

The Fun, Harmless Double Entendre World of Surrogate Advertising

Too much is made of the 'show one thing, say another' marketing phenom, an art form that's been practised by artists and poets down the ages to keep both censors and consumers happy

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

I love surrogate advertising. You know, those ads that are supposedly trying to sell you soda, but are actually – nudge nudge, wink wink, say no more – trying to sell you booze. The sheer chutzpah and playfulness of such an approach of bending the rules to straighten the path makes me feel that the world hasn't yet turned completely into a boring, self-righteous class monitor forever complaining and tattling on others.

Under the Advertising Guidelines issued by the Central Consumer Protection Au-

thority (CCPA) in 2022, the shapeshifting term 'surrogate advertising' was, for the first time, named and shamed as 'an advertisement for goods, product or service, whose advertising is otherwise prohibited by law, by circumventing such prohibition or restriction and portraying it to be an advertisement for other goods, product or service, the advertising of which is not prohibited or restricted by law....'

Yes, that's quite a mouthful. But it's basically the same concept as catching that boy in class with a dirty magazine tucked inside his physics textbook.

There's news now that highly-strung headmistresses in the central government are planning to soon prohibit liquor companies from using surrogate advertising and sponsoring events. Try and have Ranveer Singh endorse 'party events' or 'tonic water' that bear the same name and a very suspiciously similar logo to a tobacco or liquor company or brand, and they'll slap you with a penalty of up to ₹50 lakh, with Ranveer looking at a possible 3-5 yr ban. It's as much a planned crackdown on evange-

lism of sinful things as it is on smart-alecky cryptography.

Lucky that ITC's 'diversifications' into hotels and FMCG products took off and are plentifully visible. Otherwise, they may have got hauled up for surrogating their 'cancer sticks'. Or the International Man of Mystery Vijay Mallya would have been India's 'Top Wanted Wearing a Belt Above His Waistline' long before defaulting in our stars for cunningly advertising his beer by wanting people to fly Kingfisher (high).

The main point to note, your honour, is that if you are surrogating, ensure that your surrogate product a) exists, b) exists in enough vol-

ume to comfort goodie-goodies that you're selling bhajans, not the devil's incantation if the bhajans are played backwards. I'm still searching for those Royal Challenge 'CDs and cassettes' in those ads NOT advertising any liquor product.

But the concept itself is fascinating. Surrogate advertising is the marketing equivalent of the double-entendre, the paronomasia or pun where both meanings exist simultaneously, and if someone objects, you can always say – with practised indignation – that you were meaning the *other* meaning, sir!

Art has been working on this kind of double en-

Surrogate advertising is the domain of a consumer already in the know about the hidden message

tendres for ages. 'What, pornography? No, no, philistine, how dare you call it smut! It's tasteful erotica!' Poets have revelled in this showing one thing and saying another. John Donne's 1633 immortal opening lines of his sonnet, 'The Good-Morrow,' for instance – 'I wonder by my troth, what thou and I/Did, till we loved? Were we not wear'd till then?/But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?' – remains a hidden gem on open display for admiration-cum-chuckle for those who can snatch the meaning.

And there we have it. What is it that worries the grandma's so much about surrogate advertising? A beer drinker will know that a promo showing film stars on a rooftop dancing away to Tuborg drinking water is shadow-versting. But for a viewer who isn't familiar with Tuborg as a beer brand, why would he or she think a brand promoting water really wants him or her to buy beer? Why would you think that the No-

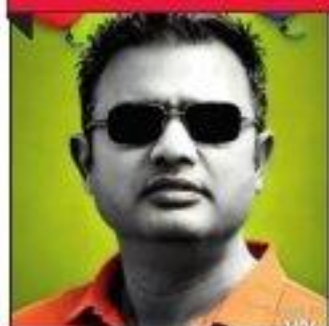
bel Peace Prize was established by the inventor of dynamite unless you already know that?

Surrogate advertising is the domain of a consumer already in the know about the 'hidden' message. Someone unaware of it will keep wondering what all the fuss (and business model) is about brands selling playing cards, glass sets, leisure and entertainment events, water... It merely reassures the buyer of the brand – that isn't allowed to be advertised, but allowed to be sold – being 'upmarket' enough to have these strange but captivating ads.

Quite like mystical political slogans and catchphrases, actually. When someone says 'Tukre tukre gang', 'Khela hobey', or 'Make America Great Again,' one is talking about kebabs, sports, and patriotism, no? Yes?

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WORD COUNTS



TUSHAR GORE

A Framework to Fix Social Media Personality Types

A neat psychobabble manual to gauge the 'real' nature of all those 'out there'

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) theory of personality types saw a surge in popularity in the early 2000s. MBTI is based on understanding the preferences exhibited by individuals along four dimensions:

1. **Source of energy** People or groups (extraversion) or solitude (introversion) – E-I preference
2. **Type of information** Numbers, details, history (sensing) or macro-trends, future potential (intuition) – S-N preference
3. **Basis of decisions** Facts (thinking) or people's inputs or reactions (feeling) – T-F preference
4. **Organising principles** Fixed structures such as lists or categories (judging) or flexible approaches (perception) – J-P preference

These four dimensions, each with two choices, lead to 16 different personalities. Organisations could 'map' teams to understand the overrepresented and underrepresented types and use this information to ensure that all styles were given the space to thrive.

A common use-case is along the E-I dimension. Knowing that individuals with the introversion preference recharge and rebalance on their own – in solitude – a team event can accommodate such needs by providing some alone time without any planned group activity.

Social media has created a platform for people to interact routinely. But unlike the workplace, where individuals interact to achieve a common goal, interactions on social media are without any group-wide targets. Yet, hypothesising a framework (similar to MBTI) to discern the different personality types on social media is an interesting exercise. One possible list:

- **Participation style** Restricted (R) – only on selected topics, or participatory (P) – involved in most topics.
- **Image preference** Conforming (C) – to an existing self-image, or building (B) – creating a new image.
- **Appetite for debate** Engaged (E) – thinks hearts and minds can change with discussion on social media, or fact-based (F) – focus on sharing facts.
- **Use of smileys/emojis** Supportive (S) – using them in support of appropriate text or tone or Liberal (L) – using excessive emojis.

The 'participation' dimension doesn't require much explanation. Individuals either selectively engage with a few topics, or participate in many. On the topics they do engage with, they can display styles that fit the other three dimensions.

The 'image' dimension is the one that highlights the individual's role or status within the group. There are, of course, many adjectives to describe the image of an individual within a group, and the same person can have a different image in different groups. Some common descriptors are 'senior/elder', 'junior/fresher', 'expert/boss', 'co-median', 'curious', 'humble-brag-gart', 'know-it-all', and 'leg-puller'. There are saltier adjectives as well that need use of asterisks.

Now this dimension is not about the *actual* image of the person, but about the individual's behaviour in conformance to an image. It's either aligned with an already existing image, or it's geared towards building an image. This dimension can also link to another facet – desire to get 'likes' on a post.

The 'appetite for debate' dimension is self-explanatory. The engaged individuals are the ones filling up inboxes without letting even one message go unanswered. They believe that people's hearts and minds can change based on some messages exchanged on social media. On the other end of this spectrum are individuals who post only facts and refrain from voicing any opinions.

This dimension coupled with the above two can cause maximum confusion in groups. An engaged individual, participative in many conversations, trying to live up to an image of 'expert', or 'leader' can cause many disagreements.

The fourth dimension is about the use of emojis – particularly the 'smiley' and its variants. 'Supportive' use generally enhances the emotion already suggested by the content. Eschewing the emoji when the content is clear enough is another example in line with 'supportive' use. A liberal use of emojis is the other end of this dimension.

MBTI was developed as a tool that can highlight individual preferences along dimensions relevant in the work setting. Even so, it doesn't provide any insights on some basic characteristics that are important at work – integrity, team-orientation, work-ethic, etc.

The above-mentioned social media framework is just a hypothetical exercise, and without any validation from any source. Even with some scientific support, such a framework would have limited use-cases because on social media, unlike in organisations, there is limited accountability and consequence for any utterance. Therefore, self-regulation is the main attribute on display.

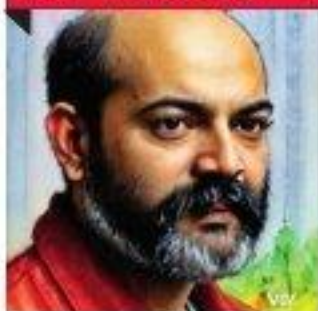
So, basically only one dimension is required to evaluate a person/post: Is this person coming across as an ass or not?

The writer is managing director, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru

We Are Not Alone – At Least, Not Our Faces

Actor Tom Hollander's a dead ringer for Rahul Gandhi, and many can pass off as others – Welcome to the 'AI' doppelgänger library

MEMORY STICK



SIDDHARTH CHOWDHURY

Over the years, I have cultivated some strange and useless abilities. One of them is writing fiction. The other is to see doubles everywhere. It is said that every man or woman has two exact replicas roaming the world at the same time, and one of them is in India. My ability is to see them in my near proximity.

The other day, I was watching Robert Aldrich's 1955 classic, *The Big Knife*, and I was struck by the resemblance that the young Jack Palance bore to the Pakistani fast bowler Shaheen Afridi. They could be father and son. And that took me on a delicious reverie of Hollywood, cricket, ethnicity and AI. A whole hour was happily wasted.

Similarly, the author's photo on the back of Faber's edition of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*, makes me pause every time I pick it up. I could replace it with a photo of Amit Chaudhuri, author of the 1993 novel *Afternoon Raag*, and nobody would know the difference. From certain angles – and it's not only because of their light rhythmic prose – Ishiguro and Chaudhuri

could be brothers separated at birth.

Chaitanya Sharma, a.k.a. Slow-Cheeta made for a forceful former footballing great PK Banerjee in the recent movie *Maidaan*. But he could well have played the other footballing legend Chuni Goswami, as their resemblance is more striking.

Since novelists, cricketers and cinema folk make up most of my world, they seem to make the best archetypes. Though occasionally, I amuse myself with a politician or two in the mix. If there is ever a road movie on the Bharat Jodo Yatra, I think the fine actor Tom Hollander would make a wonderful Rahul Gandhi. In the same vein, Bill Clinton is a dead ringer for director Roger Donaldson,

who made some excellent thrillers like *No Way Out* (1987) and *The Bank Job* (2008).

Has anyone else noticed how political activist Umar Khalid bears an astonishing resemblance to a young Bharath Gopi as Shankaran Kutty in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Kodiyetam* (1978)? Meryl Streep and fellow actor Natascha McElhone could be sisters. As could be novelist Nitasha Kaul and actress Soha Ali Khan. Soha's husband, Kunal Khemu, is, of course, a doppelgänger for the footballer Neymar.

Two actors bear a striking resemblance to Imran Khan. One is 1970s-era Robert Culp, and the other is Mark Wahlberg. Readers who have

watched *The Gambler* (2014) would know.

I remember picking up a used copy of Richard Yates' 1962 short story collection, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) in the early 2000s in Jamshedpur simply because the author's photograph reminded me of my friend, Bunty Jha. Over the years, I would read everything that Yates wrote.

It has happened many times that while travelling in the Delhi Metro or a DTC bus, I suddenly come across a face that fascinates me. Images keep flitting across it like on a laptop screen, and then one fits. The lady sitting across from me with a bag of groceries at her feet could pass for the novelist Anita Desai from a certain angle. I will only have to grey her jet-black hair.

Many times, when I point out these discoveries of mine to friends and family, they laugh it off. They don't see what I see. Where I see the connection, they see anonymity.

I am convinced that there are more than two of us at every stage of life. The figure, I believe, is closer to 10. I truly believe that god in his studio has 100 archetypes each for men and women. It is the first AI library and blacklist. Those 100 archetypes have 10 variations throughout their lifetimes. All of us, through our lives, confirm them.

At this point of time, I have the same balding pattern as Sean Connery in the mid-1970s. On the other hand, my father is convinced that it's more ex-Delhi CM Sahib Singh Varma.

The writer is the author of *The Time of the Peacock*

Many laugh at my discoveries. They don't see what I see—where I see connections, they see anonymity



MEANWHILE, SPOTTED: DUMA DUM MUSK KALANDAR

How I Found Oneness in My Brat Summer of Love

Crowds and music in 2024's biggest gigs give out vibes of unity in a fractured world

PEACE MEAL



SURYA HK

I just returned from what Charli XCX fans, inspired by the electropop star's latest album, *Brat*, call a 'brat summer' – a season of care-free indulgence, unapologetic joy, and a touch of rebellion. But in my adventures across Europe, what I found amid all the fun was something far more profound: powerful lessons in care, imagination, agency, hope, love, and unity in a world that seems increasingly divided.

Attending gigs of three of 2024's biggest music acts – concerts from Coldplay's 'Music of the Spheres' tour, Taylor Swift's 'The Eras Tour', and Adele in Munich – I experienced how art transcends borders, politics, identity and prejudices, bringing people together in a way magical and deeply human.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the term 'collective effervescence' to describe the shared emotional energy that occurs when people gather in groups. This was in full force at every concert I attended. Tens of thousands of people from various walks of life coming together to sing with passion, dance in gay abandon,

and simply be *present* in the moment. It's a heady mix of joy, community, and connection that makes you feel part of something much larger than yourself.

At Coldplay's concert in Dusseldorf, this collective effervescence was palpable. As Chris Martin led the crowd in belting out 'People of the Pride', a queer anthem, the energy was electric. The song's lyrics, combined with the band's message of love and inclusivity – moon goggles that make lights look like hearts, rainbow imagery, and coordinated neon 'love' signs across the crowd – created moments where everyone felt united.

Literature Nobel laureate Elias Canetti, in his seminal work *Crowds and Power*, delves into the nature of crowds and how they can embody a collective identity. At these concerts, I saw Canetti's ideas come to life. The crowd wasn't just a group of individuals; it was a living, breathing entity moving together, feeling together, and thinking together.

Take Taylor Swift's concert at Munich's Olympiastadion. The exchange of friendship bracelets among fans was a simple, yet powerful act of connection. Tilda, a

teenager from Portugal, told me she spent weeks making the bracelets herself, as Swift encourages her fans to spread love and kindness. The stadium, with 74,000 people inside and 50,000 more outside atop a hill, became a great equaliser, sharing the magic of the moment.

Swift's attention to inclusivity, like the stand for wheelchair-users and live sign language performers, elevated this sense of *belonging*, making sure no one was left out.

Research has shown that our brains and hearts literally sync up when we share experiences with others, especially at large gatherings. When people sing and move together, it triggers the release of oxytocin, the 'love hormone', fostering feelings of trust and bonding. A 2018 study published in *Scientific Reports* found that people who engage in synchronised activities, like singing and dancing at concerts, report higher levels of happiness and social connection.

This was evident at Adele's concert in Munich, where her soulful voice and lyrics brought the audience together in a shared experience of vulnerability and catharsis. As she sang her heartbreak hit, 'Someone Like You', the entire arena seemed to breathe as one, a collective expression of both heartache and hope. It was a moment that transcended individual stories, uniting the crowd in a universal experience of love and loss.

In a world increasingly polarised by war, politics, and social strife, such concerts offer us a glimpse into what could be – a world where love, empathy, and unity are not just ideals, but lived realities. Coldplay's stand on Gaza and Ukraine, victims of Congo and Sudan, was a reminder that music can be a powerful tool for raising awareness and promoting change. Swift's multigenerational queer-friendly fanbase, and Adele's ability to connect with audiences on a deep emotional level showed that, at the end of the day, we are all part of the same human story.

My brat summer reaffirmed my faith in humanity. When we come together, we are capable of creating something truly beautiful.



MERGED AND SUBMERGED



What sparked this move?

This law is a key piece of Fair Work's 'Closing Loopholes' initiative, targeting wage issues, labour-hire practices, and casual work definitions. The idea? Protect workers' mental health by letting them fully detach from work after hours.

Sounds idyllic. Is there a catch?

Of course, there's a catch! As the law moved through parliament earlier this year it drew criticism from employer groups who called the legislation rushed and flawed. There are exceptions where refusing contact could be considered unreasonable, depending on the situation. So, if you're a brain surgeon on call, this might not apply to you in the same way. Factors like job role, the type of contact, and personal circumstances can influence whether you need to respond. So, while it's a win for work-life balance, expect some gray areas.

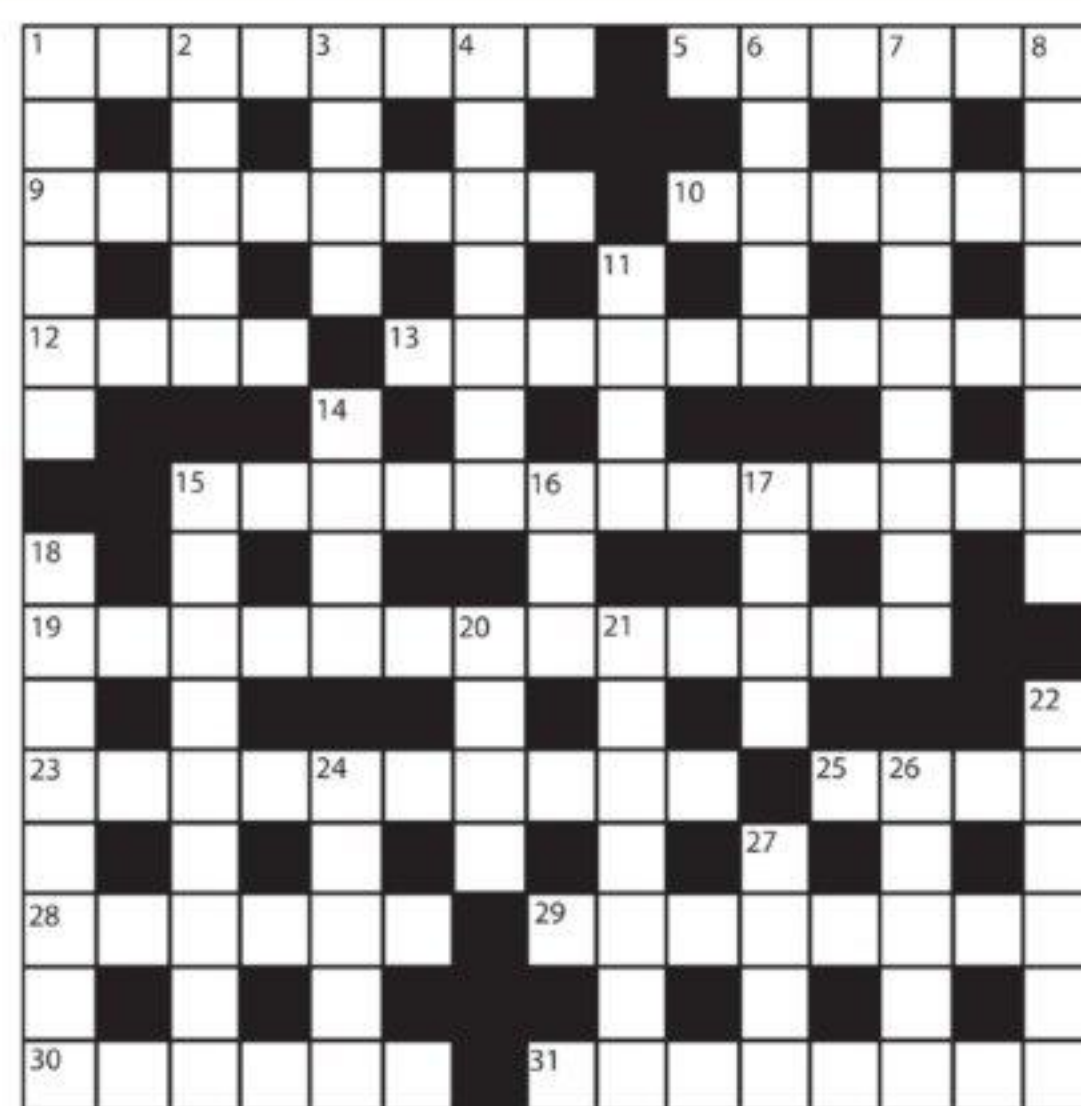
Is Australia the trendsetter here?

Not quite! France has had a similar law since 2017, and the UK is eyeing it too. It's all part of a broader European trend, with Belgium, Spain, and Italy also jumping on the bandwagon.

Text: Team ET Sunday

ET Sunday Crossword

0078



ACROSS

- 1 Guarantee mad tyrant's guillotined after conflict (8)
- 5 Mostly worked with barrel-maker (6)
- 9 In teashop, a German fellow first produces drug (8)
- 10 Dozy agent receives shelter (6)
- 12 Odd number head off? Quite the opposite (4)
- 13 Police raid Nuts magazine (10)
- 15 Model Elle on the spot? Paps get closer with it (9, 4)
- 19 12 is moving in personal property – it brings results (13)

DOWN

- 1 Evil, like a night light? (6)
- 23 Chopped up liver with lime to cover cold pasta (10)
- 25 Seven-piece group releases record: 'Let it be' (4)
- 28 Brought up and torn down, say (6)
- 29 He connects caller to king after Tosca, say (8)
- 30 See round a small island without difficulty (6)
- 31 Again take on carefree MP, loyal to some extent (2-6)

- 2 Rebel leader starts life perhaps possessing this (5)
- 3 Top primate's unknown (4)
- 4 After 10 'e he got stuck into drink to get light ... (5, 2)
- 6 ... drunk usually well before it! (5)
- 7 Priest gets to embrace rabbi and other churchmen (9)
- 8 Exciting story about boxer and fan of King (8)
- 11 Monopolists store up crops in it (4)
- 14 Smart guy in fancy lace (4)
- 15 Welsh river waders' protection on boats (9)
- 16 Henry the Fourth's complaint? (3)
- 17 Finished deliveries at the Oval (4)
- 18 Cantankerous salesman comes up with poem (8)
- 20 Sure-footed climber in central Tibet chased by 10 (4)
- 21 Obscure bits of film found in middle of Greece (7)
- 22 Tale about maelstrom's origin in such weather (6)
- 24 Perfect ladies almost unsettled (5)
- 26 Write off to a lecturer, buying time (5)
- 27 Small amount for good sheep (4)

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In 1886, Radha Gobinda Kar set up Asia's first non-governmental medical college. But for a long time, no one could have predicted that RG Kar would pursue medicine full time, let alone build a hospital that is named after him now. Just as no one could have predicted even a fortnight back that the same hospital would be the scene of a brutal rape-murder of a trainee doctor

Poulomi Banerjee & Subhajyoti Kanjilal

His father, Durgadas Kar, was a doctor, so it seemed only natural that Radha Gobinda Kar, the eldest son of Durgadas, would follow in his footsteps. For a while, he did. Everything went to plan. In 1869, RG Kar joined the Bengal Medical College (or Calcutta Medical College), Asia's oldest medical school, set up in 1835. But then he chose to take a break. He dabbled in theatre, he took up gymnastics, and he also got married. The break from medicine stretched on. A decade passed. And then RG Kar's life took another turn, and there was no looking back after that.

Born On Aug 23, 1852

RG Kar's 172nd birth anniversary was two days back, on Friday. Some sources, however, mention 1850 as his year of birth, say researchers. Which would make this his 174th birth anniversary. The discrepant mentions of his year of birth highlight the absence of enough recorded history on RG Kar. What is available has been pieced together by researchers from writings and journals over the years, including obituaries published after his death.

He was born in their family home at Santragachi in Bengal's Howrah district, a short distance from Kolkata. He was the eldest among four brothers and five sisters. It was from here that a young RG Kar would travel to Kolkata's Hare School in a horse-drawn phaeton before his father bought another house in Shyambazar, much closer to his school, says Partha Kar, a fourth-generation descendant. Partha still lives in the old Santragachi house.

Then, in 1869, RG Kar got admitted to the Bengal Medical College (now Medical College, Kolkata) to study medicine, says Dr Shankar Nath, a former oncologist at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital (RGKMCH), whose serialised writing on the history of RGKMCH and its founder is being published in a Bengali journal, he says. Continuing the conversation, Nath adds that RG Kar dropped out of college after only one year.

First Marriage, First Arrest

"Durgadas loved theatre and RG Kar shared his father's passion. After dropping out of college he spent some time performing on the stage," Nath says.

According to Projit Mukharji, professor of history at Ashoka University, RG Kar also got fascinated by gymnastics after watching a group of Anglo-Indian gymnasts perform. "With his father's permission, he formed a troupe of Indian, primarily Bengali, gymnasts, who practised gymnastics in the family's Shyambazar home. "RG Kar himself became a trained gymnast... the troupe performed gymnastics to the accompaniment of music," says Mukharji.

It was also during this time — between 1870 and 1879 — that RG Kar got married for the first time, but his wife died a few years later, says Nath.

