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, the Louvre, the Champs-Élysées — has always been out of the suburbs. But the suburbs have gradually grown, and now they have about 35 as many inhabitants as the city itself, nearly 10 million versus 2 million inside Paris. People in the suburbs tend (though not always) to be poorer, and the suburbs are much less white than the city. Now, for the first time in history, the city plan means upgrading Paris, by building 80 new metro stations and laying countless bike lanes. I think that by the early 2030s, Paris and its suburbs will be one cohesive metropolis. That will be a revolutionary change.

■ It's the day of the Euro final, so have to ask who were your rooting for in the tournament?

I'm a British and now a French dual citizen, but I always root for Holland. But this was a mediocre Dutch team. The Spanish team is the best and most beautiful in the tournament.

The deeper message and geopolitics behind the Modi-Putin bonhomie

BY INVITATION

ZORAWAR DAULAT SINGH

PHOTOGRAPH BY S. S. SINGH

Defying predictions of a stagnating relationship, PM Narendra Modi and Russian president Vladimir Putin have in 2023 shown the world the bonhomie they share. Putin added a charming touch by conveying his remarks through a competent Hindi translator, which seemed to visibly please the PM. Such talk has surely done little to ease the Modi-described Russia. The Modi visit has restored the nearly quarter-century old ritual of annual summits that had been interrupted since 2020 by Covid and then by the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

Geopolitics has always been at the heart of the India-Russia relationship. A radical and menacing China in the 1960s and the Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s had led Delhi and Moscow to develop a comprehensive strategy

partnership. Today, alignments have shifted and are more complex. Russia and China have come closer, in large part to counterbalance an unpredictable and hostile US.

But is Russia really becoming a junior partner to China, as mainstream commentators suggest? This is simply untrue. Russia has single-handedly and successfully resisted the mighty NATO alliance in Ukraine as well as absorbed the shock of nearly 60,000 western economic sanctions. According to World Bank data released in June, Russia is the fourth largest economy in the world after China, US, Germany, and Japan.

Russia is too proud, too independent and too militarily powerful to ever submit to China. Its grand strategy is to balance the US, shape a stable world, and remain a superpower. Russia has actively collaborated with the Global South in developing a more sustainable multipolar world. India, for its part, has committed itself to comprehensively deepen economic interdependence with Russia as the latter has another major Asian economy as an

option to diversify its commercial ties with China. How will Washington and Beijing look at this summit? Many have already declared Modi's folly in undermining the partnership with the US and failing to make a dent in the Sino-Russian relationship. Again, this sweeping narrative is based on half-truths and devoid of context. It also fails to recognise the partnership with the US and India.

First, a more transactional relationship with the US has been evident for some time. For two decades ago, it was conventional wisdom to assert that the US held the keys to India's emergence as a great economic, political and military power, the old assumption is no longer obvious today. In recent years, Washington has made it apparent that it sees India move as a useful instrument in a future conflict with China. This is not to say that India's legitimate interests and aspirations. This approach has unsettled Indian strategists who worry not just about the US being unable to back up tough talk on China should a serious clash erupt in the near future, but that India might find itself drawn into

a deadly Sino-American military conflict in the Western Pacific. This is a key reason for India to hedge its bets and broaden its geopolitical horizon towards the non-western world. It leveraged ties with Moscow will ensure Washington takes India more seriously as an independent player.

As for China, its growing ties with Russia have been perceived as a tacit realisation that a sequel to the US-Russia experiment — using a willing proxy — could occur in its eastern doorstep in the Taiwan Straits. Beijing might even wish for a protracted conflict in Ukraine so the US finds itself bogged down in assessing the military power of the People's Republic of China. Therefore, it is unlikely to weaken its Russia link in a hurry. The only realistic way to influence the Sino-Russian entente, is if the collective West abandons its disastrous confrontational policy and negotiates a new European security architecture that accommodates core-Russian interests. However, the prevailing politics in the US leaves little room for optimism.

The irony of this summit is that Beijing views the upswing in India-Russia relations as general

ly conducive to regional and continental stability. This is because Delhi's latest assertion of its geopolitical independence makes it less receptive to a US Cold War approach to Asia which would be providing it with the reassurance that a military superpower like Russia has a sympathetic ear to core Indian interests in the subcontinent. While Russia will not interfere in a regular realisation that the India-China border dispute, it has its own strategic reasons to encourage both its key partners in Asia to deal with their differences in a mature framework. Russia has already played such a constructive role in the aftermath of the 2020 Ladakh border crisis.

India-Russia relations are still vital because they act as a geopolitical stabiliser while also providing immense leverage to Delhi during this period of great change. The resumption from Modi's visit should be seen in this light — it is an emphatic vote for a multipolar world and India's continued march forward to major power status. ■

Dattatraya Singh's column 'Power & Diplomacy: India's foreign policies during the Cold War'

Love, lies, and the law: Dilemma of criminalising false promise to marry

BY INVITATION

MIHKA PODDAR

PHOTOGRAPH BY S. S. SINGH

On July 1, three new laws replacing erstwhile criminal laws came into force. This includes the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the 2023 (BNS) which replaces the IPC. The revised code reduces the number of sections from 511 to 354 and adds 21 new offences. One such new offence that has been hotly debated is section 89 of the BNS that criminalises 'sexual intercourse by employing deceitful means, etc.'

Among other forms of deceptive sex, section 89 explicitly recognises as a separate offence when a person 'making promise to marry to a woman with any intention of fulfilling the same, has sexual intercourse with her'. This is punishable with fine and imprisonment up to ten years.

The law is notorious for punishing sexuality outside of marriage, especially for women. Criminalisation of such false promise to marry (FPM) cases is a pertinent example. While there is a bigger debate to be had on criminalisation of deceptive sex per se, such treatment of marriage-related deception raises particular problems.

Notably, this is not a new offence — this was initially recognised by the judiciary as rape, reasoning that consent given under a misconception is invalid and, therefore, amounts to rape. This was criticised as extending the definition of rape too far and prohibiting socially sanctioned sex outside of marriage. Recognising some of these issues, courts had increasingly started using the offence of cheating to classify such offences instead of rape. This is not a perfect solution, as cheating (Section 415 under 'property offences') is a crime of the 'property' of women's bodies.

Now that BNS has recognised deceptive sex as a separate offence, it is likely that its operationalisation will be influenced by the operationalisation of the law. In adjudicating these cases, courts have considered two factors — first, whether the woman's consent was based on the FPM, and second, whether the promise was merely one which could not be fulfilled (i.e. not rape) or was false to begin with. In principle, then, one cannot be penalised if a relationship breaks up or another reason prevents the promise of marriage from being fulfilled, as long as the promise was sincere when being made. However, extraordinary challenges surrounding establishing intent remain.

Aside from this, it still raises problems of criminalising FPM as a sexual offence per se. On one hand, criminalisation of deceit recognises the locational experiences of women, where pre-marital sexual relations can have serious socio-cultural ramifications. Caste and class realities also increase the likelihood of such exploitation. Moreover, if the purpose of law relating to sexual offences is preserving sexual autonomy, as in deceptive sex, as Yale professor John H. Garvey has argued, (although exclusively in the context of rape) — should be criminalised. Fraud is false to consent, not just a promise.

On the other hand, FPM cases raise particular challenges by tethering women's sexual agency to marriage. One can sympathise with the woman who has been deceived into having intercourse, but labelling FPM cases in particular as sexual offences, as Professor Shivam Menon argues in his book, holds sex as legitimate only within the framework of marriage. This is evident in a system where marital rape is not criminalised, courts down couples engaging in premarital sex to be married, and describe all sex outside of marriage as immoral. Notably, courts have excluded married women from being capable of falling for a FPM, not because of legal obligations or remaining as realistic, but because it is a societal reality that creates an implicit assumption in the law of consent being embedded within marriage, unlike feminist struggles to free one from the other. The law consequently ends up putting social norms on honour, patriarchal controls on young women's sexual agency, and stigma around premarital sex. In practice, too, courts have been seen to use FPM cases as a tool to promote a heteronormative, intra-caste, intracommunal construct of marriage. These concerns need to be addressed by the spirit of equality and sexual autonomy values protected under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution.

The debate highlights the complexities of navigating legal frameworks in a society where traditional norms intersect with evolving concepts of autonomy and gender equality. While section 89 of BNS shows some problems with the erstwhile law, it is not clear if this can be added to the existing physical agency. It is not a case that stifles and slows you but a journey of maximising experience and wisdom.

— **Julie Kathail**, the author of 'Intimacy: Letters to the world at sundown' (Times of India) with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Poddar is a DPhil candidate in law at University of Oxford

INBOX

India's sorry state in world of football

Apropos of 'Euro has the...' (ATM, July 7), Euro 2024 knockout stages demonstrated how football brings small nations together and proves larger populations do not always equal better results. Small countries like Slovakia, Georgia and Turkey were past excellence. Despite its billion plus population, India is yet to qualify for the FIFA World Cup. Lack of infrastructure and usual cultural properties keep India in the back in most sports. Most, sports administrators are busy protecting their own interests.

