

# Appeal to reason in an unreasonable age



ACROSS THE AISLE  
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

ARTICLE 168 of the Constitution of India begins with the words “For every State there shall be a Legislature which shall consist of the Governor” and .....two Houses ...or one House”. I have always thought the presence of the Governor in the state legislature is redundant. Why should an *unelected* official be a member of the legislature composed of *elected* representatives of the people? Ceremonial duties such as Address to the House or Houses, and other so-called ‘legislative’ functions (Articles 202 to 207), could be performed without the governor being a part of the state legislature — like the King of England.

The governor’s real role in the legislative practice of the State is to grant *assent to Bills*. This is indeed an important function to complete the legislative process before a Bill becomes an Act. In order to ensure that the legislature has not transgressed the Constitutional limits, it is necessary to confer upon a person the power to grant or refuse *assent*.

## Check, not stall

Article 200 reads: “When a Bill has been passed by the Legislative Assembly of a State ....it shall be presented to the Governor and the Governor shall declare either that he assents to the Bill or that he withholds assent therefrom or that he reserves the Bill for the consideration of the President.”

The proviso to Article 200 states that the governor may as soon as possible *return* the Bill to the legislature to “*reconsider the Bill or any specified provisions thereof*” and to “*consider the desirability of introducing any such amendments as he may recommend*”. This a healthy check on the legislature but not a licence to play havoc with the legislative process.

Governors — especially in Opposition-ruled states — have run amok with the power given to them under Article 200. They assume that their power to *check* is a licence to *stall*. Hence, they invented the *pocket veto*. A pocket veto is simply to sit idle; in other words, to neither grant assent; nor withhold assent and return the Bill to the legislature for reconsideration; nor reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President. The pocket veto is unalloyed malice. It is used to thwart the will of the people expressed through a Bill passed by the legislature. The pocket veto has no sanction under the Constitution.

The two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court reached the conclusion that when a Bill is presented to the governor, he can either grant assent; or withhold assent *and*

I am afraid some of the ‘lot’ that currently hold the positions of governor are certainly not the ‘good lot’. What they are, I leave it to the reader. What they do and what they do not do are before the people of India

return the Bill as soon as possible to the legislature for reconsideration; or reserve it for the consideration of the President. The Bench outlawed the ‘pocket veto’. The five-judge Bench affirmed these conclusions. There were some points on which the two Benches differed but those points do not alarm the common citizen. We may leave it to legal scholars to debate those points.

## Common citizen’s concern

What is of grave concern to the common citizen is the major point of difference between the two Benches on prescribing time limits for the governor to act on a Bill. The two-judge Bench stipulated strict time limits, the five-judge Bench demurred and overruled. The larger Bench was persuaded by the *letter of the Constitution* which did *not* explicitly specify any time limits. The larger Bench stressed on the “elasticity for constitutional authorities to perform their functions”, the “diverse contexts and situations” and “the need for balancing that might arise in the process of law-making”. These principles are theoretically and constitutionally unexceptionable.

However, the Supreme Court ought to have also weighed the warning of Dr Ambedkar. In his concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly, reflecting human weaknesses, Dr Ambedkar said:

“*However good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may*

*turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot.*”

I am afraid some of the ‘lot’ that currently hold the positions of governor are certainly not the ‘good lot’. What they are, I leave it to the reader. What they do and what they do not do are before the people of India. When a Bill passed by the duly elected legislature is stalled for *months*, nay *years*, the Constitution is not worked, it is wrecked. The will of the people is thwarted.

Before the Supreme Court, there were numerous examples of governors (especially of Opposition-ruled States such as Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) who had tilted the Constitutional balance against the legislature. The five-judge Bench was expected to authoritatively restore the balance. It did a fine job of analysis but rested its Opinion on a theoretical premise far removed from the reality as illustrated by the facts before the Court.

## Law and reality

Law must respond to the reality. When the Supreme Court thought that the independence of the judiciary may be compromised, it interpreted Article 217 of the Constitution to take unto itself the power to select, and recommend for appointment, the judges of High Courts. Article 200 presented a graver problem. A legislature’s ability to pass laws is the essence of democracy and the rule of law. An appeal to reason alone will be futile when laws are unreasonably and deliberately obstructed.

# India from a distance



FIFTH COLUMN  
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THIS COLUMN comes to you a long way away from our beloved Bharat Mata. The first thing I noticed when I arrived in this small town in upstate New York was how clean the air was. Any Indian traveller who came here from northern India or even Mumbai would probably notice this first because it is such a dramatic change from the poisonous air we breathe in our own wondrous land. It cheered me up when I read the Indian newspapers on this cold and frosty morning that air pollution is becoming a political issue. Important political leaders, judges and doctors have started speaking of it in angry voices. As they should have done long, long ago. May their voices get angrier and louder.

The truth is that this is a major crisis that can no longer be left to provincial officials to deal with. It is a national emergency. And it is time the Prime Minister personally intervened because if something so vital as clean air is unavailable, he can quite simply forget about his grandiose dream of India becoming a fully developed country in 20 years. There are other things I notice as I sit in a gloomy mood and write this piece. The roads that I drove along to get here did not have litter lining them. The woods were beautiful, the streams pristine and the villages charming. Why does our own beloved motherland look so bad, I asked myself sadly.

The question barely came to my mind and I knew the answer. It is because our political leaders spend most of their time on things that matter to them and not to the people. They concentrate on winning elections and when the elections are over, they concentrate on squabbling over who gets the best jobs in government. They fight over who should be chief minister not because of their desire to do something wonderful for the state but so that they can strut around like petty potentates. It has always been this way. What has changed since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister is that displays of public religiosity have reached new heights.

Personally, I have no problem with new temples being built but can we also build cities and towns that are livable? One of the great marvels of ancient India were its cities. If in ancient times it was possible to build cities that were not just beautiful but equipped with urban necessities like clean water and waste disposal, why is it so hard for us to build them now? Once more I shall answer my own question. The men and women responsible for municipal governance are usually more interested in lining their pockets than in providing the services essential for making cities livable. This happens because they can get away with taking bribes to allow unplanned, ugly urban sprawls to pass off as cities. When was the last time you heard of a municipal official being jailed for allowing unplanned buildings to rise out of squalid slums?

There are solutions, dear readers and fellow citizens. But these solutions require drastic changes in municipal governance. Instead of chief ministers overseeing municipal services, they should be in the hands of elected mayors who can be held accountable. All that our chief ministers appear to do is find the biggest houses in the most expensive localities of our capital cities and cause traffic jams because of the cavalcades they travel in on the specious grounds that this is necessary for their security. All these things must be ruthlessly stopped.

Will this happen since it has not for decades? It will happen only when the Prime Minister’s office takes personal charge as happened with the Swachh Bharat campaign. Urban decay is so serious that it should be declared a national emergency and immediate measures taken not just to clean up the air in our cities but to find ways to manage waste and create parks and gardens that can act as the lungs that are such a vital component of planned urbanisation.

There are other things that must be priorities. At the top of my list is affordable housing. Millions of citizens come to our cities from distant rural villages and live in appalling conditions. A ‘room’ in central Mumbai costs more than Rs 30,000 a month, which is more than the migrants who come earn as salaries. So, they sleep in shifts in tiny hovels and eke out an existence, and the sad thing is that living on the footpaths of Mumbai or Delhi is better than life in the villages. These words were barely written when I spotted a post on ‘X’ from the Prime Minister. He said, “The 8.2% growth in quarter 2 of 2025-26 is very encouraging. It reflects the impact of our pro-growth policies and reforms...our government will continue to advance reforms and strengthen Ease of Living for every citizen.”

Ease of Living, Prime Minister? Seriously? If you could on your regular visits to foreign lands spend some time as an ordinary citizen and look at our country from a distance you might notice that our beloved Bharat Mata looks like a place where most citizens cannot even dream of such a luxury as ‘ease of living’. Time to forget about building temples and giant statues of dead leaders, and concentrate on building cities that look like modern cities and not slums.

# After aerial survey, how over 50 villages made way for Chandigarh



HISTORY HEADLINE  
BY JASKIRAN KAPOOR

LET THIS be a new town, symbolic of freedom of India, unfettered by the traditions of the past — an expression of the nation’s faith in the future.” Standing on a podium in Chandigarh’s Sector 9 park, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru delivered an impassioned speech, outlining his vision for the new city that defined a new India — Chandigarh.

At the centre of a now-shelved proposal to alter its constitutional status, Chandigarh began as an idea, envisioned by Nehru but executed by bureaucrats and builders who were ahead of their time.

Torn apart by Partition, Punjab had lost Lahore and was in dire need of a new capital. Alternatives were suggested — Ambala, Ludhiana, Patiala, Phillaur, Shimla, Jalandhar, Karnal and Amritsar — but Nehru was adamant that the capital would rise anew. And thus was born Chandigarh, a city “without an umbilical cord”, as author Vibhor Mohan describes the “caesarean birth” of this town in his book, *Chandigarh — The Backstory & the City it Couldn’t Be*.

The years from 1948 to 1951 were crucial — the new capital needed land, town planners, architects and builders. In 1948, the Punjab government appointed a panel under P L Varma, Chief Engineer. An aerial reconnaissance was undertaken by Varma, Deputy Commissioner Swaroop Singh and Executive Engineer R N Dogra. A site was in sight — on the foothills of the Shivalik range, northwards from Ambala to Shimla, flanked by two riverbeds.

Chandigarh fell in Ambala district, and derives its name from the temple of Goddess Chandī on the Kalka-Pinjore road. It was finalised on account of the land, its gradient for natural drainage, panoramic blue hills, moderate climate, proximity to Delhi and sufficient water supply.

Then, came the first of many hurdles. Over 50 villages had to be displaced for the



Nehru (right) with French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier during the inauguration of the High Court building in Chandigarh in 1955. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

new city. The challenges related to land acquisition were resolved, shares Deepika Gandhi, former director, Le Corbusier Centre, Chandigarh.

The Chandigarh Capital City plan now needed those who could execute it — architects, builders, designers, town planners. Budget being one of the biggest constraints, Nehru was inclined to pick someone closer home. He chose to connect with American town planner Albert Mayer, who was in India since 1945 and was working on remodelling Indian villages. Polish architect Matthew Nowicki came on board too, but his demise in a plane crash in 1950 and the rising dollar rate forced India to look elsewhere. French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier seemed an “affordable option”.

During that time, says historian and author Rajiv Lochan, Corbusier was more of an urban town planner whose philosophies on modern architecture didn’t have too many takers. He signed a contract that required him to stay in India for at least three years. He quickly sent his cousin and collaborator, architect Pierre Jeanneret, to seal the deal. They were soon joined by British architect couple Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, pioneers in tropical architecture with work in developing countries such as Africa.

In one of her interviews, Drew mentioned how Varma and P N Thapar, Chief Administrator, Chandigarh, refused to leave her

drawing room till she and Fry insisted on a city inclined towards educational institutions, Gandhi adds that on the advice of A L Fletcher, Punjab’s Officer on Special Duty, green belts were incorporated in the plan.

“Usually, the green cover is an afterthought, but Fletcher mooted the idea of a garden city. The city’s industrial area was pushed to the periphery and was earmarked for non-polluting industry,” says Gandhi.

The city was made in record time by engineers and architects, and workers from Rajasthan and Hisar, and, in the later years, the people of Punjab. By 1955, the High Court building was ready. On many occasions, a cash-strapped government wanted to halt the project, notes Gandhi, but Varma and then Punjab CM Partap Singh Kairon fought to keep it going. They sold plots in advance to raise funds for the construction.

When it was finally completed, Corbusier’s Chandigarh, with its geometric grid and brutalist architecture, was very different from the original fan-like plan of Nowicki and Mayer, who had rooted for a more village-like aesthetic. Tejbans Singh Jauhar, who owns Tejee Studios and is one of the oldest residents of the city, says, “The first cabaret in Sector 17 was called Calypso, the first disco was started by Mr Denny from Mumbai...This town saw an influx of Punjabis from different corners — there were people from Uganda who had fled dictator Idi Amin’s regime, from Delhi post 1984 riots, from Burma too.”

The brutalist architecture, says Gandhi, was not the starting point. It was a pragmatic way to keep costs down. “Dams were being built simultaneously at that time, Bhakra being one of them. So, cement was available easily. The planners knew this area was rich in clay, and there was abundance of bricks, especially the Nanakshahi bricks. The masons too were experts in brick laying, and so the structures we see today, which we define as brutalist, were made with local material. The exposed brick and cement walls were a conscious call to cut costs, including future costs of whitewash and maintenance. There were no machines, no cranes, no technology. Chandigarh is a city made by hand,” she says.

The writer is a freelancer based in Chandigarh

# The quest for more



ON THE LOOSE  
BY LEHER KALA

Thank goodness for the far kinder era we’re in now. At least our lives aren’t at stake when we aim for exclusivity. Other people’s good opinions come just by throwing around some money. Why do we crave expensive stuff? Is it beauty we’re seeking, or meaning? Do the imperatives of the world dictate how we conduct our social selves? It is worth noting the confusing paradox, that people of unparalleled wealth who’ve consumed, collected and holidayed themselves silly, still feel compelled to hire an un-relatable pop star like Jennifer Lopez for a family wedding. One would imagine that if you’re already at the top of the social hierarchy, there’s no motivation to do anything further. Quite the contrary. Constant deference from not-as-rich peers can be addictive but to maintain a bevy of fawning admirers means extravagance levels must keep going up.

F Scott Fitzgerald’s unforgettable mythologising of wealth in *The Great Gatsby* explores the cavalier freedoms of new world

Liberalism — and its pitfalls. The story of a self-made millionaire who throws glittering parties in the hope of prying away a woman he loved and lost, Gatsby’s relentlessly splashy lifestyle also conveys a disenchantment with the hollow pursuit of decadent pleasures. Modern life allows us to shake off the shackles of religion, design our own traditions and construct our own individual meaning of life. Which is great. But too much focus on materialistic self-interest, the novel warns, leads to a spiritual void no grand soiree or acquisition can fill. Every generation has their own idea of what it means to have arrived: 20-somethings’ hankering for Chanel or Rolex to craft an identity suggests a doomed obsession with the superficial, not unlike the characters of *The Great Gatsby*. Between our illusory wants and our inner needs is a vast chasm that can be bridged only by understanding, “meaning” isn’t in “things”. It’s in our heads.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

## LEADER BELOW PAR

After the shattering Bihar results, a distraught Mallikarjun Kharge urged Sonia Gandhi to speak to her son since he feared INDIA allies were getting increasingly restive. The RJD’s Tejashwi Yadav has made clear that the Congress leader did not pull his weight during the campaign and practically disappeared from the scene after a promising start with motorbike rallies. He could not be reached when major decisions on joint poll strategy were to be taken. Rahul twice left India during the campaign. And was even abroad when the results were declared.

The RJD was furious that the Congress dragged its feet in declaring Tejashwi Yadav as the Mahagathbandhan’s CM candidate. Later, Rahul unilaterally announced Mukesh Sahani, an EBC from the caste-based Vikassheel Insaan Party, as the alliance’s Deputy CM face, angering INDIA’s key vote banks, Muslims and SCs, who felt that someone from their ranks should have been named as a potential Deputy CM. (Incidentally, the much touted Sahani lost the elections and his party drew a blank.) Tejashwi was also embarrassed when Rahul, without consulting him, even though he was sitting next to him, raised the issue of the BJP’s alleged nexus with industrialist billionaires by citing the attendance of party leaders at lavish weddings. Subsequently there were numerous BJP-inspired memes of Lalu’s entire family at Anant Ambani’s over-the-top wedding.

Sonia promised to speak to her son, but misgivings among the INDIA allies that Rahul lacks the political acumen to lead the Opposition alliance are increasing, buttressed by the recent fracas in the Karnataka Congress. The TMC publicly proclaimed that Mamata Banerjee would be a more suitable choice as leader. SP leader Akhilesh Yadav reportedly spoke to the DMK’s M K Stalin and pointed out the Congress’s embarrassingly dismal performance in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election. He felt the grand old party needed a reality check on its actual strength on the ground and that the allies could not keep deferring to its demands simply because it is a national party.

## 1+0+0=SUCCESS?

The BJP’s electoral strategy for the 2024 Haryana Assembly poll of unifying all non-Jats proved so effective that CM Nayab Singh Saini does not need the support of any Jat-based party for his government’s survival. The Congress fared miserably at the polls under Jat leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda. This has heartened the squabbling descendants of Jat icon Devi Lal, who assume that if Hooda’s star is declining, their clan’s political fortunes are rising. Their optimism was bolstered by a successful Jat rally by INLD president Abhay Chautala on Hooda’s home turf of Rohtak. Abhay’s brother, Ajay, father of former deputy CM Dushyant Chautala and a leader of the splinter JJP party, and uncle Ranjit Chautala, once in the BJP now an independent, proposed to Abhay that if the Devi Lal clan unites, they would have “100 per cent success” in reclaiming their lost political glory. The dour Abhay turned down the suggestion remarking snarkily that the 100 per cent calculation was only correct if you appended the zero standing of Ajay and Ranjit, for not supporting the farmers agitation, with his standing of number 1.

## ROYAL SNUB

The Congress may be rejoicing over its by-election victory in the Anta Assembly constituency of Rajasthan this month, but surprisingly, CM Bhajan Lal Sharma remains unruffled, even though Congress proclaims that the result indicates disenchantment with the BJP. Anta is adjacent to Jhalawar, the constituency of former CM Vasundhara Rajé’s son Dushyant Singh, and Vasundhara and her son insisted on overseeing the campaign. After the defeat, she sought an appointment with Amit Shah only to be told to speak to the CM.

## NO SUCCESSION PLAN

Home Minister Amit Shah invited to Delhi Sanjay Jha, working president of the JD(U), Lalan Singh, Nitish’s close colleague, and a Bihar bureaucrat who is known to have the ear of the chief minister. Shah raised the delicate question as to whether Nitish had a succession plan in mind in view of his frail health. The politicians kept silent, but the official observed that knowing Nitish, he would expect any such discussion to be on a one-on-one basis directly with Prime Minister Modi.

## FAMILY TIES

Interestingly, while the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the Congress have targeted Parth Pawar, NCP chief Ajit Pawar’s son accused of passing off government land as private property and not paying stamp duty, the opposition NCP led by Sharad Pawar has kept silent. Blood ties perhaps outweigh political differences in such matters. Some of Ajit’s followers even suspect that the Pune land scam story was leaked to a Marathi TV channel by the Shinde camp. Ajit is already unhappy that CM Devendra Fadnavis has teamed up with Shinde and Ajit kept on the sidelines.



NO MAJOR IMPACT ON FLIGHT OPS

# Update completed on most of affected Airbus A320 family planes in India

Sukalp Sharma  
New Delhi, November 29

AIRBUS-MANDATED software changes have been carried out on most of Indian airlines' aircraft of Indian airlines' aircraft that could have been at risk of potential issues with the functioning of flight controls, according to the country's aviation safety regulator, Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). The software changes, while having some bearing on the carriers' flight operations in the form of delays and rescheduling, have not led to any major impact in terms of cancellations.

IndiGo and the Air India group are the major Indian operators of A320 family aircraft — A320, A319, and A321 — which form the bulk of India's narrow-body aircraft fleet.

As per data shared by the DGCA, a total of 338 Airbus A320 family aircraft of Indian airlines — IndiGo, Air India, and Air India Express — were identified as planes that required rectification action prescribed by Airbus late Friday. The required action, which typically takes around a couple of hours, was completed on 270 of those aircraft as of 5:30 pm

Saturday.

The required rectification action on the remaining 68 aircraft was likely to be completed on Saturday itself, according to the regulator.

Officials said that there was no need for passengers to panic as the impact on flight operations is not significant. Indian carriers have largely been able to avoid flight cancellations, and managed to limit the disruption to some delays and re-scheduling of flights.

Apart from four Air India Express flights, DGCA did not report any flight cancellations due to this issue as of Saturday evening. Despite the very short downtime for implementing the fix, some delays were unavoidable as a narrow-body jet typically operates multiple flights in a day and delays can quickly cascade.

The necessary changes had already been carried out on 184 of 200 IndiGo aircraft that required rectification action, as of 5:30 pm Saturday.

In the case of Air India, it was completed on 69 of the 113 affected aircraft. As for Air India Express, the required changes were made on 17 of the 25 affected planes. In all, IndiGo has around 370 A320



Fuselage sections of Airbus A320-family aircraft are seen at the Airbus facility in France. REUTERS

family jets in its fleet, Air India has 127, and its low-cost arm Air India Express operates 40 A320 family aircraft. But not all aircraft required software changes or any hardware realignment.

European aerospace major Airbus on Friday said that a large number of its best-selling narrow-body A320 family aircraft will require an immediate software change, with some requiring hardware modifications as well.

The urgent rectification action, required to be taken before the next scheduled flight of each affected aircraft, was man-

dated for thousands of jets globally and over 300 in India. It was prescribed after Airbus learnt that intense solar radiation could corrupt data critical to flight controls. There are over 11,000 A320 family aircraft in operation globally, and over half of those are estimated to be affected by the issue.

Shortly after the announcement from Airbus, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive (AD) requiring operators of the affected A320 family jets to implement the

## • SWIFT FIX

**INDIAN CARRIERS** have managed to avoid flight cancellations and reduced the disruption to some delays and rescheduling of flights

**SOME DELAYS** were unavoidable because a narrow-body jet typically operates multiple flights in a day and delays can quickly cascade

**THE URGENT** rectification action by Airbus was mandated for thousands of aircraft globally and over 300 in India

solutions prescribed by Airbus "before next flight". The DGCA also issued a mandatory modification circular for Indian airlines to carry out the required changes.

"An Airbus A320 aeroplane recently experienced an uncommanded and limited pitch down event. The autopilot remained engaged throughout the event, with a brief and limited loss of altitude, and the rest of the flight was uneventful. Preliminary technical assessment done by Airbus identified a malfunction of the

affected ELAC (elevator aileron computer) as possible contributing factor. This condition, if not corrected, could lead in the worst-case scenario to an uncommanded elevator movement that may result in exceeding the aircraft's structural capability," the European Union Aviation Safety Agency AD said.

ELAC is a flight control computer that processes pilot input to control the aircraft's elevators and ailerons, which control the pitch and roll of the aircraft. A specific ELAC hardware and software combination was seen as the vulnerability that made the computer susceptible to data corruption due to solar flares or radiation. The fix prescribed by Airbus for the bulk of the affected aircraft involved a software change in the ELAC. In some older aircraft, the ELAC itself needed replacement.

For IndiGo, the base stations where software upgrade is being undertaken include Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, and Kolkata. Air India is carrying out the changes at Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Chennai, while Air India Express is doing it at Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai.

# Centre mandates SIM binding for online messaging platforms

Soumyarendra Barik  
New Delhi, November 29

THE DEPARTMENT of Telecommunications (DoT) has directed online messaging platforms to bar users from accessing their services without the SIM card used to register for the application.

This direction would impact companies like WhatsApp, and could pose challenges for users travelling abroad. It is also could act as a potential hurdle in using such services across multiple devices, industry executives said. "...it has come to the notice of Central Government that some of the app based communication services that are utilising mobile number for identification of its customers... allow users to consume their services without availability of the underlying SIM within the device... posing challenge to telecom cyber security as it is being misused from outside the country to commit cyber-frauds," the DoT learnt to have said in its notice to communication companies such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Arattai, Snapchat, Sharechat, Jiochat, and Josh.

These platforms must now ensure that within 90 days, their services are "continuously" linked to the SIM card used to register with them. They must also disallow access if the SIM is not there in the device. In technical terms, this is called SIM binding. Associated web services of these platforms (like WhatsApp Web) "shall be logged out periodically" — not later than 6 hours.

The Centre is drawing powers from the Telecommunication Cybersecurity Amendment Rules, 2025, that were notified in October, to introduce the concept of Telecommunication Identifier User Entity (TIUE) under the scope of telecom regulations. As per the rules, a TIUE (who is not a licensee like telecom operators) uses telecommunication identifiers — such as mobile numbers — to identify its users.

Platforms will have to send to the DoT a compliance report within the next four months.

**Messaging platforms must disallow access if the SIM is not there in the device. In technical terms, this is called SIM binding**

A senior industry executive said that these directions could pose a challenge to users who travel abroad and frequently use SIM cards from those countries to access communication services. "So far, when you use a new SIM card abroad, you can continue using services like WhatsApp without any additional registration. Now with these directives, that would no longer be possible," they said.

Another person said the directive to log out from companion web instances of the messaging platforms every 6 hours could disrupt workflows, especially in professional setups. "Many people use services like WhatsApp on their computers when they're at work. Some also have to use them without their phones around in some instances. There will now be a lot of added friction in that use case," this executive said.

There are also some questions around how effective these directives could be, since many people who use such services to carry out frauds and scams use SIM cards procured through illegal means, such as using forged, or mule identity cards.

However, when the telecom cybersecurity rules were proposed earlier this year, the telecom industry had supported the need for SIM binding.

"Presently, the binding process between a subscriber's app-based communication services and their mobile SIM card occurs only once during the initial installation and verification phase, after which the application continues to function independently on the device even if the SIM card is later removed, replaced or deactivated," the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI), which represents all three private telcos, had said in a statement at the time.

# The problem, its fix and impact on airline operations

Sukalp Sharma  
New Delhi, November 29

AIRLINES ACROSS the world are scrambling to implement a fix mandated by Airbus to remedy a software vulnerability in thousands of its A320 family aircraft globally.

According to the European aerospace giant, intense solar radiation could corrupt data critical to flight controls in a significant number of these aircraft, which could in turn risk flight safety.

**How the problem came to light**

Airbus announced late Friday that a large number of its best-selling narrow-body A320 family aircraft will require an immediate software change, with some requiring hardware modifications as well. The urgent rectification action, required to be taken before the next scheduled flight of each affected aircraft, was mandated for thousands of jets globally and over 300 in India.

Citing an analysis of a recent event that involved an A320 Family aircraft, Airbus said the occurrence showed that "intense solar radiation may corrupt data critical to the functioning of flight controls." The aircraft manufacturer identified multiple A320 family aircraft that may be impacted.

It was working with aviation authorities across the world "to request immediate precautionary action from operators via an Alert Operators Transmission (AOT) in order to implement the available software and/or hardware protection, and ensure the fleet is safe to fly," Airbus said in a release.

This was followed by an Emergency Airworthiness Di-

## E. EXPLAINED

### Importance of ELAC in aircraft

ELAC, or elevator aileron computer is a flight control computer that processes pilot input to control the aircraft's elevators and ailerons, which control the pitch and roll of the aircraft

rective (AD) by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) requiring operators of the affected A320 family jets to implement the solutions prescribed by Airbus "before next flight". EASA also mentioned an incident with an aircraft that led to the discovery of the vulnerability.

According to the European aviation regulator, an Airbus A320 experienced an uncommanded, and limited and brief pitch-down event, which led to the aircraft losing some altitude even as the pilots took no such action.

While EASA did not go into further details of the incident, industry insiders say that it involved a JetBlue flight from Cancun in Mexico to Newark in the US on October 30. The aircraft had a sudden loss of altitude, and some passengers sustained injuries due to the incident.

Preliminary technical assessment done by Airbus identified a malfunction of the ELAC as possible contributing factor.