The doctor narrates another little-

RG KAR: GYMNAST, ACTOR, DOCTOR



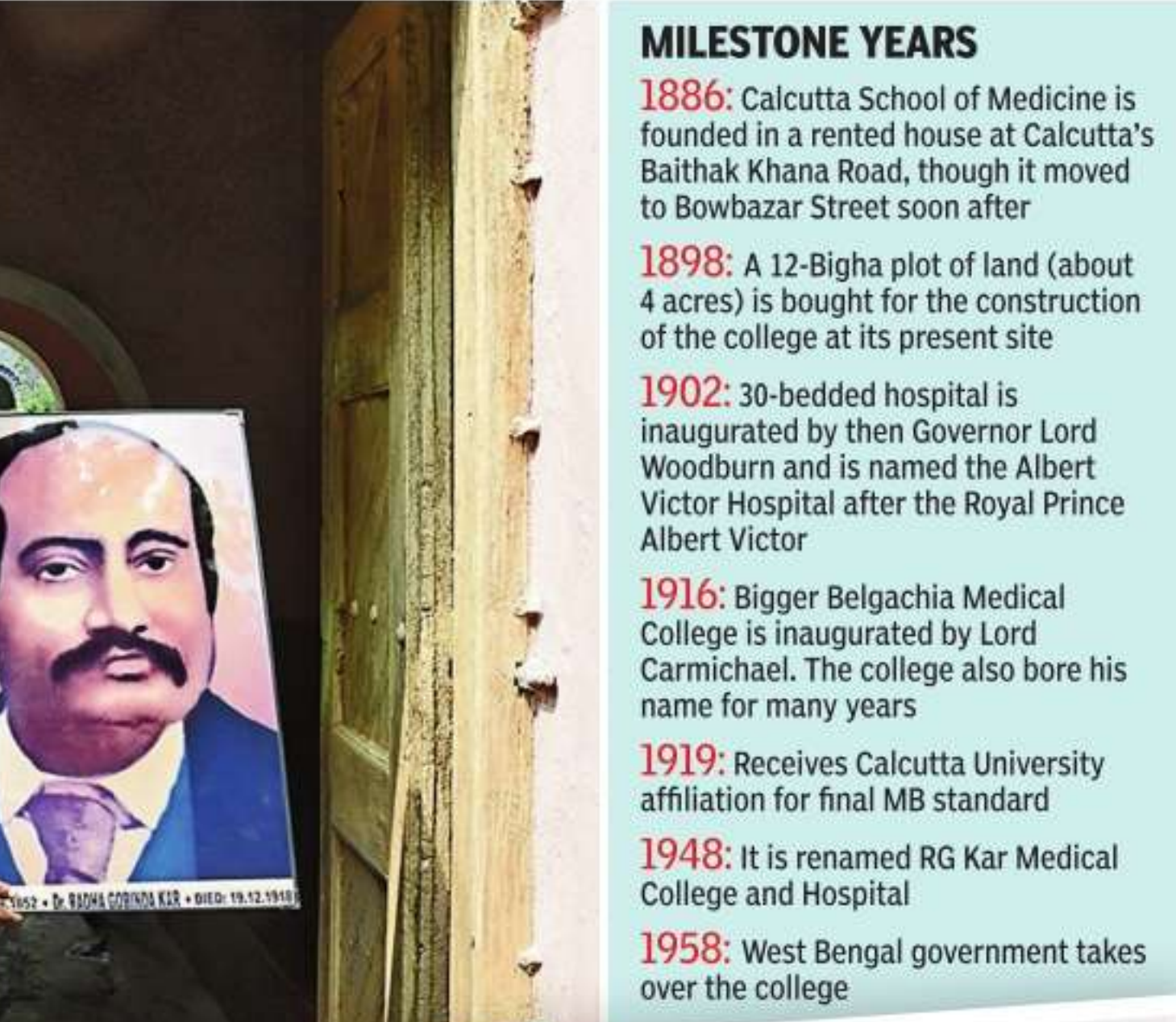
LOOK BACK IN PRIDE: Partha Kar, a fourth generation descendant, with a photo of Dr RG Kar at the family's ancestral home in Howrah

known anecdote about RG Kar from that period, referring to a previously published article in a Bengali journal. "He served a 15-day jail term in 1879... On the day of Kali Puja [which coincides with Diwali], RG Kar's younger brothers and some boys from the neighbourhood were bursting crackers. A person complained to a constable who was standing there about the noise. When the constable destroyed the crackers, an altercation followed. After some time, a police team came and arrested RG Kar even though he had not been on the spot at the time of this incident."

A Hospital Is Born

Then in 1880, RG Kar enrolled himself again in medical college, first in Calcutta (where he studied for three years but didn't complete the course) and then in Scotland in 1883, from where he finally received the LRCP&S (License of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons) degree in 1886, says Nath.

Instead of practising in England or Scotland, which would have been way



THE ALBERT VICTOR HOSPITAL

more lucrative, RG Kar chose to return to India. Back home, RG Kar "realised that the prevailing colonial culture was a great hindrance for the people... to get the benefit of the existing medical schools — both as students and as patients", states a 2011 article on the history of RGKMCH available on ResearchGate.

The Bengal Medical College had been primarily founded with the aim to churn out doctors to meet the medical demands of the British army and European civilians in India, say historians. Most of the

senior positions at the college were occupied by Europeans. "The general condition of public health in the country was appalling and there were few hospitals or trained doctors to treat Indians, while the incidence of epidemics was high," says Sujata Mukherjee, a professor of history at Kolkata's Rabindra Bharati University. Her area of specialisation is medical history.

RG Kar teamed up with other like-minded people and doctors to set up the Calcutta School of Medicine (RGKMCH now), Asia's first non-governmental medical college. "He would wait outside places

MILESTONE YEARS

1886: Calcutta School of Medicine is founded in a rented house at Calcutta's Baithak Khana Road, though it moved to Bowbazar Street soon after

1898: A 12-Bigha plot of land (about 4 acres) is bought for the construction of the college at its present site

1902: 30-bedded hospital is inaugurated by then Governor Lord Woodburn and is named the Albert Victor Hospital after the Royal Prince Albert Victor

1916: Bigger Belgachia Medical College is inaugurated by Lord Carmichael. The college also bore his name for many years

1919: Receives Calcutta University affiliation for final MB standard

1948: It is renamed RG Kar Medical College and Hospital

1958: West Bengal government takes over the college



UNITED IN SOLIDARITY: A protest at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital against the rape and murder of a trainee doctor on campus

where the rich were gathered and collect money for the institute," says Partha.

The Calcutta School of Medicine opened at a rented address in Kolkata's Baithak Khana Road. Both location and name would change several times over the years, before the more familiar RG Kar Hospital and Medical College came up in Kolkata's Belgachia. The initial courses were of three years' duration and classes were conducted entirely in Bengali, unlike in the Bengal Medical College where courses were taught in English, Hindustani and Bengali, according to researchers.

Treating In Slums

"His father Durgadas Kar wrote the first Bengali book on materia medica or medicinal substances. RG Kar followed in his footsteps and wrote books in Bengali and acted as publisher for books written by others," says Mukharji of Ashoka.

"He had a cycle and would attend to patients even in slums. During a plague outbreak, he worked with Sister Nivedita (an Irish teacher, social activist, and disciple of Swami Vivekananda) and others to take care of the afflicted. He was a social philanthropist and nationalist, in addition to being a remarkable physician," Sujata Mukherjee adds.

The Calcutta School of Medicine was managed by a trust called the Medical Education Society of Bengal, says Mukharji, and RG Kar remained its secretary till his death from the Spanish Flu in 1918. He had left his Shyambazar house to the institute in his will and after the death of his second wife — he remarried but had no children — it was sold and Rs 75,000 handed over to the trust, says Partha.

The Legacy Of RGKMCH

In its initial years, the Calcutta School of Medicine didn't have a hospital attached to it. This made practical education difficult. "In his acting days, RG Kar and others had performed Neel Darpan, a play written by Dinabandhu Mitra on the

plight of the indigo farmers, to raise funds for the setting up of Mayo Hospital. And in the early years when the Calcutta School of Medicine didn't have a hospital attached to it, students would attend classes here for practical exposure," says Mukharji.

The were several milestones in the institute's journey to its present avatar. In 1898, a 12-bigha plot of land (about 4 acres) was purchased for the construction of the college building at its present site. A 30-bedded, single-storeyed hospital building was inaugurated in 1902. In 1904, the Calcutta School of Medicine amalgamated with another similar institute, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Bengal, which had been established in 1895.

Other buildings were constructed over time to accommodate various departments in the same premises. "Finally, Belgachia Medical College was formally inaugurated by Lord Carmichael in 1916," says the ResearchGate article. The college also bore Carmichael's name for many years.

The affiliation to Calcutta University for final MB (Bachelor of Medicine) standard came in 1919. "Many famous doctors taught at the college over the years, including Sundari Mohan Das, Nilratan Sarkar (who has a hospital named after him in Kolkata) and Bidhan Chandra Roy, Bengal's first chief minister after Independence. Dr Subodh Dutta, who had pioneered the first bladder surgery in Calcutta, was also associated with the institute. Asia's first Psychiatry OPD opened here in 1933," says Mukherjee.

Though it was renamed RG Kar Hospital and Medical College in 1948, it was only after another 10 years that the state govt took over its operations.

Sixty-six years later, this govt hospital is convulsing; allegations of corruption, the rape-murder of a trainee doctor inside the hospital... It's hard to imagine the hospital's storied past when you watch today's news.

INQUIZITIVE

by JOY BHATTACHARJYA

1 In the Mahabharata, what were Panchajanya, Ananta-Vijaya, Poundra-Khadga, Devadatta, Sughosha and Mani-Pushpaka?



2 In which African city do the two major tributaries of the Nile, the Blue Nile and the White Nile, meet?

3 In which country is Poutine, a dish of French fries and cheese curds topped with gravy, regarded as a national delicacy?

4 Which 2003 film starring Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini was actually conceived by producer BR Chopra in the 1960s, but ended up being filmed almost 4 decades later?

5 Peak XV Partners is the current name of the firm formerly known as Sequoia Capital India and SEA. Why is it called Peak XV?

6 Carpenter, Stingless, Hairy-footed Flower and Bumble are all varieties of which creature?

7 Which unit of the Indian army has separate mounts for operational and ceremonial purposes, using armoured personnel carriers like the BTR80 for operations and horses for ceremonial purposes?

8 If they are known as streetcars in western US cities and trolleycars in the eastern US, by what name are they known in the only city they are used in India?

9 What is the Portuguese name for 'potato,' also the name of a popular snack in western India?

10 In the Paris Olympics, if the US headed the gold medal tally, along with China, which country was in third place with 20 gold medals?

ANSWERS

1 The conches blown in battle by Krishna and Tramsars, in Kolkata 9 Batak 10 Japan 7 The President's Bodyguard 8 Trams, or Bees 6 The name given to Mount Everest after its discovery by British and Indian surveyors 5 Peak XV was the name given to Mount Everest after its discovery by British and Indian surveyors 4 The Pandava brothers 3 Khartoum, capital of Sudan 2 The conches blown in battle by Krishna and Tramsars, in Kolkata 9 Batak 10 Japan 7 The President's Bodyguard 8 Trams, or Bees 6 The name given to Mount Everest after its discovery by British and Indian surveyors 5 Peak XV was the name given to Mount Everest after its discovery by British and Indian surveyors

Overnight, home became a terrifying place

Tamaghna Banerjee, Kamalendu Bhadra & Dwaipayan Ghosh

Their medical visas saved Netra and Narayan Biswas's lives in a way they hadn't imagined. West Bengal felt familiar and comforting for the Bangladeshi residents in their 60s as they stepped past the check post at Petrapole. Beyond the barbed wires of the international border, home had become a strange and terrifying place.

The Biswas couple had been to Bengal many times, for their appointments at Peerless Hospital in Kolkata, which is under an hour from Dhaka by flight. But never like this.

It had taken them two days, and finally a bus ride in which they and fellow passengers prayed they would pass unnoticed as shops and houses on both sides of the road burned, to reach the Benapole-Petrapole border from Faridpur, their home. A few hours after they left, a mob had turned up at their house in Alfadanga too. "Seeing the house locked, they left," said Netra, fighting back tears. She wasn't sure if she would see the house again. But a bigger anxiety gnawed at her — the safety of her son and daughter-in-law, who had stayed back in Jessore.

Attacks Began Even Before Hasina Fled

Netra and Narayan left Alfadanga on Aug 4 morning, a day before Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country after a movement led by students overran her govt as anger soared over a violent crackdown Hasina had ordered on protesters opposing quota for family members of 1971 war veterans.

Attacks on minority groups were reported after Hasina's govt fell, but Netra said they began in Faridpur two days before that as Bangladesh rapidly slid into anarchy, police lost control and mobs ran amok.

Not just Hindus, Muslims and Awami League members from Bangladesh have also taken refuge in India, fleeing bloodthirsty mobs, after the Hasina govt was overthrown



SEEKING SAFETY: Bangladeshis assemble near the Sitalkuchi border in Cooch Behar in a bid to cross over to India earlier this month

Medical Visas Quickest Way Out

Since the fall of the Hasina govt, there are, according to sources at immigration counters, hundreds of Bangladeshi citizens who have come to India, many of them on previously issued medical visas, to escape targeted mob attacks. The Petrapole border has been a major transit point. Kolkata airport, from where airlines like Biman Bangladesh operate daily flights to and from Dhaka, has been another.

In a meeting with the head of the interim govt in Dhaka, the banker-Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, two organisations that collected information on persecution faced by minority groups, mainly Hindus, since the Hasina regime's fall noted there were 205 attacks till Aug 10. Yunus, who promised steps to stop the targeting of minorities, has since visited the Dhakeshwari temple in Dhaka to send out a message of unity.

The organisations — Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and Bangladesh Pujar Udjan — said they had collected information about the attacks in 52 districts. "We seek protection because our lives are in a disastrous state. We are staying up at night, guarding our



homes and temples. I have never seen anything like this in my life," Nirmal Rosario of the unity council was quoted as saying at the meeting by news agencies.

Hide In Farm To Escape Mobs

Bhakti Dhali didn't sleep several nights, watching out for mobs that laid continuous siege to her village in Pirojpur district from Aug 3. She, her husband and daughter eventually made it to India on Aug 9, having spent much of the days in between taking cover in nearby farms. Muslims who were members or supporters of Hasina's party Awami League were also targeted by the mobs, she said. Partha Das of Pirojpur and Mahima Akhter of Jessore had similar stories to tell, unsure if they could return to Bangladesh and for now, just thankful to be alive. Akhter witnessed an attack on the local MP on Aug 5.

"If I go back now, I will be murdered," an Awami League functionary who requested not to be named told TOI from Chakdaha, a town in West Bengal's Nadia district where he has taken refuge. He was in Dhaka when the unrest began. "My immediate instinct was to protect my family, so I left for Satkhira, where they were based," he said.

Common to many of these accounts are bonds of friendship that run deeper than religious beliefs or political affiliations. As Awami League activists were being hunted down in Dhaka, he was able to get safe passage to Satkhira, nearly 190km away, riding pillion on a bike that was driven by an old friend, who is a member of Jamaat-e-Islami, the party seen to have played a key role in bringing down the Hasina govt.

But with attacks on Awami supporters increasing across Bangladesh, he decided against going home, so the house "wouldn't get marked". "I am in touch with my family, which has shifted to Barishal. They say the situation is still volatile. I don't know when I can go back home. I'll bring them here," he said.

Biplab Roy (41) was already in Kolkata on a medical visa when the unrest began and is now desperately pleading for an extension of his stay so he isn't forced to return to Khulna. His wife is under treatment at the state-run SSKM hospital in central Kolkata. Roy's mother is still in Bangladesh.

Many Camping Near Border

At the borders, hundreds more Bangladeshis have tried to illegally enter India to escape attacks motivated by religion or politics. Last week, 18 Bangladeshi nationals and five Indian facilitators were arrested from three locations in Tripura. Sixteen more were arrested in Tripura on Aug 16.

On Aug 9, a large group of Bangladeshis Hindus had gathered near zero point of the international border in Lalmonirhat in the Rangpur division of Bangladesh, which borders north Bengal. Stopped by border guards, many continue to camp across the fence near Khropo river. BSF officials said some of them tried to enter India but were stopped.

Close Calls For Indian Visitors

Indians visiting Bangladesh were caught in the upheaval too. "I can't believe I'm alive," said Shahid Ali, a businessman from Assam who jumped from the second-floor balcony of the hotel he was staying in to flee a rampage. The fall fractured both his legs and left him with a spine injury.

Ali had gone to Bangladesh on a business trip with brother Rabiul and a business partner on Aug 1 and had checked in at Zabeer Jessore, a premium hotel owned by Shahin Chakladar, a general secretary of Awami League. Ali said a mob had set fire to the hotel in the early hours of Aug 4. He ran up and down the stairs but found no escape route. "I was lucky I landed on the tin roof of a shop," said Ali, adding he later learnt of 24 deaths at the hotel. Ali left the hospital signing a risk bond because he was desperate to get out of the country. He is currently admitted at a hospital in Kolkata. "I pray for peace to return to Bangladesh and hope no one has to go through what I did," he said.

Faisal Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, an Ahmedabad resident, was relieved after crossing the Petrapole border. "Since Aug 4, I saw cars and buildings being set on fire and people openly moving around with arms on the streets. I hopped on to as many as eight cycle rickshaws and walked till I got to Benapole from Jessore town (around 50km)," he said.

Ukraine: India does high-stakes balancing act

BY INVITATION



AMITABH MATTOO

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine represents a pivotal moment in India's foreign policy, suggesting a significant recalibration of New Delhi's relationship with Kyiv and a potential downturn in its long-standing ties with Moscow. The optics of Modi's engagement with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy—marked by gestures of camaraderie and dialogue and the image of Modi placing a reassuring hand on Zelenskyy's shoulder—signal a noticeable shift towards Ukraine and its NATO-mentored policies in the region. This embrace of Ukraine will raise questions about the implications for India's strategic autonomy and whether India will be subjected to what former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described (disapprovingly), in a recent article in 'Foreign Affairs', as "loyalty tests" by the US in the future.

Strategic flexibility has defined India's foreign policy, especially in recent years. Historically, India has relied on Russia as a strategic partner, a relationship built on shared geopolitical interests and a track record of being a reliable partner. However, the world is changing, and Modi's visit seems to suggest that India is ready to embrace a more western-aligned stance, particularly in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Contrarians may question the motivations behind this new alignment. Other than personal chemistry, a deeper strategic calculus appears to have played a significant role in Modi's decision to engage more closely with Ukraine. The chemistry between Modi and Zelenskyy is palpable (although the Ukrainian President's Musharraf-like 'press meet' with Indian journalists bordered on the distasteful), but it is accompanied by a strategic imperative: the need for India to enhance its global standing and assert its influence in an increasingly multipolar world. The question remains—at what cost?

A defining moment in this recalibration came last July, when Modi met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow. The Russian decision to bomb a children's hospital in Ukraine around that period offended India. However, there was a reluctance, despite Modi's personal hurt expressed in no uncertain terms to Putin, to directly confront Russia while simultaneously recognising the moral implications of its actions. The dichotomy in India's response highlighted the complexities of its diplomatic stance and the inherent tensions in its relationships with both Russia and the West. But this seems to have now changed.

As India embraces Ukraine and by extension, the West, concerns loom over whether this pivot will undermine its strategic autonomy. Will the US demand



NOT AT ARM'S LENGTH: We will have to see how Putin reacts to this camaraderie, and our more West-aligned stance

India take sides in the ongoing geopolitical tussle between East and West? For sure, India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region cannot be overlooked. As China continues to assert its dominance and belittle India, should we not continue to balance our relationships with both Russia and the West to ensure national security? Will a complete pivot towards the West leave India vulnerable, especially if Russia aligns itself more closely with China on Sino-Indian issues, in response to India's overtures to the West. The last thing India needs is an immediate zero-sum game where it must choose between its two major partners. We will have to, of course, wait and see how Putin's Russia responds to New Delhi's new outreach to Kyiv. Will Putin recognise that his neglect of the bilateral relationship may have come at a huge cost?

It is also vital to consider the implications of Modi's visit on the broader geopolitical landscape. By engaging with Ukraine, India is not merely signalling support for a nation under siege; it is also positioning itself as a potential mediator in the conflict. This role could potentially enhance India's credibility on the global stage, but it could also entangle India in a protracted conflict that may have far-reaching consequences. Moreover, positioning requires plans, not slogans. What workable plan for peace has New Delhi proposed which will be even remotely acceptable to both Kyiv and Moscow beyond the shibboleths emphasising the importance of dialogue?

Furthermore, as India moves closer to the West, it must remain vigilant about not becoming strategically over-dependent on it while extracting benefits that will help it to moderate Chinese aggressiveness, which is not limited to the border. History reminds us that the US has a history of using leverage to influence the foreign policies of other nations. India must ensure that its strategic decisions are not dictated by simply external pressure or the whims of western powers. The balancing act is delicate, and the stakes are high. The Tsar of American strategic thinking, Henry Kissinger is often cited to suggest, perhaps apocryphally so, that while becoming an enemy of the US is dangerous, to be America's friend is fatal; there is more than a grain of truth in that wisdom.

As India navigates this complex landscape, the world will watch closely, and the implications of this shift will resonate for years to come. ■

Mattoo is professor and Dean, School of International Studies, JNU and former member of the National Security Council's Advisory Board

As a gay man, I've felt effects of inequality, so wanted to tell people about their rights

Even 78 years after Independence, India remains mired in divisions of caste, religion, gender, and sexuality.

Senior Supreme Court lawyer **Saurabh Kirpal** spoke to **Himanshi Dhawan** about his book 'Who is Equal?' which explores how the right to equality, and the laws upholding it, have affected the lives of citizens

■ What made you focus on inequalities? Was it personal?

As a gay man, I've felt the effects of inequality particularly in the last 10 years, so I feel very deeply committed to the cause of equality. Facing one kind of discrimination makes you more attuned to other forms of discrimination. Anyone who lives in this country can see how unequal we are. Some forms of inequality, like religion and caste-based, are getting worse. I felt that I had to do something about it. As a lawyer, you can fight a case about things you want to change but I am not qualified enough to fight a case other than maybe on sexuality. I can't speak for women, religious minorities or caste experiences. I would be an interloper. So how do I deal with these ideas of inequality? It is in my role as a writer who hopes to educate the general public. People who watch Hollywood films know about the Miranda rights in the US, but people do not know their rights in India. They do not know what to do when a cop stops them, or when they're being discriminated against at the workplace. I wanted to interest people in learning about their rights so that they start doing something about it. It frustrates me when people just sit back and see injustices around them and do nothing about it. But I also recognise that it is the inability of knowing what to do.

■ But haven't we made a lot of progress in tackling it since Independence?

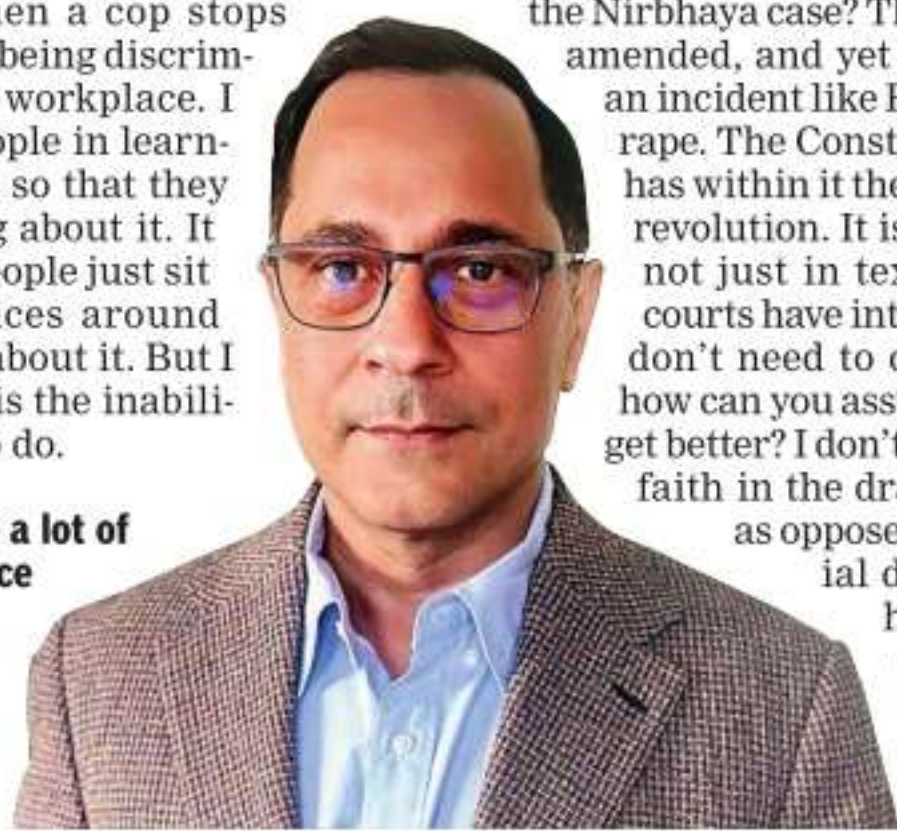
In terms of the formal equality of the law, yes, there has

been improvement, and the courts have had no small role to play in it. But certain groups like religious minorities have become far more disadvantaged than before.

We've improved, but to a person who has to fight for her rights today, it's no answer to say, it was much worse 80 years ago. That's like rubbing salt on wounds. The Constitution promised us a revolution. Slow, static, gradual change is good for those who have everything, but for the most disadvantaged and disempowered, this is just perpetuation of inequality.

■ Recently, there was a debate on amending the Constitution, with some arguing that it had not served its purpose. What do you think?

That is a typically lazy thing to do when you have a problem. Rather than figuring out how and why we got there, we throw a law at it and pretend it will somehow be a solution for everything. Look at what happened after the massive outrage and protests in the Nirbhaya case? The rape law was amended, and yet again we have an incident like RG Kar hospital rape. The Constitution already has within it the seeds of social revolution. It is revolutionary not just in text but how the courts have interpreted it. You don't need to change it. And how can you assume things will get better? I don't have any great faith in the drafters of today, as opposed to the convivial discussion that happened in the Constituent Assembly from 1948-1950.



■ Were you disappointed by the SC's marriage equality judgment?

It was a grievous blow to not only the queer community, but to the idea of citizenship and what it means to be human. The blithe, insensitive way in which it recorded historical injustices and current injustices against the queer community, and said, 'Oh, we hope something happens to you, best of luck trying to fix it', forgetting their own constitutional oath of office, was deeply hurtful. I fear that in the process of trying to deny marriage equality to the queer community, the court has also denied the fundamental right to marry to straight people. Once the court finds that there is no fundamental right to marry, it is possible for Parliament to repeal the Special Marriage Act tomorrow, and there will be no way that a Hindu and a Muslim can get married. It's a simple smell test: when we say that Article 21 gives you right to life and autonomy, and then a judgment says that you don't even have the right to marry a person of your choice and have that recognised by the state, there is something wrong with it. The judges have urged Parliament to do something about it. If the judges are so disempowered, then maybe they shouldn't have taken the constitutional oath of office.

■ The book mentions the 1950 Madras HC order that ruled in favour of merit in education. What are your views on the quota vs merit debate that has been stirred up again by the Puja Khedkar case?

Merit is when two identically placed people are competing for the same post. It is not a perpetuation of advantage to those who already have the best education and the greatest wealth. In Puja Khedkar's case, she sought to take unfair advantage by forging certain documentation. In the book, I talk about 'Desperate Housewives' star Felicity Huffman who tried to scam the US system and get her children into a university. But just because abuse happens in certain instances, you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. You reform the system to ensure that those who are most deserving of reservations get them. I fear that a large number of people who comment on this absence of privilege are exactly the people who got everything on a silver platter and have never truly understood what it means to be a certain caste.

Flood water finger-pointing shows how anti-India mood is growing in Bangladesh

RIGHT & WRONG



SWAPAN DASGUPTA

Floods are no stranger to eastern India and Bangladesh. Last Wednesday, following heavy monsoon rains, many districts in Bangladesh—particularly Feni, Comilla and Noakhali—were flooded and according to some estimates, some 4.5 million people were affected. About 50,000 people in neighbouring Tripura were also displaced by the heavy rains.