— **Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai**

Agility in foreign policy

In response to 'A Trump Second...' (ATM, July 7), I have another perspective. As a significant global player, India should not be overly concerned with the specific policies of any single US administration. Instead, it should remain agile and assess the evolving geopolitical landscape, making decisions based on national interests. Our nation's market size, defence capabilities, and economic growth indices enable us to adapt and thrive despite external political shifts.

— **Arav Chatterjee, Chennai**

Matter of experience

In 'Biden is old...' (ATM, July 7) Shobha De aptly brought forth her viewpoint that aging does not necessarily imply decline in many aspects of life. It is not a case that stifles and slows you but a journey of maximising experience and wisdom.

— **Julie Kathail**, the author of 'Intimacy: Letters to the world at sundown' (Times of India) with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

How Republican worldview will shape US-India ties if Trump wins

RIGHT & WRONG

SWAPAN DASGUPTA

PHOTOGRAPH BY S. S. SINGH

Whereas democracy involves a consideration of multiple views, the intervention of an all-powerful establishment subverts the democratic process with its own hierarchy and prejudices. Last week, even before tactical voting trumped the National Rally and made France ungovernable, the country's establishment had decided to intervene in its own name. Marine Le Pen of the far right has to fight two parallel battles: a political war against competition sensibilities and a social struggle to be regarded as respectable. The first depends on French voters, but the second is determined by the standards of capitalist class.

In the US, judging by the standards of capitalist class, Donald Trump should have been in the same club as Wall Street bankers, Silicon Valley techies and Tesco oil barons. Unfortunately, when it came to politics, the regulators of American sensibilities cast him aside as a bad interpreter and, worse, the star attraction in what Hillary Clinton called a "basket of deplorables". Even four years in the White House haven't made America's oldest established newspaper acknowledge him as human. With a big question mark before President Biden's ability to last for another four years, the movement to prevent Trump from reclaiming the White House has become absolute. In France, the situation reminded me of the Western European and the Republican National Convention in India's 2014 general election that she hadn't ever spoken to either a BJP functionary or even a Narendra Modi supporter. In her mind, the political Hindu resided in hell.

Three days at this year's National Convention conference provided an exposure to the different strands of thought that make up the NaCon worldview. If Trump wins, some of these could have a bearing on India-US ties. First, the American conservative focus on God, religion and family as the basis of America's Judeo-Christian nationhood has some commonality with the Hindu nationalist projection of Bharat as a civilisational state. It is not clear if this can be added to the already existing nationalism — a contentious term in liberal circles — as a legitimate principle of statecraft.

This nation-first approach has profound implications. If the misgivings and validity of national cultures are acknowledged as legitimate, India, which has been at the receiving end of vilification by evangelical propaganda, may have an opportunity to exploit the contradictions between America's national Christianity and the universalist approach of modern secularism. It is Hindu society's disavowal of religious conversions that has stood in the way of any understanding between the

two conservative traditions. If national conservatism sets the new Republican tone, this could change.

Second, while there is a sliding shift in America's 'mainstream' destiny, there is a need to continue pushing 'truth, justice and the American way' down the throats of other societies. The disastrous consequences of forcing Western democratic norms on countries such as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan are now being acknowledged. American conservatives are openly repudiating the universalism of the Purnima legacy of the Republican Party.

Thirdly, the growing appeal of a realist foreign policy in the Trump ecosystem suggests that the US will be both to commit resources to areas of secondary concern. If China is deemed the biggest challenge to US interests, involvements such as NATO and the Ukraine war could well be scaled down. Of course, this resource-dependant view of the national interest will be fiercely contested by the State Department and CIA. In the short term, US foreign policy could become quite incoherent, although India's position as a frontline state in the China game would carry its own logic.

Fourthly, with economic nationalism acquiring respectability, there is likely to be a shift in the norms set by the World Trade Organisation. Although there is unlikely to be any unilateral repudiation of free trade and global markets, we are likely to see the growing importance of bilateral trade deals. The return of manufacturing to the US is an article of faith for its conservatives and market economies is not among the ecosystem's principal attachments.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sharp reduction in unskilled immigration to the US and even harsh measures against illegal already in the country. This could mean unsettling fights with the judiciary and other socio-political entities. Among the major lessons from the Trump ecosystem is that it is not easy to talk right and act left. The extent to which there is an activist groundswell against the conservative approach of many conservatives, it indicates that the abrasiveness of the Trump ecosystem is one of style alone. Raw anger plays a big role. ■

HOW MONSOON DEFINES US

BINDU MENON

In Intizar Husain's story 'Clouds', a boy is perturbed by the disappearance of clouds and goes searching for them. He asks everyone if they have seen a passing cloud, but no one seems to know or care. One old man reminisces that the rain will come only if God will sit and meet that "the sky has turned miserly and the earth is no longer benevolent". But the boy barely gets the import of the man's words. He only wants to see the clouds. When he finally returns home after a long search, he finds that it has already rained and his beloved jowar tree is glistening in the courtyard. Hopefully, he looks up and finds a clear sky emptied of the rain. Wistfully, he realises that the clouds have eluded him again.

RAJ KUMAR



No season in India is preceded by so much longing, nor triggers as much loathing when it overstay

As the southwest monsoon advances, the clouds are not so elusive. The monsoon seems to hold the nation in its thrall, putting it on track and sometimes off it. No season in India is preceded by so much longing, nor triggers as much loathing when it overstay its welcome or unleash its fury. No other season grips the senses and the soul as the monsoon; from the invigorating scent of damp earth to the rhythmic symphony that rises from a pitter-patter to a pounding frenzy from its awe-inspiring visual cohesiveness to the visceral aliveness that a walk in the rain can offer. No season perhaps captures nature in all its manifestations: its beauty, bounty and benevolence. Or its fury, ferocity and fickleness.

We seem to share an unguessed bond with them. It evokes comforting memories of playing with paper boats and puddles and a yearning for some piping hot tea and pobozos. Khushwant Singh once wrote that to know India is to experience one must

know the monsoon, for "what the four seasons of the year mean to the European, the one season of the monsoon means to the Indian". In his 1956 novel 'Train to Pakistan', Singh vividly describes the onset of monsoon as an "ebony wall coming up from the east" and paints a theatrical vision of its coming — "There is a flash of lightning which outshines the daylight. The wind fills the black sails of the clouds and they blow out across the sun. A profound shadow falls on the earth. There is another clap of thunder. Big drops of rain fall and dry up in the dust. A fragrant smell rises from the earth... It has come! Sheets of water, wave after wave."

The word 'monsoon' entered the English language in the 16th century, probably picked up from Arab sailors and derived from the Arabic word 'mawsim' or the Urdu 'mawasin'. In his book 'Unruly Waters', which surveys the expansive history of Asia through its riverine culture and rains, historian Sunil Amrith points to two statements that bring out the significance of the monsoon in India. One by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the late 1960s when she said, "For us in India, security is only a missed monsoon away." The other is by environmental activist Sunita Narain at a lecture in Harvard, where she famously declared that "India's finance minister is the monsoon".

In popular imagination, the rain is embedded with all kinds of emotion, myths and cultural memories. In Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta', the emotion is of evadu (longing and hope when a banished yaku pines for his beloved and enlists the help of a cloud to send her a message). In mythology, there is the story of Rishabh, a young ascetic who must be seduced, so that he can bring rain to a parched kingdom. In musical lore, Tansen's rendering of the heat-inducing and lamp-lighting Raga Deepak takes such a toll on his health that he is saved only by the rendition of the rain-inducing Raga Megh Malhar.

Alluding to the rain, Jayanta Mahapatra once observed that there are two things which connect human beings, what is above and what is below. "They are above you and the earth beneath you and anything that connects earth and sky is rain. It is a bond you cannot miss," the poet said, adding the rain the very act of living. In similar vein, fellow poet Walt Whitman describes it as the "poem of earth" that impulsively rises from the land and bottomless seas upward to heaven and cleaves and rejuvenates the earth, while Khalil Gibran eloquently visualises it as "the sigh of the sea, the laughter of the field, the breath of heaven".

Rain brings hope and joy, it can also be dark and bleak. Such is life too. And therefore, as American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow says, "Into each life, some rain must fall."

Srinagar's resilient landmark

Amar Singh College, restored after 2014 floods, holds pride of place

SABITA IQBAL

STANDING tall at the end of a long avenue of poplars, the century-old Amar Singh College is one of the cornerstones in Kashmir's educational landscape. Nestled within the residential neighbourhood of Wazir Bagh, the sprawling 40-acre campus is a verdant oasis about 4 km southwest of Lal Chowk, Srinagar's city centre.

Influenced by Anurup Bessint, who encouraged him to support modern education, Dogra ruler Maharaja Pratap Singh donated land for the institution on July 7, 1908. It initially focused on languages and arithmetic. Recognising the need for technical training to support local industries, the Amar Singh Technical Institute was established in 1913, under the stewardship of FH Andrews. It aimed to modernise technical education and equip students with skills in carpentry, blacksmithing and pottery.

