

Kol rape: Rage is justified, revenge is not

BY INVITATION

MAITREYI MISRA

We are still reeling from the rape and murder of a female doctor in RG Kar Hospital in Kolkata. It's a case that has captured the imagination of the nation, but unfortunately there are many others that go unreported and unmarked — everyday rapes, within and outside the home and supposedly safe spaces. Regardless of the selectiveness of collective outrage, the sad reality remains that violence in its different forms is commonplace in India. During his Independence Day speech, the Prime Minister said, "As a society we should seriously dwell upon the atrocities being meted out to our mother, sisters and daughters." Let us take this opportunity to do that.

Our policies to tackle sexual violence against women have largely been reactive in recent years — whether it was changes in the law in response to the Delhi gangrape in 2012 (disregarding the recommendations of the Verma Commission set up to specifically offer solutions) or changes brought in after the gangrape of a minor girl in Kathiawar in 2019. Yet again, there are calls for increased minimum and maximum punishments. After changes made to criminal law in 2013 and 2018, we already have punishments ranging from 20 years to imprisonment until the end of a person's life, and the death penalty for many sexual offences. The state has already legislated artificial timelines for trials and investigations to be completed within, for instance, 30 days without keeping in mind the national capacity to do so. Surely, we remember our celebration when, in 2019, four men arrested for a gangrape and murder in Hyderabad were killed in an encounter. Their actual guilt became irrelevant. The celebration was about revenge, not justice.

Not addressing sexual violence as a persistent problem has prevented us from taking a long-term and broader view of the problem. In fact, perversely, the burden has been put on women to protect themselves to censorship — "don't go out of hostels after a certain time, don't access libraries at night, don't wear short skirts, don't smoke, be careful of who you talk to, etc." It is an acknowledgment, including by the state, that we can't do the hard work required so that women can access public spaces and live their lives without fear.

When we do have laws to address sexual violence specific to women such as on dowry deaths and domestic violence, the overwhelmingly accepted narrative is that women use such laws unfairly against men. While narratives around sexual violence characterise women as "mothers, daughters, and sisters", the narrative

NO EASY FIX: Instead of more laws, we need to resolve problems plaguing the police, forensics and judiciary

around the same women when it comes to other issues is that they are liars. The narrative missing from everywhere is that women are equal citizens, regardless of the role they may play in men's lives.

In the same speech, the PM mentioned that "there should be a wide discussion about the criminal law." Let's do that as well. In March 2024, a death row prisoner belonging to a socio-economically marginalised community was acquitted by the trial court. After he had already spent more than a decade on death row, his third trial court proceeding found that the forensic samples excluded the accused as the source of the male DNA. His first trial lasted around nine days. His case is not unique. In 2023, the high courts alone acquitted 36 prisoners of all charges after they had been sentenced to death by the trial court. We must take note that the 36 acquittals mentioned above indicate that the actual criminals may not even be getting arrested.

The approach to calls for social justice problems of delays has been to shorten the time required for investigations and trials. Once again, we aimed to resolve a problem in one area without addressing pre-existing and persistent problems plaguing the police, forensic labs and the judiciary, such as of pendency, manpower, proper training, and sufficient quality resources. These kinds of seemingly instant solutions do nothing to ensure justice to victims and survivors. The state's unwillingness to seriously invest in long-term solutions whether in institutional structures or social outcomes has led us away from justice and towards accepting measures that are packaged as justice.

Instead of relying on the persistence of violence, we rely on particular incidents in framing our criminal justice policy. This, in turn, has led us to believe that such incidents are exceptional, and perpetrated by an individual who is fundamentally different from an imagined "us" but who cunningly looks like us. Preventing sexual violence must require us to look at reasons that create and encourage conditions that make women feel unsafe in all aspects of their lives. Unless we do so, we will continue to confound systemic violence with episodic aberrations. We will continue to punish people with increasingly harsher sentences, without being sure that they are even guilty.

The rage is justified, the rage and revenge policy is not. ■

Misra is with Project 39A, National Law University, Delhi. Views expressed are personal.

Mags like Dharmyug and Sarita offer a lens to understand post-independence India

Soon after Independence, India saw the emergence of the Hindi middlebrow reader who was more interested in consumerism than jingoistic discourses. Academic **Aakriti Mandhwal**, who examines the success of bestselling magazines like *Sarita* and *Dharmyug* in her book 'Everyday Reading', talks to **Shruti Sonal** about what drew her to this thriving world of print

■ Instead of high literature or pulp fiction, you focused on the middlebrow. What got you interested?

I actually started off with a research project on the great Hindi pulp novelist Surendra Mohan Pathak in the early 2000s. Not only was the production quality of his books uncharacteristically good, they were priced higher. The author was fashioning himself in such a way that the very book you would have hidden earlier, you were putting on display at home. That got me thinking about books, paperbacks, magazines that neither belong to the high literary (highbrow) or the pulp (dough, lowbrow). Scholars in both Hindi and English had often studied pre-Independence magazines and books from the perspective of literariness and anti-colonial nationalism. Many times, these concerns focused on Hindi's status as national language. Yet, during the 1950s, there was this thriving world of book and magazines, paperbacks and periodicals that were focused on the idea of consumption, very different from the pre-Independence focus on literariness and justice to the right to read these magazines, often fashioned as digests with a variety of genres with something for all members of the family, often in simple Hindi, away from bustling nationalist concerns. I realised that that middlebrow is a category that deserves to be studied in its own right.

■ What role did *Dharmyug*, which was a times of India publication, play in post-independence India?

Dharmyug was the biggest best-seller of its time. What intrigued me was how it went through several iterations. It was first set up as a 'dharma' magazine, and it frequently included calendar art images of Hindu deities. The magazine would remain the same, only the sounds of silence would change color.

ary stories, poetry, nonfiction pieces on literary movements and so on. But it took a turn in the late 1950s, when the great modernist writer Dharmvir Bharti left the buzzing literary milieu of Allahabad to take over as editor in Bombay. He retained some emphasis on religion but, even as lives of minorities and class conflicts still did not find much representation, he fashioned a space for high literary writing, introducing diverse articles on cosmopolitanism. Bharti's *Dharmyug* proved that sometimes in opposition to but also very much alongside Hindu religious images and stories, readers enjoyed consuming, among other things, existing literature by Kierkegaard and Camus. This destabilises notions of how, how much, and in what context readers consumed religion. Although religious belonging has been studied as two ends of the spectrum, that is, as secular ideals and in Hindu nationalist contexts, especially in the case of Hindi periodicals both past and contemporary, *Dharmyug*'s coexistence model deserves our attention.

■ You've talked about the impact of these magazines on women readers. Can you elaborate?

I became particularly interested in female consumers and contributors of these magazines. Pre-independence Indians often framed women in the context of service to the husband and family, and of course, the nation. In contrast, post-independence magazines were framing women as confident readers. They didn't need the garb of service to literature, literariness, nation or the husband. These were magazines women had a claim to read, side by side with men. Women were also writing stories in these magazines and talking about their own daily experiences, ideas about literariness, and even make-up routines. Obviously the liter-

ary levels hadn't gone up hugely by then, but thanks to strong postal services and affordable prices, these magazines were read far and wide.

■ *Sarita* was launched in 1945 and *Dharmyug* in 1949, so one would expect nationalist overtones. Were you surprised by the non-jingoism, especially in this era of hyper-nationalism?

One of the things that was surprising to me as a historian is to not impose our own expectation to a time period. So personally speaking, it was very exciting and surprising for me to find non-jingoism. But I don't think it was surprising to readers then who were used to the formation of belonging. The 1950s has often been studied from a Nehruvian vision and emphasis on planning the new nation, or from Hindu nationalist fervour. Yet, a number of readers wanted to look ahead, exercise citizenship without prescribing to either the Nehruvian vision or that of the Hindu right. They were also expressing a right to enjoy Hindi. In *Sarita*, for example, they often questioned the use of highly Sanskritised Hindi.

■ You draw a distinction between 'everyday reading' and 'literary reading'. Has the former been ignored in recent times?

In my own field, there's been more than a decade-long intervention of reclaiming the studies of popular print and magazine history. I am excited to see that the formation of the past, that looked at these materials as not worth reading, is fading. At the same time, these 'everyday' materials should be studied anew. They were ways in which people who felt excluded — the popular — can be a great tool of propaganda.

■ On X, you've posted several images of women readers, and even the book cover shows Bollywood actor Meena Kumari with a book. Tell us about this?

All this started off because of some frustration. I write about all these very invested women readers, but I wasn't seeing them enough in print. I asked my friends and my family to dig in and give me pictures of women reading. I even ransacked my house hunting for an image of my aunt reading. I finally hit upon this great image via a friend and historian, Devyani Gupta, of Meena Kumari reading. What I'm trying to do through social media now is to create a repository of these images. I feel like visual representation is so important to people and speaks several very important things for us to think about, such as how women exercising the right to read can be an intensely political act.

One more horrific sexual assault but only the sounds of silence change colour

BY INVITATION

SANDIP ROY

The grey-haired woman in a sari seemed uncertain if she could walk all the way in the march to protest the brutal rape and murder of the junior doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. Someone solicitously asked if she wanted to ride in the three-wheeled rickshaws accompanying the marchers. "Absolutely not," Sawwati Ghosh said. "I have come here to stand beside all of you. I will walk as far as I can."

I asked her later why she had come out to protest something which, while horrific, also felt so terribly familiar. "She was a doctor working 36 hours. She takes care of patients like us but we couldn't take care of her," she said. "I cannot stop thinking about that."

Over the last week, many people, including foreign media have wondered, what about the RG Kar rape shook the country. They have many theories. One that this was a doctor who was raped and killed in her place of work. "This is not just a woman's issue," activist Ratnabali Ray said as she was kicked off. "Workplace safety is a citizen's issue."

Yet despite all the placards that call for an end to rape culture, one knows that a horrendous rape can happen anywhere in India. What has been especially hard to stomach is the victim blame that happens after. In all these years, empathy is still a scarce commodity.

When a woman was rape leaving a nightclub in Kolkata in 2018, Sheila, a friend of the woman, wondered why a mother of two had to go to a nightclub.

When journalist Soumya Vishwanathan was mugged in Delhi in 2008, Sheila said, "All by herself till 3 am at night... you should not

be so adventurous." In 2012 when the Nirbhaya case rocked the nation, Dikshit's initial reaction was brusque. She said her transport department had cancelled the licence for the bus. For any other questions, the media could go to the police commissioner. The rape and murder in Hathras was quickly spun as an honour killing because the Dalit girl was supposed to have become too friendly with the upper caste youth accused of having raped and killed her.

Of course, there is outrage when it happens but largely from the opposition. Now, members are circulating asking why the Trinamool's female MPs are silent but everyone knows that if something like this happened in another state ruled by another party, the woman would remain the same, only the sounds of silence would change color.

Initial reports in Kolkata suggested the principal of RG Kar wondered if the woman was sent into a deserted seminar hall so late at night

though he has said he is being defamed.

When the principal finally resigned, he sounded more penitent than penitent. He complained about the non-stop barrage of social media vitriol against him. He was not offering to resign because he felt the buck stopped with him or because he felt morally culpable but because the trolling was getting too much. And then in a spectacular gesture of tone-deafness, the govt chose to appoint him as principal of another medical college because they thought he was an able administrator. Even the high court seemed stunned by this logic.

Every rape story has been about the woman's character, the length of her skirt, how many drinks she had, which hotel party she went to late at night. None of these should be justifications anyway but all of these excuses have fallen short here. It seemed we had finally run out of excuses. And then, the woman died in a busy hospital in the

middle of her work shift, in what should have been her safest zone.

Yet over and over again, it's as if these horrific crimes were inconveniences getting in the way of the busy schedule of governance. You just wait for it to pass, assured that it ultimately will. That comfort is used to dismiss the pain of many people, young and old, push against the odds whether to take back the night or demand safer work-places and a law to end victim blaming.

But the only thing one cannot legislate is empathy. That must come from within.