The floods were among the first administrative challenges faced by the interim govt headed by Muhammad Yunus who assumed charge after Sheikh Hasina's govt collapsed on August 5. If the first response of the 26-year-old student leader Nahid Islam, who holds the portfolio of Telecom and IT, is anything to go by, the floods were a direct outcome of India releasing the waters from a barrage in Tripura. He claimed that India had "demonstrated its inhumanity" against the

people of Bangladesh for removing the "fascist Hasina" govt.

This puerile tirade of a student activist was, fortunately, not repeated by others in positions of responsibility. However, it became the latest conspiracy theory doing the rounds of Bangladesh that is swaying between unearthing horror stories of the ousted Awami League dispensation and building up hatred against India for its sustained support to the deposed leadership, including giving sanctuary to Sheikh Hasina. Leading the charge are the coordinators of the anti-quota students movement, two of whom are in the interim administration, and their mentor Asif Nazrul who has been given the portfolios of law and culture in the Yunus dispensation. Additional inspiration is provided by sundry YouTube commentators based in France and the US. They were responsible for forcing Yunus to divest the Home portfolio from the blunt-talking M Sakhat Hossain who had the temerity to suggest that a future democratic election should also include the party of the liberation struggle, Awami League.

Regardless of how virtuous and well-spoken

representatives of Bangladesh's thriving NGO movement such as Magsaysay award winner Syeda Rizwana Hasan and Sharmeen Murshid are, and how much Yunus's trusted Grameen Bank aide Nurjahan Begum projects the interim administration as a body committed to fundamental structural reforms that will not be sullied by political chicanery, the reality is more awkward.

For a start, the initial mystery over who was responsible for the 'spontaneous' destruction of memorials commemorating Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the 1971 liberation war appears to have been resolved. The targets of vandalism also included a cultural centre named after Indira Gandhi and the singer Rahul Ananda, a member of the minority Hindu community. It now seems that these were targeted by the student movement whose leadership seems determined that no space will be given to either Bangabandhu or the Awami League. Following sustained student pressure, the interim administration scrapped the public holiday on August 15 commemorating Mujib's martyrdom day. Indeed, those who came to the iconic

leader's gutted house in Dhanmondi on August 15 to pay their respects were assaulted and humiliated. Later, the students celebrated their 'victory' with a boisterous lungi dance.

To say that the driving force of the student movement are Islamists would not be accurate. There is nothing yet to link them to the sporadic attacks on Hindus in different parts of Bangladesh. From sundry media statements and impassioned public speeches, it would seem that a big chunk of the student activists not already attached to the Bangladesh National Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami are loosely Left inclined. While some of this is undeniably redolent with romanticism, there is a big chunk that is driven by visceral hatred of India.

Arguably, this antipathy may have been shaped by India's association with the Awami League govt, not least its subversion of three consecutive elections. However, images of the wild celebrations in Bangladesh after India lost to Australia in the ICC World Cup last year, would suggest that the hatred has gone beyond politics and assumed a civilisational dimension. As to why this should

be the case, considering Bangladesh's dependence on health facilities in India and the cultural connect with West Bengal is mystifying. Judging from the rants of professional India-baiters who blame New Delhi for all the ills of Bangladesh, some of the hatred is also economic. The suggestion is that there are too many Indian goods being sold in Bangladesh, too many Indian companies overpowering local enterprises and too many Indians taking away jobs from locals. The students aver that if India persists with its "undeclared war" on Bangladesh, there will be retribution and renewed unrest in Assam and north-east India, a complete reversal of Hasina's zero tolerance of those who used Bangladesh to subvert India.

These may be the half-baked ideas of a few hot-heads who need to grow up. Unfortunately, they also happen to be the beliefs of those who feel that the future doesn't belong to either Yunus and his NGOs or to the heirs of former President Ziaur Rahman, but to those who braved the bullets in July-August 2024, the so-called 'second liberation' that unlike the first, did not involve India at all. ■

After this dismal show, should India just give up on Olympics?

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST



CHETAN BHAGAT

My number one apprehension in writing this piece is that everyone would say a column on the Olympics is dated. Yes, it's been almost two weeks since the so-called 'greatest sporting event' ended. Less than a fortnight ago, crores of Indians streamed in to watch Neeraj Chopra do his javelin throw, where we were expecting gold. We fell into national despair when Vinesh Phogat was disqualified for being 100gm over the required weight. And yet, how we moved on! The games ended, and we went on to the next big thing on social media. Geez, this column may well be dated. Why didn't I write about the upcoming assembly elections?

But this on-and-off mentality is precisely the reason for yet another pathetic performance in the Olympics. Sorry for the harsh words. I know we live in times where mentioning India as anything but perfect means you are suspected of being part of a global deep state conspiracy or something like that. However, if you are somewhat of the old-fashioned tough-love category, you will appreciate that sometimes the path to progress lies in calling things what they are. And yes, given our profile and size as a nation, we were bad at the Olympics (again!). This is not to throw shade on our half a dozen or so medal winners. No, please guys, you were the 'izzat bacha li' of a far, far below expectations show in Paris this year. But to ignore the macro data is doing our nation a disservice. Our neighbour China won 91 medals this time, with 40 golds. We won 6 medals, and 0 golds. Sure, we hear stories of toddlers in China being tormented in a quest to win medals. Still, that does not explain this massive gap between the two most populous nations.

In fact, the tally shows that we were below North Korea and Kazakhstan.

In that light, is it better if India just gave up on the Olympics? We obviously don't spend enough on sports as a nation. Some of our weddings cost more. Even what we do spend—a few thousand crores—is not yielding results. When Abhinav Bindra won a gold in 2008, reams of articles called it a turning point for India at the Olympics. That we are now going to reach per capita GDP levels where we will see more medals trickling in. Corporates came on board, NGOs were formed with the sole quest of winning golds, slogans were coined, and we thought medals would just flow in and champions created in a consistent, planned and clinical manner. None of this happened. All we get is the occasional freak-of-nature, six-standard-deviation talent, which in a land of a billion and a half is entirely possible, that gets us a few medals.



REALITY CHECK: It's better to be humble and work on revamping the entire sports ecosystem in India

Maybe it is better to give up even trying in the Olympics and spend the sports budget on making more parks and sports facilities around the country? There's no easy answer. Ideally, you need both, and they are linked as well. A good sports infrastructure for common citizens will invariably throw up champions, rather than trying to pump up a few athletes. Building a national sports ethos and infrastructure is, of course, a long process, and I am not even sure if Indians care much for it. Sorry, we'd rather have exam tuition centres. Thus, we could give up on the Olympics, but for the once-in-four-years shame. For those two weeks, we could reschedule the IPL or the T20 World Cup (where realistically only 4 countries compete). We can also throw in an assembly election or two to distract us. And if some of those voyeuristic reality shows cooperate, they can launch at the same time too. The two weeks of Olympics will go by in a flash, and we'd barely notice.

Or, and that's a big OR, we can decide to really take the bull by the horns. We can acknowledge we aren't good at this, yet. Then rather than chanting slogans and chest-thumping about our support for India (reality check: cheering harder doesn't necessarily get more medals), we actually do what it takes to win gold medals. We don't just focus on what players. We revamp the entire sports ecosystem of the country. We put solid resources for sports. We have a quota for athletes in top universities, so that they have some security about their future. We put our heads down, have humility and say that we will work harder. We do not say 'this is India's time, and we are going to start winning now anyway.' Nobody, neither an individual nor a country is entitled to 'their time.' One has to work hard to make it happen. The Olympics results clearly show our inflated sense of self-worth compared to what we really are on the world stage. We 'feeling great' doesn't make us great. It's time to start doing what will actually make us great. ■

INBOX

Time for concrete, systemic change

Maitreyi Misra's column 'Kol Rape: Rage...' (ATM, Aug 18) is a timely reflection on the ongoing situation across the country. The issue of violence against women is not a sporadic occurrence, but a persistent and deeply rooted problem. Addressing this requires concrete, system-based solutions, rather than knee-jerk reactions. We must commit to establishing scientific investigation systems, robust forensic laboratories, and a judiciary free from undue stress. Media and social media trials must also cease.

— KAR Reddy, Vishakapatnam

Need stronger stance

Apropos of 'We need women...' (ATM, Aug 18), despite people's outrage, govt data reported about 84 cases of rape a day in 2022. Stringent laws are made ineffective by powerful offenders erasing evidence. Justice is often delayed. Women in prominent positions must rise above their affiliations and ensure that culprits are promptly dealt with and awarded severe punishment. Their efforts can reduce such assaults considerably.

— Subhash Vaid, Delhi

Down memory lane

The interview 'Mags like Dharmayug...' (ATM, Aug 18) took me back to my childhood. I was four years old when Dharmayug's first edition came out, sparking a lovely journey. It introduced me to the doyens of Hindi literature. When it went out of print, it felt like a personal loss.

— Veena Sharma, Delhi

Email your letters to the editor at sunday.times@timesofindia.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

What lateral entry fracas tells us about governance in coalition era

BY INVITATION



RUCHI GUPTA

The recent episode around lateral entries in UPSC is instructive on multiple levels. Before we can draw out the meaning of these developments, we must first set the context. The larger context is that BJP and its parent body RSS are seen to be anti-reservation and, thus, seemingly always looking for ways to do away with it. This perception was ably harnessed by the opposition in Bihar in 2015 when Lalu Yadav recast the election as a battle between forward and backward castes after Mohan Bhagwat spoke of the need to review reservations. Again, in the 2024 national election, BJP's grandiose '400 paar' ambition was seen as a desire to amend the Constitution and do away with reservation. In both cases, BJP faced electoral repercussions—losing the Bihar election and, in 2024, losing its outright majority. BJP is now saddled with multiple coalition partners—and that provides the immediate context. The third and final context is the spate of upcoming state elections, which it can ill afford to lose lest it cement the notion that it is on its way out.

With this backdrop, let's examine the policy and its politics. Govt proposed 45 mid-level bureaucratic posts for lateral entry, citing a need for expertise. These single-cadre posts were not subject to the usual reservation quotas, sparking outrage both within and outside the coalition govt. After a brief defence, in which the govt gamely put out names such as former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as examples of Congress' own lateral hires, it quickly scrapped the proposal.

This episode raises three critical issues: the need for expertise within govt, the false dichotomy between equitable representation and merit, and the distinction between political appointments and career bureaucracy. On the first issue, the govt can and must harness citizens' collective expertise for nation-building. It is also evident that no govt in India—state or national—lacks access to expertise. They have multiple channels to get technical know-how and domain knowledge—from advisors to committees and even the much-misused provision for consultants. However, the issue in governance and administration is rarely about technical know-how but is instead about political judgment,

regarding prioritisation and tradeoffs and building consensus. No mid-level bureaucrat on a temporary deputation can exercise this kind of judgment. And it is not clear that the govt—with its penchant for centralised and top-down decision-making—wants anyone to. It is also not clear why it needs to bypass existing recruitment processes for the bulk of the positions opened, such as those related to shipping, roads and highways, social welfare, and so on. In fact, if it finds itself incapable of addressing these ongoing issues through routine processes, then the issue is obviously larger than the 45 positions opened.

The second issue is the repeated positing of merit as somehow incompatible with questions of equitable representation. It is the highlighting of this false trade-off which leads to the perception that the BJP is anti-reservation. This tradeoff has been debunked multiple times and needs no rebuttal here. Moreover, given the generalist nature of many of the advertised positions, it is unclear why the Centre could not have followed a similar process of reservation in their recruitment process as well. In fact, the recent DoPT directive, which removed the six-decade bar on govt officials participating in RSS activities, supports the opposition charge that this process is meant to do away with reservations through the backdoor while appointing party affiliates to important bureaucratic positions.

This brings us to the third issue. All govt pursue a mandate based on a stated ideological vision. It is thus natural for them to co-opt individuals aligned with that ideological vision and mandate. However, individuals thus co-opted are explicitly political appointments. BJP circulated a list of names to counter the opposition, but all of those names were political appointees. No one has criticised political appointments in the Modi govt—which exist in the form of OSDs, advisors and even a few ministers. However, in circulating the list, the govt conflated bureaucratic and political appointees.

In conclusion, the rapid policy reversal we've witnessed reveals the struggle to navigate the new political reality ushered in on June 4. While consensus-building is crucial in any democracy, especially one as diverse as India, the Modi govt's previous majorities allowed it to disregard dissenting voices. These rollbacks highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to governance in a coalition era. ■

Gupta is executive director of the Future of India Foundation



MIXED UP MESSAGE: All govt make political appointments but one should not conflate bureaucratic and political appointees

Kolkata case shows how business of rape videos is flourishing online

Social media channels and porn sites are helping perpetrators monetise this dark trade

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A week after the rape-murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata that sparked protests across cities, there was another disturbing trend doing the rounds. Searches for non-consensual sex videos surged and almost overnight, there was a proliferation of channels on social media messaging apps offering a glimpse of the 'rape' for a price. Some people have converted a tragedy into an opportunity to make a quick buck.

Google Trends recorded a spike in searches for 'rape videos kolkata' on August 15 and then on August 17 while other related searches like the victim's name like 'dr xxxx rape video' 'xxxx porn' have been

SUNITHA KRISHNAN, ACTIVIST

In November I bought over 9,000 videos of child sex abuse material and rape for just Rs 532 but there was no action on my complaint



trending all week. The Publica reported that on XVideos-India, the victim's name has been searched alongside actual pornographic videos. On messaging app Telegram, channels offering such videos have sprung up with some boasting of 7,000-9,000 subscribers. The links lead an interested subscriber to cloud aggregator apps like Terabox and porn sites. 'Force video' vendors have popped up on Instagram too.

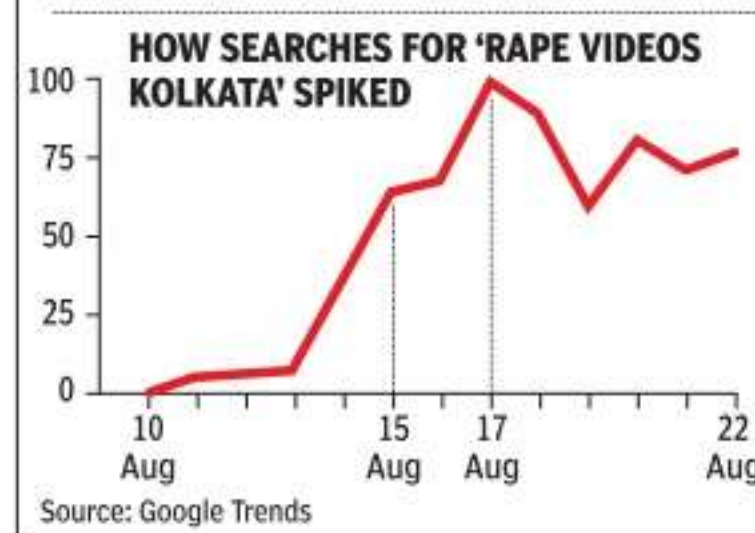
Though the Supreme Court has ordered deletion of mentions, photos and videos related to the Kolkata doctor, this rogue industry is flourishing quietly.

The motive isn't always money, sometimes, it is to control the victim. Searches for 'Prajwal Ravanna sex tape' were trending between April 28-May 4 when the scandal broke. The Karnataka MP is accused of sexually assaulting an unknown number of women and taping his exploits to blackmail them. In January this year, UP police arrested six men who had raped a class 9 student for over a period of two years and blackmailed her over with photos and videos of the act. In November 2023, a homestay employee in Agra had to suffer a similar fate when she was gangraped by five men who filmed her to ensure her silence and compliance.

Women's rights activist Sunitha Krishnan says she receives rape videos every day. "Sometimes, of babies who are six months or a year old," Krishnan, co-founder of anti-trafficking NGO Prajwala, was so disturbed by these videos that she decided to pose as a decoy customer.

"On 1st November, 1:51 pm, Seller 3 advertised he had new material for Rs 200. I negotiated the price down to Rs 50 and paid on the same QR code as before... The content of 6 folders of explicit material was delivered to me on personal chat. The folders contained CSAM (child sexual abuse material)... as well as adult pornography. It also contained videos of gang rape with victims and molesters seeming to be from India."

This is an excerpt from Krishnan's complaint to the Telangana police in November last year explaining how easily she had been able to buy adult pornography which included rape and gangrape videos. She chatted with people who had names like 'Dada seller', 'innocent boy' and bought videos containing CSAM and rape videos. "In the space of just a couple of days I was able to buy over 9,000 videos for just Rs 532," she says. She submitted names and bank accounts of five people who had sold the objectionable material. "Those



people have not been caught. Where will deterrence come from if we are unwilling to take any step in eight months?" she says.

Cyber psychologist and founder of anti-bullying app CyberBAAP Nirali Bhatia says the ecosystem of media and social media has normalised voyeurism. "Excessive dependence on tech and overexposure to violent content has desensitised and dehumanised us. Everything has become content, and we no longer feel emotionally connected with anything," she says. This also explains why people start making videos of a drowning man instead of trying to save him.

The challenge for law enforcement authorities is both the volume of such material and the difficulties of tracking these encrypted

channels. AI has made creating porn that much easier. Last week, the city of San Francisco filed a lawsuit against 18 websites and apps that 'undress' or 'nudeify' women and girls. The sites take a normal, clothed photo of a person and generate a fake nude version from it. Dissemination is simple too. Start an anonymous account, upload the videos and then disappear. In private social media channels like Telegram, encryption ensures that there is no way to detect who is disseminating the video. Channels on these apps can be shut down, but perpetrators can open another one and continue to sell this material.

Barsha Chakraborty from NGO Breakthrough Trust, which works with youth in UP, Delhi, Jharkhand and Haryana on countering gender-based violence, says that sharing of such videos can lead to secondary victimisation. "Often, we find that misinformation and disinformation is used to school or harass a woman, especially if she is vocal. This ranges from fake news to targeting the woman's identity," she says. Dr Nayreen Daruwala, program director for prevention of violence against women and children at NGO Sneha, says survivors' trauma only increases. "Women who have suffered sexual violence take a very long time to recover. Recording of sexual violence like this hinders their progress and continues their trauma."

Krishnan says she petitioned the SC on sharing of CSAM and rape videos back in 2015. "Our demand for a national-level investigative agency to probe those creating and selling this content was not met. Whether it is 2015 or 2024, the status quo prevails," she says. Breakthrough's Chakraborty says that the only deterrence is better awareness. The NGO trains young people in how to detect disinformation and misinformation and to question what they see. "We are undertaking a program that will focus on deepfakes, scams and the issue of consent in uploading or sharing of images and information," she says.

Ghosts don't scare the Indian Stree

One of the apocryphal tales of my childhood revolves around a great aunt who got possessed by an evil spirit. My grandmother's version of this story stated that this happened while my aunt was coming home late one evening. She also happened to be wearing her hair loose that day. For some reason, this was an important detail. The configuration of these three elements—woman, loose hair, and late evening—apparently created a gateway for the spirit's entry. The signs of possession were throwing up violently on various family members, writhing and crying. There were multiple retellings of this story as I grew up. On one occasion, I finally said, "Has anyone considered that it could have just been a bad case of gastroenteritis? I have similar symptoms when I eat pani puri from Elco Market." My grandmother wasn't interested in my logical arguments. Her primary purpose was to scare my sister



kinds of stories my grandmother would tell me. Here, women are free and men are scared, as the supernatural Stree, who descends for four nights in a year; only preys on men wandering around after dusk. A subversion of the fear that women experience on a daily basis.

Horror movies, though, seem to contain less unsettling components than the scary things we see every day around us. A report by National Crime Records Bureau shows that there are 51 rapes every hour. Scanning recent newspapers corroborates the bleak reality. The rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata. Two four-year-olds who were sexually abused in a

Chad Crowe



and me, so we didn't wander off to the adjacent Juhu beach. I suppose ghost stories have always served as warnings against bad decisions and their consequences.

While there is no scientific evidence to back the existence of ghosts, the simplest explanation would be that they come from the human need to personify abstract patterns. The equivalent of a Rorschach test where in an inkblot, instead of butterflies, you see a chudai with twisted feet.

Ghost sightings can also be attributed to a number of reasons like sleep paralysis, hallucinations caused by stress, sleep deprivation and even mould. Dr Shane Rogers, a professor at New York's Clarkson University, found a definite correlation between mould and haunted houses. In damp buildings, Aspergillus mould can cause shortness of breath and optic nerve inflammation, causing dark shapes to float across people's vision. I suppose the villagers in the blockbuster 'Stree' would have been better off cleaning mouldy patches off their walls rather than writing, 'Oh Stree, kal aana.' But then, if no one saw apparitions, we would not have a plot for a horror movie. That would be a shame because while believing in ghosts is likely to cause anxiety, watching horror movies has surprising benefits like weight loss. A University of Westminster study that measured heart rate and oxygen intake discovered that watching scary movies can help burn up to 150 calories. They identified 'The Shining' as the highest calorie burner. Researchers have also found that the experience releases dopamine and serotonin, which works as a great mood elevator.

Scary movies can also be an entertaining way of conveying an important social message like in the already mentioned 'Stree 2'. In the first instalment of what is now turning into an entire horror universe, there is a role reversal to the

Horror movies can't match up to the reality around us. I even read an account of four men being arrested for raping a scaly monitor lizard in Maharashtra. I would like to clarify that the monitor lizard was neither wearing a short skirt, nor did it have loose morals or too much makeup

school in Badlapur. A 14-year-old girl from Bihar raped and murdered after refusing a marriage proposal from a man with three kids. I even read an account of four men being arrested for raping a scaly monitor lizard in Maharashtra. I would like to clarify that the monitor lizard was neither wearing a short skirt, nor did it have loose morals or too much makeup.

Fifty years on this planet, and I find that we are still teaching our daughters the same things that I was taught as a child...

Don't go alone. To the park, to school, to work.
Don't go alone with any man, even if it's your uncle, cousin or friend.
Don't go alone in the morning or evening, and especially not at night.

Don't go alone because it's not a matter of if, but when.
Don't go alone because you may never come back.

It is time to ensure that laws are enforced and followed, guaranteeing safety measures for women in public spaces instead of confining us at home.

Till then, I suppose it is safer for the streets of this country to encounter a ghost in a dark alley than a man.

IS CHESS THE NEW SPELLING BEE FOR DESIS?

Baby-faced Indian-origin GMs from US, UK and Singapore are competing at the highest levels of chess even as their parents battle funds constraints and visa issues

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The queen was alive, the PM was desi and England was still raw from losing three one-dayers and two T20 matches to India in July 2022 when British chess veteran Malcolm Pein silenced a few teasing kids in Tamil Nadu saying: "One day, our Indians will be better than your Indians."

Pein's verbal checkmate has started to resemble a prophecy. Last week, a lanky 14-year-old Bengaluru-born Woolwich-bred Shreyas Royal aka Shrez not only drew a game against 18-year-old Indian grandmaster (GM) D Gukesh in London but became the youngest British GM at 15 years, six months and 24 days.

Then there is Bodhana Sivanandan, the nine-year-old lover of princess TV shows from Greater London, who inspires dread among grown-ups every time she mounts a booster seat across from them. "I've had a lot of players say to me they're terrified of playing her," exclaimed British chess veteran Jovanka Houska on TV recently about the Barbie doll owner from Harrow who will soon accompany teammates between 23 and 44 years of age as the youngest-ever player to represent England in the women's Chess Olympiad in Hungary in September. "I don't look at who I am playing, I just look at the board," she told an interviewer recently.

Shreyas and Bodhana are among



Shreyas Royal
15yrs | Youngest British GM



Abhimanyu Mishra
15yrs | Youngest GM & IM. Lives in US

Covid's second wave in June 2021, merely two years after he beat Pragnanandhaa's record by 17 days to become the youngest international master (IM) in chess history, New Jersey-based Abhimanyu Mishra sacrificed his knight for a pawn in Hungary to become the youngest GM in the world. Closer home, Singapore-based eight-year-old Ashwath Kaushik—who advises newbies to "never give up, develop pieces and take advantage of the pieces your opponent blunders"—defeated a seasoned Polish GM at the Burgdorfer Stadthaus Open in Switzerland earlier this year. More recently, Chandigarh-born Siddharth Jaga-

deesh became the youngest GM of Singapore at 17.

The players' list from US Chess Federation's National K-12 Grade Championships has so many South Asians that Daniel Lucas, their senior director of strategic communication, concedes that chess may just be the new national Spelling Bee. The scene isn't very different in the UK. "South Asians tend to value academic and non-academic activities that promote concentration and discipline," says Pein, director of English Chess Federation. He describes Bodhana's father Sivanandan Velayuthan—an engineer who moved in 2007 from Tiruchirappalli to Harrow, a borough on the outskirts of London—as "almost the perfect chess parent".

While the compelling global allure of the OTT drama series 'Queen's Gambit' coupled with lockdown boredom brought chess to mainstream consciousness post-2020, Bodhana's tryst with the game



Bodhana Sivanandan
9yrs | Will be youngest player to represent England in women's Chess Olympiad in Sept

was "a pure accident" says Sivanandan, her father. "One of our friends was moving back to India during Covid, so he gave us a bag full of books and a magnetic wooden chess board. She wanted to play with the pieces as toys," says Sivanandan, who only knew the basics of chess then. "I had to explain the game to her using YouTube videos." Before long, the schoolgirl put Harrow on the national map as UK's youngest women international master.

Perhaps India's own GM strength, which has gone from 15 to 85 in 20 years, has something to do with the success of its young diaspora. Jitendra Singh, Shreyas' teacher father who moved to the UK in 2012 and enrolled his son at his school chess club at age six, points out that Indian GM Swayams Mishra apart from English GM John Emms shared his son's journey.

It was to keep his toddler away from gadgets that US-based Hemant Mishra aka 'bapu' introduced Ab-

himanyu, then just two, to chess. At 12, he became the youngest grandmaster in the world. To ace the "cruel, logical game", the teen dropped out of a US public school ("the system allows only five days a year off," says Hemant), and joined an online school.

Last month, Abhimanyu was vying with the likes of Pragnanandhaa at the recently-concluded Biel chess festival in Switzerland even as his techie father worked in a hotel room nearby. "I cannot quit the job," says Hemant, who has borne their chess-induced expenses for ten years, including martial art and soccer lessons to build stamina for long hours of sitting.