By 1912, the institute evolved into Amar Singh College, expanding its curriculum. The college's impressive architecture reflects its intended prominence and high academic standards. It symbolised a societal shift to blend traditional knowledge with western education principles.

The college has remained a symbol of resilience and stability, offering a sanctuary for learning in a region often disrupted by conflict. Initially a men's college, it now boasts of a mixed-gender student body.

The college's historical significance is intertwined with the broader development of Srinagar during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Srinagar expanded south and southwest, new residential neighbourhoods and public buildings emerged, reflecting colonial influences in design. This period saw the construction of notable structures such as the Sher-e-Kashmir Palace Complex, SP College and the British Residency. Maharaja Pratap Singh made efforts to beautify the city by introducing roads, motorised transportation and planted avenues of trees to provide vistas and formality to the urban landscape.

Laid out around the early 20th century, Wazir Bagh developed as a Victorian-style neighbourhood in an evident shift from the crowded inner city quarters. Grand porticos and elaborate frontages, gardens and open lawns became hallmarks of these newly-built houses and buildings. Amar Singh College held a central position.

The arrival of the British saw the introduction of colonial architecture. In Kashmir, the shift from traditional building systems involving *tajana* and *digliden* was first witnessed during the latter part of the 19th century, with the introduction of colonial-style load-bearing masonry. Such buildings were broadly characterised by symmetrical and rectangular layouts constructed in good quality fired bricks, and set in lime mortar. The walls rested on high plinths (which some-



Amar Singh College, which is spread over 40 acres, was awarded by UNESCO Asia Pacific as one of the best practice conservation projects of 2020. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER



Gauged and moulded bricks have been used for the building's elevation & ornamentation.

times took the form of basements). The strength of the buildings was mainly derived from good masonry bonds and stone or brick walls. Borrowing from this trend, the U-shaped layout of the Amar Singh College building is also asymmetrical, divided into two sections along the centre, creating a courtyard-like space.

Each of the classrooms is substantial in size, with high ceilings to receive optimum natural light. Gauged and moulded bricks have been strategically used to emphasise the building's elevation and ornamentation. Moulded brickwork has been essentially applied at three levels — at the sill level, the lintel level and the floor level of both the storeys of the building. Soft bricks have been employed to cut and fashion these to the desired design.

In September 2014, unprecedented floods caused severe damage to the region, including the college. Floodwaters rose to about 15 feet, inundating the premises for more than two weeks. It caused extensive damage to the infrastructure and resulted in an irreparable loss of books and other scholarly materials. Intervention was urgently needed.

The conservation of Amar Singh College, awarded by UNESCO Asia Pacific as one of

the best practice conservation projects of 2020, necessitated restoration of decorative bricks, apart from other issues.

The project was envisaged keeping its long-term sustainability in mind, and reversibility. Another principal objective was meeting the 'like-for-like' philosophy of conservation wherever replacements and repairs were required.

Based on the initial analysis and documentation of building material, a repair methodology was adopted. Craftsmen were trained on-site to measure all the bricks that needed restoration, which were mostly suffering from spalling and delamination. No new bricks were procured. Bricks salvaged from the site were cut to size and tumbled to attain the exact design and size of the moulded bricks that needed to be replaced.

Since these bricks were from the mid-1900s, they were similar in character to the original ones. The building also boasts of wall murals in two of its hallways. Apparently influenced by Ladakhi art, these were also restored by INTACH's Kashmir chapter.

The floods of 2014 rapidly transformed the Wazir Bagh neighbourhood. Entire portions were damaged, along with traditional decorative crafts embellishing these properties.

Several buildings that collapsed have been replaced by multiple-floor commercial buildings. In such a rapidly transforming environment, where government policy on listed buildings is still not a priority, the Amar Singh College building stands as a proud landmark of the upscale 20th-century past of Srinagar's cityscape. Its restoration showcases that traditional buildings are far more robust and resilient than perhaps contemporary structures can ever be. Also, that if restoration is carried out sensitively and prudently, there is never a need to bring a heritage building down.

— The writer is Principal Conservation Architect, INTACH, J&K

CAPTION CONTEST 1467



Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and must contain the Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday, the best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo will not be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an e-copy of the caption contest to their email or a scanned copy of the e-copy clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number in your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1466



SPECTRUM JULY 7 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

No way — Meeta Ishi Sharma via e-paper, Amritsar

Middle man — Shalu, Chandigarh

The Jam Master — Alisha Gupta via e-paper, Nabha

Above the chaos — Saba via e-paper, Chandigarh

One-man show — Asha Aggarwal, Panchkula

They are as proud of their cuisine as they are critical of those who wish to play around with it

The French perfection

RAHUL VERMA

DESPITE being a die-hard supporter of Spain, I felt a little sorry for France when it lost in the football Euro Cup last week. France has a good team. To top it, the country has just gone through a gruelling election. And then, today is their national day too. On this day 238 years back, the Bastille fell, and July 14 became a symbol of revolutionary struggle.

Keeping all that in mind, I thought it was time to say *bonjour* to French food. This cuisine is a great favourite of mine, and it never fails to amaze me that France's subtle yet flavoursome food hasn't really taken off in India, not the way, say, Chinese, Thai or Italian has.

There are some big and small French restaurants across the country, of course. Delhi has a few, and I had some great meals in restaurants which no longer exist. I remember in particular *noisette* with baked cheese and snails, and the *Brie de Meaux aux truffes* — brie soft cheese stuffed with chopped truffles, served with toasted walnut bread — that I ate at a quaint little place in New Delhi.

To my mind, the cuisine is among the top three in the world. The ingredients are often mouth-watering — who can say *no* to truffles? And, of course, it's the sauce that gives every dish a special touch. Take the immensely popular *coq au vin*. This dish gets its flavours largely from a wine sauce. What appeals to me in particular is that the sauce doesn't overwhelm the flavours of the main ingredient.

I enjoy all the wonderfully elegant dishes that the French prepare with such care. Think of *ouïe paise d'escargot* or *escargots* (snails) served with dill-flavoured hard-boiled quail eggs and jelly — or *potirone de coq au vin* (a dish of coq au vin with

FRENCH ONION SOUP

STORK

INGREDIENTS	
Butter	30 g
Onions (large, thinly sliced)	4
Black pepper (ground)	1 tsp
Meat or vegetable stock	1 litre
Worcestershire sauce	3 tbsp
Garlic (minced)	1 tsp
Crusty bread, toasted	4 slices
Cheese slices	4
Salt	To taste

METHOD

Heat a heavy-bottomed pot. Add the butter, onion, black pepper and garlic. Sauté till the onions are tender. Add the stock, Worcestershire sauce and salt.

To taste. Cover and let it simmer for 10-15 minutes. Ladle out the soup in four small bowls. Add a piece of toast and cheese slice to each bowl, and put on the top shelf of your oven broiler. Heat for about five minutes. Take out of the oven, and serve.

sautee with *duxelles*, smoked duck breast with a *sautee* potatoes, honey and truffle. But, equally, I love the home-style food of France. Consider a simple garlic soup that a French chef had prepared for me, and thought it was out of this world. When there was just a bit of soup left in my bowl, he asked me to pour some wine into it. I, following his instructions, stirred the wine in, and swirled the bowl. And then, I mopped the remaining soup-cum-wine with a piece of crusty bread, and came close to nirvana.

To prepare this garlic soup, take 120 g sliced garlic, 60 g flour, 60 g butter, 1 litre strong vegetable stock, 8 slices of bread, 40 ml cream and salt and pepper to taste. Sauté the garlic in hot butter till it is light golden. Add the flour and cook for three minutes. Now add the stock and cook for 20 minutes, stirring now and then. Season. Add the cream. Place the bread at the bottom of a soup bowl. Pour the hot soup on it and serve.

Provencal food — the cuisine of south-eastern France — is a die for. I recall a meal that Michel-

starred chef Marc Bayon had prepared at a Delhi restaurant several years ago. Provencal food, influenced by Mediterranean cuisine, relies heavily on the flavours of extra-virgin olive oil, garlic and tomatoes. His menu included a delightful garlic-rubbed herb dish with vegetables and lavender jus (thin gravy or sauce), and an olive-studded red snapper with tomato *ratatouille* and sauce *rouge* (fresh French sauce). Combinations of these three ingredients would be found in soups, soups, salads and all kinds of dishes in the region, the chef said.

The French, as I discovered after a few encounters with a couple of master chefs, are as proud of their cuisine as they are critical of those who wish to play around with it. A non-visiting chef once told me that he made soup, that there were no salt and pepper on the table when he served a meal. He used to turn very French and say 'Non, non!' when anyone asked for salt or condiments.

I have my own two-wheeled answer to French cuisine. 'Oui, oui.' I say.