ELAC is a primary flight control computer that processes pilot input to control the aircraft's elevators and ailerons, which control the pitch and roll of the aircraft. It translates the

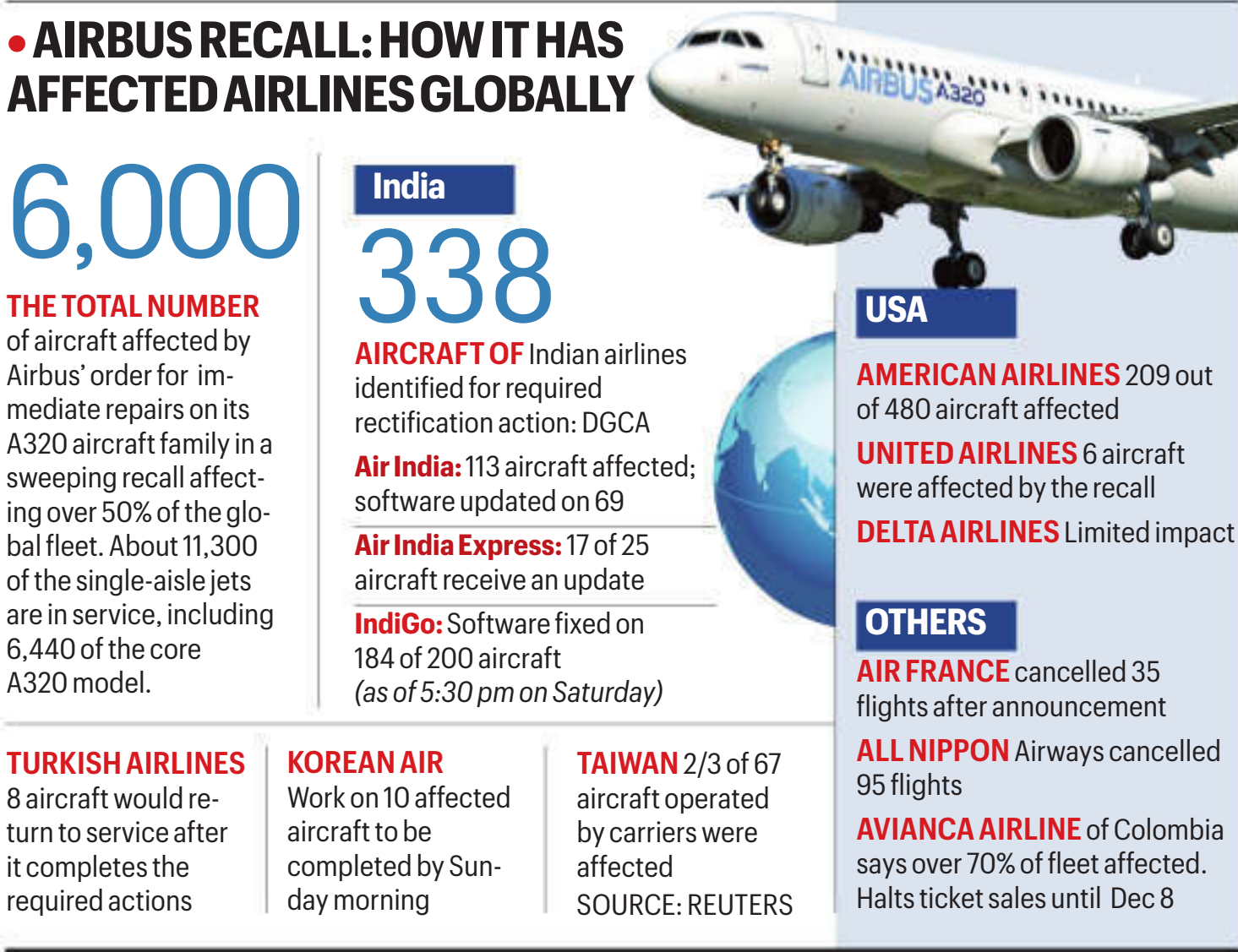
pilots' inputs from their side-sticks into electronic signals to move the plane's control surfaces. A specific ELAC hardware and software combination was seen as the vulnerability that made the computer susceptible to data corruption due to solar flares or radiation.

**Fix prescribed, action taken**

The rectification action to take care of the vulnerability is rather simple, but is required to be taken urgently. For a bulk of the affected planes, it involves a quick software update — reverting to a previous version of an ELAC software. This process, according to experts, takes around a couple of hours. However, for some aircraft — mainly older variants of the A320 family — a replacement of the ELAC unit itself may be required. This process could potentially take much longer than a simple software fix, and would be contingent upon hardware availability.

There are over 11,000 A320 family aircraft — A319, A320, and A321 — in operation globally, and over half of those might be affected by the issue. This is being seen as the biggest recall in Airbus' history, and the mandated fix to rectify the issue has had some impact on airline operations.

A320 family aircraft are the most-flown commercial jets in the world. They also form the bulk of India's aircraft fleet, with around 540 A320 family jets being operated by Indian carriers. As many as 338 of these aircraft have been identified as those affected by the aircraft's ELAC. **FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM**



## Vivek Chaturvedi new CBIC chair; succeeds Sanjay Kumar Agarwal

New Delhi: Vivek Chaturvedi, a 1990-batch Indian Revenue Service (Customs & Indirect Taxes) officer, has been appointed as the new chairman of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC), the apex body for administering the goods and services tax, customs, central excise and other indirect taxes.

The department of personnel and training issued an order on Friday stating that the appointments committee of the Cabinet approved Chaturvedi's, currently serving as member, CBIC, appointment to the top post with immediate effect. Chaturvedi succeeds Sanjay Kumar Agarwal, a 1988-batch Revenue Services officer, who completed his tenure and retired on November 28. **FE**

## 'Manufacturing push, reforms, lift Q2 growth'

Press Trust of India  
Vadodra, November 29

COMMERCE AND Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Saturday said a host of steps and reforms undertaken by the government to improve ease of doing business have helped the economy post an 8.2 per cent growth in the July-September quarter of the current fiscal.

He said the country's exports too are registering healthy growth despite global uncertainties at the trade front. "The 8.2 per cent growth reflects the host of reform measures taken by the government. Number of measures have been taken to boost domestic manufacturing and promote ease of doing business," he said while participating in a national padyatra here, organised as part of the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

He added that the growth numbers have refuted claims made by certain quarters, and it showed that India is the world's fastest-growing major economy. "We will continue to see relentless growth," Goyal said, adding India's merchandise and services exports too have recorded high growth during April-October this fiscal.

During April-October this fiscal, merchandise exports increased marginally by 0.63 per cent to \$254.25 billion, and imports rose 6.37 per cent to \$451.08 billion.

During the first nine months of this financial year, services exports stood at \$237.55 billion, compared to \$216.45 billion in April-October 2024.

## Crisil raises FY26 GDP growth forecast to 7 %

Kolkata: Crisil has raised its forecast for the country's GDP growth to 7 per cent from 6.5 per cent for the current financial year, following the first-half growth of 8 per cent that exceeded expectations.

Chief economist of Crisil, Dharmakriti Joshi, said that India's real GDP growth stood at 8.2 per cent in the second quarter, exceeding expectations. However, due to easing inflation, the nominal GDP growth was modest at 8.7 per cent. The first-half growth of 8 per cent and an expected slowdown to 6.1 per cent in the second half owing to the impact of higher US tariffs, Joshi said.

According to Crisil, private consumption was the main driver of higher real GDP growth. From the supply side, growth in manufacturing and services saw a significant rise. Joshi said lower food inflation stoked discretionary spending in the country. Joshi said that the third quarter is expected to continue benefiting from these tailwinds. While government investment will stabilise likely, there could be a belated uptick in private investments, according to Joshi.

## 'Air India not just a business opportunity for Tata Group'

Mumbai: Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran on Saturday said Air India, which is undergoing a transformation, is not just a business opportunity but a "responsibility" for the Tata Group.

The aviation sector faces continuous challenges, he said and added that the global supply chain issues make availability of parts, infrastructure and new fleet pretty unpredictable. "Every plan that you have is

becoming difficult because of the situations that you face in this area," he said.

Chandrasekaran also mentioned that the aviation is a very capital intensive business and also the margins are thin.

The group had acquired loss-making Air India along with Air India Express in January 2022, and since then, the Tata group has been working on an ambitious five-year transformation plan. **PTI**

## • BRIEFLY

### Govt, ADB ink loans pacts worth \$800 mn

New Delhi: The government of India and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has inked agreements for three loans worth over \$800 million for projects in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Accordingly, the loan agreements for the Maharashtra Power Distribution Enhancement Programme for Agricultural Solarization (\$500 million), Indore Metro Rail Project (27,147, 200,000 yen, or \$190.6 million), and Gujarat Skills Development Programme (\$109.97 million) were signed, the finance ministry said Saturday. **PTI**

### Anant Goenka takes over as FICCI President

New Delhi: Anant Goenka, Vice Chairman of RPG Group, on Saturday took over as FICCI President for

2025-2026. He has replaced Harsha Vardhan Agarwal, Vice Chairman and MD, Emami Ltd, a FICCI statement said. Vijay Sankar, Chairman, Sanmar Group, has taken charge as Senior VP of FICCI. Puneet Dalmia, MD and CEO, Dalmia Bharat Ltd, is the new VP of the chamber, it added. **PTI**

### Housing sales in 15 Tier 2 cities up 4% in Q3CY25

New Delhi: Housing sales across 15 major Tier 2 cities have increased 4 per cent annually to Rs 37,409 crore in the July-September quarter of calendar year 2025 despite a fall in volumes, according to PropEquity. These 15 Tier 2 cities are Ahmedabad, Surat, Gandhinagar, Vadodra, Jaipur, Nashik, Nagpur, Mohali, Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Bhopal, Coimbatore, Goa, Trivandrum and Kochi. The new supply declined 10 per cent YoY to 28,721 units in Q3CY25. **PTI**

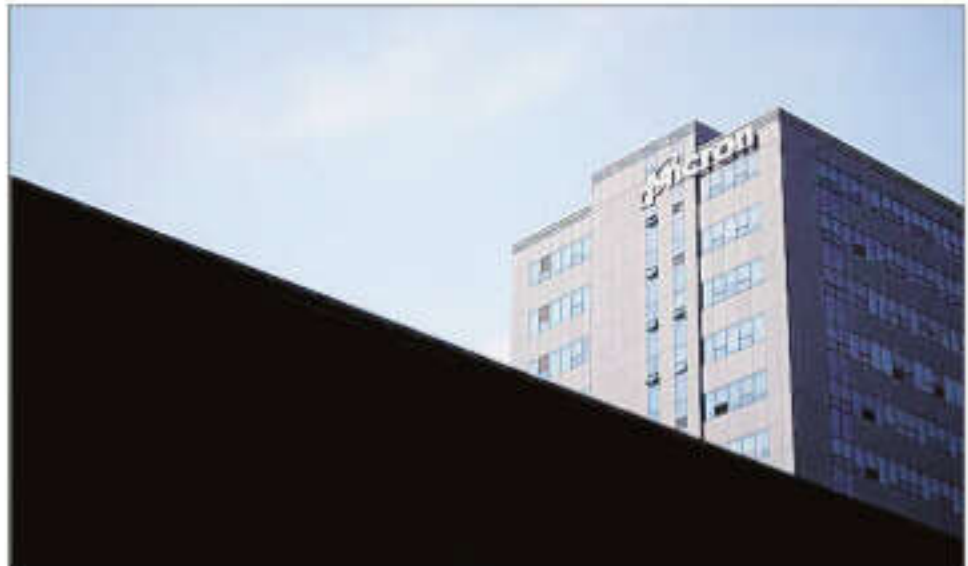
• 'NEW FACTORY TO PRODUCE HIGH-BANDWIDTH MEMORY CHIPS'

## 'Micron to invest \$9.6 bn in Japan chip plant'

Reuters  
Bengaluru/Tokyo,  
November 29

MICRON TECHNOLOGY will invest 1.5 trillion yen (\$9.6 billion) to build a new plant in Hiroshima in western Japan to produce advanced high-bandwidth memory (HBM) chips, the Nikkei reported on Saturday, citing people familiar with the matter.

The US chipmaker aims to start construction at an existing site in May next year and begin shipments around 2028, with Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry providing up to 500 billion yen for the project, the Nikkei said.



The company logo is seen on the Micron Technology offices in Shanghai, China. REUTERS

Reuters could not immediately verify the report. To revive its aging semicon-

ductor industry, Japan's government is offering generous subsidies to lure investment

from foreign chip makers such as Micron and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC).

It is also funding the construction of a plant that will mass produce advanced logic chips using IBM technology.

Demand for high-bandwidth memory chips is being driven by the growth of artificial intelligence and data centre investment.

The expansion of its plant in Hiroshima will help Micron diversify production away from Taiwan, according to the report.

It will also enable Micron to compete with market leader SK Hynix, the Nikkei said.





DOWN IN JUNGLELAND

BY RANJIT LAL

AUTHOR, ENVIRONMENTALIST  
AND BIRD WATCHER



RANJIT LAL

HOME AND THE WORLD  
A hermit crab takes shelter in a scavenged shell

Mountains or Sea? It's a Tie

The kaleidoscopic life forms on the shoreline rival the biodiversity of the mountains

WHILE GROWING up in the 1960s, I lived by the sea, in what was then Madras (Chennai). Picnics to Elliot's Beach were a weekend feature. I don't remember much, except that it appeared that the waves pounding the shores from the Bay of Bengal, were thumping great monsters, which whumped onto the beach, all deep bass and thunder and then roared towards you like an express train. The most memorable occasion was back in 1962 or '63 when a cyclone struck chucking up gleaming treasures from the depths: glistening covies, multi-coloured sea fans, even chunks of coral, a dead hammerhead shark and the exquisite skeleton of a seahorse.

It was in Bombay (Mumbai), however, that we spent the most time at the beach — Marve, not the more popular Juhu. We would pack the cars up and set off Friday evenings, returning post dinner on Sunday. On one extended stay, we even commuted to college (in South Bombay) from the 'shack' we stayed at. The beaches extending beyond the INS Hamla naval training station were usually deserted — and different in character — perfect for long walks or picking one's way over rocky terrain like the long-legged herons did. The monsoons were, of course, the best time as the tide threw up the purple and inky-blue Portuguese man o war and assorted shells. And there were always the sunsets, misty orange and fiery gold: you photographed the gently drowning globe perhaps a million times.

After dusk, at low tide, the beach would lie, vast, gleaming and lacquered as you meandered aimlessly thinking deep thoughts (of how to change the world or inveigle that girl to like you — you were in college after all); the wind buffeting you in the back like a good old friend.

You realised the sheer power of the waves if you got even calf-deep, and across the bays there were cross currents and rip tides that had claimed many a swimmer. After a good briny dip — and hose down afterwards, there was fresh prawn curry and beer on hold followed by a long siesta. And then, perhaps, games of seven tiles on the beach in the evening followed by a trip to nearby Madh island to pick up fresh pomfret for the barbeque dinner later. Yes, you could live here.

Of course, it was sweaty hot in summer, especially when the wind dropped dead and the sea almost sighed to a standstill, shimmering like mercury. Invariably, the power would go off, leaving you squelching uncomfortably in your bed and wondering about your sanity.

The mountains were magnificent and grand too, and you could never tire of their changing hues. No sea breeze could quite match the cologne-like freshness in the air. Mountain people would draw up their noses and sneer: the seaside air stank of dead fish and so did the people — a point well taken, especially on still afternoons. By the ocean, the ever-present roar and hiss of the waves would play a background refrain — here, there was just the gentle sighing of the breeze through the pines that could coax you to sleep.

Yes, both places could become ferocious when the weather turned and be equally terrifying: There was danger from deadfall and lightning in the mountains, not to mention landslides that could leave you stranded. The ocean could whisk you away like a cork if it ever caught you and giant waves could sweep perilously close to your shack, hungry as any shark. You couldn't dream of cosying up by a roaring fire in your beach shack (though yes, you could have one going on the beach at night) that you would, up in the mountains.

More importantly, the mountains offered a plethora of wildlife and birds to look out for, not to mention wildflowers, ferns, mosses and fungi. For a wild-lifer and botanist, perhaps, there was more here, to observe and delight in. Occasionally, however, you did get the feeling of being hemmed in by the mountains — they were always there, surrounding you, seemingly drawing closer as dusk approached. A kind of vast, very beautiful open-air prison... The beach, especially for those living in coastal cities — and anyone debating on whether to live by the seaside — offered a vast panorama of sea and open sky: a relief from the narrow canyoned streets and tower blocks more claustrophobic than the mountains.

So, given a choice, where would I prefer to live? The sheer biodiversity offered by the mountains put them just ahead in the race. Or so I believed, until I came across Sejal Mehta's gem of a book, *Superpowers on the Shore* (Penguin) that described the kaleidoscopic and astonishing life forms that existed on every shoreline — from property-obsessed hermit crabs and chrysanthemum-like anemones to shape-shifting octopuses (which you could meet even at Juhu beach), all of which had been shamefully ignored because you were stupid enough not to look down. So, the scores were level: Mountains: 1, Seashore: 1.

But there's a very simple solution to this quandary if you manage to pull it off: Spend the winter by the sea and the summer in the mountains.

Schools That Care

Children want schools where there is understanding without judgment, and teachers being curious about what sustains them and standing alongside them, not against them

IMAGINE

BY SHELA SEN

NARRATIVE AND FAMILY  
THERAPIST, WRITER,  
CO-FOUNDER  
OF CHILDREN FIRST



IN THE old British times, canaries were sent down coal mining shafts to detect toxic gases. I think our children are metaphorical canaries of our times. Keeping in mind the spate of recent children's suicides, the youngest being nine years old, I am going to put the spotlight on our schools for this rising toxicity. This is not to blame but to reflect and take accountability for how we are harming our children.

Schools can perpetuate torture on our children in the name of discipline. From an early age, children start getting branded with labels like 'lazy', 'duffer', 'pagal', 'slow', 'nalayak', 'failure', 'good for nothing' and so on; the ones targeted the most being generally the most vulnerable — children with visible and invisible disabilities, those who do not get high grades, who come from low-income, non-savarna families.

I have heard stories of children being locked in dark bathrooms, beaten, having their tiffin taken away and not being allowed to go to the toilet until they wet their pants. In the news, we hear of much worse — children being asked to clean toilets; a child dying after being made to do 100 sit-ups; a pen being pressed between tiny fingers; being tied up and beaten; branded with a hot iron; standing on a chair until collapse; being made to stand in the sun in peak summer afternoon.

What is the most frightening about this "torture-in-the-name-of-discipline method" is that it weaponises the very people who can protect the child — peers and parents. Sona grew up in a shelter home for street children. She shared that once her teacher tore up her notebook in class, calling her a "duffer" and encouraged other children to join in the public humiliation. During the break, she spent hours locked in the toilet to escape her peers. Anand was forced to take off his trousers in class and the class jeered at him when he started crying. Shahana, studying in Class 10, described it as, "schools are like *The Hunger Games*. We are pitted against each other and it is survival of the fittest".

Parents are also recruited into this deadly game by repeated complaints and blame. Again, the ones most targeted are those whose children do not fit the normative ideas of academic success. They are humiliated in the PTMs, in the principals' offices and, in turn, in their desperation, they punish their children.

Children do not suddenly, on a whim, decide they want to end their lives. They hang on to threads that tie them to life — it could be a loving home, a sense of belonging in school, a feeling of worthiness, knowing that they are active agents in their own lives and so much more. What if threads were snipped off one at a time until there is nothing but shame, isolation and no hope? Then, a little nudge can be a tipping point. Maybe it was an impulse at that time but



GETTY IMAGES

we erase the months and years that led to that moment.

There has been huge outrage at the number of suicides in children in the past couple of weeks. One in Class 4, one in Class 7 and one in Class 10. How can we even make sense of this? I have heard statements like, "Children these days are very fragile", "They are too impulsive." These ideas are problematic as they assume that our children are disordered, when it is the structural and systemic injustices in our society that are out of order. Canaries cannot be blamed for the toxicity in the mines.

Safety at the core of education

Saving our children's lives is a civil rights issue. We have to keep their safety at the centre and then think about how we design education around it. Not vice versa.

Once we have that clarity, then there are so many innovative ways to re-imagine schooling.

Upholding the dignity of every child

The National Education Policy (NEP) has five foundational pillars: access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability. What if, at the centre of all these, was upholding the dignity of every child? Not just as a vague concept but as clear practice guidelines on language, respect, how to respond to children when they go through difficult times and ways to build inclusive classrooms, etc. You might dismiss this as requiring too many resources or time but let's go back to the principle. We have to keep children's safety at the centre and then think about how we design education around it. Not vice versa.

SAFETY BEGINS  
AT SCHOOL  
Saving our  
children's lives is a  
civil rights issue

Accountability

Many times, teachers have shared with me that they are aware that some teachers are extremely "cruel" towards students but they do not want to talk about it because they fear a backlash or, at times, even losing their job. It is the management's job to ensure accountability is woven into daily practices. We cannot wait for our children to die to start taking action. It also does not help if the action against teachers is punitive. That perpetuates the culture of harm and injustice. Teachers are just replicating what they have learned in the culture they have grown up in. We have to design wholesome systems that include training in compassion as a pre-requisite to being a teacher, an early response to transgressions and a system that prioritises teachers' wellbeing. Schools that care for their teachers care for their children.

Peer mentoring

Many times, children find it easier to talk to other children who are non-judgmental and can understand the struggles of being a student. What if, in every school, some senior students were trained as peer mentors who could provide a safe space to listen, understand or even gently steer them toward an adult whom they trust such as a parent, a school counsellor or a teacher? I have heard so many stories of children who have shared their struggles with a peer and felt immense relief that someone "gets it" and "I am not the

only one who feels like this". This approach is impactful when participation is voluntary and the peer mentors are well-trained and supported by the counselling team.

Schools that Care

I remember an instance when a school principal was telling me how particular they were about their 'anti-bullying policy'. Soon after, I saw her berating a teacher harshly in front of me. I was reminded of a young 16-year-old's words, "Management bullies the principal, the principal bullies the teachers and then the teachers bully the students. Then they tell the students not to bully others."

When I asked young people, "What will make for safer schools?" their answers reminded me that the problem might be complex but the solution does not have to be rocket science. "Let our worth not be defined by our grades" and "show us that you care". What they are asking for is simple — understanding without judgment, being curious about what sustains them and keeps them going and standing alongside them, not against them. A fellow therapist shared a statement by a young person who was contemplating suicide, which will stay with me forever: "Don't try to stop us, try to understand us. When you understand us, together we can try to stop us."

Schools That Care is an initiative by Children First for building communities of care

Listening to the Peaks

'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' cannot be a banner. It must be a becoming



SLICE OF LIFE

BY SUVIR SARAN

CHEF, AUTHOR, EDUCATOR  
AND WORLD TRAVELLER

BOTH ADVAITA  
AND SUFISM  
INSIST THE  
DIVINE IS IN  
EVERYONE,  
DISSOLVE  
DIVISION  
REMEMBER  
UNITY AND  
RETURN TO  
THE ONE

ON THE flight from Ahmedabad to Dehradun, watching clouds peel open to reveal the first folds of the Himalayas, I felt something ancient — a whisper, a warning, a welcome. The mountains were calling not to climb them but to return to ourselves.

As a child of the '70s and '80s, Dehradun and Mussoorie were declarations: the world could be tender, thoughtful, touched by the divine. Dev bhumi was not a slogan then; it was scent and soil. The mountains were mentors. They taught us that to rise, one must also root.

But the Dehradun I arrived in was tight — tight with traffic, tempers, towers and a shrinking of generosity. This was the land of sages and seers yet it seemed smothered by its own speed. The mountains, once moral mirrors, now reflected our madness.

I had come from Ahmedabad's Food for Thought Festival, where the air was softer, conversations almost Gandhian. But in Dehradun, the hunger was different; for oxygen — of empathy, openness, ease. And there, under the banner 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', I felt the force of irony. The world outside did not feel like one family. Yet as I looked deeper, the audience reminded me that even tightly packed cities can host expansive hearts. Many were turbaned Sikhs, instantly bringing Guru Nanak into the room.

Guru Nanak, who walked across continents to ask one disarming question: What is religion without humanity? His *Ek Omkar* is not a chant but a consciousness.

Earlier that day, as I descended from the mountains toward the festival, I had been speaking with Parabjot Bali, reflecting on the sanctity of true faith. Guru Nanak's teachings, I told him, were never about religion but about liberation. Little did I know I would walk onto a stage carrying those truths on my tongue. And as I sat down, *Ek Omkar* flowing through me, Vedantic 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' glowing above me, another lineage rose like incense inside my ribcage — Ajmer Sharif. I thought of my friend Salman Chishty, descendant of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, whose *dargah* has, for eight centuries, shown India that the shortest road to God passes through the heart of another human being.

Standing there, I felt the profound kinship between Sufism and Advaita Vedanta, two mystical rivers that have flowed across our subcontinent for millennia. Both begin at the same liberating truth: There is no 'other'. There is only One.

Shankaracharya declared with thunderous clarity: *Brahma satyam, jagan mithya* — The Absolute alone is real; multiplicity is illusion. The Sufis sang the same truth in whispering ecstasy: "I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found only God." Advaita says the world is a shimmering of Brahman. Sufism says the world is a shadow of the Beloved. Advaita dissolves the seeker into the Self. Sufism dissolves the lover into the Beloved. Different metaphors, same merger.

In Advaita, ego or *ahamkara* blinds us. In Sufism, ego or *nafs* blinds us. Both ask us to polish the heart until it becomes a mirror



SUVIR SARAN

UNITED, WE STAND  
India's truest strength is ancient — the ability to see the divine in the different

of the Real. At Ajmer, thousands bow their heads not to doctrine but to the dissolving of distance — between human and human, between human and divine. This is non-duality lived as atmosphere.

Both Advaita and Sufism insist the divine is in everyone. And standing under that tent in Dehradun, I felt them merge into a single voice: Dissolve division. Remember unity. Return to the One.

It was at that moment that lines from *Earth*, Deepa Mehta's masterpiece, returned to me with a shiver — lines that have haunted me since I first heard them: *Gunj rahi hai kitni cheekhein, pyaar ki baatein kaun sune. Toot rahe hain kitne sapne, inke tukde kaun chune. Dil ke darwazon par taale, taalon paryeh zang hai kyun? Ishvar Allah tere jahaan mein nafrat kyun hai, jung hai kyun? Tera dil to itna bada hai — insaan ka dil tang hai kyun?*

Why indeed is the divine heart vast while the human heart grows small? Why are dreams breaking faster than hands can gather their pieces? Why do the songs of love grow faint while the screams of hatred grow loud? These questions are older than

war, politics, borders. And yet they are our questions still.

As the festival conversation deepened, people leaned in. The mountains outside seemed to exhale with us. Toward the end, someone asked me about the India I believe in. What rose wasn't policy — it was memory. India is having a luminous moment — loud, global, undeniable. But its truest strength is ancient: the ability to see the divine in the different; to match progress with presence; to hold technology in one hand and tenderness in the other. The world is fractured, fevered, frightened. But India has walked through shadows and still chosen light.