Shreyas Royal's family had to navigate other hurdles. In 2017, the family found that they could stay on in the UK only if his father renewed his work visa, which required Jitendra to earn £120,000 a year. The couple appealed to the Home Office. When that didn't work, the English Chess Federation lobbied on behalf of Shreyas, and Labour Party's Rachel Reeves, a former junior chess champion, wrote to then Home Secretary Sajid Javid urging him to let the boy stay. Within days, an email from the Home Office informed Jitendra that the family could stay on a new work visa. Jitendra says the ECF has also helped his son financially on multiple occasions. Now, he receives support from an Indian corporate. "Maybe me playing for England is a slight loss for India. But I feel India already has enough chess prodigies," Shreyas told an Indian newspaper recently before fulfilling his dream of becoming the youngest British GM.

Meanwhile, Abhimanyu's bapu continues to seek online crowd-funding for the world's youngest GM.

Dear reader, got the scoop? Blinds give gossip new life on social media

Whether it's the dope on big weddings or stars, anonymous handles are the new Whistledowns of the internet era

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Gossip is an enduring part of our lives, as it has been for millennia. On the show 'Bridgerton', the elusive Lady Whistledown reveals the secrets and scandals of the ton—which debutante is pregnant and which suitor has his eyes on someone else's prize. We are not in the regency era (as much as people's outdated views on marriage and courtship may suggest) but the internet has given us new Whistledowns—whether that is the popular subreddit Bolly Blinds n Gossip with 1.2 million subscribers, websites publishing (both salacious and tepid) blind items and a plethora of online handles promising inside scoops.

Take the Ambani wedding. It's not just our eyes that were glued to the grand nuptials but our ears too. Weeks after the event, social media was serving up juicy morsels of gossip from the event—which couple was arguing, who had a nervous breakdown and who was ogling Kim K.

Fact or (mostly) fiction, these bits of gossip have taken on a life of their own, originating on Reddit but making their way elsewhere on social media. So why this unending appetite for blinds? One reason is that they gamify gossip, the guessing games being much of the point. It is part of the reason anonymous Instagram handle Deux Moi has become a Hollywood sensation and spurred pages dedicated to decoding the gossip it posts.

Writer Shreemi Gupta remembers a childhood filled with chit-chat about magazines like Filmfare and Stardust, which had the famous gossip column Neeta's Natter started by publisher Nari Hira, who died on Saturday, and then editor Shobha De. "We used to love decoding blind items. It was like our crossword," she laughs. Much later, during the pandemic, she found solace in Bolly Blinds. "You can be reading the worst news in other places, but there, they would be asking why Alia is wearing this or that."

Gossip, though much derided, does play certain social functions. For one, it binds us together, says



Chad Crowe

Gupta—and she knows blind items can be unethical, problematic, malicious or simply lies. Your boring co-worker may not care to know about what your cousin is up to, but a spicy nugget about a Ranveer Singh or Virat Kohli may lead to a rare fun conversation. It also gives one an in into in-groups.

Plus, there is some kind of schadenfreude we feel when seemingly lucky, shiny, pretty people are knocked off their pedestal. Screen-

writer Aseem Chandaver has had a series of entertainment jobs that brought him face to face with gossip so salacious, it would make many blush (think unusual fetishes that bring the bathroom into the bedroom). For him, part of the appeal is destroying the deification of celebrities. "We are a country of worshippers. But when you hear that this actor only walks around in their undies or a star was caught yelling at his own phallus in his vanity van,

it removes the sheen." As Prof Andrea McDonald, author of 'Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines' put it, "Readers enjoy talking back to the fairy tale." Or maybe, they enjoy dismantling the fairy tale altogether.

Gossip, not just that of the celebrity variety, can take on societal norms too. Think about the MeToo movement where a women-led whisper network got louder and louder, until it was a scream. As Gupta puts it, "It does help to out people. I was so in tune with blind items that I knew a Hollywood bigwig called Harvey Weinstein was a predator back in 2000." The Instagram handle 'sceneandherd' was key to the MeToo movement in the art world, before a lawsuit shut it down.

In other contexts, Twitter handle JLFInsider posted the inside scoop from the literature festival, often mocking the famous faces that made their way through it. On Bolly Blinds on Reddit, too, the odd post made by an airport employee or server about which stars are rude serves to uphold the power dynamic that they're bound by in real life. The anonymity of the internet, then, becomes freeing, a way to turn the tables.

Rajinder Dudrah, professor of cultural studies at the Birmingham School of Media, argues that online

gossip is part of a wider tradition of gossiping with friends and family. "As technology often does, it exaggerates and sometimes exaggerates it," he says. "It can be a stand-in for what we are or want to be, a small diversion from our mundane

Gossip, though much derided, does bind us together, says writer Shreemi Gupta. Your co-worker may not care what your cousin is up to, but a spicy nugget about Ranveer Singh may lead to a fun chat. It also gives one an in into in-groups

life or problems at home," he adds.

The Opinionated Indian is a website and social media handle that began with Bollywood opinions but has expanded into the world of gossip blind items. The admin of the website, speaking on condition of anonymity, says that it started slow. The Mumbai-based had heard industry stories from the grapevine, but the more popular his page got, the more he began to cultivate relationships with sources. "Now, I have people on my payroll to pro-

vide gossip. Some work at top studios or are managers. A lot of PR agencies get in touch directly to share their content or if they have a movie release," says the admin.

And sometimes, industry folks reach out for other reasons—to request (if not demand) a piece of gossip be taken down. "There was one big celeb and I was writing about his womanising. I got a call from a big studio and was asked to pull it down," he says, acknowledging that the 'give and take' required in the job led him to comply.

With PR "controlling everything", Chandaver says the gossip on offer is less juicy than the good, old days. Plus, it doesn't help that we are overexposed to the lives of stars thanks to their social media accounts. "The gossip now is things like Kartik Aaryan having three vanity vans or whatever, which is fine but not what it used to be," he says. The audience, too, is getting savvier at spotting plants. Professor Dudrah says people are much more likely to pick up on this, pointing out, "huh this piece of gossip that reminds us of the existence of a celebrity is coming out pretty close to the release of their new film". Gossip can be good, bad and most certainly ugly but one thing is for sure: it's more than just frivolous timepass. Or so I heard.

PROFILES

The fight for a gender-balanced workplace

Women in Cinema Collective

The platform, whose petition led to the setting up of the Hema Committee by the Kerala government, stands vindicated as its report unveiled 'horrid tales of sexual exploitation, illegal bans, discrimination, drug and alcohol abuse and wage disparity' in the Malayalam film industry

G. Krishnakumar

“This is the voice of women and it must be heard!” This was how a Facebook post by the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) concluded hours after the Kerala government released the redacted form of the K. Hema Committee report on the issues faced by women in the Malayalam film industry on August 19, 2024. The 235-page report had created a political storm in the State as it had revealed “horrid tales of sexual exploitation, illegal bans, discrimination, drug and alcohol abuse, wage disparity and in some cases, inhuman working conditions” in the multi-crore industry.

For the WCC, “it has been a long journey” as they stood vindicated in their fight for “justice for all women wanting a dignified professional space in the film industry”. The three-member committee led by a former judge of the Kerala High Court was set up by the government in July 2017 as an outcome of a petition submitted by the collective to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan to study the problems faced by women in the Malayalam film industry. Though the committee had submitted its report on December 31, 2019, it was not made public on the grounds that it contained sensitive information.

A first of its kind in the country, the WCC came into being after a woman actor was allegedly abducted and sexually assaulted in a moving car on the night of February 17, 2017 in Kochi. Shell-shocked over the dastardly act, a group of nearly 18 women that included some of the prominent technicians, writers and actors joined hands to stand by the survivor and undertake an unwavering fight for justice.

A probe by the Special Investigation Team of the Kerala Police led to the arrest of Malayalam actor Dileep, who allegedly nursed a grudge towards the victim over her reported involvement in the break-up of his previous matrimonial relationship. He was arrested on July 10, 2017, after being arraigned as eighth accused in the



(From left) Padmapriya, Rima Kallingal, Beena Paul, Revathi and Parvathy Thiruvothu

case. After spending 85 days in the Aluva sub-jail in Ernakulam, the actor secured a bail from the Kerala High Court and was released on October 3, 2017.

According to the WCC, the “entire episode and ensuing reactions reaffirmed the stronghold of patriarchal beliefs in the film industry, highlighting the challenges faced by survivors in their course of pursuing justice”. Nearly three months after the assault on the actress, the collective was formally launched on May 18, 2017. The WCC was registered under the Travancore Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Registration Act, 1955 on November 1, 2017, with “a vision to ensure equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in cinema”.

Non-discriminatory workspace

Its mission goals included working towards building a safe, non-discriminatory and professional workspace for women in cinema through advocacy and policy change and creating awareness about gender bias and exploitation faced by women in the film industry, both on-screen and off-screen. A volunteer spirit

drives the functioning of the collective as it works in a lateral structure. The responsibilities are shared and various teams handle a wide variety of roles, including daily management, policy generation and engagement with experts on legal perspectives connected to the workplace rights of women. A person above the age of 18 years working in the Malayalam film industry, with minimum three film credits to her name and referred by the existing members becomes eligible for membership in the collective, according to the official website.

In the first two years since its inception, the WCC largely focussed on dealing with sexual harassment within the industry. As barbs were thrown at the survivor from within the industry, it rallied behind her and launched a counter-resistance campaign with the hashtag #Avalkoppam (With her). The global attention gained in 2017 for the #MeToo movement gave a fillip to their initiative.

Despite being aware of the possible damage it may cause on their careers, four members of the WCC, including the survivor, resigned from the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) in June 2018,

protesting against the organisation’s decision to reinstate Dileep, who was ousted from the organisation after he was named as an accused in the abduction and sexual assault case. Those who walked out included actors Rima Kallingal, Remya Nambeesan, and filmmaker Geetu Mohandas, after they stated that the “leadership of the association was with the accused and not the survivor”. Actor Parvathy Thiruvothu, who wanted to continue the fight from within, resigned in October 2020 in protest against the alleged derogatory remarks made by a key office-bearer of the actors’ body against the survivor.

The protracted battle against the male-dominated structures in the industry has come at a price, especially for the eloquent voices in the collective. As the Hema Committee report itself stated: “WCC members have a strong case that they were all banned from cinema because they openly stated undesirable things that happen in cinema. They are practically kept away by those who are offended by what members of the collective stated openly against the atrocities in cinema and from AMMA”.

An actor who deposed before the

committee denied the allegations of denial of opportunities to WCC members as he asked them to “accept the reality that the prominence of the actress will be reduced as days pass by and this is very common”. The collective and its working model has come under oblique criticism from within the industry as they have been often labelled as “feminists who stay inside the comforts of cyberspace” and ‘carrying out women empowerment through Facebook’.

Relentless pursuits

However, the relentless legal pursuit of the collective to ensure the workplace rights of women received a major boost after the Kerala High Court directed film production houses on March 17, 2022 to form an internal complaints committee (ICC) as per the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. The Bench, which acted on a petition filed by the WCC, held that “each film unit in an industry is an establishment and an ICC needs to be constituted for that purpose”. It had also opposed the plea of a film producer challenging the order of the State Information Commissioner to make public the Hema Committee report.

The WCC has expanded its wings by undertaking various independent projects. It partnered with the Sakhi Women’s Resource Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, to bring out a report, ‘Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment’, focusing on creating guidelines for building gender-balanced professional spaces in the film industry. It has been working on developing a network of counsellors to extend a helping hand to women facing negative experiences in the industry. The collective has also initiated a project to collect quantitative information on the number of women in the film industry under specific skill sets aimed to learn about disparity and lack of inclusion. Over the last seven years, it has emerged as a strong platform “where untold experiences of women in cinema have found voice, and are being heard”.

THE GIST

A first of its kind in the country, the WCC came into being after a woman actor was allegedly abducted and sexually assaulted in a moving car on the night of February 17, 2017 in Kochi

Its mission goals included working towards building a safe, non-discriminatory and professional workspace for women in cinema through advocacy and policy change and creating awareness about gender bias and exploitation faced by women in the film industry

The relentless legal pursuit of the collective to ensure the workplace rights of women received a major boost after the Kerala High Court directed the film production houses on March 17, 2022 to form an internal complaints committee

Rise of the scion

Pactongtarn Shinawatra

Faced with a bitterly divided Parliament, an overstepping judiciary, a slow-growing economy and her own inexperience, the new PM faces a slew of challenges in Thailand

Suchitra Karthikeyan

Thailand is now led by a third Shinawatra as 38-year-old Paetongtarn Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister on August 18. Following her billionaire father Thaksin and aunt Yingluck’s footsteps, Ms. Paetongtarn is the youngest and only second woman Prime Minister of the Southeast Asian monarchy.

Born on August 21, 1986, Paetongtarn – also known by her nickname Ung Ing – is the youngest daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra, a former telecom businessman-turned Prime Minister. After completing a BA in Political Science from the Chulalongkorn University, she switched streams and obtained a masters in International Hotel Management from the University of Surrey, England.

Ms. Paetongtarn, who grew up watching the dramatic rise and fall of her father in Thai politics, formally entered politics in 2021 as director of the Pheu Thai Party’s innovation and inclusiveness committee.

“I consult with my father on all issues, since I was young,” said Ms. Paetongtarn last year. The 75-year-old former Prime Minister received a royal amnesty in an eight-year sentence on charges related to corruption and abuse of power



last week. However he still faces charges for “defaming” the monarchy.

Prior to politics, Ms. Paetongtarn was involved in her family’s business, holding a 28.5% stake in property firm SC Asset Corp. She was also the CEO of Rende Development Co, a hotel business run by her sister. In 2019, she married commercial pilot Pidok Sooksawas and has two children. She created waves by campaigning while being pregnant and gave birth just before the elections in May 2023.

In 2020, massive pro-democracy protests broke out across Thailand, demanding an end to the military rule that was imposed in 2014, after the toppling her aunt Ms. Yingluck’s government. As an active leader of the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), Ms. Paetongtarn was chosen as one of the three Prime ministerial candidates ahead of the May 2023 elections. She promised a mix of social and economic measures in

her campaign including building high-speed rail and flood mitigation infrastructure, reining in the use of marijuana for recreational purposes and easing laws for the LGBTQ+ community.

Mixed result

The general elections threw up a mixed result, awarding the now disbanded Move Forward Party, led by Pita Limjaroenrat, 151 out of 500 seats, The PTP, with 141 seats, came second. Mr. Pita allied with eight pro-democracy parties, including the PTP, to cobble together a coalition, but was blocked by the military-ruled 200-member Senate.

Taking the lead, the PTP then joined hands with 10 other parties, including military-backed United Thai Nation Party and Palang Pracharat Party. On August 22, 2023, Mr. Thaksin returned from a 15-year self-exile as the PTP nominated real estate mogul Srettha Thavisin as its PM

pick. Ms. Paetongtarn was appointed the PTP’s leader as her father began making more public appearances.

Ms. Paetongtarn’s road to the PM post was cleared by a ruling by Thailand’s constitutional court, which dismissed Mr. Srettha as PM on August 14 for ‘gross ethical violations’ in appointing Ms. Thaksin’s former lawyer, Pichit Chuenban, to his cabinet.

Mr. Pichit had been briefly imprisoned for contempt of court in 2008 over an alleged attempt to bribe court staff. Within 48 hours of Mr. Srettha’s dismissal, Parliament was convened to vote on Ms. Paetongtarn’s candidacy. The newly-elected Senate, which has replaced all its military-appointed members, too, confirmed her appointment quickly, indicating the military’s support for the Shinawatras.

Faced with a bitterly divided Parliament, an overstepping judiciary, a slow-growing economy and her own inexperience, Ms. Paetongtarn faces a slew of challenges, including tackling a bitter power struggle between her party and the royalist-military factions of her coalition and delivering on the PTP’s promises. She also has to step out of her father’s long shadow if she wants to leave her imprint on governance while navigating the choppy waters of Thai politics.

The security tsar

To Lam

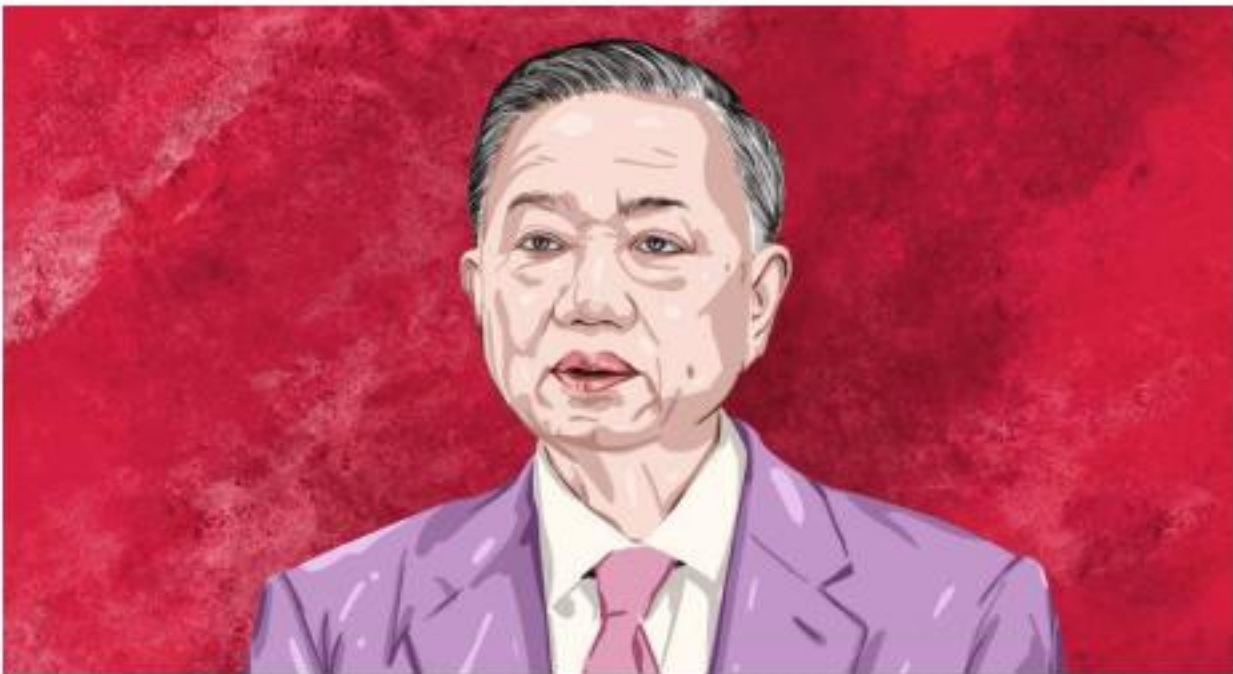
Vietnam’s new leader comes with a record of cracking down on dissenting voices while he was heading the Public Security Ministry

Priyali Prakash

To Lam, Vietnam’s newly elected President, recently concluded a three-day visit to China. Mr. Lam’s choice of China as the destination for his first overseas visit since assuming office was a testament of the new leadership to strengthen ties with its bigger communist neighbour with which it fought a war in 1979.

The welcome ceremony for Mr. Lam and his wife was held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, with the highest honours reserved for heads of states, including a 21-gun salute. Mr. Lam, who succeeded long-serving Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, who died at 80 in July 2024, moved fast in consolidating power at home and strengthening Vietnam’s partnerships abroad.

Mr. Lam was born in 1957, the year a communist insurgency began in southern Vietnam. A member of the Communist party since 1981, Mr. Lam cut his teeth in the police service. He studied at the People’s Security Academy and was recruited into the security force in October 1974 and rose through the ranks, eventually becoming the Minister of Public Security in April 2016, a post which would turn him into one of the most powerful men in



the one-party dictatorship. He has been a member of the 12th and 13th Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which holds immense power in the country by directing the government’s policies.

Steak controversy

Mr. Lam had his share of controversies as well. In 2021, he was seen eating gold-plated steak at celebrity chef Nusrat Gokce’s fine dining restaurant in London. Mr. Lam was in London after attending the UN COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland. The video went viral on TikTok, at a time when Vietnam was navigating economic complications after the COVID-19 pandemic. The video was quickly removed from TikTok, but not before it was viewed by millions of people.

The video, posted on November 3 on Mr. Gokce’s TikTok account, showed the chef personally preparing steak dishes in

front of the delegation, and himself feeding a slice of meat to Mr. Lam.

A noodle vendor in Vietnam, who went viral for impersonating chef Gokce’s typical salting style, was imprisoned for five years in 2023 for “anti-state propaganda”. The vendor had posted a video of himself shortly after Mr. Lam’s video went viral.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has also raised alarm about Mr. Lam’s rise to power in Vietnam. According to the group, his “rise to power is indicative of the Vietnam government’s worsening repression, its complete intolerance of criticism, and utter hostility to basic civil and political rights”. In 2016, when Mr. Lam was the Minister of Public Security, activists were reportedly barred from meeting former U.S. President Barack Obama during his historic trip to the country.

Vietnamese security forces, under Mr. Lam,

were also accused of kidnapping former party official Trinh Xuan Thanh from Berlin in July 2017, and blogger Truong Duy Nhat from Bangkok in January 2019.

German authorities said Vietnamese businessperson and former politician Thanh and a companion were abducted and dragged into a van in downtown Berlin, while Vietnam countered that he surrendered to Vietnamese authorities after evading an international arrest warrant for nearly a year. Mr. Thanh was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018.

Truong Duy Nhat was sentenced to 10 years in prison in March 2020 for “abusing his position and power while on duty” as a reporter, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported. Mr. Nhat worked for Radio Free Asia’s Vietnamese language service, which is funded by the U.S.

According to the HRW, Vietnamese courts convicted at least 32 people for posting critical opinions about the government and sentenced them to multiple years in prison in 2021 when Mr. Lam headed the Ministry of Public Security. Mr. Lam will continue as the President of Vietnam until 2026 when the party selects a new set of officeholders at its next five-yearly congress.

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong. Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech

Vision or division

IT WAS the prime minister's 11th successive speech on Independence Day, a record of sorts. It was the longest speech that Mr Narendra Modi had delivered from the ramparts of Red Fort (98 minutes). It was at the start of his third term and it was expected that the PM would lay out his vision for the government for the next five years.

The BJP leaders called the speech the unfolding of a bold new vision. If it was, I am afraid it was a vision that targeted a section of the people. The PM said,

"We are marching ahead with resolve, we are going far, but there is another truth – that there are some people who cannot digest India's progress. Some people cannot visualise good things for India. Because their own vested interests are not served, they don't like anybody's progress. There is no dearth of people having such a perverse mindset. The nation must be wary of such people."

DISDAIN FOR DEMOCRACY

Who are the "some people"? I know of no one who is not proud of India's progress in agriculture, information technology, nuclear energy, space, etc. Was the PM alluding to the 262 million voters who voted against him and the NDA?

Or to the youth who criticise him for the raging unemployment? Or to the home-makers who complain about the burden of rising inflation? Or to the soldiers and ex-servicemen who are perplexed by India's quiet retreat in the face of China's brazen occupation of Indian territory? In a speech intended to rally the people around a *vision* for India, the PM actually aggravated the *divisions* among the people caused by the wrong policies of his government. To call the opponents of his government "perverse" shows disdain for the democratic verdict.

If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong. Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech. He labeled the current personal law codes as 'communal civil codes' and said,

"There is no place in a modern society for laws which divide the nation on religious lines and become a basis for class discrimination. I would say, and this is the need of the hour, that there should be a secular civil code in the country. We have spent 75 years under a communal civil code. Now we will have to move towards a secular civil code. Only then will we get relief from the rift due to laws that lead to discrimination on the basis of religion."

That statement was a mixture of error, poor understanding and bias. Every personal law code is based on religion, including the Hindu codes, but that will not make the code *communal*. There is a secular code on marriage, namely, the Special Marriage Act, but it is not popular among the people of India. The common man (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh or Parsi) does not feel 'discriminated' because his neighbour is governed by another code. It would be wonderful if all the religious groups and communities can agree on a Uniform Civil Code, but that is easier said than done.

DIVISIVE RHETORIC

The very idea of UCC or ONOE rings alarm bells and it is first necessary to allay the fears. I had explained the hidden agenda of UCC and ONOE in a previous column (*Cult Worship and Consequences*, *Indian Express*, April 21, 2024). For UCC, it is necessary to hold extensive consultations with all religious groups and communities. For ONOE, it is necessary to make amendments to several Articles of the Constitution. A speech by the PM is not the start or the end of the debate on the issues. On the contrary, it will mean that divisive issues are sought to be raised and legislation pushed through Parliament which may divide the people further.

The LS elections witnessed a lot of divisive rhetoric. Attacking the Congress' Manifesto 2024, Mr Modi said,

■ Congress will distribute the people's land, gold and other valuables among Muslims;

■ Congress will take away your *mangalsutra* and *streedhan* and give it to people who have more children.

Mr Amit Shah said, 'Congress will seize temple properties and distribute them'. Mr Rajnath Singh said, 'Congress will grab the assets of the people and redistribute them to infiltrators'. The head-spinner was when Mr Modi warned the people of the coming of an inheritance tax on buffaloes. No one in the media called for a stop to the madness.

The sobering election verdict has not restrained the PM, but the fear of losing power has made his government back-track on several issues: the indexation benefit for capital gains has been restored, the Wakf Bill has been referred to a Select Committee, the Broadcasting Bill has been withdrawn, and the scheme of lateral entry into central government posts has been shelved. The fear of more divisive ideas will cease only when CAA, UCC and ONOE are withdrawn finally.

A vision can emerge only when BJP's playbook of division is junked.

inside TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



FAMILY FRICTION

THE BRUTAL rape and murder at R G Kar Medical College, Kolkata, has exposed the rift between Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee and her designated successor, nephew Abhishek Banerjee. Immediately after the crime, Abhishek had talked of capital punishment for the accused while his close associates Santanu Sen, Sukhendu Sekhar Roy and Pratima Mondol took part in protests and dharmas. A furious Mamata accused Sen of spearheading the rallies, even though the striking medical fraternity has emphasised that it is an apolitical movement. Roy was served a notice by the police. Mamata's detractors claim that she went out of the way to protect the tainted former principal of R G Kar Medical College, Sandip Ghosh, and initially allowed policemen to cover up and destroy evidence because the principal is allegedly in the know of a mafia dealing in medicines and equipment that operates in Kolkata medical colleges. After his statement demanding action against the principal, Sen was removed as spokesperson for the party. In fact, Mamata's publicity team and the usually outspoken women MPs have been muted or defensive about the horrendous crime. Incidentally, even before the incident, on July 27, when Mamata came to Delhi for the NITI Aayog meet, journalists noticed that the chair reserved for Abhishek at her press conference in the Capital was vacant.