ARTS



A writer residency in Kasauli by feminist theatre practitioner Mangai is reviving the late Vivan Sundaram's idea for this space

DREAM COMEBACK

R USMANAHESHWARI

SIMULTANEOUS conversations and multiple dialogues run across generations, it seems, at the Ivy Lodge in Kasauli. Be it in the paintings of Anuradha Shee-Gil or the art of her nephew, Vivan Sundaram, signifying political expressions with objects, sound and space. Vivan passed away in 2023. Art critic Geeta Kapur, his wife, had written this of him in her book *Wives Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*: "Fortunately, Vivan is one of those artists who is not hostile to the operations of the intellect, believing with me that critical writing supports the body of art, allows it mortality and retrieves it from a premature condition of hypostasis."

From this kind of perspective, the Kasauli Art Centre (KAC), which was housed at Ivy Lodge, created a circle of art which brought forth ideas. A brainchild of Vivan, from 1976 to 1991, KAC hosted artist workshops, seminars, theatre shows, film screenings and other art-related events with Indian and international artists in residencies and workshops that were among the first of their kind in the country. Today, the dream seems to be returning — across different artistic

expressions. Mangai (aka V Padma), a feminist academic-theatre practitioner from Chennai, is the pilot for the first Writer-in-Residence being organised by the Shee-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation (SSAF), established in 2019 to carry forward the legacy of the Shee-Gil-Sundaram family.

Theatre director Anuradha Kapur, sister of Geeta Kapur and one of the trustees of SSAF, says Mangai was an apt choice to pilot the writer residency, considering her long association with feminist theatre arts. Mangai's theatre group, Mangapachi, is known for its radical feminist-humanist subjects. Some of her critically acclaimed plays include *Steve Porroni*, *Anurovi*, *Penn* and *Modirgan*. She has authored books such as *Our Lines, Our Words*, *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India* and translated the Buddhist text *Theri Gatha* into Tamil.

Mangai shares that back in 1989, feminist scholar Kumkum Sangari had organised a workshop and two productions had been planned by Anuradha Kapur. One was an adaptation of Tagore's *Home and the World* (*Gharo Bano*), in which Usha Ganguly directed. The other was *Nagika Bhed* by Geetanjali Shree. Mangai says, "Geetanjali is recalled today as the Booker Prize winner, but her writing took a new shape after attending



'The Fall of the Slab' was an art project conceptualised by Vivan Sundaram in September 2016 to commemorate 40 years of the Kasauli Art Centre; (below) Mangai at Kasauli.



PHOTO BY PRAKASH K

Kumkum Sangari's workshop. Initially, she was to adapt Tagore, but she ended up with the text of *Nagika Bhed*, which was devised on Kumkum's concept note regarding representations of women such as Min, Aida Mahadevi, and the participants' own lives, in myth and reality. Mangai says that as of now, her own work is just "a germination of a concept (note) of sorts, continuing from that workshop which had brought together several people for five weeks."

The late Navina Sundaram's film, *A Story Behind Every Curtain*, documented Kumkum's workshop. Mangai says it opened her eyes. "Earlier, we usually referred to 1979 as the beginning of a cultural/theatre movement along with the women's movement, when productions such as *Our Susha* (against dowry), put together by Anuradha, Maya Rao and others, along with Shree Shakti Singhania; Anurovi, *Whisk Zai*, Ho, in Bombay; besides similar cultural movements in Calcutta, and the South emerged."

"In 1980, I had attended a festival called

Expressions organised by Flavia Agnes and Madhusree Dutta. Personally, that was the turning point for me. But I now realise that Expressions could not have happened had it not been for KAC's 1980 workshop, which was a culmination of art and activism. Kumkum helmed the workshop and participants included people like Madhusree, Anuradha, Haksar, Maya Rao, Shree Chhabra and Nilima Sheikh, some of whom continue to be collaborators. Anuradha, Geetanjali and Nilima too, work together."

Sharing her perspective on the space and her idea, Mangai says, "I feel extremely happy because it is like following a trail of a huge legacy. Just the space, the atmosphere and the scenic view of this place is very inspiring... There was no saying no to Anuradha, who has been my mentor since the early 1990s and I have great regard for her work. I am sure this place will buzz with activity as it used to." She also wants to explore the afterlives of that Kasauli workshop and document whether these participants branched off separately, or

stayed together, and what it means for today's practitioners, especially with similar kinds of feminist leanings. "Hopefully, we will have a workshop in Kasauli with these conversations. I am also using the time to research into Thirull Leelavathi's new edition of Rabindranath Tagore's *Vijnan Ganga*," she says. Anuradha Kapur recalls how in September 2016, Vivan conceptualised an artwork called *The Fall of the Slab*, involving breaking of the roof of the lower outhouse, which has now been replaced by a red roof and iron planks. "That was once a concrete roof. But in 2017, the caretaker said that houses in vicinity should only have tin roofs. So, Vivan decided to make it an art work and the booklet in front of an audience and it ended. We thought about it as a starting point of a new project, which Vivan named as Shee-Gil Sundaram Kasauli Art Project. In this sense, we moved from the Kasauli Art Centre workshop to the Kasauli Art Project." She says this revival offers another "future-looking possibility in repeating the older workshops of Kasauli, trying different modes of collectivity and as a space for reflection and writing. That is the kind of art project that Mangai will work on."

The SSAF also plans to have a series of seminars. "From March to October, we get six to seven working months in Kasauli. We wish to explore various possibilities, such as writer residencies and seminars. We are also exploring the idea of a three-week summer school, looking at ways to supplement both practice-oriented work and critical thinking, and theatre and visual arts workshops, which may or may not be mentioned. The summer school will be for these weeks, with young participants meeting a year later to see what they have done. Our hope is to have a pedagogical space, a summer school, as well as a space for working and viewing films, visual art, rehearsing projects of theatre, just as Vivan had envisioned..."

On display at Santiniketan, legendary photojournalist Kulwant Roy's work continues to inspire

Life, in black & white

SARITA SHARMA



Badrinath pilgrims go, copyright KULWANT ROY COLLECTION, KUTUB KHANNA ARCHIVE & INDIA PHOTO ARCHIVE FOUNDATION



Reticulated negative of Gandhi and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan at a prayer meeting.



Bhakra Nangal dam, 1950s.

IN the 1970s, celebrated photographer Kulwant Roy was diagnosed with blood cancer, a disease then shrouded in mystery. Aware that the end would come soon, he began handing over his archive to Aditya Arya, a family friend and photographer. By 1980-81, he had given Arya almost his entire collection. Roy died in 1984, leaving behind a wealth of photographic history. Arya well remembers their last conversation. "One day, if you have time, go through them and you will find something interesting," he had told Arya.

When that day arrived some 25 years later, Arya discovered a rich archive of history — of an India fighting to attain independence, of its many heroes in their candid moods, the many firsts the country was to soon touch, the many temples modern India was to raise...

Born in Ludhiana, Kulwant Roy trained at Gopal Chatter Kulkarni in Lahore, a photo studio run by Arya's maternal grandfather, which supplied photographs to *The Tribune* as well. At Lahore, and later when he opened a photo agency in Delhi, Roy saw history being scripted from those near close quarters. And like a fine archivist he kept his negatives safe. But time, fluctuating temperatures and humid conditions during those long years of storage had left crizzling-like defects on the negatives. Arya had an uphill task at hand.

"There is always a right time, right place for everything. It had opened those trunks of mine, I wouldn't have had the resources, also, the word 'digitisation' had not come into being. There were no methodologies to salvage the photographs because we were still in the world of analog. It's only in the late 2000s that people started talking about digitisation of images. By then, I had the



Kulwant Roy, Royal Indian Air Force

resources to undertake that as well," says Arya, known for his commercial and travel photography. "The negatives were like jigsaw puzzles. We assembled these on flatbed scanners and created images."

The world these images threw up was exceptional. Muslim League meetings, INA trials (among them a picture of INA soldiers singing *Kadam kadam badhaye ja* before Gandhi's signing of the Indian Constitution), the building of Bhakra Nangal dam (depicting the scale of human effort behind the scientific marvel), besides others. Roy had travelled with Mahatma Gandhi, photographed Jawaharlal Nehru as a Seva Dal volunteer in Delhi, joined the Royal Indian Air Force, trained as an aerial reconnaissance pilot...

Digitisation began in 2008, a process that turned fragile negatives into digital images. Over the years, thousands of photographs have been preserved, yet, as many remain. Around 80 are on display at Arya's Gurugram museum, Museo Camera, one of the largest museums of photog-

raphy in Asia. Nearly 75 of these are on display at an exhibition, *History in the Making: Visual Archive of Kulwant Roy*, being showcased at Artishila in Santiniketan (West Bengal) till September 1.

A highlight of this exhibition is the portrait Roy sent to friends during his world tour from 1968 to 1972. "While on this tour he was constantly clicking pictures and sending them to his photo agency. When he returned, the negatives were missing. Were they stolen? Were they hidden? No one knows what happened," recalls Arya. Roy was heartbroken. He announced rewards in newspapers for anyone who'd return the negatives, rummaged through garbage bins in a futile attempt to find them. These portraits thus serve as verbal imagery of what he saw and how he saw. Written from places as diverse as Amsterdam to Geneva and Nagasaki, these are poignant glimpses into his experiences and the images that were lost forever.