As the protest march wound through the streets of North Kolkata past bunting getting ready for Independence Day, a group of men stood watching. Baggie, a friend of Ghosh, said, "Hanging is too little for crimes like these." Ghosh has a stall selling rakhis, the symbol for brothers protecting sisters. The protesters walked past the glittering rakhis, the irony of it all unmarked on. ■

Khan and able: How Bollywood restored our faith in secularism

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AYIAR

Most of my life I believed India was fundamentally secular. The simplest reason was that if three Bollywood superstars were Muslims — Shah Rukh, Salman, and Aamir Khan — then India could not be a nation of Muslim-hating fanatics. If millions of fans from different faiths could idolise the Khans, India must be fundamentally secular.

This belief was challenged by the 2019 election that brought BJP to office a second time in a landslide. It seemed the whole country had turned Hindu. That was confirmed by shifts in the attitudes of the police, civil servants and even the judiciary.

In Bollywood, which used to be the prime example of Indian secularism with movies glorifying the brotherhood of different faiths, things began to change as well. The Khans hit bumps, both offscreen and on it. In 2015, Shah Rukh Khan pledged support for a string of writers, artists and scientists who returned national and state awards and spoke up on how intolerance "will take us to the dark ages." It drew a strong backlash, with then BJP MP Yogi Adityanath saying that Shah Rukh spoke the language of terrorists. He was dubbed a 'traitor' by others and threatened with film boycotts.

Soon after, Shah Rukh's films began flopping — 'Fan' in 2016, 'Jab Harry Met Sejal' in 2017, and 'Zero' in 2018. Was this just because the films were bad? Or had the boycott calls started to fan the base? In 2021, the police arrested his son, Aryan Khan, on a charge of drug possession. Aryan was ultimately freed, but the arrest was interpreted as a warning to Bollywood. Salman Khan never made public statements, but Aamir Khan has been critical of Modi, after the 2002 riots in Gujarat as well as after he became PM in 2014. In 2015, he declared at a journalism awards ceremony that he had discussed the communal situation with his Hindu wife, Kiran Rao, and she wondered if their family should leave India for safety. The social media overflowed with Hindu snarls that Shah Rukh and Aamir should leave India and make the country more secular.

Aamir had a huge success with 'Dangal' in 2016 but his next film, 'Thugs of Hindostan', was a disaster. He did not appear again for four years. But then came his much-touted film 'Laal Singh Chaddha' which sparked hashtags calling for a boycott. The film proved to be a big flop. Were these simply bad films that deservedly flopped? Or was Hindu alienation part of the story?

In 2022, Vivek Agnihotri's 'The Kashmir Files' narrated the ordeals and killings of Kashmiri Pandits. Its success gave rise to a new genre of films that

centred around hyper-nationalism. Many of them stoked the 'evil Muslim' narrative and spoke of the need to save Hindus from 'foreign' invaders.

At this point, I had to wonder if I had been mistaken in my assessment that the success of the three Khans proved that India was solidly secular. Had a hidden Hinduist India, lurking below the surface, come out in the open after 2019, and started carrying all before it? Even Congress had stopped mentioning the word secularism, having concluded that this was somehow associated with being anti-Hindu. Rahul Gandhi had started wearing a sacred thread and calling himself a Shiv bhakt. Was the whole of India turning in the Hinduist direction? Were the flooding Khan films part of the process?

What did that record-breaking success of Shah Rukh's 'Pathaan' in January 2023. This showed that his fan base was intact, and his earlier flops were simply bad films, not boycotted ones. He followed it with 'The Ghazi Attack' and 'Dunki'. Meanwhile, Salman Khan has his first big hit in years — 'Tiger 3'. The Khans were back, big as life. But 2023 also had 'The Kerala Story', a film on love jihad, and 'Gadar 2', which had a strong nationalist theme. The genre had not lost its audience. The two well-made films of this sort were big hits. By contrast, unremarkable films of the genre such as 'Main Aati Hoon' (about BJP PM Vajpayee), 'Swatantrya Veer Chhattrpati Sambhaji Maharaj' (about a Marathi hero), and 'The Kashmir Files' all flopped. Even films helmed by stars associated with the Hindutva brigade like Akshay Kumar and Kangana Ranaut found fewer takers.

What did that mean? It meant that audiences were still fundamentally secular when it came to watching films. The Khans had not lost their fans and had simply gone through a lean patch because of poor scripts. This should have been an indication that the 2024 election was going to be a BJP win, and that anti-Muslim sentiment was not a big vote-getter. The rest is history. ■

INBOX

Merit versus quotas: Need balancing act

Robin David's column 'Quotas, and the...' (ATM, Aug 11) is very well argued. Over-reservation will hamper India's progress. But a meritocracy that promotes only elitism, to the exclusion of the vast majority, is counter-productive. A country that actively promoted meritocracy was Singapore. However, it led to unhappiness among citizens, and then a course correction. In India, reservations were needed to correct historical injustices.

The question now is how much, in which areas and for how long.

— Anjan Sen, Navi Mumbai

Apropos of 'Quotas, and the...'

(ATM, Aug 11), meritocracy is a myth that helped capitalism flourish by removing even the consolation of fate. In today's world, people work excessively just to feel worthy. Meritocracy's emphasis on equal opportunity deeply impacts our collective psyche. However, this fails to account for the complex realities of cultural capital, individuality, and luck. There can be no such thing as 'equal opportunity', the very bedrock of meritocracy.

— Bakul Datta, Delhi

Read to Wafk reforms

Apropos of 'Wafk for Wafk...' (ATM, Aug 11), the proposed reforms are the dire need of the hour. However, to ensure its seamless inclusion, govt has to rope in progressive Muslim civil societies, constructive religious leaders and bipartisan opposition leaders in a structured and participatory dialogue.

— Sakshi Awasthy, Bhopal

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

We need women MPs to speak up louder on gender issues

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHA DE

Motira has just celebrated its 78th Independence Day. The thundering speeches are over and done with. And the silence on the floor of the domestic front. Or is it?

Let's start with the fact that at the stroke of the midnight hour on Thursday, women across the country hit the streets to protest against the rape and murder of a junior doctor at the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata.

Besides anger that the needle had not moved much on women's safety, they also expressed disappointment on social media at how the country's female leadership was largely silent on the issue.

The 18th Lok Sabha features just 74 elected women, down from 78 in 2019. Not surprisingly, West Bengal sent the maximum number, with the outspoken Mahua Moitra leading the contingent of 11 (including veteran Satabdi Roy and two other actors).

Motira is at it again, making her heard above the male din. The spiffire had justly declared, "We are warriors. The ruling party put a heavy price for throttling the voice of one woman." Motira was expelled from the LSS session. Talking about her expulsion, she said, "I lost my membership. I lost my honour. I also lost my uterus." She bravely declared, "I do not fear you."

Little wonder that women had high expectations of Ms Motira when it came to a gruesome incident in her home state.

That's not to say that there are no articulate women attempting to raise important issues in an environment that is constantly trying to put them down. Jaya Bachchan, Samajwadi Party's fifth MP, has been a very active and involved parliamentarian from the time she was nominated in 2004. In fact, she was at the forefront in raising the Nirbhaya issue in Parliament. In the Rajya Sabha, she had called out the hypocrisy on women's issues.

"Question hour is adjourned on political issues, not when it comes to women's issues," she said. Recently, she was objecting to RS Chairwoman Jagdeep Dhanikar addressing "Mrs Jaya Amitabh Bachchan". She pointed out that she has an identity of her own, much as she is proud of being the wife of a superstar named Amitabh Bachchan. She added, "Jaya Bachchan is enough." The chairman tried to make light of it, but the Opposition walkout that followed made it clear that

Jaya Bachchan's demand for an apology wasn't misplaced. "I objected to the tone. We are not schoolchildren. Some of us are senior citizens," she told the waiting press. It felt more like being mocked, she was justified. These unnecessary jibes about her being a 'celebrity' were inappropriate and unacceptable.

This is what women in Parliament are up against. Scolding and belittling are the standard tools of offensive, derogatory terms like 'nonsense' and 'buddhism' (brainless) reflects the overriding misogyny that prevails inside those hallowed halls. Whether it is Jaya Bachchan or some other high-profile female colleagues pushing for change, it is unforgivable for the Chair to declare, "I don't care!"

It violates the precious parliamentary spirit of democracy as Jaya Bachchan pointed out in the Chair. He has to care. "Absolutely. Meanwhile, carrying the debate forward, it is necessary for a woman to be known by her husband's name, like she has no agency over her individual identity? No 'astivra' (identity) to call her own?"

Apart from this, the obsessive level of physical scrutiny our women MPs are subjected to shows a nasty sexist gaze that is borderline voyeuristic. Male counterparts can wear ill-fitting, hopelessly mismatched bindi-kurtas ensembles (the most unfattering and unimaginative, current sartorial 'uniform' that's even worse than the old polyester safari suits) while our ladies are impecably dressed, mainly in gorgeous hand-woven saris. But it is their 'look' that attracts attention.

Apart from comments on their appearance, their words are clinically dissected, and their faux pas widely shared. Like when third-term BJP MP from Mathura Hema Malini totally goofed up about the Vinesh Phogat issue and preached, "It's a lesson for all to keep weight under check... she should also lose weight." The term 'fat' is a taboo. Hema's husband, Dharmendra, attempted hasty damage control by tweeting his support to Phogat, calling her a "daughter of the soil".

But it's also not unreasonable to expect their female parliamentarians to speak up on gender issues. Remember newbie MP Kangana Ranaut's insensitive remark about Vinesh having been "given the opportunity to protest against PM Narendra Modi? This is her last shot! BJP supporters for whom Vinesh is a hero for taking part in the wrestlers' protests.

Of course, we need more women in leadership posts all around the world. "Jai Matrimony to country boys. But such incidents are a reminder that they, like men, are far from perfect. ■



BOOKS

An artist as an agent of change

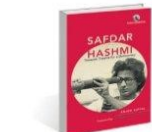
JOY SENGUPTA

LET me clarify at the very outset that writing an objective review of Anjum Katyal's expansive analysis of the life and times of Safdar Hashmi, his Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) theatre troupe and its impact on the cultural and political milieu of contemporary Indian society is not easy for me. I directly experienced Safdar's renaissance tutelage (the last 15 months of his life), and became an important element in the subsequent theatre movement. Those 15 months with Safdar created a lifetime of progressive influences and JANAM literally shaped my worldview.

Still, I was captivated by the book. Katyal has been able to bring in a wide perspective keeping Safdar as the anchor, yet spreading the net of sensitive understanding of a tumultuous century of colonial and post-colonial world — the 20th century, with its great imperialist wars, freedom struggles, peoples' revolutions, peace movements, fascist takeovers and cultural upsurge. She does this by simply linking what influenced Safdar with his perennial democratic idealism, his eclectic and prolific cultural expressions and communications, and how his life and its output influenced his times and generations to come.

The author does it in a very objective and succulent manner by employing many well-known voices — emotive and intellectual, lay and participatory, cultural and political, activists and academics, from various spectrums. Among them are those who knew Safdar personally (mother, wife, colleagues, etc.) and those who didn't (scholars, observers, cultural practitioners). And then she brings in her all-encompassing perspective, making even the polemics (political and cultural) very simple, direct and readable.

Safdar Hashmi dreamt of an egalitarian and just society, where creativity reigns. Unlike armchair dreamers and intellectuals, he tried to realise his dream by actually working towards it. He created theatre, music, poetry and took it directly to the masses to raise their consciousness. He wrote articles and essays to communicate an understanding of this aspiration for progressive change and taught students in college.



SAFDAR HASHMI: TOWARDS THEATRE FOR A DEMOCRACY
by Anjum Katyal.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 240.
₹900



Hashmi dreamt of an egalitarian and just society, where creativity reigns. PHOTO COURTESY: HASHMI FAMILY

Katyal's book on Safdar Hashmi is a reminder that no form of freedom is achieved without the consistent rigour of struggle and collective aspirations

He chose a Marxist philosophical path to understand the social reality around him and worked on the ground to fight for the rights and needs of the working class. He strived to forge unity of all humanists and progressive elements in society. But before he could further his ideas and creative and political endeavours, he was brutally murdered by political goons while he was performing a play called 'Halla Bol' with his street theatre troupe at Sahibabad near Delhi. They were trooped to the theme of the play: minimum wage demands of the workers. Post his death, a shocked creative community got galvanised across the country to unite and stand up for freedom of expression. His legacy continues.