History HEADLINE

SADAF MODAK



Hospital horror: 50 yrs on, replaying Aruna's story

IN A basement at Mumbai's King Edward Memorial (KEM) Hospital in Parel, 25-year-old nurse Aruna Shanbaug was found lying in a pool of blood early on November 28, 1973. Rushed to the casualty ward by her colleagues, she had suffered multiple injuries including contusion to the brain stem and a cervical cord injury. The investigation that followed revealed that a day before she was found, Aruna had been on duty at the hospital's Cardiovascular Thoracic Centre, which had an experimental cardiovascular dog surgery laboratory.

Alone in the basement, she was changing out of her uniform before she left for the day when her colleague Sohanlal Walmiki, a contract sweeper, sexually assaulted her. Medical examination revealed that a dog chain was tied around her neck during the attack and twisted, which led to oxygen supply being stopped to her brain. Aruna was found over 12 hours after the attack, when the next shift reported for duty in the morning. Since the assault had led to severe brain damage, doctors treating the nurse soon realised that she would never talk or walk again — the damage to her brain had put her in a vegetative state with no scope for improvement.

The recent rape and murder of a junior doctor in Kolkata has led many to draw parallels with Aruna — on how little has changed for women, including the safety and security of women health workers in public hospitals. During a recent suo motu hearing on the Kolkata incident, Supreme Court Chief Justice DY Chandrachud made a reference to the Aruna Shanbaug incident when he said, "Due to ingrained patriarchal biases, the relatives of patients are more likely to attack the women doctors and they are more susceptible to sexual violence too... the Aruna Shanbaug case is a case in point."

Aruna used to live with her sister and niece in Worli in 1973, trying to save on the cost of rent and food to be paid for the staff quarters at the hospital. When she did not return home on November 27, 1973, her sister, used to her irregular work timings, did not worry. The next day, she received a call from the hospital informing her that Aruna had been assaulted.

At the time of the incident, Aruna was engaged to a doctor at the hospital. Perhaps the stigma associated with sexual assault then — which she was tested for but Walmiki was never charged for — prevented those around her from filing a complaint on those charges. When Walmiki was arrested by the police a few days later, he was charged only on two counts — Sections 307 (attempt to murder) and 397 (robbery) of the Indian Penal Code, since he was found to have stolen some of Aruna's belongings, including a watch and a chain, after the assault. During the trial in a Mumbai sessions court, Walmiki was found guilty on both counts and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment (the maximum under the two charges). After completing his term, Walmiki was released. All this while, for over four decades since 1973, Aruna remained confined to a single room in a ward for general internal medicine patients.

In 2011, the nurse was at the centre of a discussion on euthanasia. Given her condition, journalist-writer Pinki Virani filed a petition seeking euthanasia for Aruna. The Supreme Court was to decide on the guidelines to permit passive euthanasia (termination of life) by withdrawal of life support measures to terminally ill patients. KEM Hospital's staff opposed Virani's plea before the court, stating that she meant a lot to them and that they had no problem looking after her. The court said while Aruna met most of the criteria for being in a permanent vegetative state, the staff's decision to not withdraw life-sustaining treatments to her should be respected.

The Supreme Court's verdict in the case states, "On 2.3.2011, the matter was listed again before us and we first saw the screening of the CD submitted by the team of doctors along with their report. We had arranged for the screening of the CD in the Courtroom, so that all present in Court could see the condition of Aruna Shanbaug. For doing so, we have relied on the precedent of the Nuremberg trials in which a screening was done in the Courtroom of some of the Nazi atrocities during the Second World War."

Aruna remained at the hospital till she passed away in 2015 at the age of 66 due to pneumonia. She remained under the care of the nurses, including some who had worked with her, for 42 years. For all those years, she and her assault remained in pub-



Aruna Shanbaug remained confined to a single room in a ward at Mumbai's KEM Hospital for over four decades since her 1973 attack.

Archive/Mukesh Parpiani

On the LOOSE

LEHER KALA

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IN HIS 2020 book *No Rules Rules*, Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings articulates the company's philosophy, some of it wildly original and some controversially harsh. The craftily designed 'Keeper Test' they apply to hiring — If X wanted to leave, would I fight to keep him — asks employees to rate their subordinates regularly. When the answer is no, the response is brutal. Netflix gives four months' severance and a replacement is found. Hastings appears to have contempt for the idea that companies can be run like large, happy families, and likens the Netflix process to the way sports teams are run; everyone's on tenterhooks wondering if they'll make the cut or be cast out. To their credit,

The myth of the A-team

there's complete freedom for those deemed worthy after surviving the 'Keeper Test'. No questions about clock-ins, long vacations or maternity leave (though one wonders who has the guts to avail of these privileges since anybody can be let go, at any time).

Recently, Netflix overhauled this famous culture memo with a disclaimer, "In reality, we encourage everyone to speak to their managers about what's going well and what's not." The message, essentially, remains the same: slave away to success, or you're toast. If this is the future of work, I can only shudder in gratitude that I'll be retired long before this kind of reorganising becomes commonplace. Note to self: to encourage my kids to pursue entrepreneurship and save themselves from the toxicity of this kind of pressure cooker atmosphere. Perhaps, it's an outdated idea to innocently believe creativity requires being relaxed and happy, not living in perpetual fear of being fired. It's hard to imagine how employees get things done if they have to worry about their colleagues critiquing them. Or is it that market forces deem this Darwinian approach necessary to stay ahead of the game?

The most sought after jobs, in finance, consulting and tech companies reveal an uncomfortable truth about humanity — we may be able to create sophisticated systems to conquer space and eradicate polio, but morally, we're not very different from the hunter gatherers of our ancient past. Throughout history, the achievement of an ambition has involved power struggles and backstabbing. Rome had their gladiatorial games and Japan their aristocratic warriors, the samurais who rose to rule by proving themselves against the Mongols. That savagery is, in a sense, a default setting for Homo sapiens feels depressingly real in the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games*, where boys and girls are selected by lottery to compete in a televised battle till death. In the modern context of careers, survival of the fittest doesn't mean the strongest physically, but the canniest, intellectually. Lusty scenes of blood and gore may be missing but self preservation at Netflix means thinking of everyone else in the office as disposable.

A bewildering stream of newbies constantly flooding the office is entirely in keeping with this generation's frustrating obsession with optimisation and FOMO (Fear of Better Options). It's the stuff of fantasy, to try and weed out every underperformer in a team in favour of some untested superhero. Chasing perfection is a foolhardy enterprise, destined to fail.

Tinder, only by virtue of sheer, available numbers, manages to be convincing that someone sexier is one swipe away. It may still work in romance, but writing off people work-wise so quickly doesn't acknowledge the fact that even the most brilliant among us are mediocre a lot of the time. Every painting Van Gogh made wasn't as fabulous as *Starry Starry Night*. Nobody remembers the U2 albums before *Joshua Tree*. An individual's performance in an organisation depends on so many other factors than their efforts alone, like where the company's at, and the overall marketplace.

It's debatable if all this painstaking effort at improvement has dramatically improved user experience, or skewed the competition. Like most people, Netflix too, falls somewhere in the middle.

The writer is director, *Hutkay Films*

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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Rape as a political weapon

A SENTENCE that turns my stomach every time I hear it is when a woman is brutally raped and our political leaders say, "Do not politicise this". It is a sentence that we have heard often since the brutal, horrifying rape and murder of the young doctor in Kolkata. Every time politicians talk about 'politicisation', they accidentally convey that they feel neither shame, empathy nor horror, only concern that they are worried about being hurt by political consequences. What talking about politicisation also reveals is the reason why nearly a hundred women, some of them little girls and babies, are raped in India every day. It is because our political leaders do not care enough about crimes against women. They like to believe that crimes like rape are because of social factors like patriarchy.

What is more worrying is that our political leaders have taken to choosing the rapes that they want to make a noise about and ignoring those that are problematic for them to discuss. If this is not playing politics, then what is? So the horror of what happened in that Kolkata hospital is being fully exploited politically by BJP politicians and party spokespersons because they wish to embarrass Mamata Banerjee. But they choose to forget what happened in Kathua to the eight-year-old Muslim girl who was confined in a Hindu temple, and drugged, starved and raped for days. When the little girl became a liability, she was killed by smashing her head with a rock. Hindutva organisations came out in support of the rapists. And then proceeded to spread insane conspiracy theories.

More recently in Hathras, upper caste Hindu groups also came out in support of the men who raped and murdered a Dalit teenager. She was raped in a sugarcane field and strangled so violently that her back was broken. She survived for two weeks and, before dying in hospital, named her rapists. But justice will never be fully done because her broken, battered body was burned in the dead of night by the police so no DNA testing was possible.

This happened on the watch of Yogi Adityanath, who ranks second in the ranking of Hindutva heroes. He ruthlessly squashed all attempts to tell the story. Journalists who tried to tell it were jailed and charged with sedition. That time, the political leaders who tried to 'politicise' the story came from the Opposition, but those same leaders have been mysteriously silent about the Kolkata horror because they do not wish to embarrass a Chief Minister who is an ally. Much noise has been made of the incompetence of the West Bengal government by those who want to do the 'politicisation' this time.

This time, doctors went on strike across the country and there was so much anger in the streets that the Supreme Court decided to intervene. This is good, but will it make a difference? Unlikely. Days after the Kolkata horror, two four-year-old girls were raped in a kindergarten in a Mumbai suburb. Enraged protestors took to the streets and sat in protest on railway tracks. This caused the Bombay High Court to intervene and to declare correctly that "if the school is not a safe place, then what is the use of speaking about the right to education?". Fine words, but will they make enough of a difference? Will our courts now deal more urgently with rape cases? They can sometimes take decades to be decided.

What hope is there for things to really change when the men who raped Bilkis Bano and killed her three-year-old baby daughter have managed to escape serving full life sentences because the Gujarat government decided to free them. When they came out of jail, they were greeted with garlands and sweets, and posed for pictures as if they were heroes and not convicted rapists and murderers. When a senior BJP politician was asked about the undeserved reprieve, he said that they were "sanskari Brahmins" who could thereby do nothing bad.

What hope is there for real change when someone as important as the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, can say that rapes occur only in urban parts of India because of Western influence. Does he not know that it is in rural India where rape is weaponised regularly? Sometimes to settle personal scores and sometimes for political reasons. In our big cities, there are at least journalists around to tell the victim's story, in villages, the stories remain untold and justice is almost never done.

So what can be done to bring real change? It will come only when we in the media tell every story we possibly can. But in the end, it is in the hands of our political leaders to ensure that the police do their job sincerely and that justice is done by enforcing the laws that already exist. For this to happen, they would need to fulfil their duty as political leaders instead of playing politics by choosing to view these horrific crimes against women through a narrow political prism.

It shames us all that India is sometimes described as the rape capital of the world. It shames me personally when I must warn female foreign visitors to India to be careful not to become too friendly with strangers. If our political leaders truly want to make India a country in which women are safe, they must stop playing petty political games.

Stranded in Space

AS BOEING WORKS TO RESOLVE STARLINER'S ISSUES AND BRING WILMORE AND WILLIAMS HOME SAFELY, THE DARK SIDE OF SPACE CAPITALISM IS COMING TO LIGHT

SURESH DHARUR

If you ever curse your fate for getting stuck in a long, agonising traffic jam or for a last-minute cancellation of your flight, think of the ordeal of NASA astronauts Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore who are stranded in space for over 70 days.

What was originally planned as a brief eight-day mission intended to test the capabilities of Boeing's Starliner, a spacecraft developed as part of NASA's Commercial Crew Programme, has turned out to be a nightmarish experience for the astronauts. They are stuck in the International Space Station (ISS) due to critical technical issues with Starliner. The glitches in its propulsion system and thrusters are preventing their safe return to the Earth.

A helium leak was detected in Starliner even before its June 5 launch, but NASA and Boeing's leadership deemed the issue too minor to delay the mission. Williams and Wilmore lifted off in Starliner from the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Cape Canaveral, Florida, and were scheduled to return on June 14. But as Starliner approached the ISS, it encountered multiple issues including further helium leaks and thruster malfunction, making it unsafe for the return trip.

The last two months were spent in troubleshooting to figure out if Starliner can be trusted to bring the astronauts home. Now, they will be stranded up there until next year as NASA has decided that the pair will return with the crew of

STIFF COMPETITION TO GAIN A NICHE IN THE SPACE SECTOR BY FLAUNTING SHINY NEW MISSIONS KEEPS RISK AND SAFETY ISSUES UNDER WRAPS, FAR AWAY FROM PUBLIC SCRUTINY

SpaceX's Crew Dragon, which is due to head up to ISS in September and return in February. Unlike Boeing's troubled Starliner, the SpaceX Crew Dragon has completed multiple successful missions, reinforcing its reputation as a more reliable option for crewed spaceflights.

Litany of Glitches

Both Boeing and NASA have eggs on their faces, as the botched-up operation raises questions about human safety and exposes the dark side of space capitalism. Long been a monopoly player, Boeing is now coming under intense scrutiny due to ongoing problems with Starliner, highlighting the challenges in the commercial space industry.

There is growing criticism — justifiably so — against the aerospace giant for prioritising profits over human safety. Questions are being raised over whether the company followed the prescribed modules of safety and rescue operations without any waste of time when such glitches started appearing. Technical glitches are not predictable but safety modules for rescue cannot have the same uncertainty. It cannot escape the accountability for the failure of thrusters and leakage of helium resulting in the deterioration of the health of the astronauts inside the auto-locked vehicle.

The sequence of events raises questions about whether the launch should have gone ahead despite the leak. Another issue for NASA's review is why these issues were not identified in any of the two previous uncrewed flight tests of Starliner. The key question is whether Starliner can operate reliably for onward and return journeys. Ground tests revealed that the likely source of the thruster problems was that their Teflon seals swell when hot, blocking propellant from getting into the combustion chamber.

Boeing's challenges are not limited to the space sector. It faced significant issues with commercial aircraft, including the 737 Max crisis, underlining broader concerns about safety standards. Around 20 whistle-blowers have come forward, raising alarms about safety and quality issues within the aerospace giant. The company made headlines over the last one year for all the wrong reasons: about doors and wheels flying off its jets in mid-air.

The present crisis, with implications for the long-term health of the astronauts, has underscored the importance of robust contingency planning. Technical glitches, despite rigorous testing and preparation, can occur, making it vital to have backup strategies to ensure mission success and astronaut safety.

Space Capitalism

With the entry of private corporations in the space sector, it appears that the space economy is not about exploration any-



FORCED STAY

WILLIAMS AND WILMORE LIFTED OFF IN STARLINER FROM CAPE CANAVERAL SPACE FORCE STATION, FLORIDA, AND WERE SCHEDULED TO RETURN ON JUNE 14

- The trip was originally planned as a brief eight-day mission to test the capabilities of the Boeing spacecraft developed as part of NASA's Commercial Crew Programme
- A helium leak was detected in Starliner even before its June 5 launch, but NASA and Boeing's leadership deemed the issue too minor to delay the mission
- As Starliner approached the International Space Station, it encountered multiple issues including further helium leaks and thruster malfunction, making it unsafe for the return trip
- Williams and Wilmore will be stranded up there until next year as NASA has decided that the pair will return with the crew of SpaceX's Crew Dragon, which is due to head up to ISS in September and return in February
- Starliner is one of two US spacecraft tasked by NASA with transporting astronauts to and from the ISS. The vehicle is expected to help usher in a new era of private "taxi services" operating just above the Earth

LAST YEAR, NASA ASTRONAUT FRANK RUBIO AND HIS TWO RUSSIAN CREWMATES ENDED UP SPENDING JUST OVER A YEAR IN SPACE AFTER THEIR DOCKED SOYUZ CAPSULE WAS HIT BY SPACE JUNK AND LEAKED ALL ITS COOLANT

crew members, cast a dark shadow over its reputation.

Taxi Service

Starliner is one of two US spacecraft tasked by NASA with transporting astronauts to and from the ISS. The vehicle is expected to help usher in a new era of private "taxi services" operating just above the Earth. The space agency chose Boeing and SpaceX to develop new vehicles with the intention of purchasing seats on them for its crew once they started flying. NASA's reliance on commercial partners for crewed missions is part of a broader strategy to reduce costs and increase access to space. However, the current crisis magnifies the risks of this approach.

The agency must ensure that its commercial partners meet the highest safety and performance standards. While Elon Musk's SpaceX has been sending astronauts to the ISS since 2020, Boeing's

spacecraft has taken longer to develop because it has had numerous technical setbacks in its development process but was due to have its first crewed test flight at the start of May. The launch was aborted because of a faulty valve in the rocket sending up the spacecraft, but a closer inspection revealed that there was a small leak of helium gas in Starliner. NASA, Boeing and United Launch Alliance decided to go ahead with another launch on June 1 despite the leak because it was thought to have been small and would not have affected the mission.

The second launch was aborted too because of an issue with the ground support equipment, but it was third time lucky for Starliner when it launched successfully four days later. Unlike the space shuttle, Starliner has an escape system that can propel the crew away from its rocket if an emergency occurs during launch.

The crew module measures 4.6m at its base, with a cabin that accommodates up to seven crew. NASA missions will take between four and five passengers per flight, swapping the seats for extra cargo storage. If the fifth seat is vacant, Boeing has the option to sell it to a space tourist or carry an astronaut from another country.

Starliner is designed to stay in orbit for around seven months. After separating from the ISS, the spacecraft fires its thrusters over the Pacific Ocean to begin the process of returning to Earth.

Health Concerns

Being stuck in space for a long period exposes the astronauts to several health problems arising out of exposure to radiation and microgravity. Reports suggest that Sunita Williams is already experiencing eyesight issues on the ISS, linked to the prolonged exposure to microgravity. Her condition is known as Spaceflight Associated Neuro-ocular Syndrome (SANS) and it reportedly affects the fluid distribution in the body leading to issues with vision. Cosmic rays and high-energy particles from the Sun can also hit the retina and optic nerves, causing other problems. Astronauts also face potential brain damage due to extended stay in space.

Space is an unforgiving environment for humans. The absence of atmospheric pressure and the extreme vacuum conditions necessitate careful life support management. Astronauts rely on spacecraft systems to provide a controlled atmosphere, including oxygen levels necessary for survival. Any failure in these systems can lead to serious health consequences.

The unique environment of space leads to fluid shifts in the body, where fluids redistribute towards the upper body, potentially increasing intracranial pressure. This condition can result in headaches, visual impairments and pressure on the brain, which would be a concern for long-term health. Exposure to cosmic radiation in space poses a risk of DNA damage, which can increase the likelihood of developing cancer and other neurological

WHILE ELON MUSK'S SPACEX HAS BEEN SENDING ASTRONAUTS TO ISS SINCE 2020, BOEING'S SPACECRAFT HAS TAKEN LONGER TO DEVELOP BECAUSE OF NUMEROUS TECHNICAL SETBACKS

conditions. After missions lasting six months, muscle mass can fall by as much as 30%. Bone mass, too, can also fall by between 1% and 2% for every month they spend in space.

Unplanned stays can lead to issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). No doubt, astronauts undergo rigorous training to make sure they are mentally and physically prepared for the challenges that may arise in any given mission. No human space flight is completely risk-free.

This is not the first time American astronauts have had their stay extended. Last year, NASA astronaut Frank Rubio and his two Russian crewmates ended up spending just over a year in space after their docked Soyuz capsule was hit by space junk and leaked all its coolant. An empty Russian capsule was sent up to bring them back last September. Williams (58) and Wilmore (61) are both retired Navy captains and long-time NASA astronauts who already have long space station missions behind them and are expected to have the required mental strength and resilience to face any kind of challenges. For now, they remain safe despite being temporarily marooned on the orbital outpost. Even so, the clock is still ticking.

Despite the technical challenges, NASA officials remain confident about the safety of the stranded astronauts. The ISS is well-equipped to support an extended stay, and Starliner is designed for emergency return if necessary. However, the spacecraft is only certified for a 45-day docking at the ISS on this first crewed flight, a limit it reached on July 20.

The mission is significant for NASA's Commercial Crew Programme which aims to establish reliable and cost-effective access to the ISS. Having two reliable systems (SpaceX's Dragon and Starliner) for transporting astronauts provides a backup in case one system encounters issues. This mission is also vital for Boeing's financial recovery and future profitability in the space sector as it aims to secure post-certification missions that are essential for the company's financial health.

The ongoing crisis at NASA offers important lessons for India's growing space programme, as it prepares for future explorations and manned missions.

Troubled Past

The current situation with Starliner also brings back memories of the Columbia tragedy, which occurred over 20 years ago.

February 1, 2003, Space shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, resulting in the loss of all seven crew members, including Indian-American astronaut Kalpana Chawla. The disaster was a grim reminder of the inherent risks of space travel and led to a lengthy investigation and significant changes in NASA's safety protocols.

(The author is a senior journalist)

A new way of choosing our political masters

Elections in India – Beyond Reform

C B RAU

AFTER seventy-seven years of our existence as a modern sovereign state, the achievements we proudly proclaim are that the union is still united, that we are a democracy — the biggest and the mother of all democracies — and that we have successfully and peacefully held 18 general elections, and countless state and local elections.

While the first two are at once both partly real and mostly rhetorical, it is the third that is tangible. Conducting elections in a country of the size and suffrage like India entails heroic and herculean orchestration and meticulous management. Indian administration rises to its highest height at such times. Being the person who has conducted and overseen two such elections (1962 and 1967), I can vouchsafe for that.

This fact is grudgingly accepted even by those who dub India as an 'electoral democracy'. But what we have not paid much attention to has been the process preceding the voting, and to how these electoral contests are fought and their impact on governance and development and, even more crucial, their impact on the moral sinew that has long held Indian society intact. Elections consume so much energy, vigor, vitality, attention and time, that all that transpires in the name of elections permeates and penetrates the entire society far beyond, for

god or for bad. During elections, development comes to a virtual halt, and normal administration does no other work. It is, therefore, time for some honest introspection.

To their credit, elections have facilitated smooth and peaceful transfer of power, and have given constitutional legitimacy to governance since Independence. Thanks to that, sustained effort was enabled to focus on development side by side with normal administration. That both are below par is a different story. Verdicts are accepted, and we have had no coups like the ones with our neighbors. Yet, in the functioning of our democracy, there has been what we may characterize as a 'creeping coup'. It is, unlike classical coups, not overtly illegal, sudden and violent. It has been a silent, if not stealthy, but radical reversal of roles between people and governance, representatives and the represented, rulers and the ruled. Representatives behaved like the rulers, and the real rulers – the people – became the ruled. Much like the relationship between monarch and his subjects. The political class has become at once what Milovan Djilas called the 'new class' and the 'highest caste'. It is this 'class', according to Jaswant Singh (2011, 2014), a much-respected veteran parliamentarian (who worked at the highest levels in the government) that, "has very gravely let India down In-



Elections have become a dominant cause and consequence, source and symptom of the moral ambivalence and ethical decadence sweeping across India. What makes it more offensive is that elections are being equated with 'love and war'; it means that in this too 'all is fair', and no moral lines are there not to cross. But the basic fallacy itself is to expect that something so pivotal and profitable in so many ways for so many rent-seeking class of people could possibly remain as islands of probity and purity in a swirling sea of sinfulness. The allurements – pelf, power, prestige, profit and perks – are just too sexy and seductive for a people who are weak in integrity

dia," and it and its physical expression, the politician, has been the "single greatest factor of damage to the integrity of the Indian nation."

More to the point, nowhere has the 'damage' done been higher than at the very heart of representative democracy — in elections. Foremost, the myth that we should abandon is that, through elections, it is "We,

the people of India" who choose some of our fellow-citizens whom we trust enough, to speak and act on our behalf in running the government of the day. In reality, it is politicians who control the whole exercise. The candidates are chosen by them, and the elected have to abide by what the party wishes, while in the legislator, not by the will of the people.

At no stage people have any say except in the polling booth, but by then it is too late; there, too, they are asked to choose among a motley mix of weird symbols. Parties select their nominees not based on 'suitability', but on 'electability', or 'winnability', which is a metaphor for abundant, and illegal money and muscle

power. And, star power too counts – that is why cricketers and movie stars get tickets and often go on to win and get re-elected. There is nothing more reprehensively 'representative' of our representative democracy than that both politicians and people prefer them; the former because they know how to win, and the latter because they know how to work the corrupt system. It may even be that we prefer them as we see them as our reflections.

That is why in the current Lok Sabha, as many as 46% members have criminal cases registered against them, and 27 of them have been convicted. In effect, our law-makers mostly are either the rich and/or the law-breakers. The real problem is not really what damage they do as law makers – they are mostly ciphers in the House. The mischief they do is outside in their constituencies.

But then, when political parties do not have democracy within, how and why do they want to be otherwise nationally? Most are run as dynasties and family fiefdoms. Any 'elections' held are a farce. Forming political parties is easier than starting a company, and offers a cover to legitimize illegality. There are now 6 national parties, 57 state parties, and 2,764 unrecognized parties. Our political class, with occasional aberrations, is a motley mix of dynastic leaders, lifetime politicians, party apparatchiks, and crony sycophants.

As for the voting system of the one who adopted, the First-Past-the-Post is by far the worst – by which a party with 40% electoral votes elects only 11 out of 175 legislators. At the national level, with the support of only 25.8% of eligible votes, the NDA has come back to power, which was true for previous governments too. Mandates of major parties, which few even care to read, are mostly a mumbo-jumbo of clichés, promises and 'guarantees', sparse in substance and devoid of ideological ideas or any strategic thoughts.

Come election time, nothing is off the table to be doled out or exploited – freebies, cash, caste, creed, booze and drugs. Drug addiction is already rampant in states in many parts of India and constant elections are adding fuel to the fire. Underscoring the menace, the Election Commission reported that in the 2024 general elections, it has seized drugs worth Rs 4,381 crore – surely the tip of the iceberg. Venality is both banal and brazen. Voters are doing dharna demanding that they be paid the same bribe as that paid to their neighbor the previous night! A former Chief Election Commissioner summed it up: "The 'sources' of nearly the entire money spent during elections in the country are 'not known'... Elections are polarizing events which have accentuated casteism, communalism, corruption and crony capitalism."

Not only that. Elections have become a dominant cause and consequence, source and symptom of the moral ambivalence and ethical decadence sweeping across India. What makes it more offensive is that elections are being equated with 'love and war'; it means that in this too 'all is fair', and no moral lines are there not to cross. But the basic fallacy itself is to expect that something so pivotal and profitable in so many ways for so many rent-seeking class of people could possibly remain as islands of probity and purity in a swirling sea of sinfulness.

Let us come face to face with the breakthrough truth. The defects and deficits and the dark forces they let loose in our elections cannot be fixed, mended or exorcized internally or by adopting other electoral alternatives extant in other countries like proportional representation. The reason is that what is in question is structural and systemic and a snapshot of society. The problem is not wholly the process or politicians; it is people too. The allurements – pelf, power, prestige, profit and perks – are just too sexy and seductive for a people who are weak in integrity. For, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, we are so venal that we can resist everything except temptation.