Roy's career trajectory could be divided into two phases: before and after independence. After 1947, his focus changed. He began was now trained on building of a new India; instead of following Gandhi, he was following pilgrims and travelling to various places. India was already an exotic place and his photo agency was supplying images to several international publications. Museo Camera has a wall dedicated to his images published in newspapers and magazines all over Europe, Arya recalls.

Insisting on the urgency of archiving, he wishes that he had begun digitising Roy's archive sooner. "Most of the analog material is reaching a point of no return. We have to preserve whatever we can for posterity." His advice to those whose black and white family photos are decaying is clear: "Take them out of the albums, get them scanned and get digital copies made." Test it is too late.

BOOKS

The enduring Roy of hope

DIA PANDI

THE title of the book is both evocative and mysterious: it is a personal memoir of one of our most admired public activists, or a political statement of sorts? Before I go any further, let me put in a disclaimer: Aruna and Bunker Roy have been our friends ever since we got to know them in the late Seventies in Chandigarh, and they had just started their work based in Rajasthan's Thilonia. In those days, while Bunker was training barefoot engineers to provide village-level technology that would ease the life of villagers, Aruna began coaxing the women to work with textiles and make bags, cushion covers and stuffed toys that were strung as mobiles for babies. I used to joke then that our home in Chandigarh was like their showroom: our curtains, *divan* covers, the *kushia* that our babies slept on—all these were generous gifts given to us by Aruna.

How far away those innocent times seem now. Bunker was a dashing dude then: fresh from St Stephen's College and a national squash champion. Members of his distinguished family were peppered all across the world and it seemed to us wide-eyed admirers that there wasn't anyone he did not know on a first-name basis. Aruna, the quieter of the two, had her own remarkable history. She had quit the IAS (at a time few had the courage to do so) to start work in a remote desert area with women who still wore veils, and were deeply suspicious of one who roamed around without one. I can only imagine what it must have been for the two of them to live with all the comforts of electricity and running water, in a rough 'home'



THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL:
AN ACTIVIST'S MEMOIR

by Aruna Roy
HarperCollins.
Pages 272.
₹599

«Aruna Roy's true achievement is to focus attention on the rights of people whom we had forgotten to mention. PHOTO: GAURI GILL»

with the bare minimum to ease their life. This book draws a veil over those personal hardships and the challenges of that life: both Bunker and Aruna had long ago subsumed their individual lives into that of a larger community, so readers who seek such information may feel disappointed. What the book does emphasise is that in order to effect change, one must become that change. It was Gandhiji who first gave us this mantra and as an old folk saying puts it: '*Jaise pair un pat bharayai, wahi jaisa jaisa pair parayai*.' Roughly translated, it means, 'How can one understand another's pain if she has not suffered cracked and bleeding heels?' Gradually, as this book reveals, Aruna managed to break through

the layers of suspicion and sulken disbelief. The encounter of these villagers with the sorcerer had bred in them a healthy contempt for anyone who promised them anything. The reader will meet many characters in this book, like Nauri, Mongi and Bilan, who became active participants in protests against taxes, *zari*, female infanticide. Once their tongues were loosed, there was no stopping them. Their confidence in themselves and their collective strength assuaged the arrogant and feudal system questions that it was unable to answer.

'Working class women's politics was taught to me,' says Aruna, 'by these 'professors' who knew and articulated the thought in an idiom much more compelling

and communicative than mine could have been. They stated their own limitations and made me see and accept some of mine.' It will become evident soon enough that this was a two-way education. Aruna brought them a world of the outside and they gave her insights that had the strength and honesty of lived experiences. How right Gandhiji was when he said all those years ago that before you take a decision, think of the poorest man you know and ask yourself how this decision will affect his life. Aruna brought enormous change in the lives of these sequestered and hidden women. Yet, equally, she has been radically reformed by her own work amongst them: Her work in the Right to Information, MNREGA, Right to Education et al, got her the prestigious Magsaysay Award, but her true achievement was to focus attention on the rights of people whom we had forgotten to factor in when making high-minded policies.

This glaring mistake that all governments have been guilty of committing has been highlighted in the recent elections, where the common man has trumped the uncommon and privileged person. Never again, I hope, will this salutary lesson be forgotten when drawing plans for the nation's progress. For the fruits of economic progress reach the last Indian, economic progress will be like building a fortress on a bed of sand. Again, Aruna's mentoring of a dedicated band of like-minded workers is something that must be followed by other activists. Long after she and Bunker retire, they can rest assured their followers will continue the good work they have laid the foundation for.

I finally understood why the book is titled 'the personal is political': there is no other way to live a meaningful life.

Long goodbye to Darwin and other truths

LALAN BAHUGUNA

MEERA NANDA'S 'A Field Guide to Post-Truth India' is a fascinating book that touches upon a critically important theme—the existing crisis of truth, science and knowledge and its newer manifestations in the form of post-truth culture. The book deliberates on the emerging crisis for a post-secular India, where the newer canons of 'Indian Knowledge System' are being presented as a process of decolonisation and new ways of attaining freedom from the hegemonic discourses of the 'Western Knowledge System'.

Nanda, a prominent academic and historian of science, offers a layered and nuanced critique of the changing contours of Indian thought. She states that the central thesis of the book is that a post-secular India will be a post-truth India. She lays bare the contemporary processes of post-truth making where myths are presented as a substitute for history, pseudoscience as science and mysticism as a legitimate tool of attaining scientific method and objective knowledge. Nanda's analysis filters down into a succinct argument, which shows how the



A FIELD GUIDE TO POST-TRUTH INDIA
by Meera Nanda
Three Essays Collective.
Pages 194.
₹600

repackaging of these ideas is being presented as a form of decolonisation of the Indian mind to restore the 'Indian Knowledge System'. She has critically examined the various facets of the emerging post-truth culture in India; for instance, the assault on secularism, science and scientific worldview and the making of a 'Hindu' public sphere.

According to Nanda, once upon a time, the cultivation of scientific temper and critical sense of inquiry was a fundamental duty of every citizen of the Indian republic. This

critical rationality, especially through the educational curriculum, is now being rapidly replaced by a 'Hindu temper', supported by an outdated metaphysics presented to public in the 'Indian Knowledge System'.

The author catalogues the landscape of post-truth India in two important categories. In the first and the last chapters of the book—'Big Lies and Deep Lies in Post-Truth India' and 'Yogic Perception and Hindu Sciences, From Early Beginnings to Our Troubled Times'—it is examined how discourses on the epistemological crisis are constructed by the intellectuals themselves, marching under the banner of social constructivism, post-colonialism and other fashionable theories of knowledge-as-power-games, who have led the assault on the very idea of objective truth.

Here, the author unpacks the discourses on 'big lies' and 'deep lies' from a comparative framework of the United States under Trump and India under Modi, which she considers as a paradigm shift in post-secular India. The chapters explain how an epistemological crisis creates the pathways of post-truth culture, where knowledge is not considered as justified true belief; rather, it becomes subjective

and a subject of cultural production.

The second theme of the book is addressed in chapters 2, 3 and 4. 'Defending Tradition and Defying Science: Ayurveda in the Times of Covid-19', 'The Dark Age of the Unicorn: Searching for Indigenous Ayanas', and 'India's Long Goodbye to Darwin' address questions of pseudo-science and mysticism. Here, the author has looked at the critical efficacy of Ayurvedic medicine and its different variants at the time of the pandemic.

She also critiques the model of the IITP Khajuraho Calendar, whose theme is 'Recovery of Indian Knowledge System'. Another interesting argument is made regarding the compromise faced by an objective understanding of history through the removal of Darwinian understanding from the educational curriculum of NCERT textbooks.

Over the decades, Meera Nanda has contributed to the creation of a counter-critical public to understand the importance of science, objective truth and constitutional democracy. This is a highly recommended book for anyone who wishes to understand the making of post-truth culture in the post-secular public sphere of India.

Sustainability in design and as part of life

JITESH MALIK

COMPILED and edited by Lakshmi Swaminathan, 'A Call To Return, A Journey With Didi Contractor' presents an intimate journey of a well-read, thoughtful, and a beautiful mind, in search of deep connections between the higher realm and the material manifestation. This inspiring journey is a collaged work of pieces narrated by Didi herself about her own life experiences, her pictures, sketches and Lakshmi's reflections as an intern, who is awe-inspired by the master's life and the processes that shaped her architectural works. Lakshmi has woven it all together very well, from a multitude of manuscripts and transcriptions of Didi's lectures from the latter years. The book starts with an apt foreword by Satish Kumar reminding us of the necessity of a radical shift in consciousness, which Didi exemplified through her life and works, showing us the various hiccups and strategies to tackle the ensuing environmental crisis.