In a fairly short book, Katyal manages to discuss a whole range of topics — social, cultural and political. Together, these laid the ground for a street theatre movement in India, eventually breaking down the very process of the form and content of political street theatre, its craft and philosophy, its reach and impact, as well as the genesis of all political expressions — the trigger for the idea. Safdar's thoughts and voice are employed from time to time to keep it alive

and ticking with positive energy, which epitomised Safdar and propelled a groundswell of cultural movements across the country, post his untimely death.

It is clearly a very important book at a time when the very idea of a just and democratic society seems like a pipe dream. It is a reminder to the dormant citizenry and the active dreamers that no form of freedom is achieved without the consistent rigour of struggle and collective aspirations.

Safdar was a product of both the euphoria of political independence from colonialism and despondency of the horror of Partition. He grew up while various socio-political movements raged around him, some secessionist and most for socio-economic justice. He came into cultural maturity when the draconian Emergency threw the Opposition under whose very complacent nose (while it buries itself in its reel culture and Insta consumption), the constitutional guarantees are being diluted daily.

While Safdar kept the cultural flag of 'justice for all' flying in the last quarter of the 20th century, in her passionate analysis, Katyal bares the ideas for us to take clear hints and cues to raise that flag again.

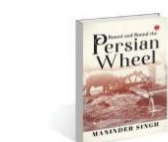
A moving family saga in the shadow of Partition

HAIRINDER KHEHLA

IN 'Round and Round the Persian Wheel', Maninder Singh crafts a moving narrative set against the tumultuous backdrop of Partition, a period that forever altered the lives of millions. The book delves into the profound struggles of a family as they navigate the chaos and displacement brought on by one of the most significant events in the subcontinent's history.

The story centres on Kishan, who works diligently in his elder brother Tej Singh's workshop, repairing Persian wheels — a symbol of the cyclical nature of life and resilience. Kishan's life takes a dramatic turn when his mother-in-law, Bibi, arrives with her young children, fleeing the violence in West Punjab in 1947. This sudden upheaval thrusts Kishan into the role of the family's primary support, a responsibility he embraces despite the overwhelming challenges.

Singh's portrayal of Kishan is both poignant and inspiring. His wife, Daya, is depicted with delicate sensitivity as she struggles to cope with the disappearance of



ROUND AND ROUND THE PERSIAN WHEEL
by Maninder Singh.
Rupa.
Pages 216.
₹295

her father, who left home to protect abducted women and was never heard from again. As she rues, "For father, being a soldier at heart, honour always took precedence over reason. He mounted a mare and rode into the setting sun accompanied by a dozen odd men."

Daya's retreat into herself is a stark contrast to Kishan's determined resilience, creating a powerful dynamic that drives the narrative forward. The arrival of their son, Tejpal, introduces a new ray of hope

into their lives. Singh expertly uses Tejpal's birth as a symbol of renewal and the indomitable human spirit. Kishan's tireless efforts and dreams for Tejpal's future become the heart of the story, representing the universal desire for a better tomorrow amidst the ruins of the past.

Singh's writing is evocative, bringing to life the emotional and physical landscapes of post-Partition India. They include references to the Punjabi Suba Movement, which reveals the cyclical nature of things, as the author points out: "It was Hindu-Sikh versus Muslims then, it is Hindi versus Punjabi now."

The other big event of the time is the Green Revolution, which, along with mechanised farming, heralds the decline of Kishan's vocation of repairing Persian wheels. Such transactions as Kishan receiving two wide wood planks as payment from a farmer for his work on a well, too, are a rarity now. Even then novelty of going to 'live in the town, in a house with electric bulbs' seems quaint. So would this sight described in the book be for many of us: 'As the bullocks began to take slow rounds of the rotary mechanism,

the wheel started rotating and the buckets began to pour water into the tub, which, through a pipe fell into a drain and further into a watercourse.'

However, as the wheels of time move, some things apparently never change. Like, the time a peon made Kishan wait endlessly for meeting Tehsildar Saab. On his return without the meeting's fruition, his friend explained: "I know his type. You should have taken something for him as a present."

Singh's characters are richly developed, each carrying the weight of their experiences with a quiet strength. The narrative is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of hope in the face of insurmountable odds.

'Round and Round the Persian Wheel' is a compelling read. Singh's storytelling is both heart-wrenching and uplifting, making this book a notable contribution to literature on Partition and its enduring impact. The narrative not only illuminates the past, but also offers timeless lessons on the strength of the human spirit as he dedicates the second part to Tejpal's endeavours to bettering his life, marked by highs and lows.

Words that conform to an Orwellian world

BINOD MEHRO

IN George Orwell's dystopian novel '1984', the all-powerful Party designs a language "to diminish the range of thought" in the totalitarian state of Oceania. Newspeak, the language which replaces Oldspeak, is invented to stifle all modes of thought so that undesirable words are eliminated and words are stripped of unorthodox meanings. For instance, the word "free" is used in statements such as "This field is free from weeds" and not in the old sense as in politically free or intellectually free, for political and intellectual freedom no longer exist even as concepts, and are therefore nameless. Besides Newspeak, the book contributed other neologisms to the English vocabulary like Big Brother, Thought Police, doublethink, vapourised, thoughtcrime — all of which convey the nightmare of a world dominated by oppression, surveillance, distorted truths and fake realities.

A similar premise, eerily and decidedly Orwellian, runs through Payal Kapadia's fantasy adventure 'Weebegone's Warehouse of Words'. The title is indeed a



WEEBEGONE'S WAREHOUSE OF WORDS
by Payal Kapadia.
Hachette.
Pages 293.
₹399

mouthful, in stark contrast to the fictional world created by Kapadia, where speech is rationed and words are a scarce commodity. The Speakers can pick and buy the living flesh-and-ink words, which are then delivered in boxes via drones. The more popular ones aren't easy to own and are auctioned away to the highest bidder. Here, the authoritarian Party of '1984' is replaced by Word Bloc and Gurrther Glib is the Big Brother watching everyone, aided by an army of Chasers, who hunt down transgressors for, well, unspeakable crimes.

"Freedom isn't for everyone, some things are better off in cages," says the sinister supreme Glib, who has confined the Words to a warehouse run by his protégé Weebegone. It's their home till they are ready to be shipped when sought by Speakers.

The Words have designated labels: names like Sky or Cloud, does like Running or Skipping, describes like Wonderful or Luminous, and so on. The Words can survive only when the Speakers utter them. But imagine a world where the Word Bloc decides what Words must be uttered and what stories need to be told to Speakers. And what if some Speakers do stumble upon stories that can't be told and dare to challenge the slogan "In Glib we trust"? Such rebels are made to disappear or, worse, silenced and then set free, to live among other Speakers as mute helpless witnesses. As one prisoner says, "Silence is its own prison."

Kapadia's book, though likely intended for young adults, does appeal to readers of all ages. For, the story holds a mirror to the times we live in: of the perils of false narratives, commodification and a blind trust in technology. The narrative is a tad sluggish in the early chapters but gathers pace as the story unravels and a roller-coaster of an adventure begins. The ones leading the resistance are a few brave Words and two Speakers with more than a streak of rebellion in them, 15-year-olds Asha and Zeb. When their paths and struggles align, they journey together to the original home of the Words: the long forgotten Wood where once freedom and truth thrived. Can they bring down the titanic of untutored and artificial scarcities assiduously built by Glib and his cohort? Or will the Words be doomed to die and the Speakers condemned to silence?

In his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language', Orwell wrote, "When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer." He believed that dictatorships engender the decline and decay of language. A somewhat similar strand of thought weighs on Kapadia as well as she rummates why certain words or languages die because of disuse. In the Author's Note, Kapadia writes, "I began to consider a singular word that is endangered because it represents the most dangerous idea of all. Truth. For isn't every language an attempt to reveal or to conceal the truths of our world?" It's a point to ponder.



BACKFLAP



MANGIFERA INDICA: A BIOGRAPHY OF THE MANGO
by Sapan Joshi.
Aleph.
Pages 408. ₹799

Beyond the often told stories of obsessions of *navarats* and *rajyas* with mango and the breathless annual debates about the best mangoes in the world, Sapan Joshi's book describes every aspect of India's favourite fruit — from the orchards where they grow to the vibrant markets redolent with their aroma, and ultimately to our tables. It delves into mango diplomacy, charts the co-evolution of the ancestors of the mango and humans and pieces together a kaleidoscope of mango varieties.



TEN DAYS OF THE STRIKE
by Sandipan Chattopadhyay.
Translated by Anuska Sinha.
HarperCollins.
Pages 335. ₹499

A staunch anti-establishment figure and a supporter of creative freedom, Sandipan Chattopadhyay was one of the pioneers of modern Bengali literature. His writings mirrored his concerns of class and gender relations and the absurdity of the human condition, while blurring the distinctions between the mainstream and the parallel stream. In 'Ten Days of the Strike', his work has been translated into English for the first time.



BUT I AM ONE OF YOU: NORTHEAST INDIA AND THE STRUGGLE TO BELONG
Edited by Samrat Choudhury & Preeti Gill.
HarperCollins.
Pages 282. ₹599

Amidst sweeping political and social changes in the Northeast and the rest of the country, have things changed for the 'Northeasterner'? How do the tribals and the old settlers find a way to coexist in the region? Essays in this book offer different perspectives, reflecting the distinctive micro-history of diverse groups and the multiplicity of stories within every state. 'But I Am One of You' sheds light on the complex fabric of identity in Northeast India.



THE WOMEN WHO WOULD NOT DIE
by Uddipana Goswami.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 207. ₹499

The 12 stories in this collection paint a searing picture of Assam. Migrants, women, children and other vulnerable people, constantly faced with violence, appear in most of these stories which are both political and personal. Folk narratives are woven into some stories, revealing a sense of history, silence, and restoration. The book chronicles a deeply fragmented society where people live, love and lose amidst everyday war and violence, but still find ways to cope and heal.

REFLECTIONS

What of the enemy within

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDEY

SELDOME have I seen so much anger and political disturbance all over the world than at present. I cannot think of any part of our planet where major upheavals, riots wars and natural disasters have not brought immense suffering. In our own corner, how can we ever consider ourselves safe if virtually every country around us is teetering on the edge of collapse? Similarly, Europe is being drawn into a deeper abyss as the Russia-Ukraine war spreads, offloading refugees and asylum-seekers on neighbouring countries unable to deal with this unending stream of unwanted guests. Central Asia, England and the waiting-to-explode US are all in a deep mess. Africa and South America, which the world has so often forgotten as a part of the human community, bring us faces of starving children, families, trigger-happy grinning militia who shoot for pleasure.

In just a few decades, the world order has changed so radically that we will have to find explanations and urgent solutions. Many of these movements have been spearheaded by the young, who are fed up with the political leaders who hold their destiny in their hands. Of course, their anger is justified but once these revolutions are infiltrated by others, the course of the movement changes. Forget Bangladesh for the time being as the context of this remark and remember our own Naxal movement, the Assam uprising that threw up the militant ULFA, the Uttarakhand students who started the movement for a separate state, and last but not least, Kashmir. Remember also that the Arab Spring in

Africa was triggered by young people, but only succeeded in replacing one form of dictatorship with another cast of fascists.

The point I'm trying to make is that the enormous energy vital to stir up the common polity is one thing, but the maturity that is needed to channel that movement towards good governance is another thing altogether. Look nearer at your own family or clan where the older generation can rule by dictating rules and regulations only up to a point. If parents do not try and understand the reasons for the children revolting against these inflexible boundaries, the result is misery all around. Sitting down with such angry children and being receptive to their voices shows wisdom that few parents display. I have so many cousins and friends who say they don't understand how their children can be so difficult when the truth is that very often, they are the ones who are more pig-headed than their progeny.

High-minded slokas and mantras are a shortcut we have adopted to replace moral science

August 15 is always a good time to remember Gandhiji. As I look around the angry world, I cannot help recalling Einstein, who said of him that generations later, the world would not believe that such a man walked the earth. As children, we all sang *De di hamein azadi bina khadga bina dhal, Sabamati ke asti time kar diye kamaal* lustily on each Independence Day. However, non-violence is now almost a forgotten lesson even in the land Gandhi practised it, so what can one say of others. Taking grievances to the streets is a call every party gives to its followers and then looks on as they wreck public property, homes and religious places. For the time that

they are part of a mob, individual identity is subsumed into that of a collective anger and a red cloud of rage in their eyes.