As I left the festival, I rolled down the window. Cedar drifted in. Dehradun felt a little less tight; as if the mountains had whispered to it, too. And I heard that whisper again: Return to oneness. Return to each other. Return to yourself. Because 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' cannot be a banner. It must be a becoming. And, perhaps, the mountains are simply reminding us: The divine is not somewhere else. It is within us. Always was. Always will be.



SCIENCE

How much plastic is too much for marine birds, mammals, turtles?

Divya Gandhi

Nearly 1,300 marine species, including every family of seabirds and marine mammals, ingest hard and soft plastics, rubber, and fishing debris. This tragic habit can kill many of these marine animals by blocking or puncturing the gastrointestinal or by twisting the intestines.

A study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* has quantified the amount of plastics sea-

birds, marine mammals, and sea turtles ingest and the minimum quantities at which the plastics mortally wound their gastrointestinal tracts.

Researchers from the University of Toronto studied published data from more than 10,000 necropsies performed on sea animals from 57 sources and found that 35% of seabirds, 12% of marine mammals, and 47% of sea turtles had swallowed plastic – and that 1.6%, 0.7%, and 4.4%

had respectively died as a result. The study included 1,537 seabirds (57 species), 7,569 marine mammals (31 species), and 1,306 sea turtles (seven species).

Ocean Plastics Research Ocean Conservancy manager and study coauthor Erin Murphy told *The Hindu*, “The most common marine mammals in our dataset were the striped dolphin, sperm whale, South American fur seal, and Florida manatee.” Among birds, the alba-

tross, gull, and tern were most often the victims, as were all seven species of sea turtles. Six to 405 pieces of ingested macroplastic, amounting to a volume of 0.044 to 39.89 ml per cm of body length, “lead to a 90% chance of mortality in these marine species,” the paper found.

Rubber was the most fatal for seabirds, soft plastics and fishing debris for marine mammals, and hard and soft plastics for sea turtles.

“Quantifying the risk of macroplastic ingestion also poses challenges compared to microplastics,” the paper read. “While laboratory studies can be used to inform quantitative risk assessments for microplastics, it is difficult to conduct laboratory or manipulative experiments to measure the effects of macroplastic pollution.”

Sea turtles had the highest frequencies and loads of plastic, at nearly 50% of samples, followed by sea-

birds (35%) and marine mammals (12%). Sea turtles were also more likely to have suffered due to ingested plastics.

Dr. Murphy said the team’s work supports policies to reduce plastic pollution and specifically target the most dangerous plastics, such as plastic bags: “We also hope this research can inform national action plans as they work to set science-based targets to mitigate the harms of plastic pollution.”

SNAPSHOTS



Adenine base editing revs up against two blood disorders

Scientists have tested a gene-editing method called adenine base editing to fix two severe mutations that cause  $\beta$ -thalassaemia, a genetic blood disease. In blood-forming stem cells taken from patients, they corrected two mutations in the *HBB* gene. The cells subsequently produced red blood cells with more normal  $\beta$ -globin and fewer signs of stressed cells. The same strategy applied to stem cells from people who had both sickle cell disease and  $\beta$ -thalassaemia yielded fewer sickle-shaped cells after deoxygenation tests.



Mars has an active electrical environment, find scientists

Using the Perseverance rover’s microphone to catch electrical activity in Martian dust, scientists have identified 55 ‘sparks’ caused by dust and sand grains rubbing together over two Martian years. From the signals, the team showed that near-surface electric fields on Mars can become strong to trigger lightning-like discharges. These discharges can help lift dust, change how dust clumps together, and drive chemical reactions to create oxidising molecules and chlorine compounds in the atmosphere and soil.



Male elephants in captivity can come together as friends

As captive breeding becomes more important in preserving Asian elephants, scientists have found a way to bring unrelated males together without prompting aggressive behaviour in a Laos facility. They were introduced first with limited contact, then in shared open spaces. In both stages, friendly actions were more common than fearful ones. Over time, friendly behaviours became more stable. The team ascertained its methods by measuring hormone levels in dung samples.

Hormone therapy can alter proteins in transwomen’s blood

A study in Melbourne has found feminising hormone therapy reshapes blood proteins in transgender women, aligning them with cisgender patterns; the findings flag long-term health risks and underscore the need for more inclusive research

Sayantana Datta

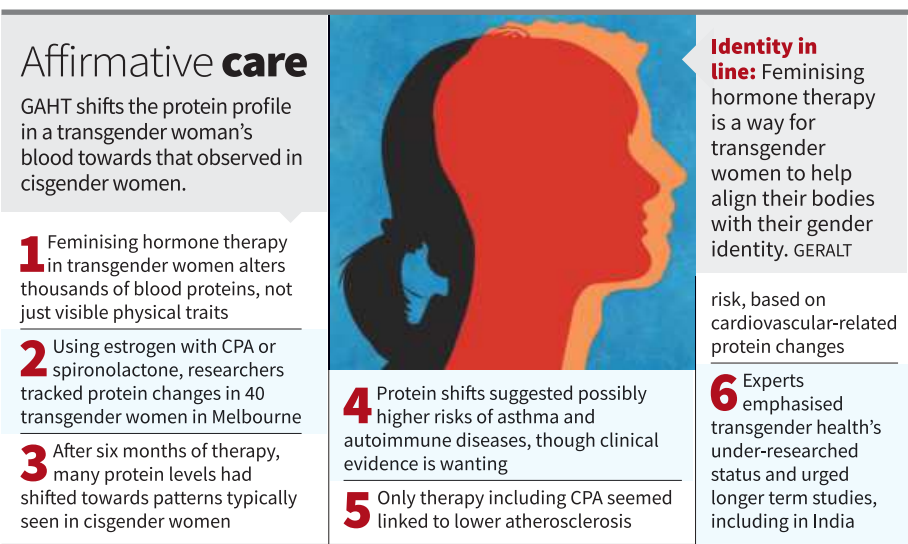
The effects of feminising gender-affirmative hormone therapy (GAHT) are more than skin deep, research in *Nature Medicine* has reported, with the changes going down to the very proteins circulating in a person’s blood.

Sanjay Kalra, an endocrinologist and the former president of the Indian Professional Association for Transgender Health, said the study “sheds light on a new aspect of transgender medicine”.

Transgender people are those whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender women, who are assigned male sex at birth but identify as women, may opt for GAHT to help align their bodies with their gender identity. Feminising GAHT typically involves a combination of estrogen and an antiandrogen like cyproterone acetate (CPA) or spironolactone (SpiroL). Antiandrogens block the effects of testosterone and dihydrotestosterone, hormones that play key roles in the development of male sexual characteristics, muscle growth, and in determining how fat is deposited in the body.

Scientists and physicians have known since the 1970s that GAHT redistributes fat, reduces facial and body hair growth, and develops breasts in transgender women’s bodies. According to the new stu-



dy, GAHT also shifts the profile of proteins circulating in a transgender woman’s blood towards levels observed in cisgender women. It took researchers this long to find this because “transgender health has historically been under-researched,” University of Melbourne endocrinologist Ada Cheung, who co-led the study, said.

The technology required to measure thousands of proteins in the body at the same time is also new and still quite expensive, the authors added.

The deeper biological changes may also increase the long-term susceptibility of transgender women to asthma and autoimmune disorders, the study found. Experts clarified that these risks have yet to be clinically observed.

The study enrolled 40 transgender women in Melbourne, assigning half to estrogen + CPA and half to estrogen + SpiroL. Re-

searchers obtained blood samples at baseline before initiating GAHT and again at the six-month mark.

Then they isolated blood plasma from the samples and measured the levels of over 5,000 proteins.

Their analysis identified 245 proteins whose levels had changed in the CPA group and 91 proteins in the SpiroL group. In both groups, GAHT had decreased the levels of most of these proteins. The researchers were also able to attribute GAHT’s effects on proteins to decreased testosterone concentration, increased body fat percentage, and higher breast volume.

The team also checked proteins whose levels had already been reported to vary with sex in a cisgender population using the UK Biobank’s Pharma Proteomics project. Using a computational technique, they found the levels of 36

such proteins were correlated with GAHT involving CPA and of 22 proteins with GAHT involving SpiroL. And for both groups, GAHT noticeably changed these proteins’ levels towards the pattern generally observed in cisgender women.

The findings suggest “the changes go far beyond what we see on the outside; they happen deep inside the body’s cells and systems,” Dr. Cheung said.

The results also suggested that using either CPA or SpiroL might shift protein profiles towards those consistent with higher risks of allergic asthma and autoimmune diseases. Only CPA use shifted protein levels to those suggestive of lower atherosclerosis risk, i.e., the risk of blood vessels narrowing and hardening due to fat deposits.

Dr. Cheung cautioned, however, that the risks are “only possibilities, not proven. We don’t yet have clin-

The many roles of sugarcane in India and the world



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

A recent paper by Olivier Garsmeur and colleagues titled ‘The genomic footprints of wild Saccharum species trace domestication, diversification, and modern breeding of sugarcane’ in the journal *Cell* conducted genomic analyses of 390 sugarcane breeds from Australia, Brazil, China, France, French Polynesia, India, Japan, and the U.S.

These plants were hybrids of a variety of genes, with multiple chromosomes in them (polyploidy). Such polyploidy had occurred due to commercial transport by human breeders, who transported and sold sugarcane across various states in a country and across countries as well, including in Afghanis-

tan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.

They also pointed out that while sugarcane is a cash crop that is used for its sweetness, it is also used to produce bioethanol, which is produced as a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels in private and public transport and commercial vehicles.

Sugarcane in India

India produces a large amount of sugarcane, particularly across 13 States. The top five States by production in 2018-2019 to 2023-2024 were Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat. About 4,400 lakh tonnes of sugarcane were produced in 2024-2025.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research has also established several sugar research institutes across the country that use classical botanical methods and molecular biological methods to improve the variety and yield of su-



India produces a large amount of sugarcane. GETTY IMAGES

garcane. The oldest of these, which is the Sugarcane Breeding Institute in Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, conducted molecular genetic analyses of four different sources across India to study the genetic diversity. This was in 2006, with the researchers’ findings published in the journal *Genetic Resources and Crop Evolution* (53, 1221-1231).

While the aforementioned Garsmeur et al. paper used samples from the western countries, China, the Coimbatore group used samples from Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu. Upon genetic analysis, the researchers found that Arunachal Pradesh had the most diverse sugarcane breeds.

In a 2018 paper in *3 Biotech*, scientists from the Indian Institute of Sugarcane Research in Lucknow also analysed the genetic diversity and population structure of 92 sugarcane varieties from subtropical parts of the country, again revealing the abundance of sugarcanes of many types in India.

Traditional medicine practitioners in China, India, and Pakistan have also been using sugarcane in their therapies. In this connection, a recent review from China, titled ‘The chemical composition and biological activities of sugarcane: Potential medicinal value and sustainable development’, pointed out that traditional Chinese medicine resources are facing serious problems in terms of sustainable development, causing a shortage that is being aggravated by changes in the natural environment and uncontrolled human harvesting.

Therefore, it is of great significance for the maintenance and development of traditional Chinese medicine resources to study those resources that have medicinal value and crop potential and to discover new uses for them. In their review, the authors discussed the chemical composition of sugarcane and its potential bioactivities, explored its applications in medicine, and charted the potential direction of future research.

As Grasmear *et al.* also noted, sugarcane is also used to produce bioethanol, which is a greener alternative to diesel or petrol in passenger vehicles like cars and buses, as well as for trucks. India has also started using sugarcane wastes, rice, and wheat to manufacture bioethanol, with the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas having started making bioethanol in Assam. In all, we look forward to a greener India with sugarcane.



Question Corner

Steady flame

How can candle wicks hold a flame for so long? - Sadhika G.

A candle wick holds a flame because it isn’t just a string that burns. Its main purpose is to deliver fuel to the part that’s very hot. When you light the wick, the heat quickly melts the wax near its base. The wick is made of cotton fibres woven tightly together, and they together serve as ‘tubes’. Through capillary action, they draw the liquid wax upwards against gravity, just as a paper towel suspended over a bucket of water will absorb it upwards. Near the flame, the liquid wax gets hotter and turns into vapour. And it’s the

wax vapour rather than the solid or liquid wax that actually burns. As long as the wick can keep supplying vapour at roughly the same rate the flame consumes it, the flame will be steady. The wick itself chars slowly. Good wicks are designed to curl over as they burn, moving the tip into the hottest part of the flame. There, the excess wick turns to ash and breaks off, so it doesn’t grow too long and produce smoke. This is how a candle keeps a flame alive for many hours.

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



FAQ

Why has Goa been asked to set up a tiger reserve?

What are the complexities of setting up core and buffer zones? How many households are likely to be affected?

Jacob Koshy

**The story so far:** The Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of the Supreme Court has recommended that the Goa government establish a tiger reserve in the State in a “phased” manner.

**What prompted the CEC?** In July 2023, the Bombay High Court had directed the Goa government to notify five “protected areas”, namely the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary, Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary, Bhagwan Mahavir National Park, Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary, and Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary (collectively referred to as the ‘Mhadei WLS and Other Areas’), as a “tiger reserve, within a period of three months.” It also ordered the State government to prepare a Tiger Conservation Plan and to determine and settle the rights and claims of Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers. The order stemmed from a petition filed by the Goa Foundation after the alleged poisoning deaths of a female tiger and her three cubs in the Mhadei Sanctuary in 2020. In 2016, the National Tiger Conservation Authority had recommended these areas be declared a tiger reserve.

**How did the Goa government respond?** The Goa government filed a Special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court against the order. It was reluctant to have the areas declared as a tiger reserve on the grounds that nearly “one lakh people” would be affected. However, in its own affidavit, it later conceded

The forests of Goa, particularly its wildlife sanctuaries, often form a contiguous corridor for tigers in neighbouring Karnataka and Maharashtra

that there were only about 1,274 households in 33 villages within the five protected areas, which worked out to approximately 5,000-6,000 individuals. It also argued that there were no “resident” tigers in Goa and the handful that passed through its forests were a “transient” population. The forests of Goa, particularly its wildlife sanctuaries, often form a contiguous corridor for tigers in the Kali Tiger Reserve in Karnataka and the Sahyadri in Maharashtra. However, this claim was ironic because in 2018, a report from its submissions to the Mhadei Water Disputes tribunal suggested that it had argued the opposite: that there was “...evidence to show that tigers in Goa were not merely transient animals, but are a resident population and the forests around Chorla, Mann and Kankumbi comprise a contiguous tiger landscape corridor to Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka and to Anshi Dandeli (now called Kali) Tiger Reserve to its south which has around 35 tigers.” The SC asked the CEC to conduct a site visit and “examine” the issue and file a report before the Court’s next hearing. The CEC filed its report last week.

**What did the CEC report state?** In its report, the CEC, which conducted site visits said there was “apprehension” among several dwellers that they would be displaced and it was incumbent upon the State government to allay their fears. The committee recommended that parks and sanctuaries of Goa that were “directly contiguous” to the Kali Tiger Reserve in adjoining Karnataka, and known to host a permanent tiger presence, form the “core” part of the Goa reserve. It suggested that the areas adjoining the Kali Tiger Reserve be designated as a “buffer zone” of the proposed reserve. “Such a phased approach is likely to minimise disturbance to local communities, while ensuring that the most ecologically-sensitive and least-inhabited areas are brought under enhanced protection at the earliest stage,” the report notes. This will mean including the Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary (50 households) and Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary (41 households) in the first phase, adding up to 296.7 sq km in the core zone. Similarly, it sought the protected areas contiguous with the buffer zone of the Kali Tiger Reserve and having minimal human habitation, namely, the northern part of Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary (9 households) and Bhagwan Mahavir National Park (2 households), be considered as the buffer zone of the proposed Goa Tiger Reserve in the first phase. Their argument was that this contiguity would strengthen landscape-level connectivity and ecological functionality.

**Why does it matter?** While Protected Areas and Wildlife Sanctuaries already invite the highest degree of State protection, declaring a region as a ‘tiger reserve’ translates to more funds for conservation and research. However, it also means designating certain parts of the forest as ‘core’ and ‘buffer zones.’ Core zones are supposed to be “inviolate” and if people happen to be resident, they are incentivised – but cannot be forced – to leave the area and settle elsewhere. Buffer zones, on the other hand, do not require to be inviolate and are tolerant of a broader range of human activity.

How will new codes change labour laws?

What are the key features of the four Labour Codes? What will be the impact of the new laws on trade unions and tripartite mechanisms? Will more workers be brought into the ambit of social security schemes? When will the government start rolling out the new codes?

A. M. Jigeesh

**The story so far:** On November 21, Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya announced the implementation of four Labour Codes – the Code on Wages, 2019, Industrial Relations Code, 2020, Code on Social Security, 2020 and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHC) Code, 2020. Parliament had passed these codes between 2019 and 2020.

**Why is the process taking time?** As labour is in the concurrent list, both the States and Centre have the power to makes Rules. The Centre published draft Rules for each code between July 7, 2020 and November 19, 2020; and as on July 2025, 32 States and Union Territories have also pre-published draft Rules under the four Labour Codes. According to a statement in Parliament during the last Monsoon session, West Bengal and Lakshadweep have not pre-published draft Rules under any Labour Codes. Delhi has pre-published draft Rules only under the Code on Wages. Tamil Nadu is yet to pre-publish draft Rules under the Code on Social Security. The Centre stated that the delay in implementing the Rules was mostly because of the lag in States.

**What are the key features?** The Code on Wages repeals the Payment of Wages Act, 1936, the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965 and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. The Industrial Relations Code amalgamates the Trade Unions Act, 1926, the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 and the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The Code on Social Security nullifies nine Acts including the Employees’



In rage: Workers from across Karnataka demand a repeal of the four Labour Codes, at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on November 27. ALLEN EGENUSE J

Trade unions worry the codes will take away several federal rights, including the right to decide minimum wages

Compensation Act, 1923, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and the Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008. The OSHWC Code repeals Acts such as the Factories Act, 1948, the Mines Act, 1952, and the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. The Government repealed and codified 29 Acts that decided the structure of labour rights from the colonial period to the first United Progressive Alliance government.

**What are the major changes?** According to the Government, the Labour Codes promote formalisation of employment, expand social security coverage, ensure minimum and timely wages for more workers, provide for engaging more women in the workforce and reduce compliance burden for employers. Some of the other features include mandatory appointment letters to all workers, social security such as provident fund and State insurance for all workers including gig and platform workers, and a statutory right for minimum wage payment. Women can now work at night and in all types of work across establishments, and they will have equal opportunities in high-paying roles. A national floor wage will be set to ensure no worker receives a wage below the minimum living standard. Gender-neutral pay and job opportunities, prohibiting discrimination against transgender persons, and “shifting enforcement towards guidance, awareness and compliance support rather than punitive action,” are some of the other features.

**How have employers responded?** Almost all employers’ organisations have welcomed the Codes. The president-designate of the Confederation of Indian Industries R. Mukundan told *The Hindu* that the labyrinthine labour law framework needed to be simplified, harmonised and modernised. “The Labour Codes do exactly that. They will create jobs, ensure social protection and maintain industrial harmony in a fast advancing economy,” he said. He argues that the uniformity across States, digital filings, reduced disputes and the emphasis on flexibility will make India a more attractive destination for doing business. However, representatives of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are sceptical. The Association of Indian Entrepreneurs (AIE) fear that the new Labour Codes may significantly increase operating costs for MSMEs and disrupt business continuity across key sectors. “While AIE fully supports progressive labour reforms and the need for a modern workforce framework, the organisation has cautioned that

the immediate impact on MSMEs could be severe unless governments provide clarity, transitional support, and flexible implementation mechanisms,” it said in a statement. It is seeking a transitional grace period with reduced penalties for MSMEs.

**What are the concerns of trade unions?** Barring the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), all Central Trade Unions (CTUs) are opposed to the Labour Codes. Ten CTUs and associated federations organised strikes against the proposed Labour Codes in 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023 and on July 9, 2025. The BMS has welcomed the implementation of two Labour Codes, the Code on Wages and Code on Social Security, and has questioned provisions in the Industrial Relations Code and the OSHWC Code. The CTUs worry that the codes will take away several federal rights, including the right to decide minimum wages in the States. The floor wage, according to them, is a joke played on workers as in the past too, the Centre had failed to address the demands and realities of workers. On social security, the CTUs argue that 93% of the workers are not covered under any social security and the codes have no provision to improve the scenario. Also, the threshold of workers for factory licence has been increased and this will exclude a lot more workers from the social security and minimum wages provisions, allege trade unions. On the Industrial Code too, they have issues as there will be “unwarranted restrictions” on the functioning of trade unions, including “limitations on membership, restrictions on outsiders serving as office-bearers, and the introduction of concepts such as the sole negotiating union and the negotiating council.” The right to strike also sees curtailments in the code. Trade unions have questioned the reduction of retrenchment notice pay, limiting the period for workers’ money claims, exclusion of house rent allowance from the definition of “wages”, the overall emphasis on contractualisation and allowing women workers in night shifts in sectors such as mines.

**What lies ahead?** The Government has announced that all stakeholders will get 45 days to respond to the draft Rules of the Codes which it will again pre-publish with some modifications. Opposition-ruled States have reservations: Kerala said it will not implement the codes, while Karnataka, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu have also questioned the Centre’s “unilateral” approach. The trade unions have urged the Government to convene the Indian Labour Conference, the tripartite forum that has not met for over a decade, at the earliest. Employers also want to the government to facilitate more discussions at the factory level so that relations are not hampered at a time when businesses are facing challenges globally.

What are the facts on uranium in breast milk?

Where were the samples taken? What has the report highlighted? What are the World Health Organization guidelines on permissible limits? Why do doctors say mothers must continue to breast feed? Why must the civic administration keep checking groundwater?

Ramya Kannan

**The story so far:** A recent study published from Bihar has revealed traces of uranium (U238) in the breast milk of lactating mothers across six districts of the State. This was followed by a period of panic, as shock set in over the presence of uranium, a known radioactive substance, in breast milk, being consumed by infants. However, a deeper reading of the study reveals that while the facts are concerning, and will have to be attended to forthwith, in this particular instance, the cancer scare associated with exposure to radioactive metals appears to be non-existent.

**What did the study highlight?** In the paper titled ‘Discovery of uranium content in breast milk and assessment of associated health risks for mothers and infants in Bihar, India’, published on November 21, in *Nature*, Arun Kumar et al said samples of breast milk were taken from 40 mothers selected randomly from six districts of Bihar – Begusarai, Katihar, Nalanda, Samastipur, Kagharia and Bhojpur – between October 2021 and July 2024. The samples underwent a detailed uranium analysis at the Mahavir Cancer Sansthan &



Improving maternal health: Women waiting their turn at a primary health centre in Vaishali, Bihar, in 2016. FILE PHOTO

The study concludes that the actual impact on infant health is likely low

Research Centre in Patna. The results showed all breast milk samples had uranium concentrations between 0 microgram/L and 5.25 microgram/L. The highest U238 concentration was observed in Katihar district. The authors linked uranium in breast milk to uranium contamination of ground water, citing earlier groundwater studies to establish the link. There is currently no permissible limit or benchmark specified for uranium concentration in breast milk. However, the World Health Organization has set a provisional guideline limit of 30 microgram/L of uranium in drinking water.

**What impact does it have on breast milk?** Scientists found the uranium isotope 238 (U238), said to be the most common isotope, making up over 99% of natural uranium in breast milk. It is a weakly radioactive, dense, and very heavy metal. It occurs naturally in the environment, and can be found in almost all rock, soil, and water, including the oceans, though in low concentrations. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), “external exposure to uranium is not as dangerous as exposure to other radioactive elements because the skin will block the alpha particles [in the uranium]. However, ingestion of high concentrations of uranium can cause health effects, such as cancer of the bone or liver.” A person can be exposed to uranium by inhaling dust in air, or ingesting water and food contaminated with uranium. The general population is exposed to trace levels of uranium primarily through food and water, according to the USEPA. The authors add: “In recent years, groundwater uranium [U238] poisoning has posed serious health hazards in the exposed population. In India, an estimated 151 districts and 18 States have reported groundwater uranium contamination, and about 1.7% of groundwater sources are affected in Bihar.”

**Does it affect mothers and infants?** Ashok Sharma of AIIMS Delhi, one of the authors, told the media that uranium was found in all samples but remains under permissible

limits, implying low expected health impact. The study concludes that the actual impact on infant health is likely low, and that most of the uranium absorbed by mothers is excreted primarily through urine, not concentrated in breast milk. Dr. Sharma added that 70% of the infants showed potential non-carcinogenic risk in the assessment but the levels observed are expected to have “minimal actual health impact” on mothers and infants, and breastfeeding should continue unless a clinical reason requires otherwise. If long-term exposure to uranium continues in infants, it may affect kidney development and cognitive and mental health outcomes (including low IQ and neurodevelopmental delay). Senior consultant gastroenterologist and former President of Indian Medical Association Cochin, Rajeev Jayadevan, seeks to place this controversy in the right context. “The word uranium can cause panic among the general public because of its obvious radioactivity implication. In fact, uranium is only one among many elements naturally found in groundwater, not only in India but in numerous countries worldwide. Groundwater is commonly used for drinking; naturally, small amounts of these elements enter the human body and get safely excreted in the urine. Only a small fraction enters the breast milk – and the levels found in this study are about six times lower than WHO’s safe limit for drinking water. Thus, compared to an adult who drinks a large quantity of water, the total amount of uranium consumed by a baby through breast milk is extremely small.” The actual immediate danger, he says, is that people might misunderstand or misinterpret the study, and stop breast-feeding in panic. Insufficient breast-feeding is a major cause of infant mortality, infections, and malnutrition, Dr. Jayadevan says. Therefore, while reporting the study, it must be emphasised that breast-feeding is safe. Periodic groundwater studies must be conducted to ensure that concentrations of metals and other contaminants do not exceed ‘safe’ limits in the food chain. The paper calls for future studies with larger sample sizes and environmental uranium profiling (in water, soil, and diet). Isotope-specific measurements are warranted to better understand maternal-infant uranium kinetics in exposed populations. Further studies are being planned to study uranium contamination in breast milk in other States.

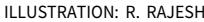


# Striking a balance in a divided nation

The new Chief Justice of India, who will serve until February 2027, believes that justice is not merely about resolving disputes, but about 'protecting the innocent from being lost in the storms of circumstance'

## Take the case of former BJP

However, earlier this year, when the case came up again for hearing, Justice Kant, now heading a Bench and poised



In 2021, Justice Kant was one of the judges on the Bench which ordered the suspension of the sedition provision (Section 124A) of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code. Four years later, in 2025, Justice Kant, now heading the Bench, turned around to question if potential abuse of Section 152, a provision which criminalises acts endangering national sovereignty and

Justice Kant gave interim bail to academician Ali Khan Mahmudabad, hounded by the Haryana Police, for his social media posts on the sufferings caused by war and Operation Sindoor. But the judge also suspected the academician of “dog whistling” and formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) of senior police officers to scour his online posts for “dual meaning”.

Chief Justice Kant has time till February 9, 2027, an ample window to prove he is there for innocents “lost in the storms of circumstance”, like the crores of voters caught in the ‘SIR’ cyclone.

At a time when the Supreme Court is moving towards more technology-driven solutions, Justice Kant chooses to remind everyone that justice is a “profoundly human enterprise” that no machine can replicate

The coming months – particularly the findings of the Dubai crash investigation – will be crucial. However, for now, HAL and the IAF remain firm that Tejas continues to be a safe, reliable and strategically vital platform for India's air combat capability.