The book is so much more than a story of an individual artist/architect. It is almost a treatise on *harma yoga*, a guide to approaching everyday life problems and forming connections with people and places, all that with a deeply compassionate and contemplative process of engagement with the ecology and the local culture in all its complexities. Her experiences in New Mexico, Andretta, Bunkay and numerous other places, all come together in her chosen home, Jower Dharamsala and Sikkharbaria. While this book doesn't cover any of her



Didi Contractor insisted on the use of locally available materials in construction.



A CALL TO RETURN,
A JOURNEY WITH DIDI CONTRACTOR
Compiled and edited by
Lakshmi Swaminathan.
Borgen Tree
Pages 168.
₹350

project in detail, it is structured in a thematic way. The first section lays down her formative years, then it opens up one's mind to the philosophical basis of her works, and goes on to describe her approach to the key ideas of sustainability and the design principles that guided her practice. In a nutshell, her process of design and approach to life is very direct and is inspired by her lived experience, all of which is beautifully captured in the letters that she wrote. These are presented towards the end of the book.

The book is full of stories and anecdotes from her childhood in the US, her growing up in a very evocative environment with artist parents and her encounters with the late, numerous artistic personalities like Hans Hofmann, Frank Lloyd Wright, the

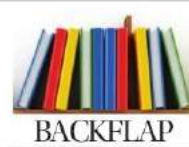
story of her name to the stories of her health and of her death. At each juncture, one is enthralled and feels uplifted by how she solves problems and celebrates life.

For me, personally, as an educator and an architect practising sustainability and a student of regional yoga, the book has many lessons. I am touched by Didi's generosity, her ability to live life to the fullest, by being in the moment and offering her work, and her learnings of life to so many people. There are many inspiring insights that she shares, but I particularly enjoyed the part where she narrates how she sees and uses light in her architecture. She goes on to describe nuanced details to increase the light with minimal openings, and offers solutions like using paper mache in plaster to make it stronger. Didi insisted on the use of locally available materials and adapted them with her own imaginative and quirky mind.

Architecture, for Didi, was both an inner journey and a relational process. She connected deeply with her clients, getting to know them well and then offered intuitive solutions.

I was riveted by the connection she establishes between craft and food. The kitchen is the lively core of her design and in the book, there are ample places where she shares recipes and the joy of growing and cooking food. Sustainability doesn't become a didactic process but a means, a call to living life in celebration with ecology and people as part of the whole.

The book has something for everyone and anyone who is choosing to live life consciously and fully!



THE DEATH OF A SARAS CRANE
by Ambai. Translated by
Gita Subramaniam.
Seaking Tiger.
Pages 190. ₹499

Tamil author Ambai's famed detective character Sudha Gupta travels to Mumbai to solve mysteries that meld suspense and intrigue with social commentary. 'A Room Measuring 250 Square Feet' tackles taboos and secrets. 'The Death of a Saras Crane' explores privilege and tragedy, while 'Sepal' delves into forbidden love, and 'Bun, Masika and Trani Chai' redefines belonging and friendship.



THE REMAINS OF THE BODY
by Saket Majumdar.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 172. ₹499

Writer Saket Majumdar says he feels deeply drawn to the shapelessness of human sexuality, particularly when it changes form between family, society, and conjugal partnerships. 'The Remains of the Body' is an exploration of desire, marriage and friendship between three Indian immigrants in North America. The author challenges conventional notions of marriage and friendship and asks questions about the primitive ways in which human beings reach out to each other.



SINEMA: THE BOLLYWOOD BUNGLE
OF ANDY DUGGAL
by Vikram Singh
Seaking Tiger
Pages 304. ₹499

Third-generation producer Andy Duggal was part of the Bollywood *creme de la creme*, but is now a walking disaster. Drinks, drugs and dalliance are his constant companions; his wife is filing for divorce; his latest film is a colossal train wreck. And now Andy finds himself entangled in a devious web spun by a mafia don. Filmmaker and scriptwriter Vikram Singh paints an eye-opening picture of the film industry.



THE BOOK OF WEALTH: A YOUNG
INVESTOR'S GUIDE TO WEALTH
AND HAPPINESS
by Mark Mobius.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 208. ₹250

In 'The Book of Wealth', Mark Mobius, one of the most successful and influential money managers in the world, offers a roadmap to understand the diverse avenues of wealth creation. Replete with examples and anecdotes, the guidebook offers practical tips to invest in stocks, bonds, mutual funds, besides alternative assets like real estate, precious metals, digital collectibles, cryptocurrencies, etc. It also delves into what constitutes true wealth, extending beyond financial accumulation and underscores the importance of prosperity.

REFLECTIONS

What Kohli can teach India A tale of two trees

GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

THE night India won the T20 World Cup, the night Virat Kohli retired from T20s, Mohammed Shami remembered his old teammate. He put up photographs of himself with Kohli on social media, starting with one that was both bleak and hopeful: fire and gravel and headlines and words that burned his heart, from 2021, when he received horrendous online abuse after the defeat to Pakistan in the T20 World Cup.

Words wound — anonymous words such as thrown by 'fans' would terribly, for players like Shami have no way to confront their tormentors. The tumult of the bigots is amplified by social media, which helps them deliver their message to the victim. The asymmetry of power is overwhelming — it's one against a mad horde, willing to lynch with words.

And Kohli stands between the mob and their victim.

After India lost to Pakistan, by 10 wickets, in Dubai in October 2021, Shami was called a traitor; he was told to go to Pakistan, but no other player was told to migrate. It was only Shami, for his religion made him an outsider — by the bigots who wish to reimagine India the way Pakistan was conceived, by feelings of separation and religious chauvinism.

Kohli tore apart the bigots during a press conference — after the BCCI media handler advised journalists that 'only cricketing' questions would be taken and then tried to muzzle a question related to religion. "To me, attacking someone over their religion is the



When Mohammed Shami was targeted after India lost to Pakistan, it was Virat Kohli who tore apart the bigots during a press conference. PH

most, I would say, pathetic thing that a human being can do," Kohli said. "I personally have never even thought of discriminating (against) anyone over their religion. That is a very sacred and personal thing to every human being and that should be left there."

Words that our politicians, seeking to impose religious and cultural uniformity in a beautifully diverse country, would do well to heed and repeat.

DRAVID AND T20s

Rahul Dravid walks away into the sunset in a blaze of glory, lionised by all for coaching India's T20 team to the World Cup title.

The irony in this is inescapable — his greatest triumph as coach is in the format he thought very little of.

Dravid is arguably India's greatest Test batsman, a classicist who personified cricket's hoariest traditions — a straight bat, a flinty mind, a body that could remain at the

crease for six sessions straight, on pitches that changed character every hour.

He's a man who played only one T20! and thought the format was so paltry that he did not want the honour of captaining India in the inaugural T20 World Cup in 2007 — he didn't even play in that tournament! What's more, he then captain, David persuaded Sourav Ganguly and Sachin Tendulkar to not be part of the team, the reins of which were handed over to MS Dhoni.

India won the T20 World Cup last month by beating South Africa by seven runs — a margin so paltry, it could well have been a defeat if the opponent had a bit of luck. T20 is a format of luck and chance and six different teams have won the title in the nine T20 World Cup tournaments — consistency is impossible, and Afghanistan can beat Australia and the US amateurs can beat Pakistan. But the format has money and glamour, tumult and noise, and that is very attractive.

Dravid is, however, a self-effacing, modest man and, surely, he knows that he's been assigned greater honour than he himself would accord to a coach of a T20 team; he would much rather have won the World Test Championship final against Australia in 2023.

He's also being idolised as a fearless man and leader for it seems to have been forgotten that he presided over a divided team made insecure by coach Greg Chappell, with whom he was aligned more than his teammates.

"It's time Dravid exerted himself and told Chappell that in future, he will call the shots," Ravi Shastri said in 2006. "Dravid should stand up and say that he is the boss and that he controls matters once he crosses the boundary line."

"Because of Greg Chappell, the dressing room was divided," Ganguly said in 2011.

"Rahul Dravid is such a type of a person who wants that everything goes smoothly. He knew that things were going wrong, but he had no courage to revolt and tell him (Chappell) that he was doing wrong."

Nice guy or a snowflake? Well, possibly the greatest Indian Test batsman, for sure.



RAAJA BHASIN

IN front of our flat in Delhi, there is a large silk cotton tree. While this is flanked by other makes and species, and is partially obscured by a brash Ashoka that started as an upstart shrub, it is the 'aravali' or cotton tree that dominates the windows and balcony. As the day passes and the seasons change, the tree, expertly, changes. When the power goes off, as it occasionally does, the drama in the tree provides greater delight than numerous TV shows.

The morning begins with a meep up and down the tree's trunk by a drey of squirrels — or are those chipmunks? I don't know the difference. But they are fluffy, kinda cute and have long, bushy tails. They seem to have nothing better to do than lose calories in their feckety scurry for food and whatever else that they fill their days with. Having got its waking and sleeping cycles all wrong, the occasional rot also mees along a purr by the tree and dives headlong into the bowl of grain that has been left out for the birds by our neighbours. Then is the turn of the parakeets, who announce their arrival, or departure, with loud screeches.