Yet, I often wonder how soldiers who shoot women and children, pilots who bomb cities, rapists, mass murderers or assassins and such goons sleep at night. Are they not haunted by the images of destruction that flash as soon as they shut their eyes? Whether they are ever caught and punished by law or whether they escape into anonymity, never forget that crime and punishment are bound by their own cycle of retribution. As my mother wrote once, there is no spirit so free whose feet are not bound by the chains of one's own conscience. In Christianity, a dying man is offered the choice of a last confession before a priest, so that he can die with a clear conscience after confessing and atoning for any wrongs he may have committed.

Even as we hoist the National Flag at every home, lustily shout *'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'*, wave party flags to terrorise our neighbours and teach the young to hate the enemy out there, what about the enemy within? Are lessons of truth, ethics, civics, respect for all forms of life, reasonableness and helpfulness even taught in most schools now? High-minded slokas and mantras are a shortcut we have adopted to replace moral science. Selfishness, greed and envy are a severe handicap as they deal with the fiercely competitive life that we pitch our young into. Helping someone before grabbing your share, being kind to strangers, treating the elderly and weak with compassion — these are values children learn by seeing their family and peer groups in school. They have to be practised before they can be preached. Gandhiji instilled these values in all the people whose lives he touched, because he himself never deviated from the tough standards he expected of his followers.

What is unfolding in Kolkata — ironically in a hospital in the heart of a city that worships the Devi in every corner for nine days each year — is unacceptable. Any society that allows such crimes is sick beyond repair.

Cartographer of democracy

SUNYAPAL SEHGAL

HARISHANKAR PARSAI once said, "I am a small writer but a big danger" (*Main lekhaak chhota par sankatbada hoon*). He was both a big writer as well as a big threat to the social and political establishment. Parsai was immensely popular across the Hindi heartland and in this regard, he was closer to his literary idol Premchand. Unlike him, he chose satire as his genre, which did not have a great lineage until he came on the scene.

Parsai's career as a writer began in 1947, as India got freedom. He was a voracious reader of world history and politics during his high school days at Tarni in Harda district (MP). He was charmed by the leadership and intellectual depth of Jawaharlal Nehru, although there was a strong infatuation towards the socialism brand of Ram Manohar Lohia and his followers. His first writings appeared in *'Panchajanya'*, a mouthpiece of socialists in Madhya Pradesh. His firebrand stories and essays made him a star in a short time.

The love affair ended soon and he was back to Nehru and scientific socialism. Before turning into a whole-time freelance writer, he served as a school teacher in private institutions for 12 years, mainly in Jabalpur. The trade unionist inside him founded the MP Shiksha Sangh during this period. Here, he came into contact with Gajanan Madhav Muktibodhi, perhaps the greatest Hindi poet in Independent India. From him, he learnt intellectual integrity, truthfulness and the capacity to struggle hard; also, an unflinching commitment to justice and democracy.

Parsai was a person full of raw sensitivity and serious human concern. It is obvious from his essay *'Premchand Ki Photo Joke'* and memoir *'Muktibodhi: Ek Sansmaran'*. He came up with volume after volume of satirical writings, aimed with unparalleled humour and wit. Published in 1985, *'Parsai Rachanawali'* is in six parts and contains around 3,000 pages. All his stories, short novels, mini stories, columns, editorial essays and interviews are included therein.

His passion for public education became his vocation. Regular columns appeared in newspapers like *'Deshbandhu'*, *'Nai Duniya'* and the journal *'Sarika'*. He spared none and particularly hit hard religious bigotry and middle-class opportunism. His boldness as a satirist was democratic and society, the conservative and benign atmosphere of the Hindi belt.

Parsai forcefully caricatured world leaders like Richard Nixon to Morarji Desai, from film personalities to police officers, from avant garde poets to self-seeking literary icons. From Akali politicians to Haryana politicians. From ministers to government officials. From personal hypocrisy to illogical communal beliefs. Thus, he can be described as the cartographer and biographer of the Indian State democracy and society. Parsai was a product and maker of his era. Reading him makes one wonder at the kind of freedom and space he enjoyed to express what he really wanted to say, and as if, we are visiting a different age. It has been a point of discussion whether India is losing its capacity for humour and satire, except in some dark corners of social media.

Remembering Harishankar Parsai in

his 100th birth year looks a subversive act. Parsai enriches and changes all his readers. His hilarity and razor-sharp sentences are amusement and instruction to everyone despite different ideological backgrounds. A great part of his creations focus on mythological divine characters and their devotees. His masterpieces *'Bhola Ram ka Jee'* and *'Bhagat ki Gat'* can be mentioned here. Studying such fictional pieces, one is reminded of Premchand's satirical story *'Mote Ram Shastri'*. Parsai rebelled against his socially dominant upper caste background at his own cost. He became a crusader against superstitions, blind faith and saintly pretense.



COURTESY: RAJANIL KUMAR SHAN

A tribute to eminent Hindi satirist Harishankar Parsai on his birth centenary

He was our Renaissance man.

Social media is always abuzz with his quotes. They are as good as the ones from Rasool Hamjatov in *'Mera Daag-istan'*. Here are three in translation: 'When a thing of shame becomes a matter of pride, then understand, our brand of democracy is working well.'

Even if somebody is a philosopher; a seer or a madman, if he makes people fearful of the darkness, then he is trying to sell the torch of his company.'

'The world over, language is used for expression. Here, it is used for riots.'

His tales like *'Inspector Matadin Chaand Pur'* and *'Sadacharka Tabee'* were turned into full-length dramas and staged countless times. Most of his important works are available on Internet with professional renderings. He is a darling of the YouTubeers. He is also a weapon in the hands of political activists and social reformers.

In 1987, he started a magazine *'Vasudha'* (The Earth) with friends like Rameshwar Gurur. The title symbolises his ideological movements. Spirituality meant to him saving somebody in a riot, sacrificing one's own life.

His enormous creative talent was articulated in fantasies like *'Rani Nag-fani ki Kahani'*. His flowing language with short sentences had no room for ambiguity. He harped on logical clarity, even if it was a controversial. He constructed a diction style more innovative and modern than his contemporaries.

Urdu poet Zauq (1790-1854) ruminates: 'Who wants to leave the beautiful lanes of Delhi?' (*Kaan jaye Zauq par Dilli ki galiyan chhod kar*). So was Harishankar Parsai, who never left his *karumbhoomi* Jabalpur, despite many lucrative offers. Gyanranjan, celebrated author, editor of *'Purana'* and a younger friend of Parsai, comments: 'Like Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Parsai would ruminate his city on foot, with a bag on his shoulder, surrounded by friends from all generations and professions. It is how he collected his extraordinary observations of human behaviour and life situations.' Parsai will be reinvented and reinterpreted in the current national setting. He shall remain our vanguard in the times to come.

— The writer is a former Professor of Hindi at Panjab University

Implement welfare schemes properly

CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

A RECENT order of the apex consumer court holding an insurance company and a bank accountable for their carelessness in implementing a crop insurance scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana highlights how lapses in the implementation of welfare schemes deft their very purpose.

Pointing out the blunders committed by the financial institutions, the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission said both were responsible for the denial of crop insurance to 10 farmers, and therefore had to fully indemnify their losses. I wish the Commission had also asked the institutions to identify the officials responsible for the omissions and recover the claim amount from them. That would have sent a warning to all those enforcing welfare schemes. In the Lucknow Development Authority vs MK Gupta case, the Supreme Court had suggested a similar course of action.

To farmers affected by crop failures on account of unforeseen events, crop insurance offers a lifeline. Effective implementation can

not only help farmers cope with huge losses caused on account of crop failure, but also prevent farmers' suicides.

In this case, the financial institutions entrusted with the enforcement of the PMFBY scheme were either blind to the consequences of their negligence on the livelihood of farmers, or were indifferent to the distress caused to farmers by their careless attitude.

The case revolves around the denial of insurance claims of 10 farmers of Khawdva district of MP. Having taken bank credit to grow soyabean crop, the farmers were financially in a tight corner when 44 per cent of the crop failed during the kharif season of 2017 due to inclement weather. They were, however, consoled by the fact that they had crop insurance but were heartbroken when the Agriculture Insurance Company of India repudiated their claim, saying their crops were not insured.

Since crop insurance was mandatory for farmers who availed of agricultural loans from financial institutions and optional for those who did not, all these farmers who had taken the loan had paid the policy premium, which was 2 per cent of the sum insured or the actual rate. The rest of the premium was to be paid as a subsidy equally by the state and the Centre. The bank, Bank of Baroda in this case, had the responsibility of not only collecting the proposals and premiums from the farmers, but also submitting it, along with a consolidated proposal, to the insurance company. It also had to upload the details on the National Crop

Insurance Portal (NCIP) of the Centre. The latter was mandatory for the insurance company to claim subsidy. Only those farmers whose data was uploaded on the NCIP and their share of the premium paid to the insurance company within the prescribed time limit were eligible for insurance cover. Even though the bank paid the consolidated premium collected from 512 farmers, adding up to ₹12,352 to the insurer, it did not upload within the time limit the details on the NCIP. Nor did it send the consolidated proposal within the stipulated time to the insurance company. Even when it finally sent it, barring one or all other proposals were either incomplete or had erroneous information on even basic facts like the cultivation area, village, etc.

Holding the bank liable for negligence, the Commission pointed out that the insurance company too was equally responsible for not taking timely action regarding the details or getting the bank to rectify the inaccuracies. More importantly, it had received the premium of 512 farmers in August 2017 from the bank, but it was only in October 2021 that it returned the premium paid by all except one, saying those proposals were rejected. So, both were equally liable to indemnify the loss suffered by the farmers, the Commission concluded. (Bank of Baroda vs Vishnu Prakash, RP No. 1588 of 2022, decided on July 3, 2024).

Hopefully, such orders will force the implementing agencies to realise their responsibilities and the government to monitor the enforcement of these schemes better.

The curious case of brown bears in Kargil and Kashmir

INTENSAR SUHAIL

IN the spring of 2016, I embarked upon a trek in the mountains of Drass to look for and, if possible, photograph the elusive brown bear. As the Wildlife Warden of Kargil district in Jammu and Kashmir (now in Ladakh), I had received reports of cattle depredation by the bears around Drass and we were tasked with compensating the losses. Although bear appearances — often in the shape of night raids on the feebly secured cattle sheds — were frequent in the villages, a worthwhile daytime sighting in the 'wild', which I was interested in, was still a big ask. My guide, the local Ranger, well versed with the area, was confident though.

Weighing up to 300 kg, brown bear is the largest land carnivore in the world. The Himalayan brown bear, inhabiting the western Himalayas from Kargil through Kashmir, Himachal and Uttarakhand, is smaller than its cousin — the Grizzly Bear of North America and Europe — and rarer to sight. A decade back, it was so difficult to see a Himalayan brown bear in the wild in our part of its range, that you could count those

who had done so on your fingers!

We had started at daybreak and after two-and-a-half-hour trek up a hill, in anguished the world's second coldest inhabited place, we arrived at a plateau, which I was told was the best location to sight the brown bear. I scanned the area with my binoculars and could see a vast tract of green meadows interspersed with patches of snow from the past winter, but no trace of the bear. We sat down beside a large rock to shield ourselves from the morning chill while we had our breakfast. Just as I rose up after finishing mine, and glanced casually over the rock, I saw what appeared to my naked eye, a small herd of cattle grazing at the far end of the meadow.

The uniform brownish colour of all the individuals in the herd made me curious and when I picked my binocs to have a better look, I was stunned to see as many as eight brown bears, three adults and five young ones of different age groups, grazing contentedly. I grabbed my camera to capture this spectacle, but the bears somehow sensed our presence and took off at an astonishing pace. I still managed to get six of them in the frame. Back then, I could not have imagined that the image, which through social and



A brown bear entering a human settlement.

print media was flashed across the country, would be a precursor in turning Drass into a favourite destination for the brown bear seekers, as it has become today.

Around the same time, brown bear sightings also started to become common in the Kashmir valley. During my journey from Kargil to Srinagar a few weeks later, I saw a mother bear with two cubs crossing the highway near Sonamarg. In the summer of 2017, when I was posted in south Kashmir, my staff rescued a cub from a *langer* camp en route to the Amarnath cave. The young one had stuck its head in a discarded glass canis-

ter, which had to be torn open to free the poor fellow. In the following years, while Drass became a famed hotspot for brown bear viewing, sightings in Kashmir, from north to south, were reported like never before.