## MOTHER FIGURES

‘Motherhood’ and ‘mother’ are comfortable notions, almost inevitably associated with women. They draw on ideas of care and nurture, scoldings and love, protection and understanding. The everyday mother could be thought to be capable of becoming like the great mothers of literature — the mother in Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* or Maurya in J.M. Synge’s *Riders to The Sea*. People tend to think they can appeal to the essential ‘motherliness’ in women. In art, the mother-and-child image in the West and the East all contribute to the deeply-embedded association in the mind of society of mothers always being women holding their children in their protective arms. These symbolise the strength of the tradition.

This tradition was challenged in a discussion between a mental health rights activist and a psychologist whose main message was that motherhood is a role, not a gender identity. The appearance of a gender identity is forged by the family and the society and is confirmed by their expectations. According to the discussants, the notion of mother is linked to a married woman and a relationship, but anyone can take up the role of mother, or refuse to take it up. This implied, on the one hand, a blindness induced by society in the face of the growing number of single mothers and, on the other hand, a denial that being a mother is somehow the ‘essence’ of a

A mother need not always be a woman. It is a role anyone can take up

woman. It is a role that can be enacted for a friend’s children, for example, but transiently. The role can then be given up. Men looking after children are not such an oddity nowadays; they, too, are ‘mothers’, sometimes single, feeding children or changing nappies. There is often an economic necessity when there is distribution of childcare — both parents must work. Besides, more women need to or want to go out to work; that is their right. In such a situation, housework and childcare have to be shared while parents must ensure that the children are in a safe place while they are away — that is also ‘mothering’.

The discussants also laid much of the change of ideas at the door of the queer movement. This movement projects the fluidity of gender identities and emphasises non-binary roles. This naturally challenges the notion of mother as a woman or motherhood as the fulfilment of womanhood. A non-binary person may be excellent at ‘mothering’ or taking care of a child — it does not make that individual less of a mother for not being identified as a woman. In parallel, a woman may not want to be a mother or economic circumstances may make it difficult for a couple to rear a child. This does not mean that a woman is ‘unsexed’ or that she has not been fulfilled in her life. Society may be resistant to a change of ideas but it is everyday life that records the change.

## SCRIPSI

‘To fashion a persona out of one’s own undisguised self is no easy thing. A novel or a poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Into those surrogates will be poured all that the writer cannot address directly — inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, anti-social desires — but must address to achieve felt reality. The persona in a nonfiction narrative is an unsurrogated one... It’s like lying down on the couch in public — and while a writer may be willing to do just that, it is a strategy that most often simply doesn’t work... The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader.’

VIVIAN GORNICK

# Delimitation, Census and the SIR are under a shared cloud

## Shadows lengthen

G.N. DEVY

The minimum definition of democracy is one that offers an unhindered right to the *demos* — the citizens who constitute the nation — to elect a government of their choice, with every vote cast in the process having equal value. In India, the colonial legislations of 1861 and 1892 provided for ‘Councils’, for which the term, ‘elect’, meant just ‘to appoint’. The 1901 Act permitted an element of election, with a Central Legislative Council of 68 members of whom 27 were ‘elected’, though the electorate was restricted to a few ‘select’ bodies and individuals. The roots of the bicameral system of Parliament can be traced back to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, which provided for a Council of States with 60 members, of whom 34 were to be elected, and a Central Legislative Assembly made up of 145 members, of whom 105 were to be elected. The term of the Council was five years. In 1935, the British agreed to create a federal structure with assemblies for the provinces of Assam, Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces, Bombay and Madras. The Legislative Councils — the upper Houses — were to be permanent chambers with one-third members retiring every third year. When the Constituent Assembly worked from 1946 to 1949 towards formulating the Constitution, the general structure of a parliamentary democracy was very much in the consciousness of the political class in India. The formulation of the Constitution which enabled the transition from the pre-Independence Councils to the first general elections to Parliament was a giant leap forward. The Constitution provided every adult Indian with an inviolable right to vote for constituting the ‘House of the People’, the Lok Sabha. The universal voting right, with every vote having equal value, is the cornerstone of India’s democracy. Since 1952, 18 general elections have been held within that non-negotiable, constitutional, democratic framework.

The process of determining and adjusting the exact number of people’s representatives in Parliament as well as the precise area of the voters’ constituencies has been institutionalised in the Constitution by providing for a Delimitation Commission. Parliament is empowered to constitute the Delimitation Commission after every general election in order



to ensure that the ratio between the population of a state and the number of MLAs in the state assembly and the number of MPs it sends to Parliament is near-equal in the case of all states. The Delimitation Commission demarcates the voter constituencies, decides the number of elected representatives, and determines the number of reserved constituencies. The total strength of Lok Sabha MPs was increased three times — in 1952, 1962, and 1972 — by the respective Delimitation Commissions created under the Delimitation Acts. Since then, the number of MPs has remained unchanged. In 2002, the then Delimitation Commission did not increase the number but ruled that it could be increased through a fresh delimitation following the first census carried out after 2026.

The 1961 Census had reported 43.89 crore people to be India’s population and the delimitation process had determined 494 to be the number of MPs in the Lok Sabha; that is a little less than one million people per parliamentary constituency. In 1971, the census had placed the population figure at 548 million and there were 521 MPs in the Lok Sabha, bringing the average population per constituency to a little over one million. Later, the number was adjusted to 543 in view of the 1971 Census, making the ratio almost one MP for every million people. The 2011 Census had placed the Indian population at 121.01 crore. No census was carried out in 2021. It appears that an MP now represents close to 2.4 million people. Going by the statistics of voters in the 2024 general election, with qualified voters being 96.8 crore, every Lok Sabha MP represents close to 1.8 million voters. These figures determine the context

of the next delimitation process. If the total population is taken as the base for the 2029 election, and if the number of MPs is not increased, the ratio will be an MP per three million people, or one MP for nearly 2.3 million voters. The next Delimitation Commission may, therefore, look at substantially increasing the number of MPs. The question is, will the process be conducted impartially? Will it leave the federal structure of the Republic untrammelled? Will it improve the quality of representation or rather work towards ensuring a continued and unquestioned rule of a single party, increasing the political heft of only a few states? The delimitation process is entirely dependent on the population data ascertained through the census. Will the census data be unexceptionable and as per the United Nations’ guidelines laid down in the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (Revision 4, March 2025) to which India is a signatory?

We have already begun with the violation of the UN recommendation of carrying out a census in the Zero Year of a decade and for the data to be made available in the first year of the next decade. All censuses in India had followed the time series by carrying out censuses in the first year of a decade, from 1951 to 2011. If the Covid epidemic thwarted the 2021 Census exercise, it should have been completed in 2023 and declared as an e2021 Census; or else the exercise should have been postponed to 2031. The government’s declaration of the census in 2026-27, making March 1, 2027 as its reference date, appears to be an arbitrary decision. The data can hardly be used for gaining an international

or intra-national perspective. No explanation has been offered by the government as to why the decision was made in blatant violation of universal census principles.

The only logical explanation for the absurd decision is that the 2002 Act and the 2003 supplementary Act of delimitation state that increasing the number of MPs can be considered subsequent to any census taking place after 2026. It appears that the government is determined to complete it before the 2029 general election, possibly also the year when India may be forced to adopt ‘One Nation, One Election’, now endorsed by the Kovind Committee Report. Normally, the delimitation process is fairly elaborate and may take several years. However, there is no guarantee that it shall be so in every future instance. With sophisticated information technology at hand, the time taken to complete the process can be significantly shortened. The Delimitation Commission is made up of three effective members — a retired Supreme Court judge, an election commissioner nominated by the chief election commissioner (in one exceptional past instance, a CEC had nominated himself), and the election commissioner of the respective state (limited to that state). The others are only ‘associated members’ with neither vote nor veto. Considering the recent decline in the credibility of the Election Commission of India and the absurdity of the 2027 Census, and considering the timings of the Special Intensive Revision of the electoral rolls, the census and delimitation, the worst fears of every India at this juncture would be whether the next delimitation leaves forever changed the entire political landscape and India’s democracy.

## DELHI DIARIES

### Rare gesture

■ The sacred flag-hoisting ceremony in Ayodhya earlier this week turned out to be a rare moment when Prime Minister Narendra Modi stepped back from assuming the lead role at a major event. As Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief, Mohan Bhagwat, walked into the Ram temple, the PM allowed Bhagwat to lead the way, following a step behind. The gesture surprised many given Modi’s reputation for a ‘*main hi main hoon* (me and only me)’ approach, where he is typically the sole prominent figure in photographs. Even during the hoisting of the Dharma Dhvaj atop the Ram temple, Modi invited Bhagwat to stand beside him, and the two jointly turned the lever. Bharatiya Janata Party leaders maintain that the PM’s gesture was meant to accord due respect to Bhagwat, the head of the *sangh parivar*. Politically, however, the move was seen as yet another attempt to repair ties with the RSS. Modi had not offered prominence to Bhagwat during the temple’s foundation-laying ceremony or its inauguration in the past. It is widely believed that the election of a new BJP president has been delayed due to prolonged differences between the party and the *sangh*. Modi’s gesture towards Bhagwat has reportedly been well-received by the RSS leadership. With the *sangh* signalling a willingness to endorse Modi’s choice, buzz within BJP circles suggests that the long-pending appointment of a new party president may be imminent.

### Harsh stance

■ The recent comment made by Deepa Dasmunshi, the All India Congress Committee general-secretary in-charge of Kerala, against the complainant in the sexual misconduct and forced termination of pregnancy case involving the suspended Congress leader and incumbent Palakkad legislator, Rahul Mamkootathil, has raised eyebrows. The complainant, a woman journalist associated with a television news channel, approached Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan against Mamkootathil. When TV news channels sought Dasmunshi’s reaction to the incident, she questioned the complainant’s decision to approach the CM instead of going to the police. Vijayan sent the complaint to H Venkatesh, the addition-

al director-general of police (law and order), for further probe.

A senior woman Congress leader not supporting the victim of a sexual abuse has ruffled both the party leadership and the rank and file. Their grievance is that a leader of Dasmunshi’s stature should have taken a softer approach towards the victim. Dasmunshi’s reaction, they argue, shows the party in a bad light.

### Big talk

■ During the debate on the Assam Prohibition of Polygamy Bill, 2025 in the state assembly, the CM, Himanta Biswa Sarma, dared the Opposition to stop him from returning as the CM in the



Gesture of truce?

2026 assembly elections. Sarma promised that if he were to return as CM, he would introduce the Uniform Civil Code Bill in the very first assembly session. Even though the Opposition is struggling to put up a cohesive challenge to the ruling BJP-led alliance, the Congress, which is the principal Opposition party in the state, was equally confident about Sarma’s days as CM being numbered.

Pawan Khara, the chairperson of the AICC (media and communica-

### Footnote

■ The Election Commission of India has gone on a publicity overdrive to announce that the Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, will assume a year-long chairmanship of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. India has the largest electorate among the 35 countries that are part of IIDEA and Kumar has promoted his pet project, the Special Intensive Revision, as an unprecedented large-scale step that is aimed at checking illegal immigration, an issue that has also gained political significance in Europe. Under his chairmanship, India will host a conference of the IIDEA on January 21 and create several committees with academics and journalists of his choice on different aspects of elections.

tion), told newsmen in Guwahati, “First of all, he will not return to power. He will go to the jail after this election. He knows it. You know it. I know it.” However, political observers argue that the Opposition will have to walk the talk to stop Sarma instead of indulging in rhetoric.

### Empty boast

■ The Pakistan high commission in London claimed a walkover at the Oxford Union on the motion, “India’s Policy Towards Pakistan Is a Populist Strategy Sold as Security Policy”. The Indian side included the former army chief, General M.M. Naravane, and former Union minister, Subramanian Swamy. Pakistan’s narrative was countered by the Indian side, which included the right-wing lawyer, J. Sai Deepak, and Shiv Sena (UBT) parliamentarian, Priyanka Chaturvedi.

Sai Deepak was informed that Naravane and Swamy had dropped out and was asked to suggest alternatives. Before he could do so, the Oxford Union chief, Moosa Harraj, who is the son of a Pakistani minister, said that the commentator, Suhel Seth, and Chaturvedi had been roped in, but later informed that they too had cancelled. The lawyer then cobbled up two Indian debaters based in Britain but was informed by the Union that the Pakistani side had not reached. Chaturvedi claimed that she was informed about the debate just two days before the event.



## What a joke

■ Sir — A new study claims that Artificial Intelligence still cannot handle a simple pun. The poor machine can calculate galaxies but collapses when it comes to scripting a dad joke. This should calm the fear that algorithms will soon steal every creative job in sight.

### Young victims

■ Sir — A recent report shows that Mumbai’s worsening air pollution now affects children in visible and troubling ways. The concern is understandable but the city’s air has carried varying levels of pollutants for years. Parents and schools can reduce exposure with sensible steps, although these measures offer only partial relief. The focus on children is valid because their lungs are still developing.

D.P. Bhattacharya, Calcutta

■ Sir — The alarm about pollution in Mumbai harming children deserves attention, yet the conversation gains more from calm analysis than despair. Mumbai has faced industrial emissions and construction dust for decades. The recent spike in respiratory complaints may be linked to short-term weather patterns as much as to long-term decline in air quality. Families and schools can manage outdoor activity more carefully. Cleaner public transport must be a serious goal. Progress will come from stable planning rather than dramatic claims.

Haridasan Rajan, Kozhikode, Kerala

Recent battles over copyright show that the tech world is eager to take up human work but imitation has limits. A punchline exposes those limits with satisfying speed. Humour carries lived experience, timing and a touch of chaos, and no model can fake that mix. Let AI win art prizes and generate films. The laugh remains firmly human territory.

Mubashir Mushtaq, Baramulla, J&K

■ Sir — Children bear the heaviest burden of air pollution because their lungs are still not fully formed. Clinics fill up before breakfast, and parents queue with the same combination of worry and exhaustion. Polluting vehicles, crop burning and



Victims of pollution

cold weather create a yearly haze that harms everyone. Emergency measures feel like half-hearted attempts to control a house fire with a teaspoon. Steady, long-term policy is the only sensible route out of this mess.

Aayman Anwar Ali, Calcutta

### Slow decline

■ Sir — Research underlines that ancient societies handled environmental strain with considerable ingenuity (“Mega-droughts, not one collapse, shaped Indus’s slow fade”, Nov 29). The move

from barley and wheat to millets and the use of trade networks fit a civilisation that understood survival. The link between extended dry spells and large-scale deurbanisation seems persuasive. The caution expressed by meteorologists is fair although it does not diminish the broader pattern. The study gives the Indus Valley a more complex and human trajectory.

Niamul Hossain Mallick, West Bardwan

■ Sir — The evidence for repeated, century-long droughts in the Indus Valley paints a picture of gradual change rather than catastrophe. The suggestion that communities adapted through migration, new crops and trade gives the civilisation far more credit than older theories allowed. The use of cave chemistry, lake records and simulations strengthens the case. The Indus story looks more like a slow evolution shaped by climate pressure than a sudden fall. It should serve as a warning for present civilisations.

K.R. Gagan, Tumkur, Karnataka

### Cosy shelves

■ Sir — Books often provide comfort long after reading habits slow down. Volumes collected over decades carry memories, beliefs and versions of the self that deserve space on any shelf.

Sourish Misra, Calcutta

Letters should be sent to: The Telegraph, 6 Prafulla Sarkar Street, Calcutta 700001, ttedlt@abp.in



Messaging apps need active SIM

NEW DELHI: The Centre has issued directions that would ensure that app-based communication services — like WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, and others — are continuously linked to a user's active SIM card. All players providing app-based communication services in India have been asked to submit compliance reports to the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) within 120 days from the issue of the directions.

Goyal on reforms

NEW DELHI: Commerce and Industry minister Piyush Goyal said a host of reforms undertaken by the government to improve ease of doing business have helped the economy post an 8.2 per cent growth in the September quarter of the current fiscal year.

GRSE notice

NEW DELHI: Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers (GRSE) said it has received notices from both NSE and BSE for non-compliance with several corporate governance provisions under the Sebi listing obligations during the September quarter.

Crisil projection

CALCUTTA: Crisil has raised its forecast for the country's GDP growth to 7 per cent from 6.5 per cent for FY26.

BOTTOM LINERS



If infrastructure is the language in which the nation expresses its ambition, science is its grammar

Sthaladipati Saha, senior VP & head - buildings & factories, L&T Construction



US levies bleed key sectors

SAMBIT SAHA

Calcutta: A day after official data propelled India's headline growth figures into the stratosphere, a more sobering trend emerged in its trade performance with the US, the country's largest export market.

Shipments to the US fell 28.5 per cent between May and October, underscoring the breadth of the slowdown across sectors hit by Washington's punitive 50 per cent tariff as well as those notionally exempt.

Export values declined from \$8.8bn in May to \$6.3bn in October, sharpening New Delhi's urgency to secure the withdrawal of the additional 25 per cent penalty tariff linked to purchases of Russian crude, imposed by the administration of President Donald Trump.

The Modi government is banking on the prospect of a limited agreement by the end of December, though similar expectations in the past are yet to materialise. The commerce secretary on Friday said India's record high of \$41.68 billion

EXPORT IMPACT

Monthly export data in \$ bn, Fall in %

Tariff sectors	May '25	Oct '25	Fall
Exempt	3.42	2.54	25.8
Uniform	0.62	0.48	23.8
India-specific	4.78	3.29	31.2

- **Exempt:** Tariff-exempt items, such as smartphones, pharmaceuticals and petroleum products — 40% of Oct exports
- **Uniform:** Items facing global, uniform tariffs, mainly iron, steel, aluminum, copper and auto parts — 7.6% of Oct exports
- **India-specific:** Labour intensive products where India alone faced 50% tariff — 52.1% of exports in October

In October is not in the 'worrying zone'.

Sectoral impact

An analysis carried out by trade intelligence agency Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) suggests that labour intensive sectors were hardest hit by tariff as it rose to 10 per cent on April 2, escalated to 25 per cent on August 7, and zoomed to 50 per cent by late August.

As of now, 52 per cent of India's export to the US is facing a 50 per cent tariff, one of the highest in the world.

According to the report published by GTRI on Saturday, textiles and garments fell 32 per cent from \$944 million

to \$643 million, with garment shipments alone down 40 per cent, from \$515.4 million to \$306.1 million.

Gems and jewellery exports slid 27 per cent dropping from \$500.2 million to \$363.8 million, with traditional diamond shipments down 29 per cent from \$193.5 million to \$138.1 million, with only lab-grown jewellery posting growth.

Marine exports sank 39 per cent, from \$223 million to \$136.9 million, as US shrimp buyers shifted from India to Ecuador and Vietnam.

Hit on exempted items

Smartphones, India's single biggest

product line to the US, suffered a 36 per cent decline, sliding from \$2.29 billion in May to \$1.50 billion in October—a loss of almost \$790 million. However, a caveat in this case could be that Apple, a major exporter from India to the US, sent plane-loads of smartphones to beat the reciprocal tariff Trump announced from the Rose Garden in White House, thereby frontloading exports before May.

Pharmaceutical exports, however, remained resilient, inching down 1.6 per cent from \$745.6 million to \$733.6 million.

Export sops

GTRI Founder Ajay Sriastava argued that the export promotion mission — announced in March and approved by the Cabinet on November 12 — still exists only on paper. Nearly eight months into the fiscal year, no schemes are operational and could miss its goal.

Moreover, India should also press the US to withdraw the 25 per cent penalty tariff given Trump's own statement that India has reduced Russian oil purchase 'very substantially', he said.

Fed cut hopes ignite global gold, silver rally

OUR BUREAU

Calcutta: Gold prices scaled a two-week high on Friday, buoyed by growing expectations that the US Federal Reserve will lower interest rates next month, reigniting demand for precious metals. Silver, meanwhile, surged to a fresh all-time high, extending its rally this month.

In global markets, spot gold rose 1.3 per cent to \$4,256.40 per ounce, breaching its earlier peak of \$4,195.5 recorded on November 13. The metal logged a weekly gain of 4.5 per cent and advanced 6.05 per cent in November, marking its fourth straight month of appreciation—an uptrend supported by macroeconomic uncertainty and renewed investor appetite for safe-haven assets.

In the Calcutta market, pure gold was priced at ₹1,28,350 per 10 gram on Saturday, reflecting a 3.34 per cent rise on a weekly basis and 5.89 per cent for the month, in tandem with international cues and heightened retail demand.

Silver's rally was even more pronounced. On the Comex, the metal jumped to a record \$57.08 per ounce, up 6.5 per cent and 18.3 per cent over the month, underscoring robust industrial demand and speculative interest. In Calcutta, silver traded at ₹1,73,100 per kg on Friday, gaining 11.71 per cent week-on-week and 15.43 per cent for the month.

"The expectation is that we're going to continue to have a slower economy going into 2026, and the Federal



PRECIOUS HIKE

Reserve is very likely to cut rates, which is getting some investors back into gold," said Bart Melek, global head of commodity strategy at TD Securities.

Lower borrowing costs tend to weaken the dollar, making non-yielding assets such as gold more attractive.

Echoing similar sentiments, Sandip Raichura, CEO — retail broking and distribution, PL Capital, said gold is poised to test the \$4,400 mark, supported by sustained central bank buying and persistent dollar softness.

Expectations of a Fed pivot have hardened in recent days following dovish comments from Fed governor Christopher Waller and New York Fed president John Williams. Softer economic indicators in the aftermath of the US government shutdown have further fuelled the view that rate cuts are imminent. Traders now assign an 87 per cent probability to a December rate cut, sharply higher from 50 per cent a week ago.

Back home, the RBI faces a delicate balancing act — evaluating whether easing inflation and resilient growth justify its own shift towards lower policy rates.

E-commerce giants expand to financial services



FINANCE PUSH

Mumbai: Amazon is preparing to offer loans to small businesses in India, while Walmart-owned Flipkart is looking at buy-now, pay-later (BNPL) products as the e-commerce giants take on the country's banks with a push into financial products.

Amazon acquired Bengaluru-based non-bank lender Axiom earlier this year. Currently focused on BNPL and personal loans, Axiom will re-embark on offering credit for small businesses and start offering cash management solutions.

Flipkart, in which Walmart has a stake of about 80 per

cent, registered its non-bank lending arm, Flipkart Finance, in March and is awaiting the Reserve Bank of India's final approval for its business plans. Company filings show two types of planned pay-later offerings: no-cost monthly instalment loans for online shoppers over 3 to 24 months and loans for consumer durables at 18–26 per cent interest rate per annum.

Flipkart expects to start offering these financial products next year, according to sources.

Reuters

Air India a responsibility for Tata Group: Chandra



N. Chandrasekaran

Mumbai: Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran on Saturday said Air India, which is undergoing a transformation, is not just a business opportunity but a "responsibility" for the Tata Group.

The aviation sector faces continuous challenges, he said and added that the global supply chain issues make the availability of parts, infrastructure and new fleet pretty unpredictable.

"Every plan that you have is becoming difficult because of the situations that you face in this area," he said.

Chandrasekaran also men-

tioned that aviation is a very capital-intensive business, and the margins are thin.

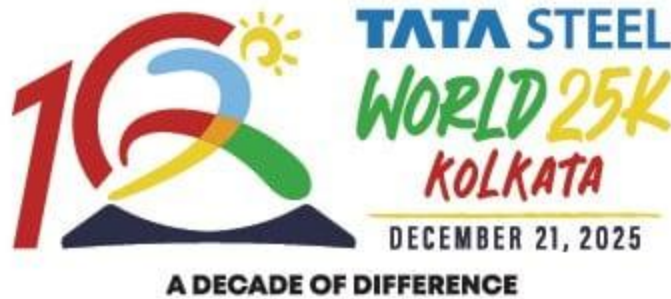
At an event to celebrate the 121st birth anniversary of JRD Tata, he said, "I firmly believe for the Tata Group, Air India is just not a business opportunity.

It's a responsibility".

Tatas acquired loss-making Air India along with Air India Express in January 2022, and since then, the group has been working on an ambitious five-year transformation plan. However, the progress has been slower than expected due to various factors, including global supply chain woes resulting in aircraft upgradation as well as delivery delays.

Highlighting the potential of the country's aviation sector, Chandrasekaran said every single percentage growth in GDP will give a 2 per cent growth for the domestic aviation sector.

TATA STEEL  
WeAlsoMakeTomorrow



WILL OF IRON. MEDAL OF STEEL.

A strong will and unwavering focus are what one needs to earn the Medal of Steel at the Tata Steel World 25K Kolkata. Yes, the running festival is back, and this year it's celebrating a decade. Conquer the thrilling distance to win the Medal of Steel and bask in glory.

#ADecadeOfDifference



TATA STEEL  
KAPILASH  
= Half Marathon =

TATA STEEL  
NOAMUNDI  
= Run-a-thon =

TATA STEEL  
JAMSHEDPUR  
= Run-a-thon =

RACE CATEGORIES:

- 25K
- Senior Citizens' Run (2.3K)
- Open 10K
- Champions with Disability (2.3K)
- Ananda Run (4.5K)
- Virtual 25K | Virtual 10K | Virtual 5K

Visit: [tatasteelworld25k.procam.in](https://tatasteelworld25k.procam.in)  
e-mail: [tsw25k@procam.in](mailto:tsw25k@procam.in)  
WhatsApp: +91 89769 94484

Helpline: +91 85272 76694  
(Monday to Saturday, 10 am to 7 pm)

Associate Sponsor







# Amma: Death is like changing clothes beyond bollywood

MEENAKSHI SHEDDE

EVERYBODY SHOULD interview their grandmothers and mothers — and granddads and dads of course — on top priority. Especially as they can fade away at any time, or get dementia or be otherwise unable to share their stories. It will usually be a fascinating revelation — even to those who think they know their mothers — to learn who they really were, before they got married and became our grandmothers and mothers. What kind of people were they, who were their best friends, what games did they love, what did they do after school/college, what movies did they watch and where, what were their dreams, what did they want to grow up and be, what was the boldest or wickedest thing they did? And even apart from all that, it was only on interviewing my Amma, Indu Shedde, now 98, that I learnt that she and Papa (the late S Rammohan) made fresh badam toop (almond ghee) at home to massage my sister Sarayu and me when we were babies. I simply crumbled like a Glucose biscuit in hot chai.

The series of interviews I did of Amma were for her autobiography, in her own voice, that I wrote and gave her as a 95th birthday present in 2022: it took me three years to write it and put it together.

Amma grew up in Dharwad, Karnataka, in a family of four widows. She learnt early on about taking financial responsibility and financial independence. She held four jobs before she married, earned a BA DLS (Diploma in Library Science) and became Assistant Librarian in Karnataka University in the 1950s, speed-reading, as she remembers it, 2,00,000 books in order to make the books' accession cards. Astonishingly, she was 32 when she married — I just didn't find the right boy, she shrugged. Yet, when



she married and had my sister Sarayu and me, she chose not to do a job, but to be a full-time mother. When my parents had the opportunity to move from our modest chawl home to a three-bedroom flat,

Amma boldly insisted they buy it, when my mild Papa dithered. Trying to make ends meet on the about ₹129 a month Papa gave her, after the home loan EMI was deducted, she invented original "vegetable art" from home to earn a little more money. She created an Air India Boeing plane and Maharajah, Taj Mahal, Krishna, Mirabai, an Ikebana flower arrangement and more, entirely from fresh fruit and vegetables, that were published in Eve's Weekly and Dharmayug magazines, and elsewhere. Her wonderful art was born in desperation.