(Note: The concluding part of the article will appear next week; Writer is a retired IAS officer of 1958 batch)

SPACE ODYSSEY OF INDIA



PROF D NARAYANA RAO

INDIA became the fourth country to land on the moon and the first to reach Moon's southern polar region on 23rd August 2023. To commemorate this landmark achievement, Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced August 23 as "National Space Day". India celebrated its first National Space Day with the theme "Touching Lives while Touching the Moon: India's Space Saga."

The celebration of National Space Day is aimed at demonstrating India's commitment to advancing its space program and inspiring future generations to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

Science and technology is all about innovation, discovery and research. Any country that has made advances in prosperity has invariably depended on Science and Technology. England became a world power; it was because of the industrial revolution. US became a superpower, it was primarily because of its technology.

Indian economy under British rule, just before independence, was abysmally small with a GDP growth rate of 0.85% (less than 1%). Today, our GDP growth rate is 7.0%. One of the factors for this remarkable growth was our proactive application of science & technology and insatiable quest of our scientists and technologists in building the nation.

Indian scientists and technologists have made significant contributions in certain areas of national priority, given the resources allocated for science and technology. Our

scientists and technologists have placed us at the forefront of the world in certain chosen areas. India is designing, developing and launching world-class communication and remote sensing satellites. These communication satellites have brought out a sea-change in our communication networks.

Now, one can communicate from anywhere to anywhere at any point of time. Even from the remotest villages in the country, one can communicate to any place in the world. Day in and day out we are enjoying TV broadcast, the comfort of mobile communications, data connectivity and internet through the satellites that we have launched. Our space scientists have designed and launched our own navigation satellite system, IRNSS. Today, our satellites form our country's neural network. We process and use our own voluminous satellite data for mind-boggling applications. Imagine what would have happened if we were still dependent on other countries for communications, remote sensing etc.,

In India, data is provided at a rate less than 20 paise per GB, which is the cheapest in the world. This data connectivity and availability at a very low cost came handy for on-line classes during the COVID pandemic. Otherwise, the pandemic would have delayed the learning process of several crores of students of the country.

India has launched a mission to moon – Chandrayaan – and it is an exciting story. One of the defining moments in India has been the roaring successful launch of India's Mars Orbiter Mission, Mangalyaan. The Mars Orbiter Mission has paved a new global pathway for interplanetary travel.

Launch of heavy payload of 6 tonnes comprising 36 satellites by ISRO on 23rd October 2022 exemplifies Atmanirbhartha, self-reliance. ISRO successfully launched Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) on 16th August 2024. Salient features of SSLV are low cost, low turn around time, flexibility in accommodating multiple satellites, satellites with low mis-



What drives the Team ISRO for such quantum leaps? It is belief in themselves; it is team excellence; it is the learning from the past missions both failures and successes; it is the sublime combination of the wisdom of elders and innovative power of younger generation; it is preparedness for all imaginable scenarios; it is transformational leadership at all levels

sion life, launch on demand feasibility, minimal launch infrastructure requirements etc. SSLV has several applications of launching small satellites for different sectors such as banking, defense, remote sensing etc.

Now, we are planning Gaganyaan, sending humanoids to space. What drives the Team ISRO for such quantum leaps? It is belief in themselves; it is team excellence; it is the learning from the past missions both failures and successes; it is the sublime combination of the wisdom of elders and innovative power of younger generation; it is preparedness for all imaginable scenarios; it is transformational leadership at all levels.

All these accomplishments were achieved by Indians trained in India. More than 95% of the scientists and engineers of ISRO got their education and training in universities and normal engineering colleges.

Today, India is a world leader in space programmes. The world is looking at India with admiration and expectations that we will contribute to solving global issues plaguing mankind, such as

fathers. These young people must transform the country through science and technology.

We realise that these youngsters are the valuable asset of the country and also asset of the world. World needs highly skilled manpower and India only can provide to the world. The hon'ble Prime Minister firmly believes that our future will be secure and our global leadership will sustain, only when we produce the next generation of world class scientists, technologists and innovators.

Universities are viewed as creators of new knowledge, innovative ideas, providers of skilled manpower, agents for social changes, symbols of international attention and prestige. During the last ten years, the Government of India has launched several important national missions: Chandrayaan-3, Gaganyaan, Deep Ocean Mission, National Green Hydrogen Mission, National Quantum Mission, National Semiconductor Mission, Anusandhan National Research Foundation. Deep Ocean Mission and Space Exploration have opened new frontiers for economic growth. Science & Technology advancements in India over the past decade have laid the foundations for country's progress and development for the future. India is seeing unprecedented and remarkable growth in its scientific advancements. India has plans to accelerate its growth and establish India as a global power house in science & technology.

With all these technological advances, India of the next 25 years will be very different from what it is. These new and emerging technologies will provide abundant opportunities to the younger generation which earlier generations did not have. Now, it is India's turn. All of us know that our time has come. I am very confident that our time has come and India is all set to regain its due place in the comity of nations.

You follow your passion and you will be successful in your chosen career.

(Writer is Executive Director (Research), SRM Group of Institutions, Chennai)

Real emissions much higher than lab tests



The report's release is timely, given the recent directive from the Supreme Court to finalise the Automotive Industry

Standard (AIS) 170 and implement remote sensing in the National Capital Region. AIS 170 will set the technical parameters for remote sensing devices and equip authorities with the necessary resources to measure vehicle exhaust in real time

rector Sheila Watson said the research clearly showed India and the rest of the world that CNG was not the clean alternative fuel that was promised. "While Delhi struggles with dirty air, a visible killer hanging over the city, TRUE has shown that this less visible but still deadly fuel is not the solution. For health and for the climate, the answers to dirty air lie in switching to walking, cycling, and shared electric mobility," she said.

The report's release is timely, given the recent directive from the Supreme Court to finalise the Automotive Industry Standard (AIS) 170 and implement remote sensing in the National Capital Region. AIS 170 will set the technical parameters for remote sensing devices and equip authorities with the necessary resources to measure vehicle exhaust in real time.

"Remote sensing technology has the capability to non-intrusively screen tailpipe emissions from vehicles on a mass scale under real-world conditions and can help identify highly polluting vehicles. It is encouraging to see the Supreme Court and the (Union) Ministry of Road Transport and Highways moving forward with the implementation of this technology, beginning with the National Capital Region," said ICCT India researcher Anirudh Narla. "Remote sensing as an on-road surveillance method can not only help identify and remove the worst emitters but also helps understand emissions performance of different technologies and fuels. This shows that while the CNG transition has helped cut toxic particulate emissions from diesel vehicles during the early years,

NOx emissions from on-road CNG vehicles without adequate controls can still be high. This builds a case for the next major transition to electrification to make tailpipe emissions not cleaner but zero," said Executive Director (Research and Advocacy) at the Centre for Science and Environment, India, Anumita Roychowdhury.

Meanwhile, there is a growing push to consider auto LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) as a more environmentally-friendly fuel option. It produces fewer harmful pollutants and could be a better alternative to CNG, according to proponents. The Indian Auto LPG Coalition (IAC) recently urged Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav to endorse auto LPG as an environmentally-friendly alternative fuel. In a letter to Yadav, IAC Director General Suyash Gupta said auto LPG, as a clean-burning fuel, significantly reduced emissions of harmful pollutants such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, and carbon dioxide, leading to improved air quality and a reduced carbon footprint.

This positions auto LPG as a "net zero hero", aligning with India's international environmental commitments, he said. "Auto LPG emits 20 per cent less CO2 compared to petrol and 60 per cent less than diesel. It produces almost no particulate matter, a major cause of air pollution, and has significantly lower nitrogen oxide emissions. Auto LPG is also around 40 per cent cheaper than petrol, and the conversion cost for a petrol vehicle to auto LPG is around Rs 30,000, which is much lower than the conversion cost for an EV," he said.



Archana Kamath announced her retirement from professional table tennis to focus on higher studies

FILE PHOTO: PTI

In India, sports & studies don't go hand in hand

RINGSIDE
VIEW



Tushar Bhaduri

NOW THAT THE Olympics are behind us, it's back to the hard surface of reality. The hype surrounding India at the Games was quite disproportionate to the medal haul (one silver and five bronze). And just over a week after the closing ceremony in the French capital, one of our athletes has decided she has had enough.

Table tennis player Archana Kamat has quit the sport in favour of pursuing higher studies in the United States. A bright student throughout her academic career, Archana aims to be an economist and believes continuing her duels on the TT table is not a feasible option.

In the Indian sporting set-up, athletic pursuit and academics hardly go side by side, unless the sportspersons themselves aim to study concurrently. Once a youngster is marked as promising and inducted into a national camp, academics take a backseat. It's nothing like the university system in the United States, where the scholars cannot afford to neglect their studies, even if they come on a sports scholarship.

In India, the higher education qualifications for a sportsperson, if they aren't themselves too keen, ensure that their prospects after their playing days will largely be restricted to the sport they practise. Many of these degrees are on paper only as the athletes had seldom been to the classroom and are devoid of the knowledge or prowess that a degree is expected to bestow. For a country that wins only a handful of medals at the Olympics every four years, the way it deals with its elite sportspersons borders on single-minded obsession, not that it helps too much in the pursuit of success at the highest level.

For this reason, most of the sportspersons that get into the system come from lower and lower-middle income groups and rural backgrounds, for whom sport is a means for their economic advancement. A settled government job with a steady income is quite a satisfactory outcome for most of them. Putting all their eggs in one basket is a risk worth taking, because it's the best and easiest option for them.

Better option

It seems Archana had the means and ambition for much more. Once she realised, after a frank discussion with her coach that a medal was unlikely, whether at Los Angeles 2028 or beyond, in a sport totally dominated by the Chinese, she decided to focus on academic excellence at an elite American university.

Education is not just a source of livelihood, but a means to know more about the world around us, to broaden our mindset and thinking. It's no surprise that most of the sportspersons without a viable means to keep themselves busy after their playing days, tend to find it tough. They may get into coaching or find a post in the federation or a job in a public sector undertaking under the sports quota, but it hardly provides work satisfaction and they have to be subservient to higher government officials or a politician or 'sports administrator' running a national body. Those employed with a PSU hardly 'work' during their playing days, but once they

retire, they don't receive any preferential treatment, expected to work like their other colleagues and even liable to be transferred to far-off locations.

Beijing 2008 Olympic gold medallist Abhinav Bindra comes across as an articulate individual, who has experienced the highest of highs as a sportsperson and also sees things from a wider perspective. The former rifle shooter wastes no opportunity to stress on the importance of elite sportspersons having an alternate vocation as a back-up. Bindra believes this would reduce the pressure on them as success and failure in the sports arena won't necessarily define them as individuals. Thinking 24x7 about their sport and how to meet their target can make one obsessive, which may not be a positive character trait, and could also be counter-productive in a sporting sense. It also helps in taking an objective, dispassionate view of one's prospects. Archana knew that as long as she remained part of the national table tennis set-up, her sporting expenses would be taken care of by the government and the NGOs that have come up to provide various kinds of support. But there is no viable revenue model for her in the long term, once she retires or someone comes up to take her spot. There are a large number of leagues coming up in various sports, providing athletes much more in a financial sense than they could dream of earlier. But that is still limited to the very top level of sportspersons and Archana may have figured out that she would be better off as a highly-qualified economist.

Limited spread

As things stand, people from the aspirational middle class and the affluent upper class are rare in Indian sport, other than in disciplines which have significant entry barriers in terms of equipment and access. There are stories galore of parents having to sell or pawn family silver or other precious belongings to fund a child's sporting dreams. Such hardship and struggle often results in a single-minded determination where anything outside the limited sphere becomes an unnecessary distraction.

If they don't quite make it to the top, they suddenly find themselves with nothing much to do. Even if they manage to reach somewhere near the summit, the very nature of sport makes it a temporary phase, often leaving them with an empty feeling with almost their entire life left to live.


In cricket, it always helps to have two strings to a bow as an all-rounder has a better chance of getting selected and making a contribution. So is the case in life. Sports is an unpredictable domain – injuries, non-selection, poor form, and sheer competitiveness can take a toll on an athlete's prospects.

Successful sportspersons are showered with awards and rewards in our country, but grass-root facilities are still lacking. All these factors often dissuade parents from encouraging their wards from taking up sports as a career.

However, the trick is to develop a love for sport at a young age and provide facilities to play close by, not necessarily to take it up professionally or to win Olympic medals. That will make better-rounded individuals and also broaden the base from which high-quality talent can come up.

Academics and sports can, and should, go hand in hand. It should not be a case of either-or.

ACROSS THE
AISLE



P Chidambaram

If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong. Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech

IT WAS THE Prime Minister's 11th successive speech on Independence Day, a record of sorts. It was the longest speech that Mr Narendra Modi had delivered from the ramparts of Red Fort (98 minutes). It was at the start of his third term and it was expected that the PM would lay out his vision for the government for the next five years.

The BJP leaders called the speech as unfolding a bold new vision. If it was, I am afraid it was a vision that targeted a section of the people. The PM said,

"We are marching ahead with resolve, we are going far, but there is another truth – that there are some people who cannot digest India's progress. Some people cannot visualise good things for India. Because their own vested interests are not served, they don't like anybody's progress. There is no dearth of people having such a perverse mindset. The nation must be wary of such people."

Disdain for democracy

Who are the "some people"? I know of no one who is not proud of India's progress in agriculture, information technology, nuclear energy, space, etc. Was the PM alluding to the 262 million voters who voted against him and the NDA?

Or to the youth who criticise him for raging unemployment? Or to the homemakers who complain about the burden of rising inflation? Or to the soldiers and ex-sevicemen who are perplexed by India's quiet retreat in the face of China's brazen occupation of Indian territory? In a speech intended to rally the people around a *vision* for India, the PM actually aggravated the *divisions* among the people caused by the wrong policies of his government. To call the opponents of his government "perverse" shows disdain for the democratic verdict.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Independence Day celebrations at Red Fort

PTI

Vision or division

If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong.

Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech. He labelled the current personal law codes as 'communal civil codes' and said,

"There is no place in a modern society for laws which divide the nation on religious lines and become a basis for class discrimination. I would say, and this is the need of the hour, that there should be a secular civil code in the country. We have spent 75 years under a communal civil code. Now we will have to move towards a secular civil code. Only then will we get relief from the rift due to laws that lead to discrimination on the basis of religion."

That statement was a mixture of error, poor understanding and bias. Every personal law code is based on religion, including the Hindu codes, but that will not make the code *communal*. There is a secular code on marriage,

namely, the Special Marriage Act, but it is not popular among the people of India. The common man (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh or Parsi) does not feel 'discriminated' because his neighbour is governed by another code.

It would be wonderful if all the religious groups and communities can agree on a Uniform Civil Code, but that is easier said than done.

Divisive rhetoric

The very idea of UCC or ONOE rings alarm bells and it is first necessary to allay the fears. I had explained the hidden agenda of UCC and ONOE in a previous column (*Cult Worship and Consequences*, Indian Express, April 21, 2024). For UCC, it is necessary to hold extensive consultations with all religious groups and communities.

For ONOE, it is necessary to make amendments to several Articles of the Constitution. A speech by the PM is not the start or the end of the debate on the issues. On the contrary, it will mean that divisive issues are sought to be raised and legislation pushed through Parliament which may divide the people further.

The BJP leaders called the speech as unfolding a bold new vision. If it was, I am afraid it was a vision that targeted a section of the people

The LS elections witnessed a lot of divisive rhetoric.

Attacking the Congress' Manifesto 2024, Mr Modi said,

- Congress will distribute the people's land, gold and other valuables among Muslims;
- Congress will take away your *mangalsutra* and *streedhan* and give it to people who have more children.

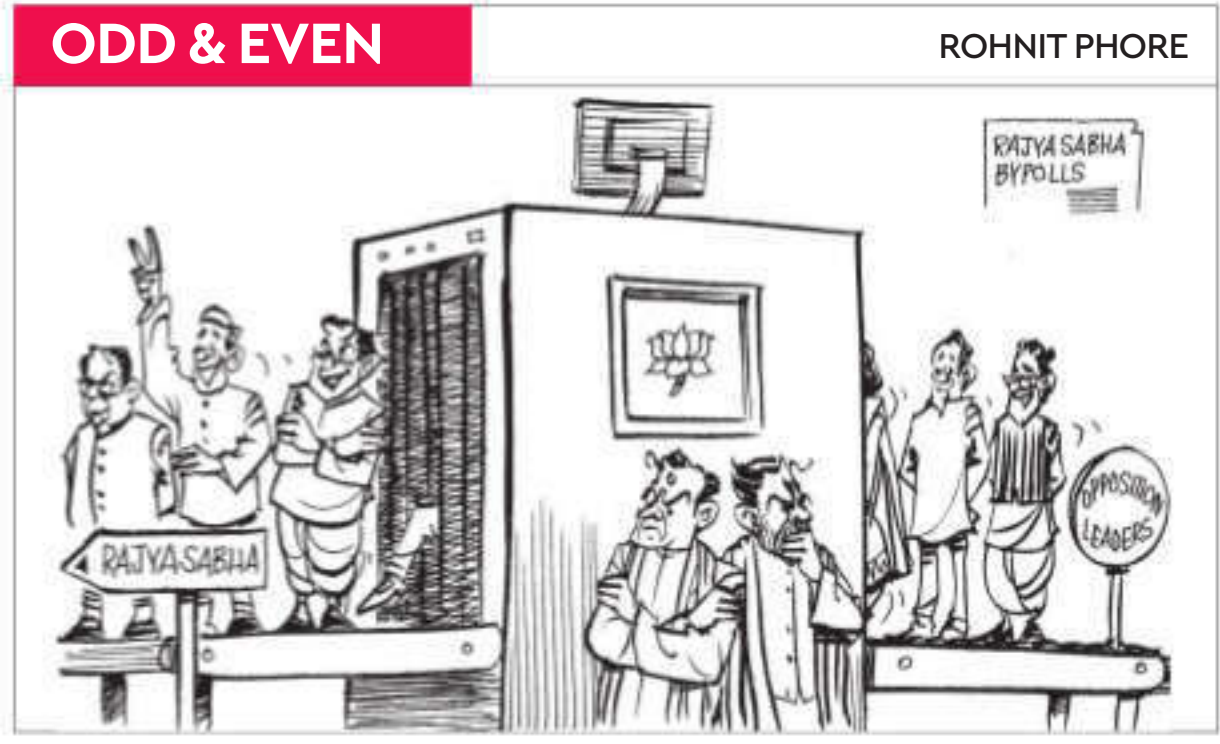
Mr Amit Shah said, 'Congress will seize temple properties and distribute them'. Mr Rajnath Singh said, 'Congress will grab the assets of the people and re-distribute them to infiltrators'. The head-spinner was when Mr Modi warned the people of the coming of an inheritance tax on buffaloes. No one in the media called for a stop to themadness.

The sobering election verdict has not restrained the PM, but the fear of losing power has made his government backtrack on several issues: the indexation benefit for capital gains has been restored, the Wakf Bill has been referred to a Select Committee, the Broadcasting Bill has been withdrawn, and the scheme of lateral entry into central government posts has been shelved.

The fear of more divisive ideas will cease only when CAA, UCC and ONOE are withdrawn finally.

A vision can emerge only when BJP's playbook of division is junked.

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DECCAN Chronicle

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Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

The King's plumbing and other toilet tales

The bus trip from Nottingham to London had taken many long hours more than I'd expected and I desperately needed the bathroom as soon as we got to the British royal residence. Vaguely waded towards a corridor, I dived in through the first door I suspected led to a toilet, to find myself in a time warp.

It was spare yet classically elegant, from the pristine black and white tiles on the floor to the twirly silver taps, chain flush, mahogany toilet seat and corner pedestal. But it was what was on the corner pedestal that stopped me in my tracks! A man's head, not a real one, luckily, or on a spike, beloved of kings of yore, but a stone bust of a bearded man gazing intently at me. I wasn't sure I could ascend the 'throne' under such intense scrutiny so I draped my dupatta over his face before I got on with it, sparing him his blushes as well. As I was washing my hands with nicely scented-soap, there was a sharp rap on the door and a British colleague breathed with some urgency, "You're in The King's loo!"

You might be asking yourself why I was in King Charles' residence in the first place? Last month, my schoolgirl daughter and I were invited by Queen Camilla to meet her, in recognition of our work in encouraging literacy in Britain. My third book *Handle With Care* was also selected from Britain-wide nominations and presented to The Queen at the National Literacy Trust's celebration. The next day, my name and that of my book was all over the British newspapers. All of which was very gratifying, but as a teller of quirky tales that reveal something about the human psyche, my stumbling into The King's loo was the trip's highlight!



The author (front row, left corner) with fellow literacy champions and the Queen Consort (centre) at the Literacy Trust's 30th birthday party

Did the washroom reveal something unexpected about The King? Polished and elegant as I imagine he must be, it probably said more about his staff's fastidiousness than the royals themselves. Could the bearded grandee's bust have been a personal touch? Like the bust of Karl Marx displayed on the telephone table by my freedom-fighting granddad, his only contribution to their home's décor? The beady-eyed royal bust I encountered wasn't, of course, of Karl Marx (despite Charles' liberal instincts, how funny would that be? And what fits of apoplexy would it cause the conservative chunks of the British public, out rioting against immigrants and their own police earlier this month?). Ultimately, the soul I glimpsed, in my surreal foray into the royal bathroom, was not The King's, but stuck-in-the-past Britain's!

To be fair to the loo, and even the royal residence in question, it was understated in comparison to the ostentatious mansions and over-the-top lifestyles of today's super-rich. Think Donald Trump's bling-bathed estates, and closer to home, the Ambani's wildly outsized nuptials. The latter's many excesses have been detailed by a gushing press and censorious critics too, so, I won't repeat them, but what does it say about the 21st century Indian?

There was an innate sophistication about our thousands-of-years-old culture that seems to have worn away in the pursuit of wealth. Who doesn't want a good life, but there's so much more to it than the accumulation of money. Have we lost sight of this truth we once held close? Worse still is the corrosive aggression we appear to have embraced, modelling ourselves on the Ugly American. It's wonderful that we're more assertive in the new millennium, because a little oomph is undoubtedly needed to overcome the many challenges we face, but are we overdoing the decibels? Who are we deafening but ourselves?

I can dismiss sniping from the western press for the sour grapes it is, but a great many dyed-in-the-cotton Indians themselves are critical of this emerging everyone-for-themselves zeitgeist. Characterised as a shucking off of the colonial yoke, it's sometimes an excuse for a grasping incivility. You could argue we're mirroring our mistreatment by the world, giving as g...rude as we get, but when they 'go low', shouldn't we 'go high'? Or, indeed, this, from a homegrown hero (still a hero to many, fortunately) – be the change you want to see. We need only look back at our past to see that we don't have to stoop to their level to succeed.

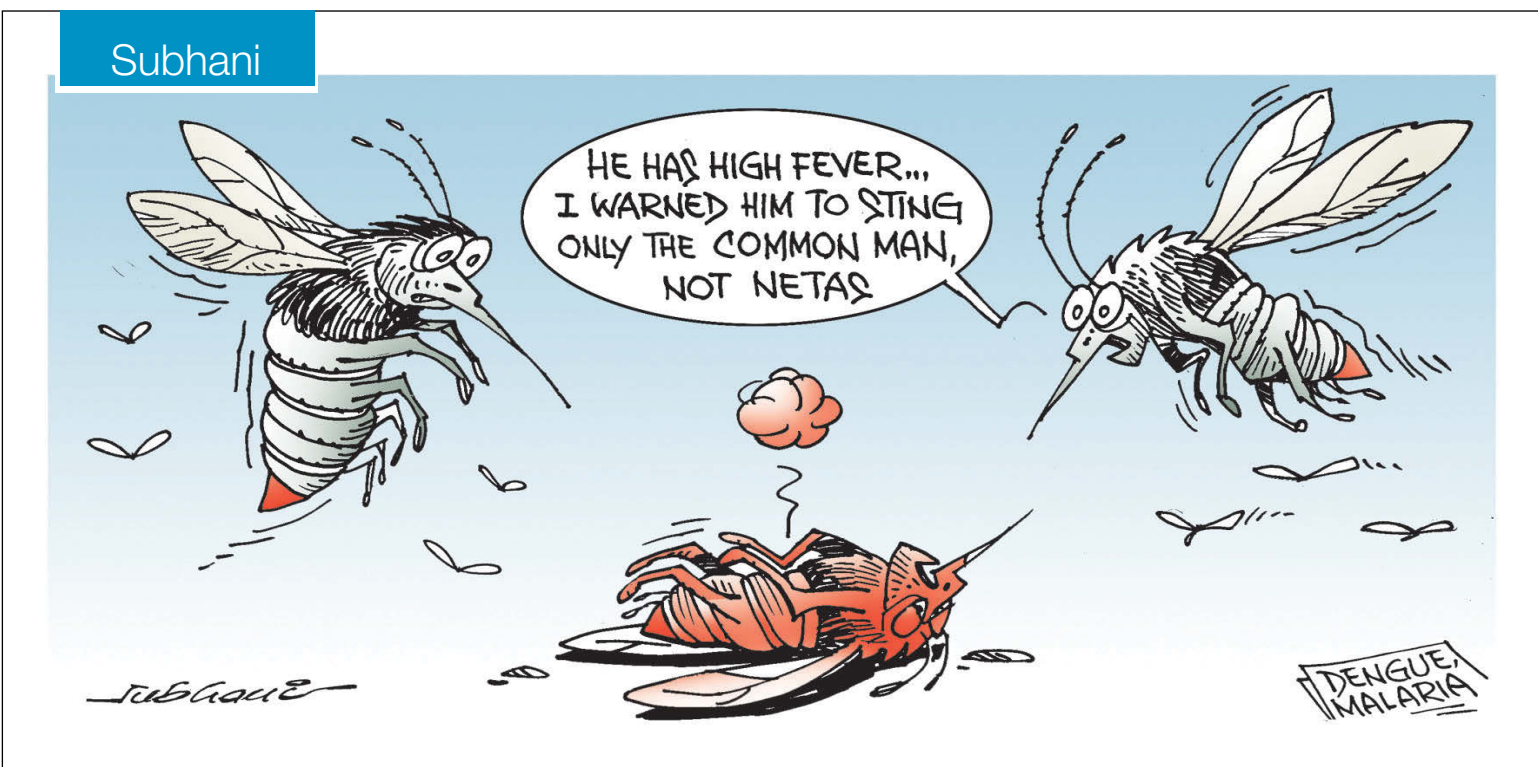
But I digress – we were inspecting bathrooms and concomitant personalities! My gaterashing of The King's loo made me wonder how yours and mine would be perceived. What would guests at our dinner parties deduce about us from our washrooms?