A camera trap installed in the Hipora Wildlife Sanctuary in Shopian district captured a female with two cubs on a sheep carcass. A fixed of mine, an avid nature lover, clicked a prime male while birding in the forests of Budgam and another recorded a huge one on his cellphone cam on a garbage dump in Gurez, Bandipora.

Increased brown bear sightings across Kargil and Kashmir over the past seven to eight years may seem to be an encouraging sign, but conservationists would advise you to take it with a pinch of salt. As I noticed in Drass later, the bears were attracted to roadside landfill site where a local Army camp dumped its kitchen refuse. The animals would take it upon them to visit the site almost every night and return to the forest by dawn. They were so punctual that you certainly would encounter one, if you were on their trail about sunrise. In Sonamarg, as also in Gurez, it's the garbage, primarily the biowaste from hotels and restaurants, that is

responsible for a high bear 'encounter rate'. As high-altitude mammals, brown bears are highly sensitive to climate change and the most pronounced effect on their ecology is the shortening of their hibernation period. As a rule, to adjust to the temperature changes, species tend to shift to higher altitudes, but brown bears — already present at very high altitudes (up to 5000m) — hardly have any room to push further up.

Brown bears, unlike their darker relatives, the black bears, live in habitats remote from human habitation, and left to themselves are seldom encountered by humans. As such, although livestock losses occur, human casualties due to brown bears in our part of the world have thus far remained negligible. However, anthropogenic activity around the habitats of these bears alters their behaviour and increases the possibilities of human-bear interface. In Kupwara district of north Kashmir, the bear attacks have been turning up at graveyards and digging out corpses have come to light, alarming us of the severity of the human-brown bear conflict we may get to witness in the coming years.

— The writer is Wildlife Warden, Department of Wildlife Protection, J&K

As public-funded universities slip in NIRF rankings and private varsities in Punjab rise, the parameters and rationale are under scrutiny

RANKING THE RANKINGS



SANJEEV SINGH BARIANA

It is that time of year again. The NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework) rankings of the Union Ministry of Education are out, and there are few surprises in Punjab. Universities funded by the state government are either not on the list or continue on the downward slide, while private universities maintain their high slots. The latest rankings, however, have led to a chorus of criticism centred around one basic question — are there more effective methods of evaluating higher education institutions and assessing the value of a degree?

The oldest university of the region, Panjab University (PU) in Chandigarh, is ranked 60th, down from 44 last year. It was ranked 38 in 2021 and 41 in 2022. The university is funded in the 60:40 per cent ratio by the Centre and the Punjab government.

Established in 1969, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, does not feature on the list at all. A university spokesperson clarifies that it did not apply for the NIRF evaluation since it had got a good ranking from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established in 1994 as an autonomous institution of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

Founded in 1962, Punjabi University, Patiala, has not featured on the NIRF list of the top 100 institutes for the past four years.

The one bright spot, as per the NIRF, is Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, which continues to maintain its third spot among the agricultural and allied sectors across the country.

It's the private institutions in the state that feature prominently in the list. The top rank holder in Punjab is Chandigarh University, Mohali. It is ranked 32nd in the overall evaluation. Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala, is placed 43rd. Lovely Professional University, Jalandhar, is ranked 45th. Chitkara University in Mohali is in the list of 100-150.

State Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains, however, gives top billing to the government-funded universities. "Our state universities are highly ranked by the NAAC. There can be no comparison on the standard of education in private universities and state universities. Our academic standards are very high. Just by way of example, all the state universities have long waiting lists for student admission while it's a walk-in experience in the private universities," he says.

Known for plainspeak, the former Vice-Chancellor of Punjabi University, Prof Arvind, says the NIRF scheme is "fundamentally flawed and ill-motivated". It should be abandoned, he feels. "With the UGC giving grants only to those universities that appear in the first 100 in the NIRF ranking, this scheme is flawed in two ways. On the one hand, this is a hidden way to cut overall grants to higher education, and on the other, the universities with lower ranks may need the grants more. Parameters such as how many teaching positions are lying vacant are a direct consequence of government policies and have nothing to do with the performance of the university," he says.

Prof Arvind adds: "It is important to come up with an alternative ranking scheme. The new ranking scheme should focus on more meaningful parameters — does the university address the educational needs of underprivileged sections of society, including first-generation learners, women from remote rural backgrounds, economically backward and other backward castes, etc? I am sure if this new ranking scheme is applied, the NIRF scheme will be turned completely upside down and the current low-ranking universities will appear at the top."

Rajya Sabha MP Satnam Singh Sandhu, Chancellor of the top-ranked Chandigarh University, claims that the "one big catch for the consistent improvement in our ranking

WHERE INSTITUTIONS IN PUNJAB STAND

	2024	2023	2022	2021
CHANDIGARH UNIVERSITY, MOHALI	32	45	48	77
THAPAR INSTITUTE OF ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY, PATIALA	43	40	57	45
LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY, JALANDHAR	45	46	58	—
PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH	60	44	41	38
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE EDUCATION & RESEARCH, MOHALI	64	51	47	40
PUNJAB AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, LUDHIANA	80	74	—	—
GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY, AMRITSAR	87	80	85	—
PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA	—	—	—	—



PUNJAB AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, LUDHIANA

RANKING CATEGORIES

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) is a ranking methodology approved by the Ministry of Education on September 29, 2015. Institutions are ranked under 11 different categories — overall, university, colleges, engineering, management, pharmacy, law, medical, architecture, dental and research.

is keeping our courses updated in sync with the job requirements of students. Digital technology in education to meet the current work scenario is central for us. We need to be updating every hour."

Professor Emeritus Bhupinder Brar, former Dean University Instruction at PU, insists that private and public institutions should not be compared at all. "It is like comparing apples and oranges. All public-funded universities are resource-crunched. We are working at one-third of the sanctioned strength of the faculty and things just cannot work out for the universities under the existing fee structure," he points out.

Prof HK Puri, a leading academic who retired from GNDU, seconds his view. "There is no sense in the NIRF assessment when state, Central and private universities are working in absolutely different environments. Most universities are working with less than half the staff strength. There is no fresh hiring while the student strength has gone up three times. How is normal teaching possible? The Centre and states are, in fact, criminally neglecting the education sector. Surprisingly, even the Opposition is not reacting to the Centre allocating a mere 2 per cent of its budget to education, and even lesser to health," he says.

Prof BS Ghuman, former Vice-Chancellor of Punjabi University, says that "Central universities, including Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Banaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University, are performing well because they don't face acute financial crises. Most of the funds in state universities are spent on salary, pension and retirement benefits and only meagre funds are left for research and upgradation of academic infrastructure. The faculty members are retiring but vacant positions are not

filled for want of funds."

Prof Ghuman lists another critical gap. The knowledge system, he says, "is changing with the speed of thinking. State universities have a lengthy and time-consuming decision-making process to introduce new courses and change the curricula. In contrast, private universities are very prompt in making decisions with regard to their courses, which are market and industry-driven, and hence private universities have a better placement record."

He says private universities also have an edge on account of the outreach and inclusivity parameter of NIRF rankings, as the percentage of students from other states and countries is much higher.

Prof Akshaya Kumar of the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Panjab University says, "It is difficult to beat private players as they are very good at managing data. Traditional universities are facing a serious crisis of faculty shortage. A sizeable number of departments are working with a mere 10 per cent strength. The research profile of the universities has taken a serious beating. Quantity has overtaken quality."

He adds: "When I joined the department in 1998, there were 22 teachers, now we are down to six. In the French Department, there is zero faculty, and research scholars are managing teaching. The impact on the ground is that the university no longer remains the first choice of good students. Some of them even prefer to go to colleges because there the faculty is reasonably good. In all such rankings, the teaching ratio is very important, and we at PU suffer badly on this count."

Prof M Rajivlochan, a member of the State Higher Education Council and formerly Director of the Internal Quality Assurance Cell at Panjab University, says, "PU's

strength lay in its nature as a research university. Most of the major science research done after Independence came out of PU. That was achieved despite the university being located in a politically sensitive region, being always short of funds and with many vacancies among the faculty. However, over the past few decades, the adverse impact of these factors began to come forth, and the research output declined."

Prof Rajivlochan adds: "In the latest NIRF survey, PU is seen struggling even at the level of research output. Even our Pharmacy Department has languished this time. The way out is loud and clear. It has been made crystal clear by many Vice-Chancellors in the past, especially Prof Anun Grover and Prof RC Sobti. Recruit more faculty. It might also help if PU were to be delinked with Punjab. The state's contribution to PU has been adverse."

For CU Chancellor Sandhu, the steady forward march of private institutions is the result of well-thought-out strategies. He says, "We have been rigorously adopting the global academic model and since 2020, our teaching learning process has been strictly based on the New Education Policy, which is flexible, transparent and student-centric. Chandigarh University has established a corporate advisory board to maintain a rich industry-academia interface, through which we have been getting regular inputs to update the course curriculum and the teaching-learning pedagogy. Our focus remains on developing industry-oriented skills and starting courses in emerging areas such as Artificial Intelligence, cloud computing, big data and analytics."

Founder Chancellor of LPU Dr Ashok Kumar Mittal, also a Rajya Sabha MP, says Lovely Professional University has "worked diligently on all parameters that the NIRF

RANKING METHODOLOGY

TEACHING, LEARNING & RESOURCES (0.30)

- Student strength (20)
- Faculty: student ratio (25)
- Faculty with PhD (20)
- Financial resources & utilisation (20)
- Online education (10)
- Multiple entry/exit, Indian knowledge system and regional languages (5)

RESEARCH & PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE (0.30)

- Publications (30)
- Citations (30)
- Patents (15)
- Research projects (15)
- Publication & citation in SDGs (10)

GRADUATION OUTCOME (0.20)

- Placement & higher studies (40)
- University examinations (15)
- Median salary (25)
- PhD students (20)

OUTREACH AND INCLUSIVITY (0.10)

- Region diversity (30)
- Women diversity (30)
- Economically and socially challenged students (20)
- Physically challenged students (20)

PERCEPTION (0.10)

- Peer perception: Academic peers & employers (100)

SOURCE: NIRF, DEPT OF HIGHER EDUCATION, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, GOI



focuses on. From research, student outcomes, cultural activities, sports, placements, consultancy projects and infrastructure to ensuring student diversity, LPU has put in a concerted effort. Many of LPU's students have been placed in top companies."

Pro Chancellor, Chitkara University, Dr Madhu Chitkara, says, "Our significant rise in the NIRF rankings across various categories over the past five years reflects our focused strategy and execution. We've invested heavily in infrastructure, creating state-of-the-art research labs and equipping these with the latest technology. This enables an environment where both the students and the faculty can push the boundaries of knowledge and innovation."

As the ranking issue triggers a debate, research scholar Navkiran Natt questions the need of NIRF when the universities are NAAC-accredited. "There is an error in judging private and public universities on the same platform. Aiming for rankings is a marketing strategy of private universities only for getting more business," he feels.

If the intention of the NIRF is to create healthy competition among peer universities and colleges, experts feel the parameters need an urgent review, along with data accuracy. Allegations routinely surface of incorrect numbers being reported, and a focus on quantity over quality in research papers.

On the GNDU campus, some faculty members claim the university did not qualify for the NIRF ranking exercise this year, and hence decided to stay out. Teachers have submitted a representation about the working conditions, vacancies and dilapidated infrastructure to the Governor, who is also the Chancellor of the university. For the students and faculty of public-funded education institutions in Punjab, it is one intervention that would be welcomed.