She values her independence, and after our dad passed away, she insisted on living independently at a senior citi-

zen's home, preferably outside Mumbai — rather than stay at my sister's place or mine (though she stayed with me during COVID).

Recently, someone asked her, are you afraid of death? "Not at all," she replied, without hesitation. "What is there? It is like changing clothes, that's all. The soul remains." I had also asked her, is there any unfulfilled wish you have? "I wish I could see you settled," she replied (meaning married). "OK. But can you guarantee that any woman you know would be much happier, more fulfilled as a person, as someone's wife — than if she were single and independent?" No, she shook her head. "OK, do you feel I am happy and fulfilled as a person, and probably already have everything or most of what I need?" I asked. She immediately said yes. We hugged for a long, long time. Then she said grinning, "If anyone asks you, you can always say, 'Mere paas Maa hai'." We both laughed heartily, then we did a high five. Our gorgeous Amma.

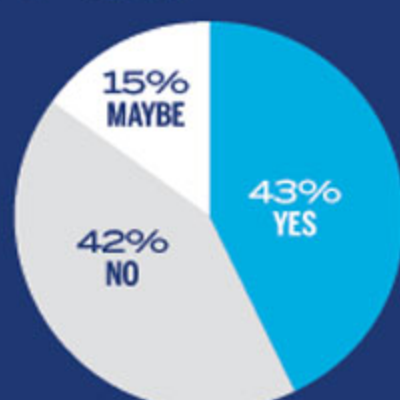
Meenakshi Shedde, film curator, has been working with the Toronto, Berlin and other festivals worldwide for 30 years. She has been a Cannes Film Festival Jury Member and Golden Globes International Voter, and is a journalist and critic. Reach her at [meenakshi.shedde@mid-day.com](mailto:meenakshi.shedde@mid-day.com)



ILLUSTRATIONS/UDAY MOHITE

## mid-day Poll

Do you think having higher education is necessary to be successful in the world of business?



To take part in the poll, please follow [mid-day](#) on LinkedIn and X.

## Letters of the week

### What is news?

Rahul's column on Dharmendra was a well-written mirror of the times we live in. We hunger for "news" real or fake. A pity.

KEITH STEVENSON

### Great piece

A wonderful article, Meher. That was a wonderful era in India, especially Bombay with great jazz bands and cabarets.... all gone now.

ROOSI MODI



## The binge watch

zara hatke

RAHUL DACUNHA

In one of the early episodes of The Family Man: Season 3, an exhausted Srikant Tiwari (Manoj Bajpayee) asks his son, Atharva, why his daughter, Dhriti is in such a bad mood.

"They" have a lot on their mind, "they" are climate champions, LGBT warriors, "they" are social media influencers, "they" are worried about a lot of things," the son says.

"Who are 'they'? Your sister is one person, who are 'they'?" the flummoxed Srikant asks.

The son, with an irritated eye roll explains, "See Pa, Dhriti equals 'they' — Dhriti likes to be called 'they, them' not 'she, her'."

"But why?" Srikant asks "Oh ho, Dad, she's a non-binary person."

After a beat Bajpayee asks. "Accha this 'they' aur 'them', Hindi main kya bolenge?"

The son for once is perplexed, he says, confused, "Hindi mein iske pronouns invent nahi huey."

While the audience laughs out loud at the Gen Z speak, Srikant looks defeated, wondering which is harder, handling his daughter's vocabulary, or the dangers that the country faces.

No napalm bomb can frighten him, but non-binary jargon terrifies the super spy. For the uninitiated, The Family Man is a web series about a spy (Bajpayee) living a double life, working for TASC, a fictitious

intelligence wing of the country while he performs menial household tasks for his middle-class family.

For me the show is a binge watch, each season growing in ambition and scale. Season 1 got you hooked immediately. The sheer hilarity of a spy wondering if he should diffuse a bomb, or attend a parent-teacher meeting.

In that moment, when Manoj Bajpayee's character looked more terrified at what might befall him facing the school principal vis a vis a RDX bomb, I knew I was hooked.

I'm an OTT obsessive — I watch a movie at night, binge watch web series, a habit picked up in the COVID-ers — but I'm harsh on a web series. Something has to grab me, an atmosphere, an antagonist, very often it's an actor — the Family Man, premiered in 2019, and I'm still emotionally with the show, its horrifying political events, married with its humour, result in a show with a beating heart.

The OTT universe, the bosses in the boardrooms, look at web shows, by their ability to create spinoffs, seasons, sequels. But most of all, they look for sustainable characters — characters with a want

**While the audience laughs out loud at the Gen Z speak, Srikant looks defeated, wondering which is harder, handling his daughter's vocabulary, or the dangers the country faces.**

and an objective that sustains across seasons. In Season 1 and 2, Srikant got his antagonists — in the third season, we have a new antagonist, the shit hits the ceiling, the government believes Srikant is a suspect in his on boss's death, his own family crumbles around him, his wife has filed for divorce, his kids feel badly neglected and his target, in this case the mighty Jaideep Ahlawat rides majestically into the sunset, leaving Srikant dying — a season 4 is set up, will he live? Will his family reconcile? Will Ahlawat's "Rukhma" be caught?

But most important, we the viewer ask will the humour sustain. The brilliance of the show is the humor, sustained over its tensest moments — here's an example:

Srikant wants to confess to his son, his real profession. The family is gathered around the dinner table, along with Srikant's best friend, JK (Sharib Hashmi). Srikant says to his son, nervous...

"Beta I have a secret to tell you..."

The son asks terrified, "Don't tell me I'm adopted."

"No, no, nothing like that — I'm an agent."

The son is relieved, "Ah ok a travel agent, right?"

"No, son, I'm a secret agent" The son is finally impressed, "Wow that's so cool, wait till I tell my friends — do you have a code name, like tiger, lion, cheetah, panther, bear, zebra?"

Srikant pauses, "No, beta I don't work in a circus, I work for the government."

Maybe Season 4 could be called "Family Man 4: For he, she, they, them."

Rahul da Cunha is an adman, theatre director/playwright, filmmaker and traveller. Reach him at [rahul.dacunha@mid-day.com](mailto:rahul.dacunha@mid-day.com)





# MBA OR NOT, YOU ARE NOT AN 'IDIOT'

**Nikhil Kamath and his misplaced comment about those doing an MBA being 'some kind of an idiot' has opened up the debate on whether one of the most sought after degrees is, in fact, as valuable as it is deemed to be**

**TANISHA BANERJEE**

ON a recent episode of the Startup Pedia podcast, Zerodha co-founder Nikhil Kamath leaned back in his chair and casually delivered a line that blew up the Internet. "If you're 25 and doing an MBA today, you must be some kind of an idiot," he said. The timing couldn't have been worse. In less than a week, lakhs of students across the country will sit for CAT and other MBA entrance exams, beginning an annual ritual built on years of coaching classes, and family expectations, and the aspiration of a better life. Kamath's line may have got lost if not for a sharp, steady rebuttal from MBA student Anaheez Patel, who is studying at NYU Stern. Filming a response reel, Patel pushed back saying, "Not everyone wants to be a hustler or entrepreneur. For every outlier who made it without a degree, there are thousands whose careers jumped because of one." Her video quickly gathered its own momentum, creating a split-screen debate that begged the question — is the MBA degree heading to extinction?

When we speak to her, Patel is even more precise. "The classroom knowledge is honestly the least transformative part of the MBA," she says. "What matters is the density of opportunities around you — alumni networks that span decades, recruiting pipelines that

are exclusive to MBA cohorts, exposure to global internships." For students without corporate family connections or inherited social capital, she calls the degree "a democratising agent," one that "legitimises your presence in elite professional circles and accelerates upward mobility in ways that raw skill alone often cannot."

Even the industries that claim to be evolving, she argues, remain conservative at the top. "Firms like McKinsey, Bain, Goldman, Blackstone — these still treat the MBA as a standardised filtration mechanism," she says. "There are alternative pathways, but they're exceptions, not the norm." Education remains one

of the few scalable ladders available to those who didn't inherit one. In a country where opportunity is unevenly distributed, telling everyone to 'just hustle' flattens inequalities that shape every rung of the climb.

The debate didn't blow up simply because of one founder's provocation. The hyper-visible startup ecosystem comprises unicorn founders who dropped out, YouTubers preaching hustle, and influencers insisting that degrees are out-dated. Despite the noise online, demand for MBAs remains enormous. Each year, more than two lakh candidates sit for CAT, chasing seats in a handful of top institutes. And at the leadership level, degrees still matter. A Mint analysis from 2016 found that 144 CEOs of BSE 500 companies hold an MBA, a reminder of how deeply the credential is woven into India's corporate architecture. Though there are some aspirants that feel that an MBA is not required unless you get into a top college. Furthermore, the fees are high, and there is with no guarantee of a

good placement.

If the online debate felt abstract, Vipul Sharma, 25, hears it differently from inside an actual MBA classroom at IIM Mumbai. "It's not the first time I heard a high profile person like Kamath say what he said," he says. "People reach a certain stage and start believing only one path leads to success. But success means different things to everyone." For him, the idea that all young people can simply "startup" ignores basic realities. "Not everyone has the mental bandwidth, family support or networks to do that," he explains. Coming from an engineering track, he felt technically strong but unfamiliar with the business world. "People like me who didn't have insight about the business world — we can't really startup. MBA is the one degree that provides ample opportunities to pivot, and

upgrade compensation and position."

Sharma's own reasons were quite practical. "I didn't want a job that was only technical. I wanted to create an impact," he says. Managerial and strategic roles were out of reach with just a BTech. And the market, he insists, hasn't caught up with the rhetoric. "Founders say degrees don't matter, but when they visit campuses, they go only to Tier-1 colleges. That's hypocritical."

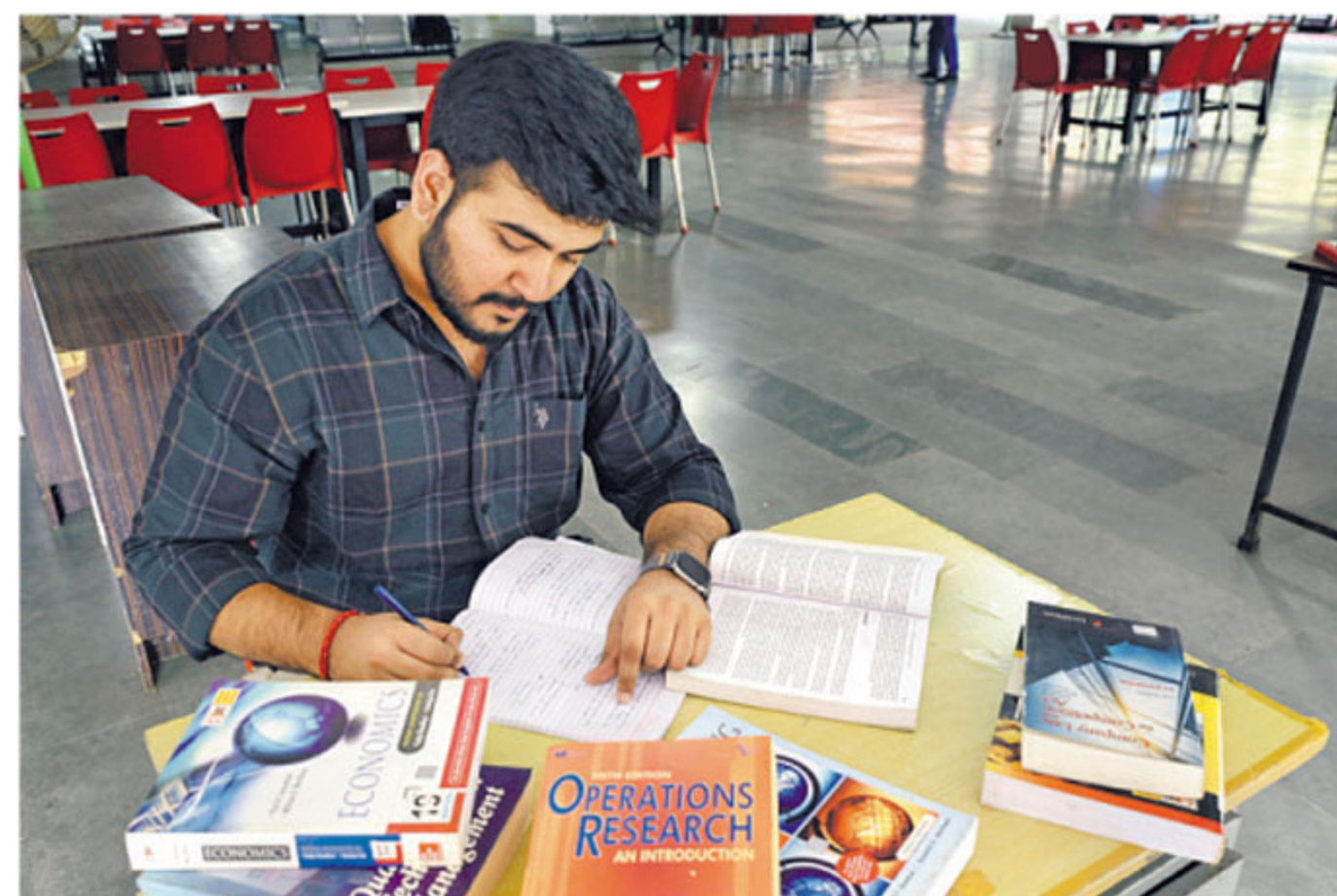
A very different energy comes from Akshaara Lalwani, founder and CEO of Communicate (India), who sits on the opposite end of the table from the nervous twenty-somethings clutching their CVs. As the final interviewer for every hire, even at the most junior level, she has a ringside view of what actually matters in the job market. And for her, an MBA degree barely nudges the needle. "I don't give more than ten to twenty per cent weightage to the degree, not more," she says. "An MBA from any institute for the sake of a tick mark holds zero value." What does get her attention is the rare pedigree programme. "If you've been able to get into a tough, well-organised university, it tells me you've followed a disciplined approach. That discipline usually percolates into the employee life cycle."

She rejects jargon-filled candidates who "can't get the job done," arguing that 80 per cent of her decision rests on who the person is and their clarity, adaptability and willingness to figure things out.

On the other hand, Shreya Das represents something more restless as a co-founder who learned everything the scrappy, bruised,



**KARAN RAGHANI**



Coming from an engineering track, Vipul Sharma felt technically strong but unfamiliar with business which is why he pursued MBA. PIC/KIRTI SURVE PARADE

**'Not everyone has the mental bandwidth, family support or networks to do that,' says Vipul Sharma, 25, student at IIM Mumbai. Coming from an engineering track, he felt technically strong but unfamiliar with the business world. 'People like me who didn't have insight about the business world — we can't really startup. MBA is the one degree that provides ample opportunities to pivot, and upgrade compensation and position.'**



**ANAHEEZ PATEL**

Continued on page 15



BOOKS

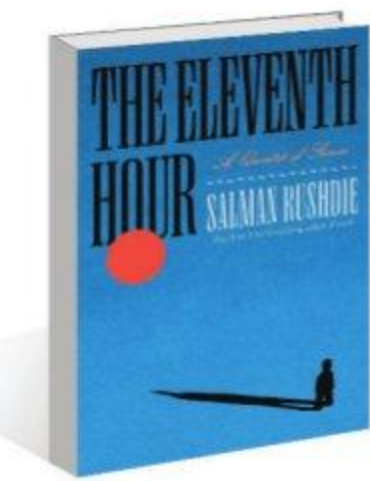
The many duplicates of Rushdie

ADITYA VIKRAM

WRITER wakes up and finds a body in his bed. On closer inspection, he discovers that the dead man, that stranger, is himself. Duplicates everywhere, he thinks, and remains clueless, even comedic about his own passing. Even though he is invisible, the ghost does not want to wander in his blue pajamas, or else he would gain the reputation of a laughing stock, the phantom in nightclothes. He prefers to be properly dressed for appearances. A man famous for his punctuality, he laughs hysterically at the new appendage to his name: ‘late’.

In Rushdie’s short story of the same name, this ghost worries about his legacy, his place in literary history, and other long-buried secrets. It would be preposterous to say this ghost is a fictional duplicate of Rushdie, but that is not entirely untrue. Inspecting the entanglements of fame, death, literature, and history, his latest quintet, ‘The Eleventh Hour’, is replete with doubles. Travelling between the three places he calls home, it arrives at the eleventh hour of his long and renowned literary career; an elegy to fiction itself.

In an interview, Rushdie admits that this book is born of his intimate encounter with death, and the many questions it let loose. He has been running from death for a large part of his life, but the latest tragedy struck the closest — in 2022, he was stabbed by a man who found his books offensive. While his last work of non-fiction was dedicated



**THE ELEVENTH HOUR**  
by Salman Rushdie.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 264. ₹899

entirely to this event, these stories offer something more than celebrity.

There are multiple duplicates and different deaths. ‘In the South’ is about two old men, Junior and Senior, who are doubles of each other. Against the backdrop of the tsunami in India, Junior passes away. Senior wanted to die but ended up living. The story ends with him longing for his shadow and his copy, the hopeful other to his cynical self. Rushdie’s telling is charismatic as usual; the story sparkles in its detail. It begins like an ancient tale of twin brothers. And ends in dramatic reckoning: “The world was meaningless. The texts were empty, and his eyes were blind.”

‘The Musician of Kahani’ is a surrogate of Salman’s magnum opus, ‘Midnight’s Children’, in both length and character. Here, the fame of a musical prodigy turns ominous. The narrator is an old man who calls the city

‘kahaani’, story in English. There is a grand wedding, a gossip column, and a tough pregnancy. Perhaps because of such attempts at cliché, and the looming shadow of his own work, the story offers only a pale reflection of the novel. ‘Oklahoma’ begins with a similar experiment. The story has a foreword that claims it was written by Mamouli Ajeeb, a writer who signs as MA. This name, despite an interesting meaning and motive, fails to be a crafty alias. It doesn’t have the ring, comedy, or novelty of the alias, a practice that is commonplace in the language of ‘Mamouli Ajeeb’, Hindi-Urdu. The real surprise and substance of the story arrives later.

The literary relationship between the writer and his part-mentor, part-inspiration, Uncle K, starts off as endearing. Obsessed with disappearance, he vanishes. Later, Auntie K, also a writer, is about to shoot the narrator in the head. This dramatic and fearful turn offers the reader a meaty question. MA has been found guilty of stealing real people for his story instead of imagining characters as a writer must. He writes well but lacks imagination, and that is his crime, and failing. This story ends in Kafka-esque horror.

‘Late’ shines because it is the familiar retold in fascinating moves. Simone Merlyn Arthur, the writer at the heart of the story, is recognisable — something like EM Forster; gay and heartbroken by Indian men, and something like Alan Turing, who cracked secret codes for England during World War II. A great book happened to him once. After the glory and shock of literary stardom, he never

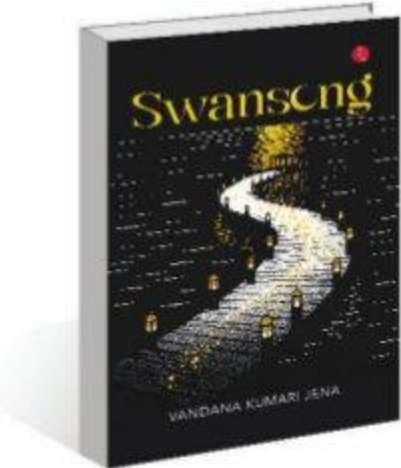
published another word. He declared that he stopped writing, but that was only a flimsy veil over the truth. The manuscripts he wrote later remained incomplete or snaked away into the shadows. Is this writer Rushdie or Arthur? An Indian student at Cambridge discovers his ghost, and his later manuscripts, but doesn’t quite know how to assess them. Inhabiting her confusion, and her reverence for the writer, I find myself in the position of this young girl, trying to read the later work of a mighty writer. Of course, the girl is a double of the younger Rushdie, who was an Indian student at Cambridge himself, around the same time. Another one of the duplicates is the old man in the piazza, from the last story of the collection. This story mourns the pain of language itself.

In this melee of duplicates, the young are foils for the old. Grand characters are passing away. They are towering in different ways, as grandfathers, uncles, friends, writers, keepers of language. Duplicates in parables are often two halves of the same self, divided for neatness and quarrel. They remind us that no image is clean or reducible. While parts of this quintet shine with Rushdie’s still-intact brilliance, the less sharp stories take us back to their originals: his early genius. “I have planned quite the exit myself,” says Arthur Chacha, the ghost of a writer. He is about to vanish under a bridge. The narrator prophesies: “there are no neat resolutions”. I am glad that we have another hour until midnight.

— *The reviewer teaches at Ashoka University*

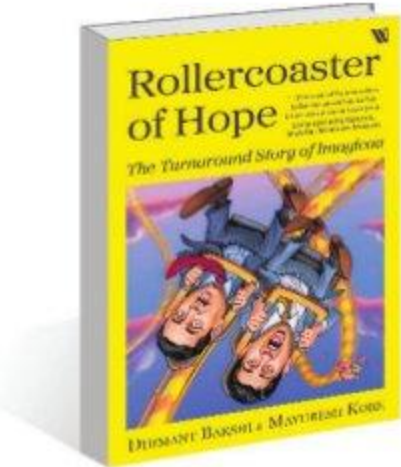


BACKFLAP



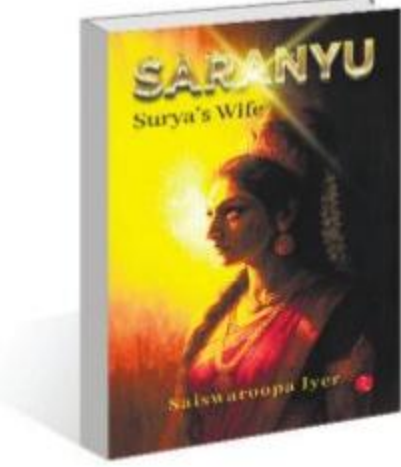
**SWANSONG**  
by Vandana Kumari Jena.  
Rupa.  
Pages 200. ₹295

Sometimes the quietest moments carry the loudest truths. In this book, author Vandana Kumari Jena peels back the layers of everyday life to reveal the hidden struggles, secrets, and courage that define us. Here, nothing is what it seems. A birthday marks the beginning of the end, a neighbour hides more than gossip, an ordinary home turns into a stage for a final performance. By turns poignant, chilling and quietly defiant, these 24 stories do not soothe. They disturb, provoke and linger.



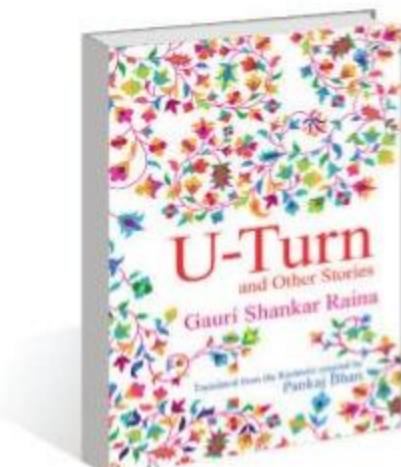
**ROLLERCOASTER OF HOPE**  
by Dhimant Bakshi & Mayuresh Kore.  
Westland.  
Pages 240. ₹399

This is the story of how the beloved theme park Imagicaa in Maharashtra was pulled back from the brink of collapse. In 2018, it turned into a non-performing asset. Within no time, a lender dragged the company to the National Company Law Tribunal courts. When newly appointed CEO Dhimant and CFO Mayuresh received the NCLT summons, they were taken aback. The project was the realisation of a long-held dream, and it needed to be protected from a dire fate: insolvency, or a possible lockout of India’s “best theme park”.



**SARANYU: SURYA'S WIFE**  
by Saiswaroopa Iyer.  
Rupa.  
Pages 216. ₹395

Saranyu is wedded to Vivasvan, lord of the Sun. Blinded by his radiance, she forges her own shadow, and in doing so, sets into motion a cosmic conflict between light and darkness, duty and desire. Saranyu’s journey becomes one of self-discovery. Torn between brilliance and shade, she reclaims her voice, her power, and her place in the order of the cosmos. The book reimagines her not as a consort, but as a creator, a mother, and the unseen force behind the rhythm of existence.



**U-TURN AND OTHER STORIES**  
by Gauri Shankar Raina. Translated from Kashmiri by Pankaj Bhan.  
Niyogi Books.  
Pages 182. ₹495

Written over three decades, these stories highlight the themes, issues and motifs of the largely syncretic life of the Kashmiri people. The tales are set against the socio-cultural backdrop of the place and its people. From love at first sight to an archaeological longing for Kashmir’s glorious past, the author touches upon varied themes. The stories are in equal parts brooding and light-hearted, despondent and hopeful.

Truth serum of a virologist

CHARU AHLUWALIA

BIMAN NATH’S ‘The Whistleblower’s Wife’ stands out as a refreshing addition to the body of Indian pandemic literature because it refuses to walk the familiar path. While most writers trained their creative gaze towards interpersonal relationships and emotional claustrophobia of the lockdown, Nath turns away from emotional interiors. His work enters the under-explored territory of the politicisation of India’s healthcare system during Covid-19, presenting a narrative that feels fresh yet unsettling. He expands the pandemic fiction canvas beyond the personal to public, from the emotional to systemic.

Drawing inspiration from the real-life death case of scientist Dr Vinod Shah, the failed trial report of Remdesivir published in *Science*, and the Fishbein whistleblower case in AIDS clinical trials, Nath fictionalises a scenario that parallels similar concerns.

The book tries to interrogate the vulnerability of scientific research, as commercial opportunism and political pressure create fertile ground for compromised ethics and manipulated data. This blending of fact and fiction transforms the story into a social mirror that exposes systemic cracks in the pharmaceutical companies during the pandemic, where “we are all friendly, not friends” when it comes to money games.

At the core lies a moving story of a separated couple in Bengaluru. Its emotional spine is Madhuri, the divorced wife of Aditya, a virologist, who finds herself drawn back into his life only through the shock of his suicide. As she unravels the circumstances surrounding his death, the novel justifies its title: she becomes the “whistleblower’s

wife”, joining together clues her ex-husband has left behind. The linear week-long timeline keeps the story pulled tight, devoid of any subplot. The language employs some jargon, but remains accessible.

The merit lies in the exploration of Madhuri’s emotional turmoil. Her grief and determination shape the engagement with mystery. Through flashback, the reader gets into the couple’s love life that lingers beneath layers of pain, where scenes are evocative enough to convey a glimpse of their past romance. Equally compelling are the interior monologues of Aditya, which break the silence around a character otherwise known only through others’ memories. These reflective passages reveal his physical suffering, psychological disintegration and moral exhaustion, creating a window into the inner world of a man torn between family love and work ethics.

Yet, the story falters in certain structural and atmospheric aspects. The thriller element emerges almost midway, which may test the patience of those expecting a conventional fast-paced novel. Moreover, the whydunit suicide suspense is not multilayered enough to hold reader interest throughout. The Covid setting is underdeveloped. A cursory mention of “ominously grey skies” and “travel restrictions” does not recreate the claustrophobic fear that defined pandemic life.