Remember that party game where you're asked to pick dinner guests from anyone in the world, alive or dead? What would, I asked myself, Jane Austen, Frida Kahlo, Barack Obama and Satyajit Ray make of my little downstairs loo? Would Ray approve of the large Art Deco Kolkata poster adorning its wall? Would Obama find the diminutive sink too small for his manly hands (Trump's grubby paws would fit right in, but who's inviting him)? Would my choice of a vividly orange hand towel gladden Frida's heart? And that giant vat of antiseptic handwash, would Austen recognise our kindred spirits through that?

Perhaps. What I think it does say about me, is that I'm an arty, astringent, petite Indian, as so many of us are; passionate about my birth country no matter how far. Now please play along wherever you are, scrutinizing your own homes, particularly bathrooms, that part of you you least like to expose, for clues to your innermost souls!

Shreya Sen-Handley is the author of the award-winning *Memoirs of My Body*, short story collection *Strange and travelogue* *Handle With Care*.

Subhani



Is Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict civilisational?



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

The Caucasus region is a weathered vastness in eastern Europe bestriding the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It consists of expanses of southern Russia and the independent nations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – all portions of the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). While physically this territory lies between Europe, Asia, Russia and the Middle East, ethno-religiously it is on the borderlines where Islam encounters Christianity. Doctrinally, it is the frontier where not-too-perfect democracy bumps into undiluted authoritarianism.

Armenia is overwhelmingly Christian, with 97 per cent of the people following the Armenian apostolic faith, one of the oldest Christian churches established in the first century CE. On the flip side, Azerbaijan is 96 per cent Muslim, with 65 per cent of the people observing Shia Islam and the rest being denominationally Sunni. Four-fifths of Georgia is also Orthodox Christian by faith.

For centuries, the Nagorno-Karabakh region has served as a frontier between three major civilisational strains represented by the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire, the Sunni Ottoman Empire, and the Shiite Iranian Empire. The region an ethnically Armenian enclave has, therefore, been a focal point of contention for centuries.

The discord between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh thus is deeply entrenched in history. In 1805, the region conclusively became part of the Russian empire under the auspices of the Treaty of Kurekhay. The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and subsequent nationalistic movements led to violent clashes over this strategically significant territory.

During the Bolshevik revolution in erstwhile Russia, it endeavored to declare freedom but was occupied by the Red Army and integrated into the newly constituted Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

During the Soviet era, Nagorno-Karabakh was officially designated as an autonomous oblast within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic with a fair amount of regional autonomy despite its predominantly Armenian population. This administrative decision sowed the seeds of future discord by leaving the Armenian majority feeling politically marginalised. Although tensions were somewhat managed under Soviet rule, they never fully dissipated.

Following the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, as Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh became a flashpoint once again. In 1988, the regional council of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unite with Armenia, igniting violent clashes and leading to a full-scale war that lasted from 1991 to 1994. The war ended with a ceasefire that left Armenia in control of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Recent developments: The escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September 2023 once again plunged the frozen Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict into a fresh cataclysmic phase. The crisis was ignited by Azerbaijan impeding the Lachin Corridor in December 2022, the only road connecting Armenia to the region. The blockade led to severe shortages of essential supplies in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan ostensibly attempted to rationalise the blockade blaming Armenia for using the corridor to transport military supplies, a claim that Armenia denied. The situation was further exacerbated by the reduced presence of Russian peacekeepers, as Moscow's focus shifted to its conflict with Ukraine.

The situation reached a critical juncture on September 19, 2023, when Azerbaijani forces launched an offensive. This action culminated in the occupation of the Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, marking the end of its 30 years of de facto inde-

In a development, Armenia has agreed to return several villages to Azerbaijan. These villages were occupied by Armenia during the First Karabakh War, and are crucial for Armenia's trade routes.

pendence and triggering a mass exodus of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians within a week. Once considered a "frozen" dispute, the conflict has now drawn renewed international attention, with significant local, regional, and global implications.

Regional and global involvement: The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has drawn significant involvement from regional and global powers, each with its own strategic interests. Turkey, a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, has played a crucial role by providing military support and political backing. This includes the supply of advanced weaponry and drones, enhancing Azerbaijan's offensive capabilities. Turkey's involvement aligns with its strategic interests in asserting influence in the South Caucasus and countering Armenian influence.

Russia, traditionally a balancing force in the region, maintains a complex relationship with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia has a mutual defence obligation with Armenia but also engages in significant economic and military cooperation with Azerbaijan. This dual approach allows Russia to retain leverage over both nations while safeguarding its strategic interests in the Caucasus.

Iran, sharing borders with both countries, has taken a cautious stance, advocating for a peaceful resolution while being concerned about the conflict's impact on its regional security and its significant Azeri minority population. Iran's involvement has primarily been through diplomatic efforts aimed at de-escalation and preventing external powers from exacerbating the conflict.

Azerbaijan has deepened its strategic ties with China, becoming its second partner in the South Caucasus after Georgia. This partnership,

formalised with a joint declaration, builds on growing economic cooperation since 2015, especially within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's interest in the region has intensified, aiming to establish new trade routes bypassing Russia. Recent agreements with China and Iran further align Baku more closely with Russia, challenging Western interests in the region.

India needs to be watchful about the developments in the Caucuses given the recent churn in the international geostrategic landscape. The conflicts raging in Europe, Middle East and the tensions in Asia are rolling the global order.

Mediation efforts and peace prospects: Mediation efforts to resolve the conflict have been ongoing since the early 1990s, with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States, playing a central role. Despite numerous meetings and proposals, a lasting peace has remained elusive due to the intransigence of both sides, the complex geopolitical interests of regional powers, and the deep-rooted mistrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed Moscow's commitment to mediating peace negotiations, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, the recent ceasefire has not addressed core issues such as the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the rights of displaced persons, leaving the prospects for lasting peace uncertain.

In a notable development, Armenia has agreed to return several villages to Azerbaijan. These villages were occupied by Armenia during the First Karabakh War, and are crucial for Armenia's trade routes. As the two countries edge closer to a peace agreement, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a complex and ongoing challenge with significant implications for regional stability and international relations.

The writer is a lawyer, MP and former Union minister. The views expressed are personal. Twitter handle @manishtewari.

LETTERS

SURESH GOPI'S STATUS

Suresh Gopi, Union minister and the only BJP member elected from Kerala, is finding himself to be 'a fish out of water' ever since he was inducted into the Cabinet. For a person who had lived a major part of his life in fame, comfort, affluence and in the glare and lights of camera of the tinsel world it is certainly difficult to cope himself with the pressure, nuances and the nitty-gritty of the post held as a minister. Though he might be relieved as a minister he still has the responsibility of an MP towards the welfare of his voters.

B.S.Jayaraman
Coimbatore

RAHUL & WAYANAD

As one living in proximity to Wayanad that gave a fresh political rebirth and a fresh lease of existence in political reckoning to Rahul Gandhi after his ignominious defeat in Amethi in 2019, I have been waiting to hear the news of the first steps he has taken on his promise of building 100 houses to those rendered homeless in the catastrophe of July. But till this date not a single word could be heard about the efforts he is making or intending to take either from him directly or from his party's high command. With a stony and surprising silence of this kind on the promised help it will be a big question how his sibling Priyanka Vadra will sail through safely in the by-election to take place in Wayanad by the end of this year.

MuthuSrinivasan
Coimbatore

STALIN ON RESHUFFLE

Chief Minister Stalin has snubbed the media rightly and in a polished manner like a knife cutting butter by replying to a question thrown at him as to whether there would be a "cabinet reshuffle". His reply that he had not heard any such news or been informed reminded everyone of his father and former CM Karunanidhi who was well known for such "unexpected punches" during his tenure. Stalin has inherited the talent from his father. It is time the media did their homework before asking silly questions.

M.C.Vijay Shankar
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Anita Anand



Can a 'bottom-up' approach help in tackling crimes targeting women?

The gruesome rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata on August 9 has met with an outcry in the city and across most parts of the country.

Following the incident, doctors and medical institutions went on strike, providing only emergency and OPD services, and raising concerns about the safety of the medical staff. The Indian Medical Association asked Union health minister J.P. Nadda to introduce a special Central law to prevent violence against doctors and to designate hospitals as safe zones.

On August 15, demonstrators at R.G. Kar Medical College pushed past a police barricade, entered the hospital, throwing stones, and began to vandalise the emergency ward and the area where the victim was found. The Kolkata police commissioner put the blame for the incident on the "malicious media campaign" against the police. Public anger is targeted at the state government headed by chief minister Mamata Banerjee and the police.

The horrific incident in Kolkata brings

back memories of the 2012 Delhi gangrape and murder incident, commonly known as the "Nirbhaya" case, in which a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern was gangraped and tortured on a moving private bus while travelling with her male friend. The then all-India protests had demanded stronger penalties for rape and more safety measures for women in public spaces.

The government responded with the passage of several new sexual assault laws, a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years for gangrape, and six new fast-track courts solely for rape prosecutions. The complexity of rape prosecutions is evident in that the "Nirbhaya" case was the only conviction among the 706 rape cases filed in New Delhi in 2012. So much for the implementation of the law.

But, the "Nirbhaya" case may have nudged rape or molestation victims to report the crime. Police records show that during the last quarter of 2013, twice as many rape victims filed a police report, and four times as many allegations of molestation. This is progress.

After Nirbhaya, the government set up

the "Nirbhaya Fund" for "empowerment, safety and security of women and girl children". Under the fund, one of the schemes was the One Stop Centre (OSC) Scheme, offering multiple services to women, to be implemented across the country as of April 1, 2015.

The progress of the OSCs has been predictable. A 2023 study by the Mumbai-based non-profit IndiaSpend of the OSC scheme found that less than half of the funds from the Union government were utilised between 2015 and 2022; there was no integration between systems such as the Women's Helpline; and a general lack of awareness among stakeholders such as the police. According to the 2023 Lok Sabha data, 733 OSCs were operational in 729 districts; over ₹735 crores of the ₹868 crores in approved funds were released to the districts, of which ₹328 crores has been utilised on the ground and over half the funds appearing as actual expenditure lies in the bank accounts of district collectors or magistrates.

The 2014 BJP election campaign promised to reduce crimes against women.

Since then, such crimes have risen, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau. In his Independence Day speech in August 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "Crimes against women must be probed as soon as possible, and those involved in such monstrous acts must face strict punishment at the earliest, this is necessary to create faith in society. There is anger among the people because of this. I can feel that rage." Anger, rage and calls for punishment are there, but what after that? The demonstrators who invaded R.G. Kar Hospital destroyed property and injured people. Striking medical professionals put public lives at risk.

So, what is to be done? Noam Shpancer, professor of psychology at Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, suggests that sexual violence is deeply intertwined in our biological and psychological makeup shaped by an interplay of biological, psychological, circumstantial and socio-cultural variables. There are two ways to address the issue: a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach.

A top-down theory he suggests, is applied through changes in regulations or laws. However, in India, changes in laws have not deterred the perpetrators of sexual violence. Law enforcement is based on punishing those who break laws. The psychologist B.F. Skinner suggests that punishment only teaches what not to do. A bottom-up approach, Prof. Shpancer suggests, is where individuals, families and communities initiate actions and conversations to create new terms, new scripts and expectations, and a new social consciousness. And a special focus on consciousness-raising groups, especially for men. It is the bottom-up approach that must be cultivated in tackling crimes against women. This starts in the home, in educational and religious institutions, in workplaces and businesses, and in the government. Till now, little of this has been attempted. Expecting only the government or laws to fix the problem is like whistling in the wind.

The writer is a development and communications consultant

REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Shroud of silence and fear over Kerala movie industry

More than the cases detailed in the Justice K Hema Committee report, it is the hesitation of many affected women who refused to speak to the committee and the deafening silence of top industry men on the report that lay bare the chokehold of the industry's power structure. The government must take *suo motu* action

The Justice K Hema Committee report is finally out. The committee was constituted by the government of Kerala in 2017 to study and report on various issues faced by women in the state's movie industry. Chaired by Justice Hema with veteran actress Sarada and retired IAS officer KB Valsala Kumari as members, the committee was tasked with examining prevalent working conditions for women in the Malayalam movie industry and suggesting measures to ensure their safety and gender justice. Everyone had welcomed the appointment of the committee—a first by any state government.

The appointment, though, was not a *suo motu* one but the result of two events. The first was an act of crime: In 2017, a well-known actress in Malayalam cinema was abducted and sexually assaulted while returning from a shoot, allegedly at the behest of a leading actor, leading to public

outrage and persistent media attention. This blew the lid off the exploitation of women in the industry and triggered discussions about their safety. The second event was an off-shoot of that incident: The formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), which then led a consistent campaign for the government to intervene.

The report presents a gruesome picture of the Malayalam film industry, where predators rule and prowl. The first part of the report, detailing the evidence collection process, is an eye-opener about the atmosphere of fear and silence that prevails in the industry. The committee identified 30 categories of women in the industry and tried to contact representatives from each. They started off with an open call, but not a single individual responded to it. Then, the committee attempted to contact the potential respondents individually and schedule meetings according to their convenience and availability. Even after repeated assurances of confidentiality and privacy, women in the industry were not willing to come and depose. Representatives of some of the most vulnerable categories, such as dancers and junior artistes, were the least willing to appear before the committee. The same pattern continued with women artistes, technicians and workers in other areas of the industry. When the committee formed WhatsApp groups to facilitate the exchange of information, the witnesses either kept silent or left the group. Predictably, the responses from the various industry organisations—run by powerful men—were also lukewarm. Only a courageous few came forward. Most of the feedback and testimonies

the report draws insight from were made possible by the cooperation of WCC.

More than the actual and written content of the report, these poignant background details portray the atmosphere of fear and coercion—direct and indirect—that exist in the industry. The report itself spells out its anxiety about the respondents: “We are, therefore, concerned about their safety and of their close relatives.” Evidently, women respondents feared that they would not only be rendered jobless, but even their lives could be in danger.

According to the report, 32 women from WCC and 31 from different categories (it is not clear if there is an overlap) deposed before the committee. After overcoming many such personal, legal, and institutional hurdles, the committee submitted its report to the government in 2019. It took more than four years and another fiery round of media inquisition, public outcry, and relentless appeals and efforts by WCC for the government to put the report in the public domain. The government not only did not initiate any serious actions based on suggestions made by the committee, but it also tried its best to keep the report in the deep freeze, offering various lame excuses and reasons. Now that select portions of the report are out, the government is under trial by the public.

The report reveals a highly toxic work culture prevailing in the industry, where sexual harassment and exploitation are rampant. The industry is ruled over by a few who wield the power to promote or destroy careers (including that of male artistes/technicians). Apart from disparity in wages and the

CS
Venkiteswaran

It took public outcry and relentless efforts by WCC for the Hema committee report to be made public, four years after its submission

absence of contractual obligations, women are forced to work in unspeakable conditions. They are even denied basic human rights like water and food, toilet facilities, proper privacy to change clothes, and safety and security at shooting locations, places of accommodation and during transportation. There is no complaints-redressal system. Many of them are asked to “compromise and adjust” if they want to survive in the field. If any woman (or man) dares to ask uncomfortable questions, they are unofficially banned from the industry. The past history of such banishments—even of eminent male actors like Thilakan—further accentuates the climate of fear and acquiescence within the industry.

The concern and anguish of the committee are evident throughout the report, as also its frustrations over inherent obstacles facing any attempt to reform: “As long as the power structure exists in Malayalam film industry, they will take full control of it... (the) constitution of Internal Complaints Committee comprising of persons in cinema will be of

no use at all to protect any woman in Malayalam film industry from sexual harassment/assault/abuse in cinema... We have absolutely no hesitation to state that there must be an independent forum which must be constituted by the government, as per a statute, to deal with the problems of women in cinema.”

Hence the committee has suggested the enactment of a separate law and formation of a tribunal with adequate powers under the statute to address the problems in the industry. Only an independent judicial forum can give women the confidence to report harassment or abuse.

But, unless there is political will, once the media storm settles down, the report will be laid to rest like any other. The industry and the organisations within it—part of the problem rather than the solution—bow to the same power structure. The government, too, seems to support the male lobby, as is evident from its lethargy so far and the evasive responses after the report came out, where the burden of action is thrust upon the

victims. The persisting atmosphere of fear is evident from the fact that none of the major actors, directors, technicians or producers—except for director Lijo Jose Pellissery and actor Jagadish—have come out openly to argue in favour of the report. Even the new-gen artistes seem to be waiting silently for the toxic era to get over rather than take it on frontally.

Valsala Kumari's stinging observation defines the Malayalam film industry today: “There is a culture of silence that shrouds Malayalam movies which is partly a consequence of a fear psychosis engendered by the working of the power nexus that controls Malayalam cinema.” Till now, those associated with the industry considered it “normal”. Now that it is all out in public, the onus is upon the state to seek *suo motu* action. But are women's rights a “*suo motu*” issue for the state?

CS Venkiteswaran is a film critic, documentary filmmaker and professor. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



The man who knew how to retrieve lost moments

I had known of Natwar Singh virtually all my life, but the first time I really got to know him was probably in 1976. He was deputy high commissioner in London. I was the president of the India Society at Cambridge and using it as a stepping-stone to the Union presidency. The Emergency, which was on at the time, made India topical and controversial. It was Natwar Singh's job to defend it.

I invited him to an India Society meeting to do just that. He came armed with some 500 glossy brochures. “This should convince your membership”, he quipped, smiling broadly, as he stepped out of his Mercedes. We took him to Pembroke College for dinner.

That's when the embarrassment began. From soup onwards, I kept getting messages that no one had turned up to hear him. The hall where he was due to speak was empty and it stayed that way. So, after coffee, when we finally got there, it was bare.

Its silence was all you could hear.

“Ah”, said Natwar Singh, “this is the penalty of popularity!” Whilst the other officers of the Society and I were speechless with embarrassment, not him. “This is a good excuse for me to buy you boys a drink”, he offered. “I take it your college bar won't be shut?”

He stayed for almost two hours, bought all the rounds and did most of the talking. We were riveted. Natwar was a raconteur on a range of subjects and had a wicked sense of humour. Needless to say, the Emergency was not discussed. I don't think he was sorry about that. We certainly weren't.

Decades later, by when we were almost friends, he became India's foreign minister, and I telephoned him early in the morning after his swearing-in. “BBC World Service want to interview you for HARD-talk India”, I explained. “Would you agree?” I didn't think he'd refuse and, in

fact, he didn't. But five minutes after our conversation ended, he rang back.

“Have you told the BBC I was a friend of EM Forster?” I had not. I didn't think it was important. But it was to Natwar. Far more, it seemed, than being foreign minister of India. It was the first time I realised how different he was to other politicians. Most of them wouldn't even know who Forster was!

Of his many achievements, I would say Natwar was probably most proud of his books. His biography of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, his grandfather-in-law, is a delight. But I would say his put-downs were classier. Once asked if he was a hawk or a dove, he riposted: “I'm running a foreign ministry, not a bloody aviary!”

Of Jaswant Singh, his predecessor as foreign minister, who always spoke slowly in lugubrious, measured tones, Natwar once said: “In his case slowness of speech does not equate with profundity of thought”. Even Jaswant, to whom this was promptly reported, smiled warmly. Natwar's quips were witty but never offensive or hurtful. They made you smile, not wince.

Not surprisingly, Natwar wasn't very good with gadgets. Mobiles confounded him. During the live recording of a discussion in front of a large audience in a Door-darshan studio, his phone began to ring. Sitaram Yechury, who was speaking, paused hoping Natwar would kill the incoming call. But Natwar couldn't find the

OF NATWAR SINGH'S MANY ACHIEVEMENTS, I WOULD SAY HE WAS PROBABLY MOST PROUD OF HIS BOOKS... HIS PUT DOWNS WERE CLASSY. HIS QUIPS WERE WITTY BUT NEVER OFFENSIVE OR HURTFUL. THEY MADE YOU SMILE, NOT WINCE

phone. He tried his various pockets, searched the floor, and looked helplessly at the rest of us. Meanwhile, the ring got louder and louder.

Finally, Natwar discovered the phone. “Answer it”, said a very irritated Sitaram. “It's probably Sonia.” “Nah!”, Natwar shot back grinning, “Bibi ha!”. And switched the phone off with a flourish. The studio audience was in splits.

In fact, the call was from his driver, but Natwar knew his version was funnier. More importantly, it would relieve the tension that had built up. He had this instinctive skill of knowing how to retrieve lost moments. It was one of his most winning qualities.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Economic opportunity key to inclusion of transgenders

Affirmative action and reservations have become well-worn political duelling points. To its credit, despite budgetary allocations not being adequate, the Centre has taken several steps to bring about a more inclusive environment for gender minorities. It formulated the first equal opportunities policy for the transgender community that prohibited the disclosure of the gender identity of a transgender person without consent. Despite the government setting up shelters and framing pension and health insurance schemes, the transgender community is still largely on the peripheries when it comes to equal opportunities in the job market. This might change if current trends in the corporate world continue. In recent times, corporates have pushed job opportunities for the transgender community. Tata Steel is one of the first blue chip companies to conduct a recruitment drive for transgenders and has already employed over 100 in various positions in the company.

Corporate support is important because, despite progressive legal reforms recognising the rights of transgenders, the lack of adequate skill development initiatives tailored to suit them continues to put them at a disadvantage. Other corporates too have stepped up to the plate. HDFC Bank has initiated a Parivartan skill development programme for transgenders as part of its corporate social responsibility initiative—transgender candidates are trained in NSDC-certified self-employed tailor programmes. Ibra, 32, had to drop out of school due to constant harassment over her identity. From a poor home, she worked as a maid for several years. “Joining HDFC Bank and Centum Foundation's Parivartan skilling programme was a turning point in my life. My teachers taught me both tailoring and design. This investment in me ignited my hopes. The programme not only taught me a skill but also changed my thinking. I was given a sewing machine and now I have started a career,” she said. Ibra has aspirations to become the next Manish Malhotra. Similarly, Deutsche Bank has partnered with

Rotary Club in Mumbai to start the first salon run by transgenders.

Earlier this year, the second edition of the Trans Employment Mela was held in Delhi, organised by the Transgender Welfare Equity and Empowerment Trust Foundation and InHarmony, along with the ministry of social justice and empowerment and the National Institute of Social Defence. Big corporates were in attendance including Accenture, Procter and Gamble and Ericsson. Meghna Sahoo, secretary of the All Odisha Transgender Association, said, “I am happy that corporates are offering us jobs, but we also need sensitisation. Many people think that our cause is not so important, but corporates making an effort will make a huge difference.”

Delhi-based Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), which has analysed budgeting and schemes for transgenders, holds that there must be more need-based planning across PSUs, taking into account the voices of the community through participatory budgeting at all levels. In its report, *A Budget Brief: Issues faced by the Transgender Community*, it said, “The existing frameworks and tools of gender-responsive budgeting must be broadened to integrate planning, budgeting, and implementation of schemes for transgender persons. Adoption of an intersectional approach and need-based planning while formulating policies and schemes would certainly address structural gaps and pave the path to achieving substantive equality and redistributive justice for the trans community.”

With corporates like the Tatas and HDFC Bank taking the lead in becoming inclusive employers committed to diversity and equal opportunities, it is likely that others will follow suit. Reports from several corporates say that when presented with the appropriate opportunities, transgenders have proved innovative and productive, and this will surely open more doors going forward.

The views expressed are personal

Nationalism versus sense of community

At the Paris Olympics, Pakistani athlete Arshad Nadeem clinched the country's first individual gold medal, which was also its first track-and-field medal. India's Neeraj Chopra secured a splendid silver in the same game of javelin throw.

Things were fragile for a few hours after the game. Some elements on this side of the border posed questions about India losing to Pakistan, and a Hindu losing to a Muslim. There was gloating along these lines by some across the border. The fact that the match happened only a week ahead of the Independence Days of the two countries (August 14 and 15) perhaps served to whip up such sentiments.

But, soon enough, emerged two silver linings—the mothers of the athletes, Razia Parveen and Saroj Devi—who undid the spurious animosities in simple sentences. Reporters interviewed the two women about their sons' successes after the game and asked the obvious question: How do you feel about who your son competed against?

Both women had the same answer about their son's competitor: “He is like my son, I wish him well”. Through their responses, the women showed an alpha community charged with hyper-nationalism the origins of the word “community”—which is to have something in common. They also underlined the meaning of sportspersonship, which is reflected in the benign camaraderie displayed by the two athletes on the podium finish.

These events point to a larger political proscenium, which has its roots in the

fight for freedom from a common imperial oppressor and the subsequent mapping of frail boundaries that cannot fully contain overlapping tendencies. They prod us to question how borders are imagined and how cultures cross over.

The similarity we see in a person from another community or religion, practising life differently, is a frustrating view. The others look like us, use the same spices in food but cook them differently; they procure the same fabric but wear their clothes differently; adhere to the same values but implement them differently; and think the same thoughts but speak differently.

Communities, and, by extension, nations, are imagined on foundations of standardised antiquity. A unified past that ties everything together. Any departure from this process of standardisation leads to the othering of a person. Empathy is a virtue we extend to commonness.

A case in point is the character of Subodh Malgaonkar (played by Ashutosh Rana), the Right-wing leader in Mahesh Bhatt's phenomenal film, *Zakhm* (1998), who stresses on abiding by the rituals of a community, even if the deceased wanted the last rites done differently. He says: “Our lives are not entirely ours... We also have to live according to what people expect of us.”

In his seminal work—*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983)—Irish political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson outlines the thoughts that gave rise to the concept of nationalism. He points out how modern notions of nationalism emerged



As communal walls get erected the world over, mothers like Neeraj Chopra's can perhaps bring these down

PTI

when religious philosophies declined. In the New World, pamphlets and manifestoes replaced religious scriptures, but they rendered a similar effect, which was to limit the individual from crossing over, giving rise to confusion in exercises of belonging and identity.

Of course, Anderson's is a much more complicated thought than what can be summarised in a short essay. But he opens a window to the modern reader to allow the differences in, only to find similarities. Motherhood is a good place to begin this imagination.