06

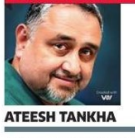
SUNDAY CHITLATER

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

THE FACT IS, JINGO BELLS, JINGO BELLS, JINGOISM ALL THE WAY

Facts have a nasty habit of coming in the way of sheer belief that faithfully guarantees patriotism, stock market performance, subsidy dependence, and such wonderfully reliable things

SUNDAY SAPIEN



ATEESH TANKHA

After a recent trip to the US, I'm pleased to announce that jingoism is alive and kicking. This has nothing to do with the 147-word vocabulary-constrained logorrhea of Donald Trump. Or the equally muddled manifesto of Project 2025 – a political initiative published by the Heritage Foundation that aims to promote conservative and rightwing policies to reshape the US federal government by the Orange One wins in November – which could elevate the standing of the US presidency at the expense of that nation and make some

frustrated autocrats in other large democracies green with envy. Instead, it has everything to do with the steadfast rejection of that silently dissenting historical witness: fact. This is a serious problem in an age liberated by individual interpretation, PC rendering, social media influence, and compensative revisionism. In such a situation, fact is bound to be unreliable, because it stubbornly refuses to be explained, restrained, swayed, or altered. This is why fact-checking should only be invoked to contest the statement of an opponent, never to question the foundation of a belief.

You can imagine my relief, therefore, when I met my Ivy League colleague prof, who held that only the US had the right to develop and manage social media platforms because, unlike some other Asian and European countries, it was a nation of laws that held individual privacy and liberty to be sacrosanct. Despite such unshakable conviction, I chose, in a Luciferian moment, to test him further. 'Didn't President Obama initiate mass surveillance of citizens through the National Security Agency?' He was silent for



DEALING ONLY WITH FACTS OF THE MATTER

a moment, wracked by doubt, before he replied, 'I cannot recall the exact details of that event, but I am sure that our laws would never allow digital platforms to monitor Americans. Unlike China,' he continued, gaining confidence from the comparison, 'which does not deny that it spies on its citizens.' I could not help but marvel at the man's sense of certainty despite my reference to decade-old information.

On my way back to India, though, I felt less

hopeful. While I was confident that the common law would never let the dull body of fact lure him away from the faithful guarantees of patriotism, stock market performance, subsidy dependence, and temple construction, I harboured a long-held suspicion that the educated elites were likely to be more sceptical of novel perspectives and more hostile to the cries that challenged their absurdly rational view of life, the universe and everything else. In this, it turned out, I was delightedly

Fact is bound to be unreliable – it stubbornly refuses to be explained, restrained, swayed, or altered

ly mistaken.

Our PM had recently inaugurated the 're-opening' of Nalanda University – after 800 years. Indians had much to be proud of, and even more to look forward to. One eminent academic said as much on a digital platform, lauding the ancient institution's many achievements. But in his enthusiasm, he reset the standing date to the 30th BCE.

As such, it was only natural for him to conclude that worries such as Ashoka had patronised Nalanda, adding to its already venerable reputation an odour of the most profound majesty: This was too good an opportunity to pass up. I needed to know if this academic measured up to his American counterpart.

'Nalanda did not exist five centuries before Christ,' I wrote to him. It was built four centuries after Christ. To further challenge his belief, I insisted that if Ashoka had indeed patronised the school, the Mauryan monarch must

have been summoned from a slumber of at least seven centuries by a powerful necromancer of unknown provenance.

But the scholar turned out to be a man of many letters, but little faith. He was willing to not only accept this error, but also to obey, henceforth, the dictates of fact. I was deeply disappointed.

But just as I was about to give up hope, another voice came to the rescue. 'Your love for Christ is tremendous. Thanks for looking down on Indians. You are a true soldier of the Vatican.'

'Callous! Callous!' I chortled, overjoyed. He was a learned member of the medical fraternity, who was unconvinced by my taking exception to a time difference of a mere 900 years while using Christ's birth year as a point of reference. Jingoism is in no danger here. Let fact take heed.

The writer is founder-CEO, ALL-SOURCE Content Solutions.

NO FILTER



RUCHIR JOSHI

Going to Lisbon? It's a Crime to Not Eat Pastel de Nata

And who serves this Portuguese pastry best? A tiny Chinese bakery, of course

You know that something that happens when you start hearing about something new. At first once or twice, and then frequently, and then it snowballs. That happened to me a few years ago when I first heard the phrase 'pastel de nata'. What was the meaning of this Spanish pasta of nothing?

Is it pasta-de-Nadal – a pasta liked by the tennis maestro? I started reading the phrase 'Pastel de Nata' in a couple of British food columns. I still wasn't paying attention, so I continued to think this P&N was a) Spanish, b) a savoury. Then I read some descriptions that identified it as a 'sweetish item', as my school mess manager used to call desserts and puddings. Finally, I understood that this 'Swedish' item was Portuguese.

Last year, in Oxford, I saw something called a pasteleria – Portuguese for bakery – had opened, and there was a long queue outside. Walking past it one day, I saw the queue wasn't there so I leapt in. 'Hi, can I please have one of those?' 'It's called pastel de Nata, sir. How many would you like?' 'Oh, just the one, please.'

'Just one?' 'Ooo-kay.' He tonged a small round thing onto a plate, an object that looked like a cheese puff from Kathleen's in Kolkata, only made by a very stingy, miniaturist puff-chef. 'That'll be three, thank you.'

I brought the thing to my mouth, intending to bite it into half. It disappeared down my gullet before I could stop, leaving a memory of something crisp crackling and a warm waft of high-end custard. A few days later, I spent another two quid, and this time, the biting into half was successful, and I understood that it was the main point in eating one of these – to feel the slightly blackened salty

What Sorcery's This! She's Black And Desi?

In a shocking twist, a US presidential contender of German-Scottish ancestry finds Kamala Harris having multiple identities

ON THE LEDGE



PALASH KRISHNA MEHROTRA

Last week, Don-bhai, in his X chat with Elon-bhai, called Kamala-devi as she appears in the latest cover of Time magazine as 'like the most beautiful actress ever to live', adding, just so that there's no rancour at home, 'It was a drawing, and actually, she looked very much like a great first lady, Melania.'

He made it clear he wasn't being disrespectful. 'I respect either one, but we was Indian all the way. And then,

all of a sudden she made a turn and became a Black person.'

Trump is fond of mixing diverse ingredients in his signature dish, soup. So, one has to look carefully to find the main ingredient. The crux here lies in two sentences: 'A number of years ago when she was Black and Black' and 'All of a sudden she made a turn and became a Black person.' The rest is broth.

While Trump's confusion is understandable, he needs to understand that we live in an enchanted fairytale world where magical transformations take place all the time. Who knows, tomorrow he might wake up

and find that he's been turned into a McDonald's Happy Meal. This is more complex than it sounds. He will have to make up his mind if he wants to eat the patty, the bun, the cola, or the toy. God forbid, he might even wake up with an Afro in place of the curled karens tongue he has for a hair piece. You never know.

Kamala is not the only Indian to suddenly turn Black. At the 1989 Woodstock concert, when Ravi Shankar was playing sitar, he turned into Jimi Hendrix before the exotic hippie crowd that found the Indian instrument so exotic – the star became an 'Indian guitar', billowing mad feed-

Kamala's not the only Indian to turn Black. At Woodstock, Ravi Shankar turned into Jimi Hendrix



IS SHE A WOMAN OR A DEMOCRAT?

Sorry to Spoil Your Sunday, But Push's Come to Shove

When a ghastly crime becomes fodder for 'Khela hobey' politics, it's changing time

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

You'd think that nothing could be more gruesome than a 31-year-old junior doctor – let's call her 'DI' – the Bengali suffix for didi (elder sister) – being raped and murdered inside the hospital where she worked. You'd think wrong. What is more gruesome is the way the West Bengal administration has proceeded with the horrific case.

► Last Friday when DI's body disappeared, authorities of Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College & Hospital tried to pass off the murder as suicide to the victim's family. The police initially did the same. After all, why on Earth would a state-affiliated institution's authorities lie?

► Trying to pass off homicide as suicide is SOP if you want to put a lid on things. Self-sexual assault – self rape – is, however, far more difficult to do. So, a case of one murder it has officially become.

► RG Kar principal Sandip Ghosh resigned three days later – 'I can't take this insult anymore' – from post and government service. But a conscience can be like lipstick. The police initially did the same. After all, why on Earth would a state-affiliated institution's authorities lie?

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ta, prevalent in most state hospitals here. But he was 'party chap'. Much like the principal. Roy has been arrested, even as it is suspected that he wasn't a lone wolf, if one of the 'wolves' still. Rumours of a racket of 'hospital supplies' involving RG Kar insiders that DI may have become too vocal about is also doing the rounds.

► But what takes the breath away is the speed with which evidence near the crime site has been tampered with. FWD 'renovation' work near the seminar room where DI was murdered had started on Saturday – a day after the crime came to light. The renovation... is for creating more amenities for PGs and junior doctors as demanded by them. This should not be seen as an attempt to tamper with evidence. The seminar hall where the crime took place is sealed, said a hospital administrator. So much for all those Netflix episodes of CSI. Let the expected DNA test results not also get PWDed into the blue.

► In this context, Manabendra Banerjee's order to the police on Monday's night...

► On August 12 to find the perpetrator (s) by Sunday (Aug 18) or else she would have the case transferred to CBI, was a bit of a deadline to demand the central investigators complete their probe by this Sunday (today) and ensure the guilty are hanged. Sundays seem to be DI's 'Catch 'em if you can' challenge days. Incidentally, the CBI stopped the 'renovation' work on Tuesday night.

► On August 13 night, thugs infiltrated protesters at RG Kar and went on a trashing spree for more than half an hour – strangely targeting standing fans in particular. One wonders who they were and what they were venting against.

Meanwhile, red herrings are being strewn from various corners, sections of a 'cynical' public included.

► What was the real purpose of the 'Women, Reclaim the Night' protest marches in which lakhs participated on August 14-15 night, eh? Wouldn't it have been better if there were silent candle-light vigils instead of angry sloganeering? Would it have been more effective if only women, and not also men, had come out that night?

► Didi, and her nephew, TMC MP and Dada Abhishek Banerjee, have already found a 'conspiracy', linking the citizenry's anger and anguish with CPM(M) and BJP attempts to trigger a 'Bangladesh like mass movement to capture power'. Yes, perhaps people would have stayed home singing 'Eka cholo re' on their own if they weren't egged on by political pollsters.

In all this fog of deceit, appropriation, whataboutery, protest aesthetics, two things mustn't be lost sight of the need to build a case that puts away the perpetrators. And removal of an administration doing its best to make a horrifying crime, its perpetrators, and their facilitators vanish.

If this doesn't make a people demand a 'porbitoran', nothing should.

Indrajit Hazra at timesofindia.com

NO OFFENCE

Morparia



lighthearted approach has led TikTok users to apply the term in various unexpected contexts, such as their office orders or even a walk of shame. For instance, your morning coffee with a splash of half-and-half? Demure. Gracefully sitting on the subway? Very demure. What was once a term reserved for describing reserved women has become a semi-ironic social media staple.

Why is everyone so into it? The trend has caught on because it takes a traditionally reserved term and redefines it in a fun and creative way. This shift reflects how social media can transform and adapt language, turning an old concept into something relevant and engaging for a new audience. By using 'demure' in diverse ways, users are exploring and expressing new dimensions of identity and femininity.

Are there other similar trends that involve reinterpreting old terms? Yes, trends like 'coquette', 'brat' and 'wholesome' have also redefined traditional concepts on social media. Text: Team ET Sunday

ET Sunday Crossword

0077



- 1 With Jim and Don he mixed a lot of liquid in it (8)
- 2 Mother keeps gift unexpected benefit (5)
- 3 Report 2nd US report 1st report (4)
- 4 In this place I upset Catholic apostate (7)
- 5 Fair to the French, having almost perished (5)
- 6 Finding out people's lives across are charged with (15)
- 7 Fasten metal priest accepted in game (4)
- 8 They may be small but lethal to some cats (4)
- 9 Cinema has at least one plan for removing female (6)
- 10 Not as many show sheep (3)
- 11 One annual check up to find tiny parasite (4)
- 12 Get mail spelling out threshold for entry, say (3,5)
- 13 Sound of foot note (4)
- 14 Stop talking – engagement's over! (4,3)
- 15 Good example of crinkly blow dry women missed (6)
- 16 20 invited in bishop for expensive cut (14)
- 17 In need of exercise, exciting fun and sex (5)
- 18 Occupied detention centre formerly (4)
- 19 22 Inter-city (4)
- 20 She ran wards in Northampton when hospital was aged (6)
- 21 Letter produced by lecturer and peer (6)
- 22 Selection: large 10 is involved (6)
- 23 Look inside 10 from (1-3)
- 24 Nickle drink (4)
- 25 Nick keeps a close eye on Jacques performing (6,7)
- 26 Continue, having atoned for rude greeting (4,9)
- 27 Officer's false story to push (4)

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SO MUCH FOR CULTURAL CAPITAL

Opinion

SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2024



New Zealand's Lydia Ko enters the Ladies Professional Golf Association Hall of Fame

Golf the big winner

With a gold at the recently-concluded Olympics, Lydia Ko has had a dream run

OVER THE TOP

Mera! Shah



"I GET TO write my own ending," says Simone Biles. In a remarkable moment captured on film in *Rising*—a documentary on the American gymnast—Biles opens up about the mental and physical challenges she faced after her stunning withdrawal from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Watching the documentary in the weeks leading up to the 2024 Olympics in Paris, Lydia Ko pauses and then writes that line down in her yardage book. Ko—a two-time medalist at The Games—is already the most decorated golf Olympian, and the public pressure to win gold has driven the Kiwi to go off social media entirely. Expectations aren't new for Ko who became the youngest golfer in history (man or woman) to be ranked number one when she was just over 17 years old. Winning gold in Paris would give Ko the points needed to enter the LPGA Hall of Fame—a career goal for the Kiwi.