The highest branches are taken by a pair of kites, whose sharp eyes search for prey and then, with a sudden swoop, off they go to grab their next meal. Quite like squatters, bulbuls and barbets arrive to claim space on vacant branches and refuse to budge. When the flowers emerge a bright red in early spring, in when the fruit bats arrive and the evening hours are taken over by these unusual pollinators.

The other tree is in the hills and is one that I have known all my life. This is *eunymus*, sometimes called a mock lemon. This fine person was meant to spend life as a small shrub, but somewhere along the line changed its mind and grew into a delightful, small tree. By its side were three other companions that time has taken to the place where good souls and good trees finally go. One has put down fresh cuttings in the hope that one day they, too, will emerge over the small plants around.

Unlike the cotton tree that discourages climbing with its straight trunk and conical gales along the bark, the *eunymus* welcomes its scramblers. This tree, with its dense foliage and intricate sculpture, was where we would vanish as children. In its lushness lay castles and forts. Branches could transform themselves into ships or aeroplanes and the occasional spaceship could come visiting and zoom us off to a distant planet.

At other times, this tree could emerge as a real-life hiding place. Take the moment when a good neighbour, somewhat older than me, decided that all the little ones and the somewhat older girls of the area were entitled to the protection of his well-developed biceps. Now someone who had moved more recently into the area, and was



Langurs foraging in the eunymus tree after heavy snowfall. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

No one climbs the eunymus tree now. Another generation of tree climbers has also grown and gone

far older, did not know this. Nor was he particularly kind or polite to the girls who were now under protection of the aforesaid biceps. A moment of crisis occurred when the new neighbour pushed one of the girls aside while she was sleeping on the path that he had to cross. Her legs got tangled in the sleeping rope and she hurt herself. The biceps did not approve of this. This required suitable action. Quite like a scene from the infamous *Mahabharata*, the biceps were ably assisted by his minions. We waited till the person who pushed was to return home. A confused mass of caws, whistles and barks announced the impending arrival of the who had dared push a girl. The person passed under the eunymus tree where the biceps lay in wait. An arm swinging a frying pan shot out of the foliage, and a certain somebody lay flat on the path. In moments, the biceps and assorted underlings had vanished. None spoke of the incident again.

No one climbs the eunymus tree now. Another generation of tree climbers has also grown and gone. It has now been passed on to monkeys who, taking their lesson from a frying pan-wielding human, now use this tree to ambush and waylay anyone who is carrying something edible. In winter, the rhesus monkeys give way to the large dark langurs, who eat the leaves and gnaw at the bark. When they are beset with other nooks and crannies, house sparrows occasionally make their nests in the deep innards of this tree. A few days back, with the first lashes of monsoon rain, a disused nest fell out of the tree. This may not have had the artistry of a weaverbird or the determination that was a woodpecker's cavity in a tree, but, from a little distance, was neat enough. A closer inspection revealed the materials that it was made of. Here was a sign of our times. The much-feared sparrows had made their nests from the very materials that endanger them and other birds — the whorls of long pine needles and strands of hair were interspersed with strings of plastic and polyester stuffing.

Repatriate's reunion with samosa

ANUSHEH

THROUGH decades of travel and setting up home in different countries, the search for comfort food often ended with savouring a samosa in its numerous forms. Those stepping beyond Indian shores share an emotional bond with this mildly spicy, crisp savoury snack, always immensely pleasurable and satisfying.

I am reminded of one of my many sojourns into the bylines of Anawartha Road in downtown Yangon (the erstwhile Rangoon, the commercial capital of Myanmar). I had stepped into a small, non-descript restaurant that claimed to be serving authentic Myanmar cuisine. Tempted by the list of vegetarian dishes, the *samosa* soup in particular piqued my interest. Like most Indians, the crisp flaky potato-filled golden triangles were a mouth-watering delicacy that conjured up sweet memories of student days when 'samosa and chai' were a ritual with friends. That day, the picture that stared back at me had some pointed edges peeping out of a host of soup. Obviously, the *samosa* had travelled a long way.

Most of us believe that *samosa* is an Indian snack that has evolved over centuries. Not quite, since its origin can be traced to Central Asia and the Middle Eastern countries. The

first mention of a snack bearing a striking similarity to our modern-day *samosa* was found in Arab cookbooks dating back to the 11th century. These mentioned the pastry as 'sambusak' (derived from 'sambosag', a Persian term). The recipe seems to have reached South Asia through the Middle Eastern skilled cooks who sought employment in the kitchens of the Sultan of Delhi.

Mention of the *samosa* in Amir Khusrau's writings (poet and scholar of the 13th century) revealed its popularity among the nobility and royal families. By this time, the *samosa* had been refined to perfection with stuffings of mince meat, ghee and onions.

Samosa is prepared with a wafer-thin outer pastry that is rolled out and formed into a cone, filled with stuffings ranging from meat

and game, to potatoes, cottage cheese and vegetables, before being sealed and deep-fried on a low flame to yield a crisp, golden brown outer crust with a soft filling inside.

The basic recipe remains the same but over time, delectable variations have emerged — *lukhm* in Hyderabad, *samosa chut* is popular as street food in North India, *sambosak* in Arab countries, *samosa* in Turkish-speaking nations of Central Asia, *baguza* in the Maldives, *sambusa* in Ethiopia and Somalia, and *Indonesian's* own version of *samosa* is served with *sambal*.

Samosa wound its way into Myanmar as it did into South Asian countries. Served as a fried snack in tea shops and as street food, it has also been adapted into a more wholesome dish served in local restaurants, as *samosa* soup, called *samosa thauk*. Interestingly, this is a jump from an oil cook, into a bowl of lentil soup.

Samosa soup is a combination of lentil soup, *samosa*, and salad comprising onions, cabbage, carrots, chillies and coriander leaves. Tamarind or lemon juice can be added to make it a bit sour and tangy. A complete *samosa* soup combines more than 20 ingredients, and the end result is simply delicious.

On my return to India after 16 years, I have perfected the *samosa* soup, and love to serve it as a Burmese-Indian entree!

The basic recipe remains the same but over time, delectable variations have emerged across continents

Tragedy that every forest fire unfolds for the voiceless

GURBHANU SINGH

ANOTHER monsoon is upon us. It's a time when, ideally, melodies of *Mallikarjuna* should have been sweetening the misty air of Shimla. However, the first showers rather appear as the strike of Lord Shiva's trident — especially in a city that is still recovering from its frightening monsoonal experience last year. The first rains have fallen and with them have also fallen a few deviants: mud, has eroded downstream and engulfed stranded vehicles in its path. One awaits with bated breath the next two months!

Before overcast clouds from the south-west arrived to create romance or paths in Shimla hills, it was the smoke from forest fires that had filled the cityscape, and also the news columns. I have spent many nights keeping vigil at the Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre at Tufkhand as fires raged far away, and asking the forest guard incharge if he had received enough local help to put out the blaze. The worry, of course, is the safety of the rescued wildlife (mostly leopards and bears) that are housed at this centre for treatment, rehabilitation and even as their permanent home. However, on May 28, luck and effort did seem to have run out as five threatened animals approached the aged inhabitants.

In a strenuous situation amid choking smoke, the forest staff, led from the front by the Deputy Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Shimla, did their all to save the wild inhabitants. Miraculously for the wildlife the blaze took



The rescued cheetah and leopard cubs.



A forest pond is a blessing for animals. PHOTO COURTESY: KANWAR SINGH

an upward turn, only to create another danger as it then headed in the direction of the Bal Ashram. The news spread and the entire district administration was on the spot taking control of the situation.

Unity is strength, and the joint efforts of the administration and citizens resulted in controlling the fire, averting what could have been a twin tragedy.

Countless such tragedies in my India have been averted during the past summer when our great lakes of fauna were reported in a city where buildings never had the need or provision for one, and daily life now seems to be transitioning into a welcome monsoon.

For those sensitised to walk the earth a bit more gently — a result of their passion and education in wildlife

— the past summer was indeed a forgettable one. They were privy to the disaster that unfolded during the forest fire season.

I remember having a discussion with my superior as to the veracity of a social media image where in a pheasant mother lay charred to death beside its clutch of eggs, obviously choosing death rather than abandoning her maternal instincts. Whether that image was real or not, the forest staff at Mashobra Range did rescue the orphaned cheetah cubs from another forest fire. They are now being nursed at Kufri Zoo. The endeavour has been beautifully filmed by the Conservator of Forests, Shimla, to raise awareness about the silent

tragedy that every forest fire unfolds for the voiceless.

Majority of forest fires are caused by humans. Isn't lighting someone's home on fire supposed to be a crime of the gravest kind? Many human hearts still resonate with the pain and suffering borne by the faunal forms of life, but it arguably takes a Buddhist-like sensitivity to acknowledge the suffering of the flora. Irrespective of our abilities to be sensitive, that plants are as alive as we are proved by the legendary polymath, JC Bose. More recently, in the *Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben has postulated strikingly on how floral life forms feel, communicate, love and form social bonds. The recent forest fire in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have thus been a gigantic disaster in the Wohlleben or Boseoian sense.