The slow-paced suspense and reliance on a single thread tamer the intensity expected from a thematically engaging thriller. The emotional resonance of Madhuri’s journey and Aditya’s interior monologues enrich the narrative, but these strengths coexist with stretches that feel narratively restrained.

Despite limitations, the book is noteworthy for questioning scientific morality and political complicity. Though a thoughtful reading experience, it falls short of achieving imaginative boldness that might have elevated it to a truly compelling whydunit.

— *The reviewer teaches at Govt College Panarsa, Mandi*



**THE WHISTLEBLOWER'S WIFE**  
by Biman Nath.  
Speaking Tiger.  
Pages 263. ₹499

Smouldering realities

MANISHA GANGAHR

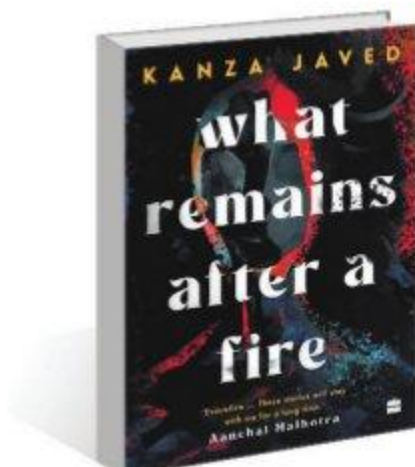
REAL, restrained, and resonant! ‘What Remains After A Fire’ offers unadorned tales that feel genuine and intimately familiar, dwelling upon the small dilemmas of ordinary people. Shifting between Pakistan and its diaspora in the US, Kanza Javed follows people who are fighting to shape their destinies while being pushed to the margins of the world they inhabit. This collection, of eight powerfully crafted stories, weaves together remarkable strands of betrayal, love, festering doubt, brutal ruptures, aching absences, and grief that refuses to fade.

The motif of fire and its lingering aftermath — whether dramatic, as in blazes, or subtle, as in the stubborn, persistent scents — resonate with remarkable precision. The tales emerge from lived experiences and woven memories, shifting between past and present, amid here and there, feeling this and that. Yet each story is intensely affecting.

Javed undertakes a masterful exercise in characterisation, capturing the raw complexity of being human. Characters, both central and peripheral, are rendered with equal depth and vitality as they move through their lives — wrestling with emotions and confronting the weight of their choices.

Daddi, Muhammad Rauf, Zara or Ruby, each possesses a quiet dignity. Their every action, every hesitation, carries significance. In their contradictions and vulnerabilities, they feel alive, standing tall as if their stories were always meant to be told.

Parallel to the art of portrayal are the carefully sculpted narrative voices that reveal the subtleties of thought, emotion, and motivation that direct description alone could not have conveyed. Be it Noorie trying to capture Bilquees Begum’s vanished lover in a glass bottle and forging an unexpected bond with the dying woman; or Annie recollecting the maid’s braid, cut as punishment for a forbidden act; or Aisha erasing all traces of her third miscarriage — Javed’s narrators draw



**WHAT REMAINS AFTER A FIRE**  
by Kanza Javed.  
HarperCollins.  
Pages 229. ₹499

the reader into their struggles.

In fact, the prose moves with an almost whispered clarity and measured elegance, allowing simple phrases to open into deeper reflection. For instance, in ‘The Last Days of Bilquees Begum’, Noorie puts it out: “Muhammad Rauf had loved Bilquees. Bilquees must have loved her husband... and she definitely loved Waqar. Ghazala loved the house and her duty. Feroze loved me... And I loved Feroze... But if I looked very closely... there was no love anywhere. No one loved anyone... it was all an illusion.” Each story opens with lines that are stark, brutal and poetic.

‘Carry it All’ begins with, “She dreamt of fire again,” while ‘Rani’ opens as: “My grandmother kept calling her dead husband to bed.” These first words set the tone; the reader is drawn not merely into the nuances of human condition but also the poised craftsmanship of storytelling.

Written with acute sensitivity, these stories traverse socio-cultural divides, as Javed interrogates the dynamics of identity, the limits and possibilities of personal agency, and the realities of attachment and loss.

What strikes most is how the collection immerses readers in narratives so vivid and deftly wrought that they leave a transformative, almost overwhelming, catharsis.

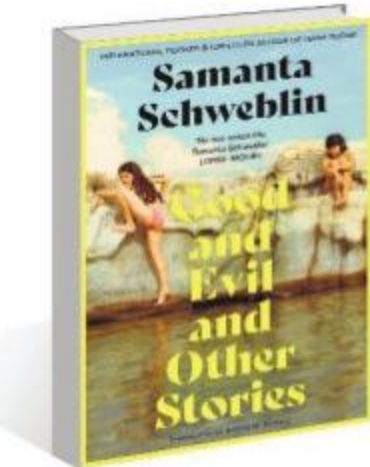
— *The reviewer teaches at GGDSD College, Chandigarh*

Good and evil dissolve in rich ambiguity

RAJESH SHARMA

DYING may not bring lucidity, but enacting it in the imagination may. The narrator in Samanta Schwebelin’s story ‘Welcome to the Club’ attempts suicide by drowning and wonders if eternity is only some everlasting inertia. She changes her mind and returns to her home in which she has lived like a prisoner. Their rude neighbour skins and “opens like a book” a rabbit he has hunted down. He then asks her to kill her little daughters’ pet rabbit. The guilt will make her love the girls enough to not “damage” them by killing herself. The violence that drove her to attempt suicide is transferred to the shamanic ritual of sacrifice enacted in the imagination. She lets the actual rabbit go, but in the process she has skinned herself metaphorically and ripped herself open like a book, and turned the page.

The doubling effect between the woman and the rabbit is repeated in at least two more



**GOOD AND EVIL AND OTHER STORIES**  
by Samanta Schwebelin.  
Pan Macmillan India.  
Pages 179. ₹699

stories in this anthology. In ‘William in the Window’, it is between a cat and the narrator’s husband; in ‘The Fabulous Animal’, between a horse and a boy. The strange entanglements render our sense of reality suspect. Is our reality only derivative? Is it but a shadow? The precise, crystalline language, invested in sharp, exact detail, yields in every story a complexity that has the fascination of a mystery. The stories have resolutions, but resolutions are not answers.

Schwebelin is a weaver of uncanny patterns that push the narrative over the edge. A precocious boy asks a woman, “Have you ever woken up for real?” He wants to become a flying horse, and falls to his death soon after. Precisely then a horse has fallen in the street outside.

A woman cannot leave her husband because the cat she loves belongs to him. The cat is poisoned and dies. She senses its presence around her and wonders if she is losing her sanity. Her friend sees the dead cat, but she sees too her own husband’s “blurry” palm impressed on the bathroom wall tiles. Has he died? She has always feared she will not survive his death, just as the woman whose cat has died has believed she will not survive her cat.

At the heart of Schwebelin’s storytelling are relationships swimming in dread and love. ‘An Eye in the Throat’ is a mute son’s tale of losing a father behind a wall of silence and contrition. The father plunges into grief when he realises his error years later.

An alcoholic poet awaiting inspiration fas-

cinates two little girls. They live out, in nightly escapades to her filthy home, their fantasy of serving the muse by looking after the poet who retreats into drunkenness to avoid sobriety which, she fears, will endanger others. They coax her out of alcoholism for one night, and one of them drowns in her sober company in the sea.

Slow, creeping psychological violence makes ‘A Visit from the Chief’ sit apart from other stories in the book. The cool, philosophical criminal, at once menacing and mesmerising, weaponises his old mother to enter homes without breaking in. But like the rude ‘master’ in ‘Welcome to the Club’, he too turns out to be a healer. The woman is rewarded with self-knowledge. He walks away with her cash and cards.

Schwebelin makes narrative rationality collapse in story after story. An abyss opens, and good and evil dissolve in rich ambiguity. The meaning glows in the dark, sure yet unreachable.

— *The reviewer is former professor of English at Punjabi University*



# REFLECTIONS

## Chandigarh’s tennis glory



**PRADEEP MAGAZINE**

MEMORY creates time and needs a trigger that can rekindle a past whose images are stored in our mind. A stream of pleasant, joyous pictures flashed in front of my eyes when Chandigarh and tennis were mentioned in the same breath in recent reports. The Chandigarh tennis stadium, that was built in the Eighties, was taken over by the UT administration citing mismanagement of the sports federation in running the centre. As I read the news, nostalgia transported me back to a time that still nourishes my present.

Indian tennis today presents a bleak picture and the future promises no better: The highest-ranked Indian player in the world is Sumit Nagal at around 300 and the nation as a team is struggling to stay afloat in the Davis Cup. When I was taking my first steps in sports journalism, Indian tennis shone bright. It had already made the Davis Cup final twice and Ramanathan Krishnan was a true legend who had twice made the semi-finals of the Wimbledon and had acquired a world ranking of number 3 when at his peak. He was followed by the lanky, magisterial Vijay Amritraj, who had taken India to another Davis Cup final in 1974, which India forfeited, refusing to travel to South Africa due to its apartheid policies.

During the same period, Chandigarh had an engaging administrator in MG Devasahayam, whose love for the sport made him strive to make the UT a centre of excellence in tennis. Those more politically inclined will remember Devasahayam for developing a human bond with Jayaprakash Narayan during his incarceration after Emergency was imposed in 1975. The ailing JP spent his prison time in Chandigarh’s PGI and is widely quoted as having referred to

Devasahayam (the Deputy Commissioner) as his “friend” and the “son he never had”.

Devasahayam was a daring, energetic civil servant, who had entered the Indian Administrative Service after leaving the Army as a Major. Sports lovers remember him as the man who brought Chandigarh to the international tennis map. What heady days they were in the Seventies for a student of English literature at Panjab University. Bunking classes to be watching a tennis tournament that the campus courts hosted, where the likes of Premjit Lal, Jaideep Mukherjee and the maestro, Ramanathan Krishnan, though much past his prime, also played. Also participating in that tournament was 15-year-old Ramesh Krishnan, son of the legend Ramanathan himself.

**UT’s energetic administrator MG Devasahayam strove to make it a centre of excellence in the sport**

Watching from the makeshift wooden benches that surrounded the court were us, the students, and tennis lovers of the city. Ramesh, who would later dominate Indian tennis and make the Wimbledon quarter-finals twice and acquire the highest ranking of 23 at the ATP, mesmerised the crowds while wielding the racquet like a painter’s brush. Much like his father had done worldwide, Ramesh had those delicate touches and a pristine backhand that would pierce gaps in the court as if he was threading a needle.

Armoured with deft strokes and facile elegance, it was no surprise that he beat his father in the final and announced to the world the arrival of a prodigious talent. He achieved much, but could never reach the top in a tennis world that was getting more and more physical and favoured brute fitness over being just skilful.

A glimpse of what fitness and athleticism can do was first shown to us by another teenager, Leander Paes, in Chandigarh. He won his first

major International Tennis Federation tournament in 1989 as a junior at the Chandigarh lawn tennis courts, beating Pakistan’s Usman Rahim in the final. A few months later, he won the Wimbledon Junior title, which was no surprise to those who had watched him in Chandigarh. Those lunging, diving volleys, the swiftness with which he rushed to the nets after his serve and the energy that he drew from the cheering crowds that became the trademark of his game later, were all on display that afternoon.

A year later, in 1990, Paes was to make his Davis Cup debut against Japan. Chandigarh’s tennis stadium was again the venue that showcased the 16-year-old’s talent at the world stage. It was a much debated decision where the non-playing captain, Naresh Kumar, pushed for the teenaged Paes to partner Zeeshan Ali in the crucial doubles tie. Years later, in a televised interview I did with him for Doordarshan, Paes broke down while remembering his debut as he thanked Naresh for showing faith in him. He had not let his mentor down in that doubles game, which the Indian duo won in five sets, with the fifth set going to a record scoreline of 18-16.

My last year as a professional journalist in Chandigarh coincided with the city hosting the Davis Cup semi-final against Australia and receiving a 0-5 drubbing. Ramesh was on the wane but Paes was to later make rapid strides, winning an Olympic bronze and a clutch of doubles Grand Slam titles with his friend-foe Mahesh Bhupathi and many Davis Cup wins that are part of folklore now. Unfortunately for Paes and just like Ramesh, he did not have a big frame to unleash those booming serves that most certainly would have pushed him to the very summit of the world tennis ladder.

India, from the promise of becoming a tennis power, is now not even a footnote in the international tennis circuit. A flawed, indifferent, nepotistic tennis federation could be one of the many reasons for this gloomy state of affairs. The takeover of the Chandigarh stadium from the local tennis federation by the UT administration is symbolic of that steep, sudden fall.

**— The writer is the author of ‘Not Quite Cricket’ and ‘Not Just Cricket’**

## Not at home at home, abroad when abroad



**BINDU MENON**

DAVID SZALAY, this year’s Booker Prize winner, is an unusual immigrant. Born to a Hungarian father and Canadian mother, and having lived in several countries, including the UK, Canada and Lebanon, he is today, ironically, an immigrant in his native country, Hungary. In an interview with BBC Radio, the writer said, “Even though my father is Hungarian, I never felt entirely at home in Hungary. I suppose I’m always a bit of an outsider there, and living away from the UK and London for so many years, I also had a similar feeling about London.” Szalay’s life traces a familiar but often overlooked trajectory — the circular migrant, someone who migrates not once, but repeatedly, acquiring new layers of estrangement in each move.

Szalay’s Booker-winning novel ‘Flesh’ follows the arc of Istvan, from his quiet housing complex in a Hungarian town, then as a struggling immigrant in London, and finally into a rarefied world of affluence. The book captures what it means to be untethered — never quite at home in the place one leaves, nor in the place one reaches. This is the friction Szalay says he wanted to explore: “a book that stretched between Hungary and London and involved a character who was not quite at home in either place.”

This tension of in-betweenness echoed throughout the Booker shortlist. Most of the writers who made it to the shortlist were immigrant or post-immigrant. Three of the six shortlisted books, including ‘Flesh’, Kiran Desai’s ‘The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny’, and Susan Choi’s ‘Flashlight’, lay bare the complexities of immigrant life.

The Booker website notes how these protagonists are “often caught between nations, finding it hard to fit in, and struggling with loneliness or isolation”. This captures the central paradox of the immigrant narrative: the dual identity, the simultaneous insider-outsider status, standing at the threshold of two countries yet belonging fully to neither.

Jhumpa Lahiri describes this poignantly. “A lot of my upbringing was about denying or fretting or evading,” she once said, acknowledging how the immigrant household is often built on anxieties that stretch across continents. Her debut novel ‘The Namesake’ embodies this duality. As Ashoke and Ashima attempt to re-root themselves in Massachusetts, the novel contrasts their experience with that of their children, who inhabit a hybrid terrain. The children are second-generation immigrants living between the inherited world of their parents and the American world that surrounds them. Yet Ashima, the first-generation immigrant, also comes to realise that Calcutta — “the city that was once home” — has become foreign in its own way. Vikram Seth, too, captures this dislocation in his poem ‘Diwali’, describ-

ing those “who are not at home at home/and are abroad abroad”.

Earlier, much immigrant fiction followed a familiar track: the journey outward, the departure from a known setting — home, language, family, and perhaps a sense of self — into a new world where survival hinges on adapting to unfamiliar norms. But the reality is far more complex.

In her memoir ‘They Called Us Exceptional’, Indian-American writer Prachi Gupta describes the suffocating weight of the “model minority” expectation. Coming from a family that is educated, affluent and driven, she reflects on the unspoken demands of chasing the American Dream and how the immigrant minority is expected to speak and behave in a way acceptable to the West. Gupta reveals the emotional and cultural labour required to fit into what she calls a “hypercapitalist culture that only values us for what we can produce”. Her poignant address to her mother underscores this complexity: “I never asked you what hopes and dreams buoyed you amid the all-consuming loneliness and grief of leaving your family and your country behind.”

**The immigrant experience is no longer a single story, it has splintered into multiple strands**

The immigrant experience is, therefore, no longer a single story. It has splintered into multiple strands.

Benjamin’s Malayalam novel ‘Aadujeevitham’ (Goat Days) and Sunjeev Sahota’s ‘The Year of the Runaways’ reveal the precarity and social invisibility that define the lives of undocumented migrants. The refugee narrative, by contrast, emerges in works such as Mohsin Hamid’s ‘Exit West’ and Khaled Hosseini’s ‘And The Mountains Echoed’, where displacement is abrupt, violent, and often irreversible. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘Americanah’, migration becomes a series of crossings rather than a single departure.

Diaspora writing, in essence, shows identity evolving across cultural, racial, linguistic and political boundaries.

Return, too, is central to immigrant literature. The journey back — literal or symbolic — asks who one becomes after crossing borders and whether “home” remains a fixed, meaningful space.

Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat offers an evocative view: “The idea of this great anguish of living between two worlds has diminished somewhat for many immigrant people... I would like us to move beyond these tropes of being only between two worlds. We are at the same time speaking to no one and everyone.”

It is a reminder that immigrant narratives now encompass the multi-layered identities of a world where movement is constant, and where belonging can be multiple, partial or one driven by choice and circumstance.

**— The writer is based in Bengaluru**

## Avoiding adverse association

GOOD association that takes our mind to the Truth is called *satsang*. Etymologically, ‘sat’ means ‘truth’, while ‘sang’ means ‘to associate’. *Satsang* includes holy congregations where devotional topics are discussed. Conversely, *kusang* is bad association that pulls our mind into worldly contemplation.

Narad refers to it as *dusang*. Just as weeds choke a plant, bad association chokes the sapling of *bhakti* in our heart. Thus, evading *kusang* is extremely important.

*Kusang* tempts us towards worthless pursuits. It presents us with easy opportunities for gratification. These come in myriad forms, including social media, video games, and movies. To protect one’s devotion, it is best to minimise exposure to low-value delights. Unfortunately, our material mind finds *kusang* very reliable.

Suppose one is bitten by a snake. What is the way to know if the venom has spread through the body? Here is a simple test for it. Offer bitter *neem* leaves to the person and ask how they taste. If the person finds them sweet, you can conclude that the poison has entered the blood.

Similarly, our mind and senses are made from *maya*. They are naturally drawn to worldly indulgences and entertainment. Hence, *kusang* tempts us to drop our guard. The intellect says, ‘What is the harm in looking? It will give me a quick short break



for a few moments.’ Then the intellect yields further and thinks, ‘What is the harm in indulging a little more?’ And before we know it, *kusang* sways the mind beyond our control. We must therefore cautiously avoid adverse association, just as we avoid keeping garbage inside our home.

If we repeatedly succumb to savouring a lower pleasure, we risk falling into the grip of a pernicious habit. Then, to reverse the harmful tendency becomes a challenge.

The *Mahabharata* states: A small sapling can be chopped off easily, but cutting a fully grown tree takes a lot of effort.

Thus, in matters of *kusang*, precaution is the better part of valour. Narad advises us to ‘stay away from adverse association by all means’. In the next *sutra*, he ups the ante on the dangers of *kusang*.

Narad points out that *kusang* unleashes a

chain of events. *The Bhagavad Gita* details the downward spiral of *kusang*:

*While contemplating on the objects of the senses, one develops attachment to them. Attachment leads to desire, and from desire arises anger. Anger leads to clouding of judgment, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed; and when the intellect is destroyed, one is ruined.* (verses 2.62-63)

The *buddhi* is the most important faculty we possess in our mind-body mechanism. The convictions we harbour in our intellect become the ‘beliefs’ we live by. These are the lenses through which we see the world. If the *buddhi* is ruined through *kusang*, then our beliefs get warped.

Every so often, parents approach me, ‘Swamiji, my teenage son has gone astray. He has fallen into an awful chemical addiction. What should I do?’

I respond to them, ‘Check his friends circle. If his close acquaintances are derelict, his beliefs have been adversely impacted. In association with drug addicts, he has become convinced that skirting responsibility and experiencing the euphoric high from drugs is the definition of a good life. His defective belief is destroying him.’

So powerful is the impact of association upon our convictions! Hence, Ram explained to Vibheeshan: ‘It is preferable to live in hell than to do *sang* of terrible people.’

**— Excerpted from ‘Narad Bhakti Sutras’ with permission from Rupa**

## Challenging the entire architecture of Indian medical culture



**MEGHNA PANT**

WHAT does it mean to be alive in a society that treats information as privilege, choice as optional, and dignity as negotiable?

It is a question most Indians avoid, perhaps because the answer exposes the uncomfortable truth about how we deal with illness, ageing, pain, and — most of all — death. We treat suffering as a private embarrassment. We treat medical authority as unquestionable. And we treat end-of-life care as a taboo, something to be whispered only when all hope has evaporated and the hospital bills have begun to feel like ransom notes.

But at the wonderful *Godrej Literature*

*Live! The Mumbai LitFest*, at the launch of ‘A Good Life: The Power of Palliative Care’, where the crowds outside were so thick they almost broke the doors down trying to enter, Jerry Pinto shattered that silence.

There are writers you read. And then there are writers you return to — like rituals, like homecomings, like comfort food for the soul. Jerry Pinto has always been that writer for me. I watched Jerry rise to speak as the lovely Faye D’Souza looked on.

He spoke about palliative care with a calm, almost radical, clarity. Something shifted. Because what he was really talking about wasn’t medicine. It was humanity.

Jerry began with a deceptively simple story: a young paralysed man who finds meaning in making decorated envelopes, supported by a palliative care team that gives him agency rather than pity. It wasn’t dramatic. It wasn’t cinematic. And yet, the story carried the weight of a manifesto. Here was a man who could not move his body, and yet — through care rooted in dignity — he could move through the world with purpose.

This is the quiet revolution Jerry is

arguing for: that palliative care is not about dying well, but about living well — even within limitation.

This idea alone challenges an entire architecture of Indian medical culture. We are a country obsessed with “doing everything possible”, often in ICUs where machines hum louder than human voices. We confuse ventilators with victory. We mistake prolonging life for preserving it. And we equate acceptance with surrender, even when acceptance may be the truest form of compassion.

One of Jerry’s most devastating stories is about Uncle M — a man who loses his voice after cancer surgery, without warning, without preparation, without even the dignity of

**In our model, doctors are gods, patients are passive, and families are collateral damage**

being told what to expect. His family is too dependent on the surgeon to question him; the doctor is too arrogant or hurried to explain; and the man himself is left to scribble jokes on pieces of paper at parties, tolerated but not understood.

Jerry’s provocation is sharp: if information is power, why do we deny it to those who need it most? If choice is central to democracy, why does it evaporate in hospital corridors? If dignity is sacred, why does illness so easily erase it?

The answers are systemic and cultural. We have inherited a deeply hierarchical medical model where doctors are gods, patients are passive, and families are collateral damage — sucked into a vortex of fear, guilt, debt, and impossible decisions. Add to this our national discomfort with talking about mortality, and you get the perfect recipe for suffering that could have been avoided.

Jerry’s call, therefore, is not just medical. It is moral. He urges us to reconsider what care means. Not as charity. Not as protocol. Not as the final step before the curtain falls. But as a philosophy of living

— one that prioritises communication, comfort, companionship, and clarity.

What Jerry’s work demands is emotional literacy: the ability to discuss uncomfortable truths with grace, to hold space for pain without turning away, to redefine strength not as fighting endlessly but as choosing wisely.

And perhaps most importantly, Jerry asks us to dismantle the shame around needing help. Because palliative care is not defeat. It is presence. It is the scaffolding that holds a person when life becomes fragile. It is, in its purest form, love made practical.

When Jerry Pinto spoke that day, he didn’t offer easy hope or melodrama. He offered perspective, vocabulary, a way to live that honours the full arc of being human right till the end. If we listen to voices like Jerry’s, perhaps it can mean this — *To be alive is to insist that care is not a privilege. To be alive is to demand that pain not be borne alone. To be alive is to make dignity non-negotiable.*

And to be alive, truly alive, is to walk each other home with honesty, clarity, and love.

**— The writer is an acclaimed author**







# Opinion

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2025



South Africa team celebrate after winning the Test series against India in Guwahati this week

## India no longer an impregnable fortress

RINGSIDE  
VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

“THEY NEED TO bowl us out. For us, that will be the win-win situation — if we can bat out the full day tomorrow. For us, it’ll be as good as a winning situation.”

This would not be an uncommon statement from any representative of a visiting team that came to India between 2013 and 2023. Securing a draw — while losing a series 0-1 — would imply that they were defeated, but not disgraced, on what was considered the toughest assignment in Test cricket.

But the above words were uttered by Ravindra Jadeja, one of the key factors in India’s long and proud home record in the longest format of the game, after the fourth day of the second Test against South Africa. India had lost the first match, and the best they could have hoped for was the scoreline to remain the same.

It must be noted that English is not Jadeja’s first language, but describing a notional 0-1 home series defeat — as things turned out, it became 0-2 halfway through the fifth day — as a “win-win situation” means Indian cricket may have to make peace with a ‘new normal’, at least for the near future.

It’s all the more ironic coming from Jadeja who has made no secret of last year’s 0-3 home debacle against New Zealand being one of the biggest disappointments of his career. But there’s no hiding from the fact that India is no longer an insurmountable challenge for resourceful, well-prepared and well-drilled visiting teams.

A lot was made of the 2-2 series draw in England earlier this year, with the argument floated that the transition after the retirement of some veteran stalwarts was complete. But the fine print was conveniently glossed over.

India were one big hit away from losing the series — 1-3 probably — and pitches and the largely lacklustre English bowling attack didn’t pose the sturdiest obstacle as their selectors were keener to get their big guns ready for The Ashes.

The West Indies were not expected to be the toughest opponents, but if the Indian think tank believed they just needed to turn up at home against the World Test Champions, they had not learnt their lessons from a year ago.

### Surface tension

When India was a formidable team at home for most of the decade gone by, the quality of personnel at disposal in both batting and bowling — pace and spin — meant they could dominate teams irrespective of the nature of pitches.

But now the biggest concern seems to be which surface would help the home team most, or more pertinently, which one would disadvantage the visitors most. That hasn’t worked because the current Indian batting line-up can’t be guaranteed to flourish on either seam-friendly or spin-favouring tracks. And the bowlers, especially finger-spinners, have lost the temperament and skill to dismiss good batsmen cheaply on flat pitches.

Hence, the lack of continuity in this regard. A narrow defeat on an under-prepared wicket in Kolkata was all it took to change course and go for a tra-

ditional Indian wicket in Guwahati. The only thing that remained unchanged was the result of the game.

Overseas tweekers, who have to largely ply their trade on unresponsive surfaces back home, have to develop the traits of flight, dip, accuracy, drift, spin and variations, and out-bowl their counterparts in India, whatever the conditions. So, in a way, the best-case scenario for India is a flat pitch while batting, and one that does all sorts when they are bowling.

That puts a lot of emphasis on the toss, and there have been voices putting part of the blame for India’s recent troubles on the coin flip. True, the hosts lost four of the five tosses against New Zealand and South Africa, and in the one instance they did win — against the Kiwis in Bengaluru — they chose to bat in seamer-friendly conditions, getting bowled out for 46.

It put the team under pressure in a relatively short series, prompting them to revert to their default mode of preparing turners, which played into the hands of the opposition, who kept winning tosses. An argument can be made that India was a victim of the perfect storm.