A few weeks later, Ko found herself going into the final round with a two-shot lead. "The next 18 holes were going to be some of the most important 18 holes of my life...this is my last Olympics...I knew that being in this kind of position, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," she would say later. As it turns out, Ko made the most of that chance and kept her two-stroke advantage till the end and finished at 10 under 278. Germany's Esther Henseleit won the silver with a total of 8 under 280 while the People's Republic of China's Xiyu Lin won bronze with 7 under 281. Lydia Ko is now a three-time Olympic Medalist after earning the gold in 2024; the silver in 2016 and the bronze in 2020. A 20-time LPGA Tour winner, she is now a member of the LPGA Hall of Fame.

Of the Indian squad Aditi Ashok did well to climb 11 places with a final round four-under after a wayward third round scuppered her chances. "I think today was probably the best day for me. I feel like I was hitting approach shots and I was holding putts, but where was working, so I think that's where the seven birdies came from," said Ashok. Dagar had to endure some tough conditions at Le Golf National, and couldn't quite get her game going. Ashok finished tied 29th while Dagar was 49th in the field. Ashok's near fairy-tale finish at the 2020 Tokyo Games brought

Indian golf from the fringes of public perception into the mainstream. The fact that so many people in India watched the golf on telly, and know who these two athletes are is a sign of how far things have come.

The big winner at the Olympics was the game of golf. The huge galleries, the scores of French fans following their players and breaking into the French national anthem sporadically, the golfers embracing the Olympics experience and living at the Games village, among other distinct experiences differentiated the Games from any other golf event on the planet. And the players seemed to realise it; Scottie Scheffler was in tears as he was awarded the gold medal, as was Lydia Ko. Both understood that to take first place at the Olympics is of a different order of merit than winning even a major championship.

The only fairy tale ending though was reserved for Ko. "Cinderella's glass slippers are see-through and my podium shoes are also see-through...For it to have happened here at the Olympics, unreal. I do feel like I'm a mythical character in a story tale. It really couldn't have gotten any better than I could have imagined and I've had so many grateful things that happened in my career so far, and this really tops it. I couldn't have asked for anything more to be honest," she gushed at the post-event presser.

As the Games drew to a close, Simone Biles emerged as one of the superstars of the 2024 Olympics. The gymnast scripted one of greatest comebacks in Olympics history: her four medals included the individual all-around Gold that she had won eight years back. "I've accomplished way more than in my wildest dreams," Biles told a packed press conference room. "Not just at this Olympics, but in the sport."

Five days later, after the conclusion of the ladies golf event, the champion spoke to the press about drawing inspiration from Biles. "I kept to write my own ending...I kept telling myself that, and I wanted to be the one that was going to control my fate and the ending to this week. To have ended this way, it's honestly a dream come true," said Lydia Ko.

In the past, Ko has spoken about retiring at the age of 30. As occasions go, there couldn't be a better time for the newly-minted LPGA Hall-of-Famer and Olympic Champion to hang up her boots. But she's just 27 years old, and Lydia Ko hasn't written her exit lines yet.

A golfer, Mera! Shah also writes about the game

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The issue is *not* whether there was wrongdoing or actual conflict of interest on the part of Ms Buch. The issue is *not* whether the government is shielding Ms Buch in order to shield the business group. Rather, the issue is a simple and straightforward one: Did Ms Buch *disclose* her past connections and actions—and the *potential* conflict of interest—to SEBI, to the government, to the Justice Sapre Committee, and to the Supreme Court?

THE UNFOLDING SAGA of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has gripped the attention of the business and financial world. Sherlock Holmes said, "If you remove superstition, melodrama and chaos, all you're left with is cold facts." The superstition in the saga is that a government always speaks and acts in the interest of the people. The melodrama is that the story pits Big Business against the Small Investor and at the end of the day we must avoid blood and gore. The chaos is because too many people speak in too many voices and the result is only noise.

If you cut out the superstition, melodrama and the chaos, you will find the truth. The central question was, what was the source of investment in a business group? The group denied any wrongdoing and claimed that the money was legitimate. The doubters alleged that the money was through over-invoicing and round-tripping, and was illegitimate. SEBI investigated the matter and reported that it had found, *prima facie*, nothing wrong, but the doubters were not satisfied. Ultimately, the Supreme Court asked a five-member Committee under Justice Sapre to investigate and report.

What committee found

What the Justice Sapre Committee found—and could not find—are impor-



Hindenburg Research has made allegations against SEBI chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch and her husband Dhaval Buch that they had economic interests in entities investigated by the regulatory body

Things are not what they seem to be

The Committee found that there were 13 overseas investors including 12 foreign portfolio investors (FPI). The 'beneficial owner' of each FPI had been disclosed but the *ultimate* beneficial owner—the last natural person in the chain—had not been disclosed. Why? Because the requirement to disclose the last natural person had been *done away with in 2018*. Nevertheless, SEBI claimed that it had investigated that has been *aroused can be put to rest*. The securities market regulator suspects wrongdoing but also finds compliance with various stipulations in attendant regulations. Therefore, the record reveals a chicken-and-egg situation."

On the connected question if the investors or their beneficial owners were 'related parties' to the investee companies, the Committee found that the terms 'related party' and 'related party transaction' had been amended substantially in November 2021 but with *prospective effect*, some from April 1, 2022 and some from April 1, 2023! The Committee's comment on this aspect was equally scathing:

"Having adopted the path of making explicit stipulations prospectively, the feasibility of testing the principles under-

lying the regulations governing related party transactions has been eroded."

The final conclusion of the Committee was that "...it appears that the legislative policy of SEBI on the ownership structure of FPIs has moved in one direction while the enforcement by SEBI is moving in the opposite direction."

Sebi carries on

Nevertheless, SEBI continued with its investigations into 24 specific cases. When the Committee's report was submitted to the Supreme Court, the Court heard arguments and by an order dated January 3, 2024 upheld SEBI's actions. The Court also directed SEBI to complete its investigations in *three months*. Seven months have elapsed.

Conflict of interest

Everyone thought that the allegations of the short-seller, Hindenburg Research, had been given a quiet burial in January 2024, but the short-seller hit the headlines again in August 2024 when it made allegations against Ms Madhabi Puri Buch, Chairperson of SEBI, and her husband, Mr Dhaval Buch. Ms Buch was appointed whole time member of SEBI in April 2017. After she completed her tenure, and a gap, she was appointed Chairperson on March 1, 2022. When the crucial decisions were taken in 2018 and 2021-24, Ms Buch was in a decision making position in SEBI.

Allegations of conflict of interest have been made against Ms Buch. It appears that she and her husband had economic interests in entities that were investigated by SEBI and reviewed by the Justice Sapre Committee. Ms Buch admitted her investments but offered explanations: they were made when she and her husband were private citizens; that they had redeemed the investments upon her appointment in SEBI; and that the companies concerned had become dormant soon after.

The issue is *not* whether there was wrongdoing or actual conflict of interest on the part of Ms Buch. The issue is *not* whether the government is shielding Ms Buch in order to shield the business group. Rather, the issue is a simple and straightforward one: Did Ms Buch *disclose* her past connections and actions—and the *potential* conflict of interest—to SEBI, to the government, to the Justice Sapre Committee, and to the Supreme Court? *Apparently not*. Nor did Ms Buch recuse herself from the investigations.

Assuming all the facts in Ms Buch's favour, at the least she committed a grave and culpable error. She ought to have made a disclosure and recused herself from the case. Her participation has tainted the investigations. She must resign and the allegations investigated *de novo*.

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter: @PChidambaram_IN

FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Musings on India today

AS SOMEONE BORN three years after India awoke to 'life and freedom' on that magical midnight, I had the misfortune to spend my growing years in those socialist decades when everything was shabby, second rate and in short supply. So for me, personally, the liberalisation that a Congress prime minister was forced to bring remains among the best things that have happened in our journey as a modern nation. The truth is that we got political freedom on August 15, 1947, but along with it came an economic dictatorship through central planning. It was the liberalisation brought by P.V. Narasimha Rao that gradually dismantled the licence raj. It is sad that this Congress prime minister has been so disrespected by his own party. He deserves our reverence and gratitude.

This was the first thought that crossed my mind while listening to the Prime Minister's long speech from the Red Fort last week. But I paid attention to how Narendra Modi praised his own 'reforms' and wondered if he knew that there has been

only a limited amount of real reform in the past decade. Roads, airports, trains, stations and ports are being built faster, which is good. The welfare state is more efficient, which is also good. And history will record that one of Modi's real achievements was the dramatic change in rural sanitation brought by the Swachh Bharat campaign that he announced in a more memorable speech from the Red Fort. I found it hard to agree with him when he asserted that he had transformed governance.

This is not true. The reason why none of the new denizens of that privileged enclave known as Lutyens' Delhi has discovered this is because there is an iron dome above this piece of expensive real estate that prevents all real information from breaking through. Modi's ministers are more inaccessible than Congress ministers ever were. This could be because he never had the courage to kick them out of their palatial bungalows and order them to live as more humble Indians do. This led to serious failures in governance.

A recent, scarp example is the way his education minister began by denying that there had been paper leaks in the NEET examinations or that the National Testing Agency (NTA) was seriously flawed. It was only because desperate students took to the streets and news channels took up their cause that this minister was forced to listen.

One of the most important

reforms that should have been made in the past ten years is in the sphere of education. Millions of Indian children are forced to turn to government schools and colleges, because they are all they can afford, and they remain as lousy as they were before. Modi's chief ministers have governed some of our most backward states in the past decade, and they did nothing to improve the rotten school system they inherited. The prime minister spoke of how he wanted to see a time when Indian students would not need to go abroad for higher education, but does he know that this remains a distant dream because of his government's neglect of real reform. It is silly to boast of how many new colleges have been built if they continue to offer nothing that can be called an education. Quality is the problem. Not quantity.

My mind continued to wander during the speech, so I started cataloguing the things that India has achieved and the things that we have failed to achieve. Achievements make a shorter list. It is to the credit of Narasimha Rao and Narendra Modi that India at least looks better than it did in the years before the economy was liberalised. Private enterprise has bloomed and flourished and today we have world-class companies, hospitals, colleges, schools, hotels and restaurants. They would be much better if governance had improved enough to get officials out of the way. This has not happened so what has

bloomed alongside is corruption as a mega industry.

If colonial governance had not continued to be practised by the men living under that iron dome much more could have been achieved. Instead of tinkering with this and that, the law minister should have discovered by now that the justice system does not work. It is too cumbersome, too expensive and too stuck in administrative methods that died in developed countries a century ago. The minister for urban affairs would have noticed that our cities and towns look like vast slums with oases of cleanliness and prosperity dotted here and there. Has the prime minister noticed yet that there are no smart cities?