An important location where this imagination is realised is the arts, especially cinema. Even in popular Bollywood films like Yash Chopra's *Veer-Zaara* (2004), there have

been attempts to resolve territorial disputes through love, landscapes, and values, as is the case in Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi* (2018). While the former is an extensive, albeit exaggerated, take on “love triumphs all”, the latter is centred on the fatigue of nationalism itself. In *Zakhm*, motherhood is visualised as a state that transgresses religious identities to arrive at concepts of love and care.

At a point when bricks are being concretised on the communal walls the world over, one might turn to everyday humans like mothers to loosen the strings around the human condition. One might take a leaf out of Parveen's and Devi's books and maybe even crack a wall.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Better personnel leads to policing

This is with reference to “Social audits can help decolonise policing” by Maja Daruwala (Aug 18). Enhanced capacity in the police is a crucial building block, but it must be accompanied by the recruitment of better personnel. The Centre and the states must coordinate efforts for ensuring better policing.

Bhavna Chhabra

Culture persists despite divisions

This is with reference to “Neeraj-Arshad warmth echoes shared culture” by Karan Thapar (Aug 18). Nations may be cut up and divided on the basis of politics and religion, but the common cultures, food, traditions they share can never be obliterated.

Eric Rasquinha

Consider the safety of health workers

This is with reference to “Why health care needs safe-systems approach” by Anand Krishnan (Aug 18). As the Kolkata incident has shown, strong politico-administrative commitment and a rethinking among the hospital administrators is the need of the hour.

Chetana Barvalia

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com



Archana Kamath announced her retirement from professional table tennis to focus on higher studies

FILE PHOTO: PTI

In India, sports & studies don't go hand in hand



RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

NOW THAT THE Olympics are behind us, it's back to the hard surface of reality. The hype surrounding India at the Games was quite disproportionate to the medal haul (one silver and five bronze). And just over a week after the closing ceremony in the French capital, one of our athletes has decided she has had enough.

Table tennis player Archana Kamat has quit the sport in favour of pursuing higher studies in the United States. A bright student throughout her academic career, Archana aims to be an economist and believes continuing her duels on the TT table is not a feasible option.

In the Indian sporting set-up, athletic pursuit and academics hardly go side by side, unless the sportspersons themselves aim to study concurrently. Once a youngster is marked as promising and inducted into a national camp, academics take a backseat. It's nothing like the university system in the United States, where the scholars cannot afford to neglect their studies, even if they come on a sports scholarship.

In India, the higher education qualifications for a sportsperson, if they aren't themselves too keen, ensure that their prospects after their playing days will largely be restricted to the sport they practise. Many of these degrees are on paper only as the athletes had seldom been to the classroom and are devoid of the knowledge or prowess that a degree is expected to bestow. For a country that wins only a handful of medals at the Olympics every four years, the way it deals with its elite sportspersons borders on single-minded obsession, not that it helps too much in the pursuit of success at the highest level.

For this reason, most of the sportspersons that get into the system come from lower and lower-middle income groups and rural backgrounds, for whom sport is a means for their economic advancement. A settled government job with a steady income is quite a satisfactory outcome for most of them. Putting all their eggs in one basket is a risk worth taking, because it's the best and easiest option for them.

Better option

It seems Archana had the means and ambition for much more. Once she realised, after a frank discussion with her coach that a medal was unlikely, whether at Los Angeles 2028 or beyond, in a sport totally dominated by the Chinese, she decided to focus on academic excellence at an elite American university.

Education is not just a source of livelihood, but a means to know more about the world around us, to broaden our mindset and thinking. It's no surprise that most of the sportspersons without a viable means to keep themselves busy after their playing days, tend to find it tough. They may get into coaching or find a post in the federation or a job in a public sector undertaking under the sports quota, but it hardly provides work satisfaction and they have to be subservient to higher government officials or a politician or 'sports administrator' running a national body. Those employed with a PSU hardly 'work' during their playing days, but once they

retire, they don't receive any preferential treatment, expected to work like their other colleagues and even liable to be transferred to far-off locations.

Beijing 2008 Olympic gold medallist Abhinav Bindra comes across as an articulate individual, who has experienced the highest of highs as a sportsperson and also sees things from a wider perspective. The former rifle shooter wastes no opportunity to stress on the importance of elite sportspersons having an alternate vocation as a back-up. Bindra believes this would reduce the pressure on them as success and failure in the sports arena won't necessarily define them as individuals. Thinking 24x7 about their sport and how to meet their target can make one obsessive, which may not be a positive character trait, and could also be counter-productive in a sporting sense. It also helps in taking an objective, dispassionate view of one's prospects. Archana knew that as long as she remained part of the national table tennis set-up, her sporting expenses would be taken care of by the government and the NGOs that have come up to provide various kinds of support. But there is no viable revenue model for her in the long term, once she retires or someone comes up to take her spot. There are a large number of leagues coming up in various sports, providing athletes much more in a financial sense than they could dream of earlier. But that is still limited to the very top level of sportspersons and Archana may have figured out that she would be better off as a highly-qualified economist.

Limited spread

As things stand, people from the aspirational middle class and the affluent upper class are rare in Indian sport, other than in disciplines which have significant entry barriers in terms of equipment and access. There are stories galore of parents having to sell or pawn family silver or other precious belongings to fund a child's sporting dreams. Such hardship and struggle often results in a single-minded determination where anything outside the limited sphere becomes an unnecessary distraction.

If they don't quite make it to the top, they suddenly find themselves with nothing much to do. Even if they manage to reach somewhere near the summit, the very nature of sport makes it a temporary phase, often leaving them with an empty feeling with almost their entire life left to live.

In cricket, it always helps to have two strings to a bow as an all-rounder has a better chance of getting selected and making a contribution. So is the case in life. Sports is an unpredictable domain – injuries, non-selection, poor form, and sheer competitiveness can take a toll on an athlete's prospects.

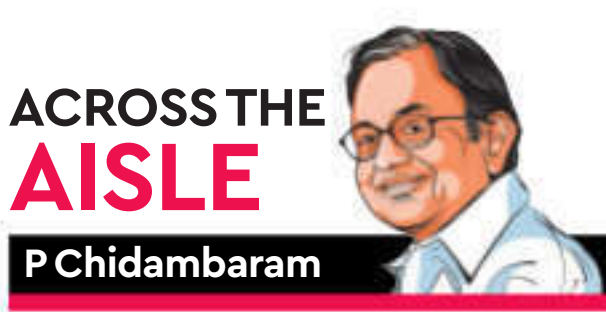
Successful sportspersons are showered with awards and rewards in our country, but grass-root facilities are still lacking. All these factors often dissuade parents from encouraging their wards from taking up sports as a career.

However, the trick is to develop a love for sport at a young age and provide facilities to play close by, not necessarily to take it up professionally or to win Olympic medals. That will make better-rounded individuals and also broaden the base from which high-quality talent can come up.

Academics and sports can, and should, go hand in hand. It should not be a case of either-or.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNI T PHORE



ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong. Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech

IT WAS THE Prime Minister's 11th successive speech on Independence Day, a record of sorts. It was the longest speech that Mr Narendra Modi had delivered from the ramparts of Red Fort (98 minutes). It was at the start of his third term and it was expected that the PM would lay out his vision for the government for the next five years.

The BJP leaders called the speech as unfolding a bold new vision. If it was, I am afraid it was a vision that targeted a section of the people. The PM said,

"We are marching ahead with resolve, we are going far, but there is another truth – that there are some people who cannot digest India's progress. Some people cannot visualise good things for India. Because their own vested interests are not served, they don't like anybody's progress. There is no dearth of people having such a perverse mindset. The nation must be wary of such people."

Disdain for democracy

Who are the "some people"? I know of no one who is not proud of India's progress in agriculture, information technology, nuclear energy, space, etc. Was the PM alluding to the 262 million voters who voted against him and the NDA?

Or to the youth who criticise him for raging unemployment? Or to the homemakers who complain about the burden of rising inflation? Or to the soldiers and ex-sevicemen who are perplexed by India's quiet retreat in the face of China's brazen occupation of Indian territory? In a speech intended to rally the people around a *vision* for India, the PM actually aggravated the *divisions* among the people caused by the wrong policies of his government. To call the opponents of his government "perverse" shows disdain for the democratic verdict.



INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Family friction

The brutal rape and murder at R G Kar Medical College, Kolkata, has exposed the rift between Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee and her designated successor, nephew Abhishek Banerjee. Immediately after the crime, Abhishek had talked of capital punishment for the accused while his close associates Santanu Sen, Sukhendu Sekhar Roy and Pratima Mondol took part in protests and dharnas. A furious Mamata accused Sen of spearheading the rallies, even though the striking medical fraternity has emphasised that it is an apolitical movement. Roy was served a notice by the police. Mamata's detractors claim that she went out of the way to protect the tainted former principal of R G Kar Medical College, Sandip Ghosh, and initially allowed policemen to cover up and destroy evidence because the principal is allegedly in the know of a mafia dealing in medicines and equipment that operates in Kolkata medical colleges. After his statement demanding action against the principal, Sen was removed



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Independence Day celebrations at Red Fort

PTI

Vision or division

If we had thought certain issues would be put on the backburner following the reduction of the BJP to 240 seats, we were wrong.

Apparently, the PM still swears by the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE). He mentioned both in his Independence Day speech. He labelled the current personal law codes as 'communal civil codes' and said,

"There is no place in a modern society for laws which divide the nation on religious lines and become a basis for class discrimination. I would say, and this is the need of the hour, that there should be a secular civil code in the country. We have spent 75 years under a communal civil code. Now we will have to move towards a secular civil code. Only then will we get relief from the rift due to laws that lead to discrimination on the basis of religion."

That statement was a mixture of error, poor understanding and bias. Every personal law code is based on religion, including the Hindu codes, but that will not make the code *communal*. There is a secular code on marriage,

namely, the Special Marriage Act, but it is not popular among the people of India. The common man (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh or Parsi) does not feel 'discriminated' because his neighbour is governed by another code.

It would be wonderful if all the religious groups and communities can agree on a Uniform Civil Code, but that is easier said than done.

Divisive rhetoric

The very idea of UCC or ONOE rings alarm bells and it is first necessary to allay the fears. I had explained the hidden agenda of UCC and ONOE in a previous column (*Cult Worship and Consequences*, *Indian Express*, April 21, 2024). For UCC, it is necessary to hold extensive consultations with all religious groups and communities.

For ONOE, it is necessary to make amendments to several Articles of the Constitution. A speech by the PM is not the start or the end of the debate on the issues. On the contrary, it will mean that divisive issues are sought to be raised and legislation pushed through Parliament which may divide the people further.

The LS elections witnessed a lot of divisive rhetoric. Attacking the Congress' Manifesto 2024, Mr Modi said,

- Congress will distribute the people's land, gold and other valuables among Muslims;
- Congress will take away your *mangalsutra* and *streedhan* and give it to people who have more children.

Mr Amit Shah said, 'Congress will seize temple properties and distribute them'. Mr Rajnath Singh said, 'Congress will grab the assets of the people and re-distribute them to infiltrators'. The head-spinner was when Mr Modi warned the people of the coming of an inheritance tax on buffaloes. No one in the media called for a stop to themadness.

The sobering election verdict has not restrained the PM, but the fear of losing power has made his government backtrack on several issues: the indexation benefit for capital gains has been restored, the Wakf Bill has been referred to a Select Committee, the Broadcasting Bill has been withdrawn, and the scheme of lateral entry into central government posts has been shelved.

The fear of more divisive ideas will cease only when CAA, UCC and ONOE are withdrawn finally. A vision can emerge only when BJP's playbook of division is junked.

ple further.

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A vision can emerge only when BJP's playbook of division is junked.

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Sporting chances

Elections of presidents of sports bodies usually reflect the political climate in a state. Last month, Sharad Pawar's candidate Ajinkya Naik convincingly defeated Sanjay Naik, backed by BJP state president Ashish Shelar, for presidency of the Mumbai Cricket Association, which was interpreted as an indication of the MVA's rising political graph in Maharashtra. The former MCA president Amol Kale, who passed away this June, was backed by Devendra Fadnis when the BJP was riding high in the state. Meanwhile, Congress leader Deepender Hooda was prominent in wrestler Vinesh Phogat's tumultuous victory procession through Haryana on her return from the Olympics. The Congress hopes to cash in on Phogat's popularity in the upcoming Haryana assembly polls.

Incidentally, Home Minister Amit Shah's son Jay is likely to make waves soon in the international cricket world by securing the post of chairperson of the International Cricket Council (ICC) which falls vacant in November. Both the Australian and the British cricket bodies have assured their backing to the Indian candidate. Jay has twice been elected secretary of the BCCI, but his term ends next May and the court ruling specifies a cooling-off period after two terms in office. At 35, Jay will be the youngest chairperson of the ICC. He already heads the ICC's finance committee.

REFLECTIONS

Why Vinesh should be feted



GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

VINESH PHOGAT was not a winner at the Paris Olympics, yet her stirring story has caused her to be lionised after her return to the country — strange fetishisation of failure, cynics would say. Yet, 21 years of wrestling — the injuries and the pain, the wagging tongue of villagers, the blood, sweat and tears — cannot and must not be distilled into a single label denoting failure at the greatest stage in the world. Vinesh is a multiple World Championships medallist, and has won countless medals in other international events. She's not a failure by any stretch of imagination.

Vinesh didn't deserve a medal in Paris; she'd reached the final of the women's 50kg freestyle wrestling before being disqualified for being overweight the day she was to fight for gold. She was 100 grams overweight — someone in her team of coaches, physio, trainer and nutritionist made a horrible miscalculation and she couldn't make the 50kg grade on Day 2 of competition. They didn't figure out how much weight Vinesh could lose by sweating in the cooler nights of Paris. Vinesh herself knows the rules — she will never say that she was robbed of a medal. Her supporters think she was wronged and that's why they turned up in huge numbers after she landed in New Delhi — she was honoured in more than 100 places during her travel to her village, Balali. Local politics was a factor behind this — Haryana is going to the polls in October, after all.

But the real reason Vinesh should have



It's her crusade for justice against powerful men in positions of power that makes Vinesh even more important as a role model

been feted and honoured and celebrated as an icon is that she's spoken against sexual harassment in sport; she's dared to name her alleged tormentor, former Wrestling Federation of India president and BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. The law is taking its own course now, after the Delhi Police's unhurried action in the matter, and Vinesh is determined to see the matter to its logical conclusion. Her peerlessness as a wrestler has not been in doubt for a decade; it's her crusade for justice against powerful men in positions of power that makes her even more important as a role model in the present times, when the Kolkata rape-murder of a young doctor has touched a raw nerve.

LESSON WELL LEARNT

Neeraj Chopra, winner of a silver at the Paris Olympics, didn't come to India to be

lionised — perhaps he remembered the lessons of 2021 when, after winning a gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics, he had to attend hundreds of felicitation events. He'd put on weight and had to end his competition season early. He's not making the mistake again. Less than a fortnight after he won a silver medal in Paris, Chopra finished second at the Lausanne Diamond League, with a best of 89.49 metres. As in Paris, he was second to a man who crossed 90 metres — Grenada's Anderson Peters (90.61m). The mark of 90 metres has become a millstone around the neck of Chopra, who had thrown 89.45m to win silver in Paris. He's never touched 90 metres in competition, and the wait has become excruciating; in Paris, there were four others who had gone that distance in the past. After Arshad Nadeem went past 92 metres with his second throw, at least three throwers knew that they could do that, too, for they actually had done that in the past.

Chopra had not done it, but he said he was confident he could do it, too; that might appear to be bravado, but that's also the way champions think and are encouraged to think — that there's nothing they cannot achieve. Chopra is quite a unique blessing to Indian sport — most of our previous Olympics successes came in events that are weight-controlled (wrestling, boxing) or shooting, which involves using a weapon. Chopra is a world-class sportsperson in a sport that needs extreme levels of athleticism, strength and technique.

Despite two Olympics medals, it does seem that Chopra's best throws could lie in the future — he says he knows it. He says he needs to decide when to undergo surgery to get rid of a persistent groin injury. Chopra is only 26, and throwers are believed to peak in strength and technique in their 30s. Chopra does have time to go past 90.

Layered & complex world of translation

SUPRIYA KAUR DHALIWAL

EARLIER this month, I found myself in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a place where languages seem to hang in the air like humidity, pressing down on the city in a palpable, almost tactile, way. I had come as a Punjabi translator for the inaugural SALT (South Asian Literature in Translation, a multi-year project at the University of Chicago) Summer School, an opportunity that promised to be remarkable.

As I stepped into my role as a translator of Punjabi into English, surrounded by other translators — each of us tethered to our own languages like lifelines — I couldn't help but feel that the air there was thick with the echoes of Sinhala, Tamil, Bengali, Urdu and Hindi, a cacophony of tongues that felt at once foreign and familiar. Even English seemed out of place here, as though it, too, was trying to assert itself in a landscape that resisted any kind of easy categorisation.

I felt this resistance in me as I moved through my days there, listening, observing, translating, and yet never quite arriving at a full understanding of where I was, or who I was within it.

In Punjabi, the language of my home and my translation, I've often felt a sense of alienation. This feeling likely stems from the underlying tension I've always been exposed to — that Punjabi is the *other* language, not just another language. So, returning to Punjabi after I've established alternate careers in alternate languages isn't merely wishful thinking.

In one of my favourite podcasts, *Indy and Dr*, the host, Indy, speaks with a representative from *Nau-jawani*, an online media platform. Indy poses a question: "If Punjabi is the seventh largest language in the world and still growing, why is there such a fixation among my generation, or the generation above us, on the idea that Punjabi is dying?" *Nau-jawani* responds reasonably, "I'd guess there are a number of reasons. Probably, the most prominent is that we are a very negative community because of all we've faced over the last 50 to 75 years, including numerous defeats. All these negative experiences lead us down a road where we start to believe we're constantly under attack, that we're besieged, and so we resort to tropes like the Punjabi language is dying."

However, many millennials and Gen Z individuals aren't anywhere close to believing that the Punjabi language is dying. We have our ways of staying connected to it — through music, literature, films, and translation.

In a translation workshop, translation felt less like a mechanical process and more like meditation. We found ourselves deeply immersed in our texts, feeling the weight of each word, the flow of each line, and the silences between them. I realised that my role was not just to translate the words, but to convey the essence

of them — to allow the audience to feel what the writer felt, even if the words themselves were different. This was not a task I could accomplish alone; it required me to draw upon my own experiences, my own understanding of both languages, and the shared history of our cultures — all this accompanied by the companionship of other translators.

While I was a part of the multilingual prose workshop, working on translating some Punjabi short stories into English, there were separate strands of workshops for Bangla, Hindi/Urdu, Tamil and multilingual poetry. In the workshops that solely focused on translating from a single language, the authors whose works were being translated were present in the seminar room. We heard many anecdotes, but the most fascinating reflections came from the Hindi/Urdu translators, who were translating a two-page short story by Asghar Wajahat, which we had the opportunity to hear him read at the inaugural event.

In translating, we are not merely bridging gaps; we are acknowledging them, respecting them, and allowing them to exist

Our co-translators from the Hindi workshop told us that since their group was working on translating the same story, sometimes their days were so rigorous that by the end of it, they had only been able to translate three to four sentences. This made me re-evaluate translation not just as a task to be completed, but as a way of being in the world, of engaging with the complexities and contradictions inherent in any act of comprehension in any given language.

I thought of Kate Briggs' words in *'This Little Art'*, "If a translation is like a table, then it has known and is open to different kinds of making (for example, both its initial assemblage and its later repeated setting)."

By the end of the Summer School, I realised that Colombo had become a kind of metaphor for the act of translation itself — messy, layered, complex, resistant to easy understanding. I left with a sense of incompleteness, of something unfinished, unsaid. And perhaps, that is the true purpose of translation, not to erase differences or to smooth over the rough edges, but to dwell in the space between, to inhabit the tension, the discomfort, the uncertainty. In translating, we are not merely bridging gaps; we are acknowledging them, respecting them, and allowing them to exist.

Colombo, in all its chaotic, incomprehensible beauty, taught me this. And for that, I am grateful.

— The writer is the author of *'The Yak Dilemma'*

Making of a golf champion

COLASHOK AHLAWAT

SHE used to watch her father return from playing golf. He was posted in Delhi then. The year was 2006. The golf bag and the gleaming irons used to be laid out for cleaning, and both the kids would observe the process keenly. One day, as he got ready to go to the golf course, Diksha asked Col Narinder Dagar, "Papa, will you take me too?" She was just six. Her mother was firm: "She wants to go with you, take her, she will not trouble you."

Col Dagar remembers with fondness the first day he took her to the Army golf course in Dhaura Kuan. She stood there watching him hit the balls and walked all the way down the fairway though it was a hot summer day. The routine did not change. Diksha would follow him like a shadow. "Darling, aren't you tired?" he asked her after a few days. "I love it dad," she replied.

One day, when he asked her whether she would like her own golf irons, her eyes sparkled with joy. He went looking for small irons for a left-handed child. He got her an iron, a pitching wedge and a putter.

When she was 10, the golf attachment only grew. A hard-working girl, she would tag along every afternoon after school. One day, he asked her, "Would you like a proper golf set of your own? Once I get it, there is no looking back for you." He could see the elation in her eyes. She was a determined sportsperson.

Diksha's mother would pick her up daily



from her school in Delhi Cantt, carrying her lunch and golf kit. They would head to the golf course, where she would practise for four hours straight. After reaching home, she would have her academic home tuitions. Her days were full of toil, there was no moment to spare, but the parents recall how she took it in her stride. She had acquired a great sense of self-discipline.

She did her Plus Two from Army Public School, Dhaura Kuan.

Diksha Dagar was ranked India No. 1 for three years in all categories — ladies and juniors — during her amateur career. She represented India at the Asian Games in 2018, World

Amateur Team Championship in 2016 and 2018 and Asia Pacific Cup in 2016, 2017 and 2018. In 2019, she turned professional. She is a three-time winner of the Ladies European Tour, South African Women's Open in 2019, Czech Ladies Open in 2023 and Aramco Team Series London in 2021.

She also has the record for the best finish by an Indian in a Major British Ladies Open tournament. Her aim remains to play in the Ladies Professional Tour Association Championships.

Diksha was awarded the Arjuna Award this year. For the Paris Olympics, the family reached the host city on July 28. Col Dagar had booked a hotel close to the golf course. Two days later, while returning from a get-together at India House, their car met with an accident. Diksha's mother got badly injured and had to be hospitalised. This incident did upset Diksha's prospects in the Olympics. She secured a final ranking of T49.

The Olympian had participated in Tokyo 2020 too and is the youngest Indian winner on a European tour. She was ranked No. 3 in the Order of Merit of Ladies European Tour in 2023 and is currently ranked world no. 167.

Now, here's the truly inspiring bit. Diksha, 23, cannot hear properly since she was a child, but the family puts it best — "her soul always heard the message of the heart, she wanted to fly high, and she did".

Let it be a story for all parents to learn from. Every child has god-given gifts. It is for us to stand like a rock with our children, like the Dagers have done.

Loss and gain with having a leopard around the farm

KULBHUSHAN SINGH SURYAWANSHI

I WAS about to go meet my nephew, Balu, when my father told me that a leopard — perhaps the same one that I had photographed — had killed one of Balu's cows the previous night. I left home but then lingered in the front yard, wondering if Balu would be upset with me because he knew that I was fond of the leopard. Balu and I were almost the same age and had grown up together. He was a hard-working farmer and unlikely to let something this serious pass.

The first time I heard of this leopard was when Balu had come home to deliver something from the farm and saw a picture of a leopard on my laptop. He said there was one in the ravine near our Lekurwali farm, the one that he managed and shared a portion of the produce with my father. This particular farm was adjacent to the Ajanta reserve forest. He was amused that I was so curious about leopards.

My father told him that I was planning on studying them in the Himalayas for a PhD. He said he had heard of people going to the Himalayas for *tirth yatra* and *tapasya*. Going all the way to study leopards was a

new one for him. "Anyway, why go all the way when there was one right by our farm," he said half-jokingly.

I tried to explain to him the distinction between a snow leopard and a common leopard. I told him snow leopards were adapted to living at high elevations with limited oxygen and intense cold.

"Then, the common leopard must also be adapted to the heat of our Maharashtra summer," he remarked. He went on to tell me how he believed that this leopard near our farm was old.

The next time I returned to our farm a year later, Balu said he hadn't seen the leopard in many months and suspected that he was dead. He was most surprised when I asked him if he suspected that someone had killed the leopard. He said nobody around here had a gun and a poisoned leopard would be found out.

I frequented the Lekurwali farm over the next two years. I would regularly see wild boars, four-horned antelopes and nilgai, but never a leopard.

Balu would usually be milking his cows and buffaloes around the time that I returned from the farm and passed by his *gotha* (animal shed). He always asked



The rains had turned the meadow bright green, and the leopard's lemon-yellow coat looked like a painting. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

me about the animals I saw. If I reported nilgai or langurs, he would send one of his people to shoo them away. He would then make a trip himself to make sure

that the crop-raiders were gone. Then, the first time I saw this new leopard was when I was returning from the farm. I looked back for a moment and saw a large male leopard walking casually on the other bank of the ravine. He walked out of a thicket and sat in the open on a rock in a grassy meadow. The monsoon rains had turned the meadow bright green, and the leopard's lemon-yellow coat, with its dark black rosettes, looked like a painting on someone's living room wall. He looked at me nonchalantly. He was a good 50 metres away, and there was a small stream between us, but still, I was surprised by his boldness. I watched him for a good 15 minutes and took some pictures before he got up and walked along the stream.

Then, one night, when Balu was guarding his wheat crop, he saw an eye shine. He suspected it to be nilgai and tried to chase it away. He was fairly close when he realised that it was a leopard. He made a swift retreat but did not turn his back on the leopard.

The next time I saw the leopard, it was closer home. My wife reminded me that it was near the same pool where our three-year-old daughter had been playing the previous evening.

"But this leopard has never harmed a human," Balu joined the conversation.

I was a little surprised when my father said that the leopard had killed one of Balu's cows.

When I reached the *gotha*, I expected him to be a little cross, but he was his usual self. I did not want to bring up the cow or the leopard, but he jumped as soon as he saw me and started telling me all the details of how the leopard got into the *gotha* and killed the cow. He recreated the whole scene. I asked him if he would apply to the Forest Department for compensation. He said he would try, but often it is not worth the effort.

Coyly, I asked him how he felt about the leopard. He said it was the best thing that had happened this year. When he saw the surprised look on my face, he explained that for the past few years, he had been hiring a farm hand to keep away the langurs, nilgai and boars from his crops. But ever since this new leopard had become a common presence, the crop-raiders have kept their distance from the Lekurwali farm. "I have been saving ₹6,000 a month," he said, proudly.

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