### Control the controllables

But questions need to be asked. Are India giving themselves the best chance to flourish at home? Test cricket remains a specialist’s format, and an all-rounder is one who can command a place in the team on the sole basis of either skill (Jacques Kallis, Ian Botham, Ben Stokes, Imran Khan; Jadeja, of late). In the case of the present Indian team, it seems they prefer to go for quantity to tide over the lack of quality.

In the Guwahati Test, apart from the openers and the No.3, there was no one who could be termed a specialist batsman. Dhruv Jurel may show potential, but is far from being a finished article yet. Having a lot of batting and bowling depth is desirable, but as recent events have shown, that’s in name only. Batting for long periods of time against quality bowlers and setting up top-notch batsmen is a state of mind and is done best by those who have been doing it for years. Nitish Kumar Reddy bats at No.8 and bowls a handful of overs, and it’s clear he’s not considered a front-line performer in either facet. Similarly, Axar Patel, the fourth spinner in Kolkata, was under-bowled and his primary role seemed to be getting some crucial runs down the order. Such assets are called utility players — they try their best not to let the team down, but get caught out somewhere. Head coach Gautam Gambhir will forever be associated with the twin debacles at home. One has to go back more than four decades for the last instance of India losing a home series two years in a row. But this is also a fact that there are hardly any players in domestic cricket breaking the selectors’ door down, demanding to be picked in Tests. For all the platitudes about putting the longest format on a pedestal, the next several months will witness a surfeit of what-ball cricket.

Teams hoping to qualify for the World Test Championship (WTC) final — that’s one peak India has yet to conquer — build their campaign around near-invincibility at home. India are already behind the eight ball. When they return to the whites in Sri Lanka in the second half of 2026, they need to have most of their issues sorted, otherwise another WTC cycle would have passed them by and they will be under pressure again when the Aussies come calling in early 2027.

ACROSS THE  
AISLE

P Chidambaram

I am afraid some of the ‘lot’ that currently hold the positions of governor are certainly not the ‘good lot’. What they are, I leave it to the reader. What they do and what they do not do are before the people of India

ARTICLE 168 OF the Constitution of India begins with the words “*For every State there shall be a Legislature which shall consist of the Governor and.....two Houses ...or one House*”. I have always thought the presence of the Governor in the state legislature is redundant. Why should an *unelected* official be a member of the legislature composed of *elected* representatives of the people? Ceremonial duties such as Address to the House or Houses, and other so-called ‘legislative’ functions (Articles 202 to 207), could be performed without the governor being a part of the state legislature — like the King of England.

The governor’s real role in the legislative branch of the State is to grant *assent to Bills*. This is indeed an important function to complete the legislative process before a Bill becomes an Act. In order to ensure that the legislature has not transgressed the Constitutional limits, it is necessary to confer upon a person the power to grant or refuse *assent*.

Check, not stall  
Article 200 reads: “*When a Bill has been passed by the Legislative Assembly of a State....it shall be presented to the Governor and the Governor shall declare either that he assents to the Bill or that he withholds assent therefrom or that he reserves the Bill for the consideration of the President.*”  
The proviso to Article 200 states that the governor may as soon as possible *return* the Bill to the legislature to “*reconsider the Bill or any specified provisions thereof*” and to “*consider the desirability of introducing any such amendments as he may recommend*”. This is a healthy check on the legislature but not a licence to play havoc with the

INSIDE  
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Leader below par  
After the shattering Bihar results, a distraught Mallikarjun Kharge urged Sonia Gandhi to speak to her son since he feared INDIA allies were getting increasingly restive. The RJD’s Tejashwi Yadav has made clear that the Congress leader did not pull his weight during the campaign and practically disappeared from the scene after a promising start with motorbike rallies. He could not be reached when major decisions on joint poll strategy were to be taken. Rahul twice left India during the campaign. And was even abroad when the results were declared.  
The RJD was furious that the Congress dragged its feet in declaring Tejashwi Yadav as the Mahagathbandhan’s CM candidate. Later, Rahul unilaterally announced Mukesh Sahani, an EBC from the caste-based Vikassheel Insaan Party, as the alliance’s Deputy CM face, angering INDIA’s key vote banks, Muslims and SCs, who felt that someone from their ranks should have been named as a potential Deputy CM. (Incidentally, the much touted Sahani



Article 200 of the Constitution of India governs how a Governor can act on a bill passed by the state legislature

## Appeal to reason in an unreasonable age

legislative process.

Governors — especially in Opposition-ruled states — have run amok with the power given to them under Article 200. They assume that their power to *check* is a licence to *stall*. Hence, they invented the *pocket veto*. A pocket veto is simply to sit idle; in other words, to neither grant assent; nor withhold assent and return the Bill to the legislature for reconsideration; nor reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President. The pocket veto is unalloyed malice. It is used to thwart the will of the people expressed through a Bill passed by the legislature. The pocket veto has no sanction under the Constitution.

The two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court reached the conclusion that when a Bill is presented to the governor, he can either grant assent; or withhold assent *and* return the Bill as soon as possible to the legislature for reconsideration; or reserve it for the consideration of the President. The Bench outlawed the ‘pocket veto’. The five-judge Bench affirmed these conclusions. There were some points on which the two Benches differed but those points do not alarm the common citizen. We may leave it to legal scholars to debate those points.

### Common citizen’s concern

What is of grave concern to the common citizen is the major point of differ-

ence between the two Benches on prescribing time limits for the governor to act on a Bill. The two-judge Bench stipulated strict time limits, the five-judge Bench demurred and overruled. The larger Bench was persuaded by the *letter of the Constitution* which did *not* explicitly specify any time limits. The larger Bench stressed on the “elasticity for constitutional authorities to perform their functions”, the “diverse contexts and situations” and “the need for balancing that might arise in the process of law-making”. These principles are theoretically and constitutionally unexceptionable.

However, the Supreme Court ought to have also weighed the warning of Dr Ambedkar. In his concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly, reflecting human weaknesses, Dr Ambedkar said: “*However good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot.*”

I am afraid some of the ‘lot’ that currently hold the positions of governor are certainly not the ‘good lot’. What they are, I leave it to the reader. What they do and what they do not do are before the people of India. When a Bill passed by the duly elected legislature is stalled for

*months, nay years*, the Constitution is not worked, it is wrecked. The will of the people is thwarted.

Before the Supreme Court, there were numerous examples of governors (especially of Opposition-ruled States such as Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) who had tilted the Constitutional balance against the legislature. The five-judge Bench was expected to authoritatively restore the balance. It did a fine job of analysis but rested its Opinion on a theoretical premise far removed from the reality as illustrated by the facts before the Court.

### Law and reality

Law must respond to the reality. When the Supreme Court thought that the independence of the judiciary may be compromised, it interpreted Article 217 of the Constitution to take unto itself the power to select, and recommend for appointment, the judges of High Courts. Article 200 presented a graver problem. A legislature’s ability to pass laws is the essence of democracy and the rule of law. An appeal to reason alone will be futile when laws are unreasonably and deliberately obstructed.

Website: [pchidambaram.in](#)  
Twitter: [@Pchidambaram\\_IN](#)

fared miserably at the polls under Jat leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda. This has heartened the squabbling descendants of Jat icon Devi Lal, who assume that if Hooda’s star is declining, their clan’s political fortunes are rising. Their optimism was bolstered by a successful Jat rally by INLD president Abhay Chautala on Hooda’s home turf of Rohtak. Abhay’s brother, Ajay, father of former deputy CM Dushyant Chautala and a leader of the splinter JJP party, and uncle Ranjit Chautala, once in the BJP now an independent, proposed to Abhay that if the Devi Lal clan unites, they would have “100% success” in reclaiming their lost political glory. The dour Abhay turned down the suggestion remarking snarkily that the 100% calculation was only correct if you appended the zero standing of Ajay and Ranjit, for not supporting the farmers agitation, with his standing of number 1.

### Royal snub

The Congress may be rejoicing over its by-election victory in the Anta Assembly constituency of Rajasthan this month, but surprisingly, Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma remains unruffled, even though Congress proclaims that the result indicates disenchantment with the BJP. Anta is adjacent to Jhalawar, the constituency of former CM Vasundhara Raje’s son Dushyant Singh, and Vasundhara and

her son insisted on overseeing the campaign. After the defeat, she sought an appointment with Amit Shah only to be told to speak to the CM.

### No succession plan

Home Minister Amit Shah invited to Delhi Sanjay Jha, working president of the JD(U), Lalan Singh, Nitish’s close colleague, and a Bihar bureaucrat who is known to have the ear of the chief minister. Shah raised the delicate question as to whether Nitish had a succession plan in mind in view of his frail health. The politicians kept silent, but the official observed that knowing Nitish, he would expect any such discussion to be on a one-on-one basis directly with Prime Minister Modi.

### Family ties

Interestingly, while the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the Congress have targeted Parth Pawar, NCP chief Ajit Pawar’s son accused of passing off government land as private property and not paying stamp duty, the opposition NCP led by Sharad Pawar has kept silent. Blood ties perhaps outweigh political differences in such matters. Some of Ajit’s followers even suspect that the Pune land scam story was leaked to a Marathi TV channel by the Shinde camp. Ajit is already unhappy that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis has teamed up with Shinde and Ajit kept on the sidelines.



# Mind & Games

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2025

CARL ZIMMER

**L**AST YEAR, ARDEM Patapoutian got a tattoo. An artist drew a tangled ribbon on his right arm, the diagram of a protein called Piezo. Patapoutian, a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in San Diego discovered Piezo in 2010, and in 2021 he won a Nobel Prize for the work. Three years later, he decided to memorialise the protein in ink.

Piezo, Patapoutian had found, allows nerve endings in the skin to sense pressure, helping to create the sense of touch. “It was surreal to feel the needle as it was etching the Piezo protein that I was using to feel it,” he recalled. Patapoutian is no longer studying how Piezo informs us about the outside world. Instead, he has turned inward, to examine the flow of signals that travel from within the body to the brain. His research is part of a major new effort to map this sixth, internal sense, which is known as interoception.

Scientists are discovering that interoception supplies the brain with a remarkably rich picture of what is happening throughout the body — a picture that is mostly hidden from our consciousness. This inner sense shapes our emotions, our behaviour, our decisions, and even the way we feel sick with a cold. And a growing amount of research suggests that many psychiatric conditions, ranging from anxiety disorders to depression, might be caused in part by errors in our perception of our internal environment.

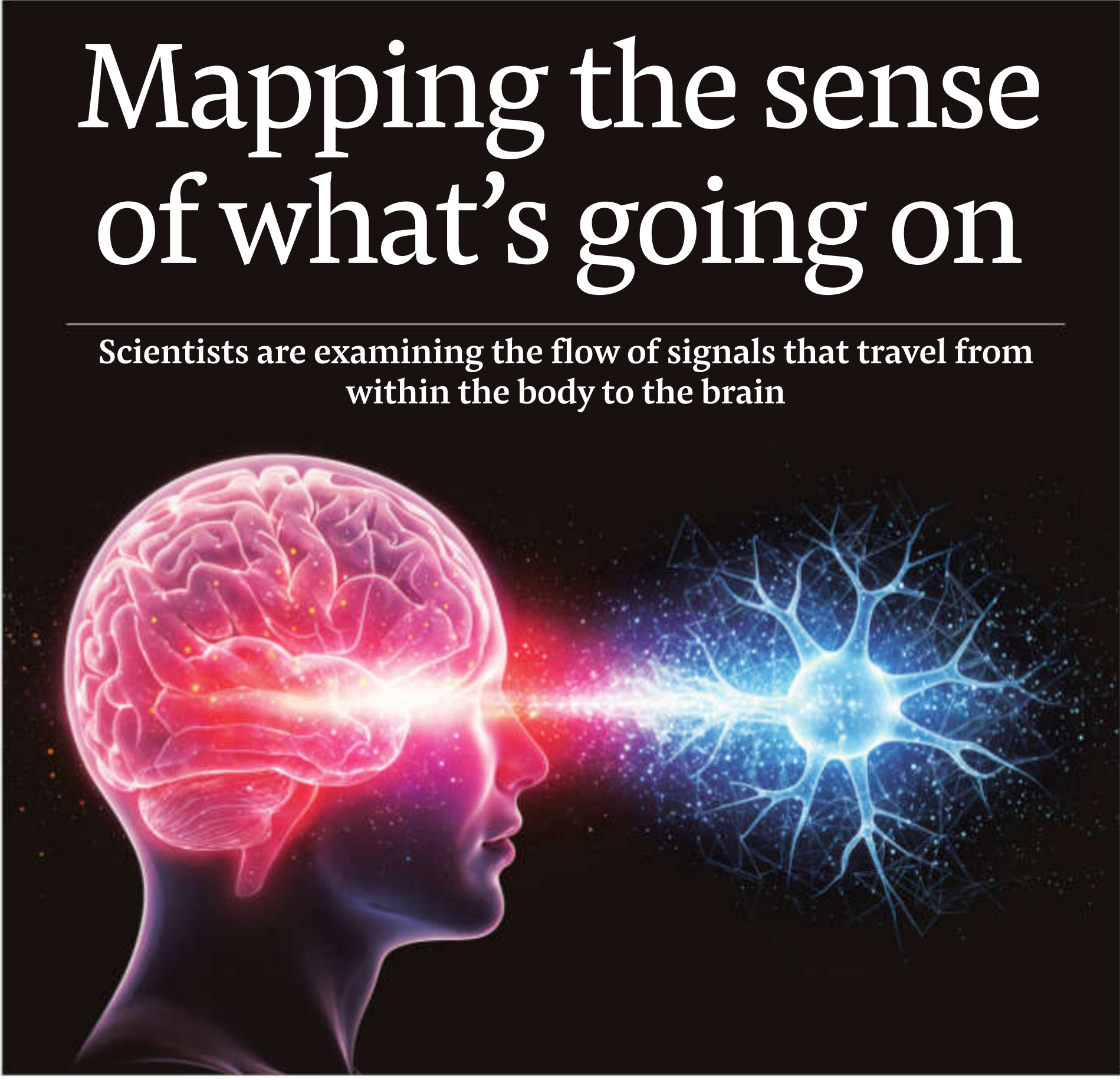
Someday it may become possible to treat those conditions by retuning a person’s internal sense. But first, Patapoutian said, scientists need a firm understanding of how interoception works.

Everyone has a basic awareness of interoception, whether it’s a feeling of your heart racing, your bladder filling or a flock of butterflies fluttering in your stomach. And neuroscientists have long recognised interoception as one function of the nervous system. Charles Sherrington, a Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist, first proposed the existence of “interoceptors,” in 1906.

But Sherrington believed that these interoceptors supplied the brain only with a meager trickle of signals. Most of the brain’s activity, he believed, involved making sense of touch and the other senses that relay information from our surroundings. Sherrington made this error in part because he could not see how intimately our organs and nerves are wired together.

Now scientists have powerful tools for studying interoception. “Just in the last five years, fundamental puzzles that have been around for 100 years have been solved,” said David Linden, a neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins University who is writing a book on interoception.

To study Piezo inside the body, for example, Patapoutian and his colleagues insert engineered viruses into the organ of a mouse; the viruses enter the nerve endings that infiltrate the organ and cause the neurons to glow. Close inspection has revealed that the nerve endings



use Piezo proteins to detect changes in pressure in many organs. “Pressure sensing is everywhere in the body,” Patapoutian said. In the aorta, for instance, Piezo proteins sense blood pressure.

Many of the Piezo-packed nerve endings belong to the vagus nerve, a cable of 100,000 neurons that infiltrates many organs. The vagus nerve detects pressure, but it also has receptors that register other changes, such as swings of temperature and acidity. These signals flow into the brainstem and from there spread to other brain regions for interpretation. Brain-scanning studies suggest that this network is constantly humming away, mostly beyond our conscious awareness.

Our brains then use the information to make a steady stream of adjustments to our bodies. “The brain is constantly guided by these internal signals,” said Diego Bohórquez, a neuroscientist at Duke University. When we breathe in, Piezo proteins sense the stretching of our lungs. The brain responds by stopping the inhalation from overstretching the delicate linings of the lungs. How it does so, and what it does with that information, remains largely mysterious. Progress has been made recently on at least one puzzle: how interoception makes us feel sick.

“When you feel ill, you lose energy, you lose your appetite, you don’t feel well, and you say, ‘Oh that’s a nasty bug making me feel ill,’” said Catherine Dulac, a neuroscientist at Harvard who studies sickness.

As it happens, the brain is constantly monitoring the body for signs of infection. The brain then creates mental representations of such infections and uses them to fight back. It might raise the body’s temperature, which enables immune cells to fight germs more effectively. But the brain does more than just react to interoception: It learns from this internal sense and then makes predictions that improve our survival. “You don’t just want to know when you’re running out of oxygen — you want to know when you’re going to run out of oxygen,” said Camilla Nord, a neuroscientist at the University of Cambridge. “You want to have a future sense.”

As vital as interoception is to our survival, Nord and other researchers suspect that it is also responsible for many disorders. If the brain misinterprets signals from the body, or if those signals are themselves faulty, the brain may send out commands that cause harm.

Increasingly, researchers think that some psychiatric disorders could be

treated as disorders of interoception. Weight-loss drugs like Ozempic already hint at how potent this kind of treatment could be. These medications, known as GLP-1 drugs, mimic the signals that the gut sends to the brain when you’ve eaten, leading to a loss of appetite. Nord and her colleagues have found that people with a range of psychiatric disorders, including bipolar disorder, anxiety, major depression, anorexia and schizophrenia, share unusual activity in a brain region known as the mid-insula, which is essential to interpreting signals from the body.

But Patapoutian cautioned that interoception would be hard to harness until it was better understood. He and colleagues at Scripps Research hope to provide a foundation for such advances by creating an atlas of interoception throughout the entire body. In one recent discovery, they found that fat is infiltrated with nerve endings that sense pressure with Piezo proteins. “Apparently it is important there, but we still don’t know what it’s sensing,” Patapoutian said.

Patapoutian hopes his interoception atlas will help scientists get a firmer understanding of what our nerves are sensing not just in our fat, but throughout our bodies. —NYT

## To get a man's attention, meow a little more

Many cats have concluded that their male owners do not always listen at once

CLARISSA BRINCAT

**AS HE LECTURED** on animal behaviour, Kaan Kerman, an instructor in the psychology department at Bilkent University in Turkey, noticed a pattern. Dog owners tend to confidently interpret their pets’ behaviour, he said, “but cat owners are always puzzled.” Compared with dogs, cats have been studied less, partly because they prefer to stay at home. “If you want to bring cats into the lab,” Kerman said, “good luck.”

When he and his colleagues asked cat owners for permission to film inside their homes, the response was enthusiastic. “As long as you give us some answers about our cats,” was a common reply. What that study found may not be as welcome among men who care for cats. In a study published this month in the journal *Ethology*, the researchers reported that cats meow more frequently when greeting male caregivers. The team hypothesised that men “require more explicit vocalisations to notice and respond to the needs of their cats.” In other words, the researchers are suggesting that many cats have concluded that men don’t always listen, and adjusted their behaviour accordingly.

Volunteers who identified themselves as their cats’ primary caregivers were asked to wear an unobtrusive camera and record their first few minutes after returning home, while behaving as naturally as possible. The researchers analysed the first 100 seconds of footage from 31 volunteers, focusing on the first cat to approach the caregiver in multi-cat households.

Across all demographic variables — including the sex

and age of the cat, pedigree status and number of cats in the home — only one factor was linked to vocalisation frequency: the biological sex of the caregiver. On average, cats produced 4.3 meows in the 100-second greeting window with men, and 1.8 with women. (The researchers also counted vocalisations such as trilling, chirping, growling or purring.)

The researchers suspect that the difference reflects communication styles. Earlier work has found that female caregivers tend to speak more to their cats and may be better at interpreting feline vocal cues than males.

Jonathan Losos, an evolutionary biologist at Washington University in St Louis and author of “*The Cat’s Meow*,” said the hypothesis was plausible, but only if competing explanations can be ruled out. “So the authors suggest that we men are clueless, that we’re ignoring cats and they need to get our attention more,” he said. “Could be true.”

Still, he noted that the sample size was small and that alternative explanations are possible. “Is this inherently due to differences between men and women,” he asked, “or something about the experimental setup? Could men and women differ in how they follow instructions?”

Mikel Delgado, a cat behaviourist and senior research scientist at Purdue University, was more skeptical. “We need to be careful about interpreting this as a clear finding that is going to translate to all cats,” she said. Furthermore, the study did not account for other factors, including how long a cat had been left alone, and whether it was hungry.

And, Delgado said, although participants were instructed to behave naturally, the researchers did not track how much the owners spoke to their pets in the study footage, another variable that influences how much cats vocalise. Such work matters for cat welfare generally, he added, because cats are “very good at hiding their problems.” The better humans understand what their cats are trying to convey, the better they can care for them.

“If only they could talk,” many cat owners have been known to lament. —NYT

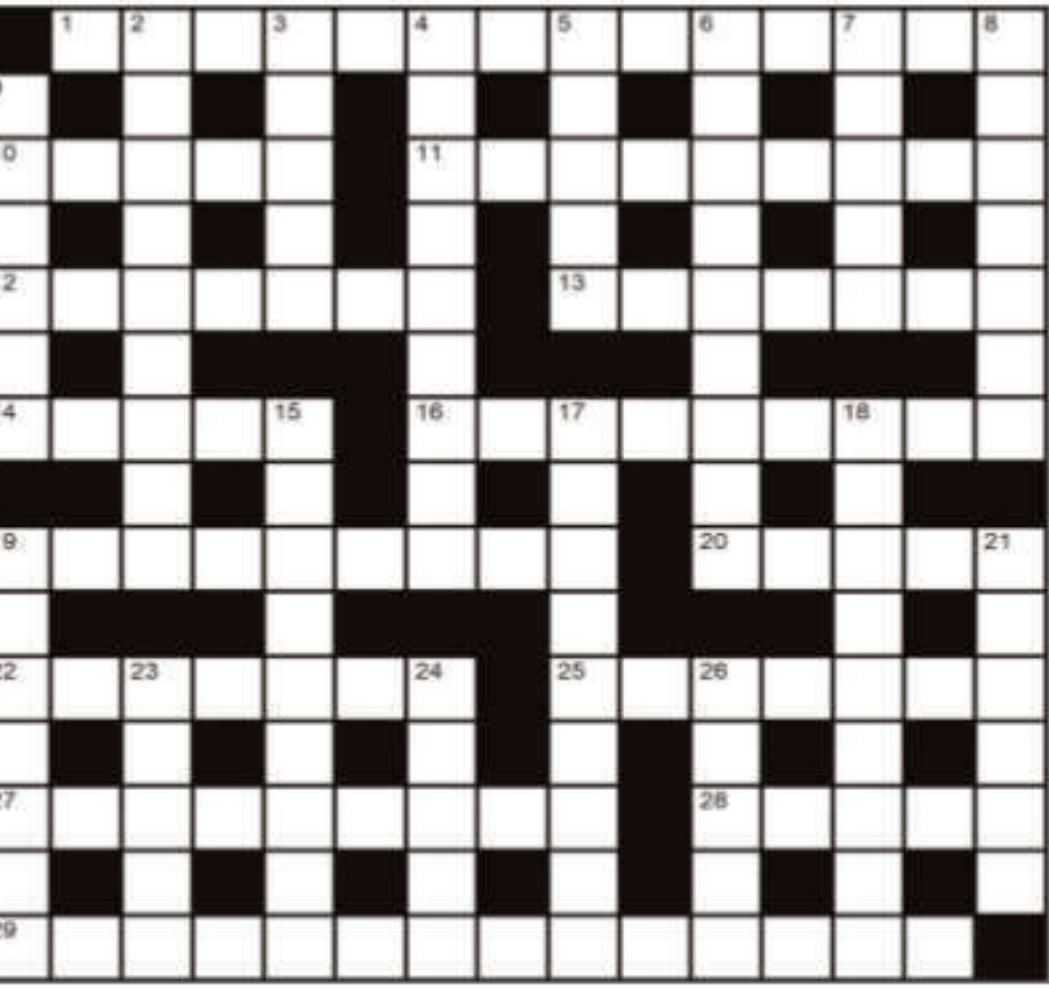


CROSSWORD

KAKURO

BRIDGE BOUTS L SUBRAMANIAN

LEXICON

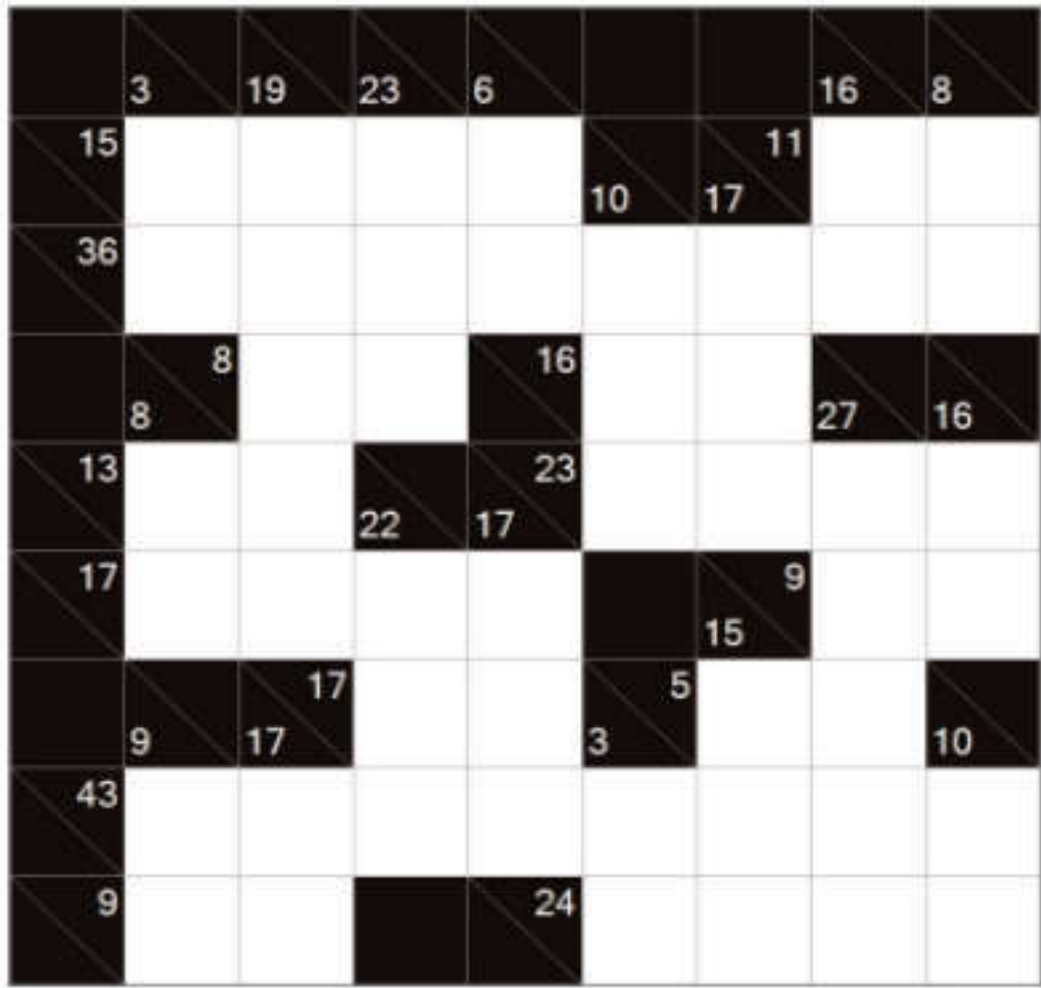


**ACROSS**  
**1** CEO of Meta (4,10)  
**10** Dr Karsanbhai Patel’s domestic detergent giant (5)  
**11** Among other things (L) (5,4)  
**12** Inert pill (7)  
**13** Written musically (7)  
**14** It may take \_\_\_\_; it may take a very long time? (5)  
**16** Former OPEC member (9)  
**19** \_\_\_\_ Corporation is the largest coffee-house company in the world (9)  
**20** Psychic phenomena (5)  
**22** Naval commander (7)  
**25** Mediterranean port (7)  
**27** Like goods despatched which are yet to reach

their destination (2,7)  
**28** A knowledge domain that you are interested in or are communicating about (5)  
**29** \_\_\_\_ Bank: it had its IPO in September 2000 (6,8)

**DOWN**  
**2** Montreal-based airlines (3,6)  
**3** A deceitful and unreliable scoundrel (5)  
**4** Anti-piracy software makers who sued Microsoft for infringing a patent held by them (6,3)  
**5** Nav \_\_\_\_ Films: Dev Anand’s banner? (5)  
**6** Fictional land in Anthony Hope’s “Prisoner of Zenda”? (9)  
**7** Acclaim, dazzling effect or success (5)

**8** Elderly relative (7)  
**9** Make it \_\_\_\_; hurry, colloquially speaking? (6)  
**15** Arguably the most influential former chairman of ONGC who died of cancer on 1st Feb 2010 (5,4)  
**17** Take to pieces (9)  
**18** \_\_\_\_ Multitech Ltd: Ahmedabad based manufacturer of laminated tubes (5,4)  
**19** African language (7)  
**21** Oilseeds traded on commodities market (6)  
**23** Deadened or softened the sound of (5)  
**24** Cowboy’s noose (5)  
**26** Inceptions as of an idea (microbes) (5)



In Kakuro sum puzzles, the numbers in the black squares refer to the SUMS of the digits, which you are to fill into the empty spaces directly below or to the right of the black square containing the number. No zeroes are used here, only the digits one through nine. An important point: A digit cannot appear more than once in any particular digit combination.