When Modi became prime minister a decade ago, he seemed to mean it when he promised economic liberalisation, but this has turned out to be a false promise. When was the last time you heard of a government company being privatised? When was the last time you heard an official mention the word? It must be sadly said that Modi has spent ten years walking along the same path that Congress prime ministers walked and it is a path that leads to that decrepit socialist India in which midnight children and someone who came a few years later spent their childhood and youth. If Modi's speech this year was uninspiring, it is because he has few new achievements to list. We must hope that real change happens now.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



REFLECTIONS

[THE BIG PICTURE]

Why health care needs safe-systems approach

The culture of most hospitals makes cover-ups, workarounds, and quick fixes the predominant response to failures rather than root-cause analysis and systematic problem-solving

Hospitals should not be in the news except for celebratory reasons. However, in India, hospitals are in the news for all the wrong reasons. Either it is for violence against health care workers (HCWs) or a mishap where patients are at the receiving end of the health system. A failure of the system and not individuals.

While the Kolkata rape incident is a one-off case, violence against HCWs is a cause for serious concern. I strongly feel that violence against HCWs is inherently linked to patient-care systems. A system that does not care for its workers will also not care for its patients and vice versa. Ultimately, these reflect how humane our health system is. HCWs face attacks from both sides—patients and relatives and from the administration.

For example, in any case of health service failure—be it the non-administration of a patient or an avoidable death of a patient, one of the first actions of people in power to counter public outrage is to suspend the doctor(s) concerned and order an enquiry. This knee-jerk reaction to the suspension of doctors, sends the message that justice has prevailed, and the inquiry is forgotten. Except, of course, for the fall guy doctor(s). Even hospital

workers are happy with this, as it deflects responsibility from them to individuals. While people are right to be outraged, preventing such occurrences requires a systemic response. If any patient is referred to another hospital because of the lack of an appropriate specialist or equipment or service, individual doctor(s) should not be held responsible.

So, how do we make our hospitals humane and safe for both health care workers and patients? We can learn from the "safe-systems" approach, which underpins an effective road safety management system and is built on the premise that humans will make mistakes, but no one should be seriously injured on the roads. This shifts the blame from the driver to the transport system. Neither the driver nor the pedestrian should suffer. The safety of both is the priority. Similarly, keeping the safety of both HCWs and patients should be the responsibility of the health system.

In the safe-systems approach for traffic injuries, we treat traffic injuries as not only a behavioural problem but also an engineering problem. The "engineering" elements of the system—vehicles and roads—should be designed to be compatible with the human element to minimise harm, particularly by making roads forgiving of human error. The five elements of a safe transportation system are—safe roads, safe road users, safe vehicles, safe speeds, and post-crash care. A safe system ensures that all five elements work in synergy and that an error or weakness in one element is compensated for within other areas. It also emphasises that responsibility is shared, safety is proactive, and redundancy is crucial. Road crashes should be investigated as a system failure rather than as an individual crime. The same logic also applies to health systems.

Human errors occur simply because of being human, and factors such as anxiety, stress, and fatigue (doing a 24-36 hours duty) increase the risk of errors. Systemic errors occur when something in the environment/system contributes to the occurrence of errors, such as crowded hospitals, inadequate staffing, or non-functional technology.

No one chooses to make errors; rather, human error is inevitable, unpredictable, and unintentional. Being humane to doctors can miss a diagnosis, or a surgeon can operate wrongly. Rather than blaming them for carelessness, we should find out why necessary steps of prevention were not taken, and once the incident happened, why the steps for mitigation and future prevention were not taken. A system-centred approach recognises that any such incident is a symptom of a deeper systemic problem.

Akin to road crashes, health service failures are a continuum of an infinite number of mistakes of different degrees, ranging from catastrophes (which make newspaper headlines) to minor slips (which patients never come to know about). Health service failures include both clinical errors (made up of inappropriate treatment or diagnosis) and system errors like delay in treatment, poor attitude of care providers, or inappropriate referral. Most of these occur at highly crowded places like emergencies or high-pressure areas like operating theatres or intensive care units (ICUs), often due to the need exceeding the capacity to provide safe care.



Anand Krishnan



While the Kolkata rape incident is a one-off case, violence against health care workers is a cause for serious concern

REUTERS

One of the main reasons that hospitals and health systems in India don't learn from failure is because the work environment inhibits speaking up or questioning, fears of redistribution, due to a clear hierarchy, and lack of effective teamwork. Secondly, the culture of most hospitals makes cover-ups, workarounds, and quick fixes the predominant response to failures rather than root-cause analysis and systematic problem-solving. To address these, we need to adopt a 'safe-health-systems' approach, which should include the five elements:

Safe patients: Since they know themselves best, patients need to be more proactively engaged in their management. For this, they need to be educated and empowered, and our health system must be willing to engage them more.

Safe health care teams and processes: Health service delivery is a teamwork of doctors, nurses and others who attend to different aspects of care. Avoiding errors requires good communication between them and acceptance of collective responsibility. The use of updated decision management guidelines, standard processes, and use of check-

lists to ensure that these are followed and documented is also critical.

Safe medicines and technologies: The health system must procure safer and better quality medicines. All health care technologies should be well maintained, and have fail-safe and early warning systems which get deployed if something goes wrong (like airbags). Ensuring the availability of medicines, technologies, and human resources at the correct time and place is critical.

Safe hospital culture/management: A culture which rewards people for reporting errors rather than punishing them ensures that every error is reported and investigated. Ensuring the safety of HCWs is a part of this aspect. Most public hospitals do not have clean, safe spaces for sleeping and resting for junior doctors, especially for women. That we continue to fail to provide these basic services and yet expect them to deliver quality care shows our utter disregard for them.

Post-incident management or response: Timeliness of response to a failure is critical to ensure that it does not spiral out of control. The response includes calming the situation, correcting the wrong, or providing alternative solutions. For example, if a patient is to be referred, advance information can be provided to the referred facility, and transport arrangements can be made. This needs a round-the-clock team of social workers and hospital administrators. Doctors and nurses are frontline care providers and should not be given this task. This ring-fencing of HCWs is most important. The media should also frame such stories as system failures rather than individual errors.

While these may not prevent all adverse incidents, these would go a long way in addressing the day-to-day grievances of both patients and health care workers and create a more conducive and pleasant hospital environment. However, the implementation of this approach requires a strong politico-administrative commitment and a rethinking among the hospital administrators and health care providers. May the Kolkata incident spark the first step in this regard.

Anand Krishnan is a professor at the Centre for Community Medicine at All India Institutes of Medical Sciences New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY SENTIMENTS]

Karan Thapar



Neeraj-Arshad warmth echoes shared culture

Have you ever thought about how Punjabis view Pakistan? It's distinctly different to the rest of the country. In fact, I would imagine the closest parallel is how Bengalis view Bangladesh. Both states were divided at Partition, and nostalgia and affection for the lost half has not dimmed. If anything, it seems to pass down the generations.

Perhaps this is why the Neeraj Chopra-Arshad Nadeem story was headline news for the rest of the country but an unexceptional outcome for Punjabis. As before, let me further let me remind you that Haryana, until 1966, was for centuries a significant part of the undivided Punjab. Ambala and Rohtak were as Punjabis as Lahore and Ludhiana.

So, it is not surprising Neeraj and Arshad would gravitate towards each other. Not just their sport but their culture determined it. They have more in common with each other than either do with their Grenadian, European or American fellow athletes. That they would embrace and laugh, speak warmly of the other and, even, share a bond—which is so obvious—is not unusual. The opposite would be rare.

That's also true of their mothers. The reason they don't view their son's rival as an opponent is because they sense the "Punjabi" connect. No doubt, this explains the striking similarity in the way they spoke. "I also pray for Neeraj", said Arshad's mother, Raziah Parveen, "as she is also our son".

Sargi Devi, Neeraj's mother, said virtually the same thing. "The one who got gold is also our child and the one who got silver is also our child."

I first became aware of what I'm calling the Punjabi connection in 1980. I was visiting Lahore. It was my first trip across the border, and until I got there, I looked upon Pakistan as a foreign country. Of course, it was, but the people definitely were not. Nor was I strange and alien to them.

One evening at Salloos, in the old WAPDA building, I found I was the only guest in the restaurant. I prepared myself for a lonely dinner and a quick exit. How wrong I was. Within minutes of discovering I was a Punjabi from India, the restaurant staff walked up and asked if they could chat. When I agreed, they took charge. They ordered the choicest food, recommended the sights I must see in Lahore, insisted on replacing the warm rotis with fresh ones that were piping hot and kept bringing up my plate till it resembled a wedding cake.

But it was their questions I'll never forget. "Have you been to galli no x in Jullander? My parents lived there", I was asked. "Have you ever met Amritab Bachchan and Rekha? I'm so keen to meet them", was another question. "Tell me about Indira Gandhi. I want to know everything about her", was perhaps the most surprising. They were living their parents' lives

with a zest and enthusiasm as if it were their own. For them, India may have been another country, but the place where their parents were born was still home. I understood, for the world that had been lost but far from forgotten. Sitting in Salloos, I was their new-found connect with it.

Now, 1980 was a good 44 years ago. A lot has happened since. The pre-Partition generation has died, politics divides and doesn't fascinate us, and Bollywood films are no longer the same. And, yet, we still look alike, speak the same language, eat similar food and, even, curse with the same lingo! The only separation is religion and a line on a British-drawn map. The Punjabi connection is strong enough to overcome that.

This is what drew Neeraj and Arshad to each other. It's also the reason why Indians and Pakistanis are not so different. The Punjabi connection is strong enough to overcome that.

They feel comfortable in each other's company. They don't need to explain themselves. They know they'll be understood. A shared culture is stronger than divisive politics. If only our politicians understood that.

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

[SUNDAY LETTERS]

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Social audits can help decolonise policing

Day after day, we read about police misbehaviour: Police illegality, deaths in custody, police atrocity, excess use of force, abuse of office, extortion, bias, and lack of response.

Without visible punishment or corrective measures to make sure the same doesn't happen again, the inevitability of malfeasance has beaten the public into acceptance. Everything points to the need for more effective police. Crime is becoming more sophisticated. Ever more stringent laws that nibble away at constitutional protections have done nothing to make policing more effective.

It is not as if the pathways to better policing are not known. Recommendations on every aspect lie unattended. They include the 1903 British-appointed Fraser Committee on torture, the post-Emergency eight volumes of the National Police Commission in 1981, two Administrative Reforms Commissions, the seven Supreme Court directions in the Prakash Singh case in 2006 and the Verma Committee's recommendations of 2013 that wrote a chapter on police reform after the Delhi gang rape.

Different interest groups give different reasons for stagnation. The leadership will point out that extraneous forces cut into internal decision-making, and internal lines of supervision and authority stand weakened to the will of politicians. The constabulary will point to unfair working environments that see them working over long hours, seven days a week, in rough conditions, and perpetual equipment and personnel shortages where they are needed the most. Some of this is justified.

At 103.47 personnel per 100,000 people, India's police-population ratio is amongst the lowest in the world. Since salaries eat up the lion's share of budgets, little is left for infrastructure upgrades and people skilling. After the initial stint at induction, less than 2% necessary in-service training. Nationally, the cumulative spend on training sits at around 1% of the overall police budget.

So how do we move ahead? One building block is certainly enhanced capacity. But

the requirement of more boots on the ground has to be tempered with the notion of better personnel. Recruitment cycles that take anywhere between one to three years—and often had to be revoked because of malpractice—have to become regular, protected from taint, and most importantly, have to move from merely weeding out the most unsuitable to carefully selecting those best suited to law-abiding policing.

Training offers another simple building block. The Comptroller and Auditor General have documented the crumbling state of training institutes. Much of police behaviour is defined by the relationship between the political executive and the police establishment. What accountability there is, faces inward and upward within the hierarchy or toward the bureaucracy and the legislator. The layers of external oversight like the human rights commissions and police complaints authorities that have been set up at taxpayer expense are yet to show they are the cause of any discernible improvement in policing culture. The public has little role to play.

Yet, communities are the main beneficiaries of good policing and the main victims of bad. Public participation in setting the safety agenda for a locality and periodically evaluating police performance through open forum sessions is seen as essential to effective and accountable policing. Social audits, involving all segments of a local population, set a gauge for satisfaction and future fine-tuning. They provide a rare moment for the community at large to mediate grievances in a safe space. The joint exercise of police people and political representatives also builds a better understanding of the challenges the police face. Done across a state, it sets up healthy competition between districts. This would be a true measure of decolonised policing.

Maja Daruwala is chief editor, *India Justice Report*, and senior advisor, *Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative*. The views expressed are personal

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