In the difficult season gone by, one of the most heartening sights was the monthly report on wildlife monitoring from the Renukaji Wildlife Sanctuary. What a blessing a lone, small water pond in the forest can be to wildlife in the sweltering heat was captured by a camera put at a vantage point. Between June 13 and June 17, the water hole, barely a foot deep, was unmissably used for a cool swim by a porcupine, a mottled palm civet, a yellow-throated marten, a black-throated deer, a mother bear and her cub, and was our omniscient companions in Shimla — a macaque.

Life in the wild is not a rose, so let's not add thorns to it. Those who have survived the fire, now have a monsoon toed with Shimla prays to the benignity of the rain gods!

— The writer is an Indian Forest Service officer

Risk is an inherent part of adventure, but so can be preparedness to tackle any eventuality. It's time to turn introspection into action

MAKING ADVENTURE TOURISM SAFER

PARTH JOSHI

AS the brief weather window between late spring and pre-monsoon opened up, I was buoyant, packed and ready to depart on a two-week expedition to Kalindi Khal, a high-altitude pass in Uttarakhand connecting the holy shrines of Gangotri and Badrinath, when the news came that nine trekkers had died after being caught in a blizzard while on a trek to Sahasra Tal. It's a high-altitude lake in Uttarakashi district not very far from where we were planning to hike.

A few weeks later, another grave tragedy was averted in the neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh. More than a hundred trekkers were left stranded in the middle of a trek to Hamto Pass, connecting the valleys of Kullu and Spiti, abandoned by their trekking guides who found themselves overwhelmed with the logistics.

These are not one-off events. This year itself, a woman lost her life while paragliding in Kullu as her harness broke off mid-air, and two tourists died while rafting near Rishikesh, swept off by a strong river current.

Every year, we see an increasing number of fatalities across the adventure tourism sector in the country. While some of these involve seasoned adventurers succumbing to unforeseen events or elements, a majority of these cases are avoidable situations, symptomatic of the disarray the industry finds itself in. It calls upon policymakers, the industry and civil society to introspect on the immediate and long-term measures to ensure the sustainability

of one of the fastest growing segments in the Indian tourism market.

CHANGING PRIORITIES

The early 1990s saw the rise of adventure tourism in India, as young adventurers, driven by a passion for the outdoors, turned into entrepreneurs. Foreigners and upmarket Indians with a taste for nature were their primary clientele. These yesteryears were perhaps the golden days of the industry, with meticulous planning that relied on experts rather than the Internet, and customers who were driven by their passion for the outdoors rather than peer pressure.

From there, things snowballed into a state of degeneration pretty fast. A rapid surge in infrastructure improved connectivity by leaps and bounds, from highways to airports, while the IT revolution brought in a new consumer segment of young people riding a wave of surge in disposable income eager for some adrenaline rush. Then came social media, with its curated feeds glamorising adventure while conveniently omitting the risks and preparation involved, inciting people to attempt activities beyond their skill level.

Statistically, we may say the adventure tourism sector is at an all-time high. The global market size was valued at \$282.1 billion in 2021 and projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.2 percent from 2023 to 2030. It is creating local employment, especially for youth, and putting hitherto unknown destinations on the map.

Yet, this may be a ticking time bomb. Unsustainable adventure activities pose a grave risk to both the environment as well

as human safety. Look at the case of Antarctica, where tourist numbers have exploded from around 7,000 in 1996 to almost 1,00,000, with the carbon footprint of each tourist arrival equalling a snow load of 75 tonnes. Or Mount Everest, where overcrowding at altitudes above 8,000 metres, once unimaginable, is leading to an increasing number of tourist deaths.

When it comes to India, these incidents are increasingly prompting an impulsive and overly cautious reaction from the authorities, focusing on immediate response but lacking in foresight. Take the example of the Uttarakhand High Court ban on camping in alpine meadows in the state in 2018, or a blanket ban on all treks in Kinnaur district in Himachal Pradesh in the wake of inclement weather in 2021. In fairness, this is often prompted by a lack of support infrastructure and human resource. Yet, it does not bode well either for the industry or the adventure community if such instances start becoming the norm rather than an exception.

There are four key areas we can focus on to strengthen the foundations of the adventure tourism industry—strong policies and operational standards, human resource, support infrastructure and consumer behaviour.

At present, we have the National Adventure Tourism Strategy released by the Ministry of Tourism in 2022 and the Indian Adventure Tourism Guidelines formulated by the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India in 2018 as guiding policy documents. Some states have their own adventure tourism policies or guidelines. While all of these try to establish a scope of the industry and a vision for its growth, they need to be supplemented with robust operational standards and guidelines, coupled with institutions that can enforce them upon the industry.

For instance, look at the Austrian Alpine Association (ÖAV), a renowned organisation dedicated to mountaineering and alpine safety in Austria. It offers a comprehensive training programme for mountain guides, ensuring high competency across the profession. The ÖAV also maintains and operates a vast network of mountain huts that provide vital refuge and support for hikers and climbers in the Alps. Or the European Commission Adventure Tourism Safety Guidelines, an initiative to harmonise safety standards across the Euro-

pean Union for different adventure activities, emphasising on risk assessment, guide qualifications, emergency response plans, and participant information.

We only have a handful of such training institutes in India, that too with limited teaching and infrastructural capabilities. In a large country like ours which has a diversity of biogeographic regions, each with their own portfolio of adventure activities, we need to consider at least one such institution in each state. Furthermore, these institutes need to be able to engage with their peers globally through exposure visits and knowledge exchange. We should aspire for Indian adventure guides to be competent enough to ply their trade globally, like their Nepalese or European counterparts.

Similar standards need to be enforced for classification and maintenance of equipment, which can follow those set by internationally renowned organisations like the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA) or the International Rafting Federation (IRF).

NEED TO REDEFINE ROLES

It is important to note that enforcing such standards requires the government to play the role of a market regulator. In the current scenario where price-based competition is leading to compromises in equipment quality and deployment of quality human resource, establishing minimum price ceilings, at least in the short term, can provide a regulatory oversight to ensure that the industry complies with and performs to global standards. Look at the case of Bhutan, where establishing minimum per day tariffs for foreign tourists enabled tour operators to provide high quality services while ensuring that the tourist numbers remain sustainable.

The government also needs to play the role of a market enabler to create a robust safety and support infrastructure. Even today, we only have a handful of private operators providing heli-rescue or other emergency evacuation services, or insurance companies providing comprehensive outdoor insurance. This leads to most rescue operations falling upon the armed forces or the state disaster management authorities, who have limited infrastructure and resources to spare. Using fiscal incentives like tax credits, subsidies or

guaranteed contracts can lower the initial investment risk for private companies, encouraging them to enter these markets.

We can also develop a market for ancillary services. Take the case of weather forecasts. Adventure tourism relies heavily on the ability to predict the weather and preparing for associated risks. Activities like mountaineering demand highly accurate weather forecasts down to the hour, for which most operators are willing to pay a premium. This could be a potential entry point for tech entrepreneurs working in the domain of geospatial applications. Adventure tourism will greatly benefit by adopting the 'Make in India' approach, which is accelerating growth in the manufacturing sector.

Consumer responsibility is another crucial aspect. While governments and operators have a role to play in establishing strong safety measures, the onus also falls on consumers to be informed and prepared. Social media's curated portrayal of adventure tourism often glosses over the inherent risks. As we can see from all these fatalities on Mount Everest, no amount of money or Sherpas are sufficient to safeguard one's life in the absence of adequate physical preparation, and adherence to safety standards.

While on a trip a few years back to climb Stok Kangri, one of the most popular trekking peaks in Ladakh standing a little over 6,300 metres, I was appalled to find out that because of human waste, one could not drink water from the streams flowing along the camps, forcing one to buy plastic mineral water bottles. This went against the entire purpose of going outdoors, being able to enjoy nature in all its purity. That one could also buy a bottle of beer for a relatively meagre sum of ₹300 at the base camp in the middle of nowhere was another matter. Cut to today, all trekking activity is completely banned in the region, plagued by water scarcity and unmanageable waste. A classic example of why not to spoil the well from which you drink.

We do not need any more Sahasra Tals or Stok Kangris. This requires strong policies and regulations by the government, abolition of professionalism from the industry, and responsible behaviour by the consumer. Risk is an inherent part of adventure, but so can be risk preparedness.

—The writer is a climate expert and outdoor enthusiast



(Above) Approaching the summit of Stok Kangri, a trekking peak in Ladakh; and (left) local communities & authorities had to stop the trek to Stok Kangri as overcrowding led to pollution and scarcity of water downstream.



Activities like mountaineering carry high amounts of risk. While it is up to the tour operators to ensure that safeguards are in place, climbers also need to ensure that they are physically and mentally prepared for such activities. Location: Summit camp of Kang Yatze 1 peak in Ladakh. PHOTO BY THE WRITER