**BIZ QUIZ**

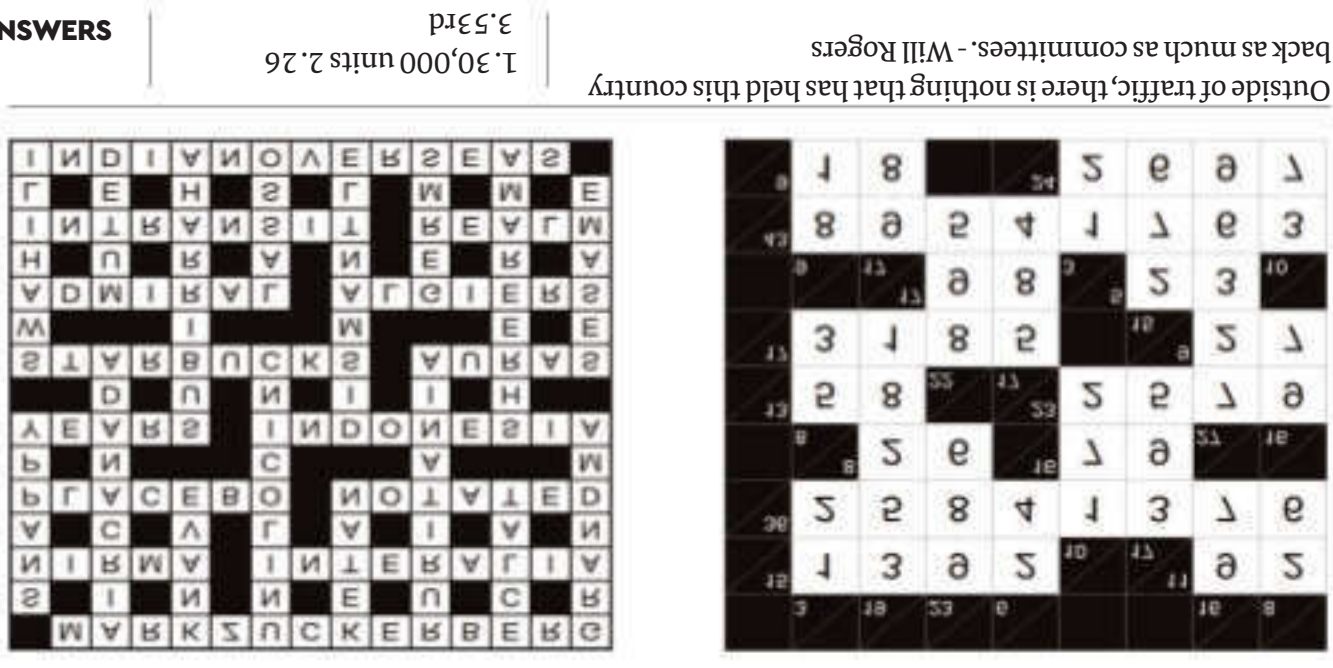
1. What sales milestone has M&M’s e-SUV lineup recently achieved?  
2. How many new aircraft is Air India expected to induct in 2026?  
3. Justice Surya Kant has been sworn in as the \_\_\_\_ Chief Justice of India.

**BUZZ WORD**

The Buzz Word is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Today’s clue: WAX equals COT

Amxzqkf ah xbehkwx, xgbfb kx laxgkly xgex gez gfsq xglkz wamlxbp jewn ez imwg ez waiilcoxzfz. - Ukss Bayfbz



### WHEN BOTH SIDES HAVE FIT - I

Enjoy today’s deal from a match-point event where east put up a brilliant defence.

When both sides have fit, it is difficult to say which side will make how many tricks. Take the west seat in today’s deal from an IMPs contest.

With opponents vulnerable and you are not, you open in third seat 1H. Lefty doubles for takeout. Partner leaps to 4H. Righty bid 4S. What do you do with S x-x H A-T-9-x-x D A-x-x-x C A-x?

**Analysis:** Partner appears to have five trumps and may have a side suit of five or more cards. Looks like north has four spades, for he might have overcalled 1S with a five-bagger. For bidding at the four level, you can give south five cards in spades. If he has bid on only four, he will have a near-opening hand.

Let us apply the law of total tricks; ‘The total number of tricks on a given hand is equal to the total number of trumps in the two hands put together’. You have ten and they have nine. Suppose you assume that they can make ten tricks in spades, you should be making nine tricks in hearts. As it will be a good save, you decide to bid 5H. LHO doubles and everyone passes. The E-W hands are:

S x x	N	S A x	W	N	E	S
H A T 9 x x		H J x x x x	-	-	pass	pass
D A x x x	S	D -	1H	dbl	4H	4S
C A x		C T x x x x x	5H	dbl	All pass	

North leads a spade. You win, play a heart to your ace, discard a spade from dummy on the DA, cash CA, and give up a club. With trumps 2-1 and clubs 3-2, you claim eleven tricks.

**Discussion:** You thought you were saving but ended up making the contract. Result +10 imps to your side. Strictly, 5H was a two-way bid; as a save or for make. It works like magic in favourable vulnerability situations when you apply the ‘Law of Total Tricks’.

You had to make an educated guess about the number of trumps partner has and the number of trumps the opponents have in their combined hands.



# Unsure Insurance

Health insurance is meant to provide peace of mind, but many policyholders encounter pain and paperwork

Lijee Philip

It was a long night for 24-year-old Rohan Mehta from Mumbai. After five days of unrelenting fever, he was finally admitted to a hospital. The doctors couldn't pinpoint what was wrong. He was tested for malaria, typhoid and dengue, but results proved inconclusive. As his temperature touched 103°F and fatigue set in, his physician decided hospitalisation was the safest option.

After 10 days, Mehta recovered after a course of anti-malarial treatment. The bill came to ₹2.48 lakh. Confident that his ₹10 lakh comprehensive health insurance policy from a leading private insurer would take care of it, he submitted a claim.

What followed was disbelief. The insurer rejected Mehta's claim, citing "unwarranted hospitalisation". Even after Mehta submitted a doctor's certificate that hospitalisation was necessary, the insurer remained unmoved.

A few weeks later, a representative from the insurer's third-party administrator turned up at Mehta's doorstep, asking to see his Google Maps timeline to verify whether he was indeed admitted during those days. "It felt like an interrogation," says Mehta. "He was looking for reasons to reject the claim, not help me."

Three months of back and forth later, the insurance ombudsman intervened. Within a week, the ombudsman ordered the insurer to pay the claim in full. "The insurer has no authority to decide whether a person should be hospitalised or not, that's a doctor's prerogative," the order stated.

Rohan's story isn't an exception. Across the country, countless health policyholders are finding themselves entangled in similar battles over technicalities and interpretations.

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has reported that health insurers disallowed claims worth ₹15,100 crore in FY24—around 13% of all claims. It also noted that claim repudiations (claims fully rejected) rose nearly 19% year-on-year.

That is shaking the foundation of trust in what is still a small but growing slice of insurance in India.

## INCONSISTENCIES APLenty

Consider the case of 35-year-old Arjun Sharma from Pune. When he contracted dengue earlier this year, his platelet count dropped to 38,000—a dangerous level that required transfusion and hospitalisation.

He had a ₹50 lakh health policy from Star Health. Confident that dengue was covered, he filed a cashless claim.

Star Health rejected it. The reason: "Hospitalisation not necessary."

"It made no sense," recalls Sharma. "I was weak, dehydrated and my platelets were plummeting. The doctors said I could have gone into shock any moment. Yet the insurer claimed I didn't need to be hospitalised." An ombudsman later ruled in his favour, but the damage was done—both emotionally and financially, he says.

Experts say dengue-related rejections are alarmingly common. Insurers often use arbitrary platelet-count thresholds to reject claims. "Some companies deny claims if the count is above 1 lakh; others if it is above 80,000. There's no uniform medical reasoning," says Nikhil Jha, founder of Hercules Insurance Advisors. "It's one of the most random parameters used in health insurance."

Then there's the case of 72-year-old Ahmedabad resident Bharat Sethi, who was advised to port his old health policy to a "premium" plan with fewer restrictions. A few months later, he suffered a heart attack and underwent open-heart surgery.

His claim for ₹4 lakh was rejected; the insurer claimed "non-disclosure" because a hospital note mentioned he had experienced "heaviness in chest and constipation for three months".

"That note was written by the doctor after admission; it wasn't true," says Sethi's son. "But the insurer cancelled the entire policy, calling it material non-disclosure." After 10 months of appeals, the claim was finally settled but the episode left the family wary of the

Experts say dengue-related rejections are alarmingly common. Insurers often use arbitrary platelet-count thresholds to reject claims

very product meant to protect them. "Insurers forget that these are ordinary people, not legal experts," says Jha, who works as an intermediary with insurance companies. "They don't understand the fine print or medical jargon. They buy peace of mind but get paperwork and pain instead."

## INSURERS' DEFENCE

Insurers, on their part, insist the picture isn't as one-sided as it appears.

Star Health, India's largest standalone health insurer, says it has settled over 1.4 crore claims worth ₹62,100 crore since inception, with 95.6% of cashless claims settled within three hours.

"Our claim settlement ratio stands at 90.5%, and rejections are only 9.5%—largely due to non-disclosure, documentation gaps, or fraudulent claims," says Anand Roy, MD & CEO, Star Health & Allied Insurance.

Aditya Birla Health Insurance also points to its multi-layered scrutiny process. "Every claim proposed for repudiation goes through medical review and an independent high-level committee," says Anuradha Sriram, the company's chief actuarial officer. "We are digital-first—customers can submit claims online, track them in real time and receive proactive updates."

ICICI Lombard and HDFC Ergo did not respond to ET's queries.

Insurers argue that they are walking a tightrope—be-

Our claim settlement ratio stands at 90.5%, and rejections are only 9.5%, largely due to non-disclosure, documentation gaps, or fraudulent claims"

ANAND ROY, MD & CEO, Star Health and Allied Insurance

tween rising medical inflation, fraudulent billing and customer expectations. A senior executive from a private insurer says: "If consumers don't declare pre-existing diseases, it affects everyone. Pricing gets dis-

torted. Health insurance is a pool—honesty on both sides keeps it sustainable."

Still, for policyholders waiting months for a claim or feeling humiliated by verification visits, those numbers offer cold comfort.

## REGULATORY INTERVENTIONS

For Mehta and others, IRDAI's ombudsman network is often the only route to justice. According to the Council for Insurance Ombudsmen, 95% of health insurance complaints relate to non-settlement of claims.

In response, IRDAI has introduced several reforms: From August 1, 2024, insurers must strive for 100% cashless claim settlement. In July 2025, they also proposed new Internal Ombudsman Guidelines, requiring insurers to establish in-house ombudsmen to resolve complaints up to ₹50 lakh. It also cut down processing turnaround time—cashless approvals are now expected within three hours.

Ombudsman offices have proved that they can deliver, as Mehta saw when his rejected claim was cleared within a week.

Now, the question is of scaling it up. "Transparency and timelines are improving," says a senior official from the regulator on condition of anonymity. "But enforcement remains a challenge. The industry's systems and training need to evolve faster." IRDAI did not respond to ET's queries.

## CASHLESS CONUNDRUM

If claim rejections are one part of the puzzle, cashless treatment disputes form the other.

Earlier this year, the Ahmedabad Hospitals and Nursing Homes Association withdrew cashless facilities for policyholders of Star Health, Tata AIG and Care Health Insurance, accusing insurers of unpaid deductions and outdated reimbursement rates.

Similarly, in September 2025, several insurers, including Tata AIG, Star Health and Niva Bupa, suspended cashless tie-ups with Max Healthcare.

For patients, this means showing up for surgery and being told cashless is not available, please pay upfront.

Hospitals claim insurers are squeezing tariffs to uneconomic levels. Insurers counter that hospitals inflate bills. The tug-of-war has

left patients in the crossfire.

Data from Gujarat show that only 29% of claims were settled cashless—far below the national average of 60%. The rest were paid as reimbursements, forcing patients to first pay out of pocket and claim later.

"It defeats the whole purpose of insurance," says a health analyst. "Cashless was meant to bring relief. Now it's become another uncertainty."

## DOMINO EFFECT

The growing mistrust isn't just scaring customers—it's unsettling investors.

In September, Madison India Capital sold its entire 1.15% stake in Star Health for around ₹299 crore. In May last year, several institutional investors offloaded nearly 7% of the company for ₹2,210 crore.

While these moves don't necessarily signal collapse, analysts say they reflect "investor de-risking".

"When claim ratios rise and consumer complaints pile up, investors get nervous," says an insurance-sector analyst. "They fear regulatory penalties, reputation loss and shrinking profitability."

A financially stressed insurer slows down claim settlements or raises premiums—the cost ultimately falls on policyholders.

Among India's young, this distrust is already visible. "I took a health policy for peace of mind," says 24-year-old Meenal Kapoor, who bought a private plan last year. "But after seeing how my friend's claim was rejected, I'm not sure if I'll renew it. While selling, they are aggressive. When you need them, they vanish."

Elderly policyholders echo the sentiment. "Once you are locked into a product, premiums go up, benefits go down," says a 68-year-old retired government officer. "They dis-

continue old plans and call it upgrade. If there is any discrepancy, they cancel the policy."

Those who have won compensation after long legal battles—like Renu Bansal, who fought 13 years for her kidney donor claim—describe the experience as "a test of endurance".

## SILVER LINING

Still, driven by people's fear of medical inflation, health insurance has grown sharply: standalone health insurers reported a 38.3% year-on-year growth in premiums in October 2025, outpacing the overall general insurance industry (5%).

The government's move to exempt indi-

13% Health Insurance Claims Disallowed in FY2024

Its Worth ₹15,100cr

## Rejection Reasons

■ **Arbitrary Interpretations of Medical Necessity:** Insurers sometimes override doctors' advice, deciding that certain treatments could have been done at home

■ **Non-disclosure:** Even minor omissions or inaccurate doctor notes can be labelled as "concealment"

■ **Documentation Errors:** Small mismatches in hospital reports or missing papers often derail otherwise valid claims

## What Health Insurance Buyers Must Do

■ Always follow doctor's advice—if they recommend admission, do it

■ Never hide or understate pre-existing conditions

■ Verify hospital reports before they are sent to the insurer, any wrong information can haunt you later. Insist on doctor-certified admission notes

■ Keep digital and physical copies of reports

■ Be patient, not passive. Follow up diligently

vidual health policies from goods and services tax (GST) in September 2024 has also spurred demand.

There is progress. After Covid, the industry has gone digital—nearly 70% of claims are now cashless, most processed online. The process is faster and more traceable than ever before.

And for every rejection horror story, there are also silent successes, families whose bills were cleared within hours, patients who didn't have to think twice before admission.

A senior private insurer official sums it up: "We are not perfect, but the direction is right. The system works best when everyone—hospital, insurer and patient—is honest and transparent."

For insurers, the challenge is credibility. Rapid expansion and aggressive sales have brought in customers but not loyalty. Claim delays and confusing policy language are eroding trust. Those that simplify terms, offer real-time claim visibility and train their agents well will survive.

For hospitals, collaboration is key. Transparent pricing and standardised billing can restore balance. When hospitals overcharge, they give insurers ammunition; when insurers underpay, they drive hospitals out of networks.

For the regulator, the moment calls for speed. IRDAI has shown intent; now it must show enforcement. Quick penalties for arbitrary rejections, mandatory transparency in hospital networks and faster ombudsman decisions will help reclaim consumer confidence.

And for policyholders, awareness remains the best weapon.

In India's health insurance story, the promise of protection still needs to be protected.

lijee.philip@timesofindia.com

# Who's Headbanging to Hare Murare?

Bhajan clubbing is taking Indian cities by storm as Gen Z, spirituality and techno beats come together

Kanika Saxena

A hall full of hip youngsters are sitting cross-legged on the floor, hands swaying in the air, heads banging to the rhythm pounding on the stage. The song? Not a Billboard chart-topper. Not the latest Bollywood hit. It is an old bhajan, set to groovy music, that is moving the youngsters to soul-tapping ecstasy: "Sree Krishna Govinda Hare Murare/Hey Nath Narayan Vasudeva..." Move over, Taylor Swift. This is tailored for the spirit.

Bhajan clubbing is taking Indian metros by storm as Gen Z, spirituality and techno beats come together in one trending moment. It has turned into a full-blown nightlife alternative with tickets, sound setup and chanting fans. This is spiritual partying.

Backstage Siblings, the musical band of Kolkata-based Raghav Agarwal, 25, and his sister Prachi, 22, perform a repertoire of old Hindi film songs and bhajans. For them, bhajan clubbing is not a passing fad. "For us, it's not a trend but a deeper cultural movement. People are finally letting go of old stereotypes about bhajans sandhyas and realising that anything bringing peace, even a bhajan, is worth embracing," says Raghav.

Bhajan clubbing, says Prachi, isn't new: "It has been with us for years, it's only being recognised now. Choosing peace, in whatever form it comes—that is what

The typical bhajan club attendee is between the ages of 25 and 40. Spiritual seekers overlap heavily with the techno, indie and Bollywood crowd"

SRIDA PATODIA, cofounder, SortMyScene



Bhajan clubbing is not a trend but a deeper cultural movement. People are finally letting go of old stereotypes about bhajan sandhyas and realising that anything bringing peace, even a bhajan, is worth embracing"

PRACHI & RAGHAV AGARWAL, Backstage Siblings

bhajan clubbing means to us."

To them, devotion is not being modernised, it is being reclaimed. "It's not about the song itself, but the feeling behind it. Whether it's sung to a guitar or a flute, the soul of the bhajan stays alive," says Raghav.

Backstage Siblings are gearing up for an all-India Bhajan Jamming Tour from January, covering cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. Each show is likely to have 2,500-3,000 attendees.

## GOD IS IN THE GIG

Event platforms are witnessing a surge in "devotional but danceable" gigs, complete with lights, tickets and waitlists. SortMyScene, a ticketing platform for music and cultural events, has listed over 100 such events in India, from



Bhajan jamming session by Backstage Siblings

Delhi and Mumbai to Bengaluru and Kasol, this year.

According to Srida Patodia, cofounder of SortMyScene, bhajan clubbing does not cater only to temple regulars. It is pulling in mainstream nightlife consumers. "Our internal audience data shows that the typical bhajan club attendee is between the ages of 25 and 40, and spiritual seekers overlap heavily with the techno, indie and Bollywood crowd," she says. She adds that the emerging soundscape includes "devotional but danceable remixes, folk-fusion and electronic-inspired chants". Young bands performing "Shiv Tandav", "Ram Siya Ram" and "Raghupati Raghav" in contemporary formats are becoming popular.

## PRAY, WHAT SONG IS THAT?

Bhajan clubbing is on the rise in Delhi. The ISKCON temple at Punjabi Bagh held an event in late November: Collective chanting and devotional music drew in youngsters. Nikunj Gupta, founder of Sanatana Journey, a plat-

form promoting Sanatana Dharma among youth, will host a bhajan clubbing event in December and tickets, costing ₹899, are selling fast. Says Gupta: "Youngsters are looking for a sense of community. They are looking at this as a recreational activity."

In Mumbai, Kallol Café in Navi Mumbai is hosting a 40-seater bhajan clubbing night early December.

London-based Radhika Das, whose kirtan concerts are packed, says, "Young people are overwhelmed by noise, speed, expectations and constant online comparison. They are craving something

Youngsters are looking for a sense of community. They are looking at bhajan clubbing as a recreational activity"

NIKUNJ GUPTA, founder, Sanatana Journey



Radhika Das

Young people are overwhelmed by noise, speed, expectations and constant online comparison. Mantra music calms the mind and creates connection without pressure"

RADHIKA DAS, kirtan artist and bhakti yoga teacher, London

grounding, something real. Mantra music calms the mind and creates connection without pressure."

Das likes to create rich soundscapes but is mindful that "the mantra has to lead, and the music must follow". "If the sound helps someone feel God more deeply, the fusion works. If it distracts from devotion, then it's not in the right direction," he says. "Instruments can evolve—guitars, strings, percussion—but the chant remains the North Star. If the music deepens devotion, it belongs. If it overshadows it, it doesn't."

A young attendee at a recent kirtan by Das in Delhi shared on Instagram that what struck her the most was the absence of "the desperation to look cool".

There is no sequinned clubwear, no judgement, no side-eye. "It felt like a new cultural wave with chai and coffee replacing cocktails," she wrote, adding that after the pretence in most social spaces, "spirituality feels like the truest philosophy of life".

A bhajan clubbing ticket can cost up to ₹1,300, a world away from free satsangs and prasad

laddoos. Says Patodia: "The average entry fee of events we have partnered with is ₹699." Backstage Siblings' bhajan sessions cost ₹1,000, similar to their Bollywood concerts. Organisers point out that lights, logistics and venues that can host thousands don't come cheap.

However, long before bhajan clubbing became a ticketed youth phenomenon, some organisations like the Art of Living Foundation have been turning devotional songs into high-energy social experiences. Dr Saurabh Shekhawat, a dental surgeon and singer from Jaipur who is associated with Art of Living, describes the growth of spiritual music as organic, not trendy. Art of Living's events are mostly free, hosted in cafes or open spaces. "We may soon introduce a reasonable entry fee just to ensure the keenness of participants," says Shekhawat.

## DEVOTION BREAK

As a generation that grew up online takes a break from their hyperconnected hours of posting and scrolling to sing Hindu devotional songs, Gupta says the appeal goes beyond religion or ritual. He says it is about belonging: "A sense of community at such events probably gives youngsters a reason to attend."

Kirtan singers say the shift is not just about enjoying bhajans differently but about spirituality becoming personal rather than prescriptive. Das says this generation is not running from religion but is redefining its terms: "I believe spiritual music is becoming a lasting part of youth culture. This isn't a trend; it's a response to a deeper emotional need."

The need for a collective experience also defines the format. Bhajan performers choose short, familiar chants so that crowds can join in instantly. The Agarwal siblings, who lead bhajan jams with guitars and percussion instruments, pick popular chants that allow immediate participation. Bhajan clubbing seems to have entered nightlife not as hardcore religion, but as an alcohol-free, anxiety-free, collective high, giving youth what clubs rarely do—participation, purpose and a peer group they don't have to impress.

kanika.saxena1@timesofindia.com



Nupur Amarnath

Srijani Samaddar, 37, blames the phone for the demise of her father due to a sudden heart attack earlier this year. The work-from-home UX designer believes it was his obsession with his smartphone that led to poor sleep, heightened anxiety, limited physical activity and a decline in his overall health. She noticed the patterns in 2021 when she started living with her parents in Kolkata. Her father had got his first smartphone during the pandemic. “It started harmlessly but soon troublesome patterns emerged. The rabbit hole he went down was YouTube,” she recalls. He would watch content on “India-Pakistan conflict” that sometimes bordered on the absurd. The algorithm kept feeding him the same. “The older generation doesn’t understand how content works. They don’t understand credible/ non-credible sources, post-truth and AI manipulation. He’d have arguments based on what he saw. His point was that if there’s a video, it must be true,” she says. Talking to him and trying to explain didn’t work and was met with irritability. Samaddar now watches her mother, 62, going down the same road. “I get up at night to tend to my newborn, and I see her phone on,” she says. Samaddar and her sister have made an early intervention with their mother. If you think Samaddar is overreacting, she’s not the only one. Scores of older millennials and Gen X are in a similar predicament: it is not just their kids who are glued to the screens, it is also their parents. The latter group is the most concerning, says Dr Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, professor, psychiatry, AIIMS, Delhi, and a WHO expert on addictions. “When it comes to screens, smartphones, or the internet, we automatically think of adolescents and young adults. All concerns and studies are on this cohort. But now, pensioners have enough free time and access to screens that can lead to excessive, if not problematic, use,” says Balhara.

**GREY SCREEN**  
Teens and screens have been a source of worry for some time now. Social psychologists like Jonathan Haidt warn of the rise of an “anxious generation”, while Australia is set to roll out a social media ban for under-16s on December 10. The worry, though justified, ignores the elderly, who have always topped the TV viewership charts. Most now have smartphones and tablets. The result: another fast-growing vulnerable group added to the screen-time debate. Lucknow-based Abhilasha Kumar (name changed), 37, is worried. A legal consultant specialising in AI governance and data privacy, she is a single mother to a toddler. She recently moved in with her parents, both 68. She has noticed their screen time going up. “I feel concerned when I see them on their phones almost all the time,” she notes. What worries her more is misinformation and AI-generated content. “I wish there was more information on it, more community support, awareness programmes, etc. Because when I try to tell them, they don’t like it,” she says. “For now, I have to parent my son as well as my parents on screen time.” Dr Prasun Chatterjee, chief of geriatric medicine & longevity science at Artemis Hospitals, Gurgaon, and a member of WHO’s technical advisory group for healthy ageing, calls those in their late 30s to 50s the sandwich generation, having to take care of their parents and children. Chatterjee says he is noticing a rise in dementia cases in the 70+ demographic. “While the underlying causes are many—social isolation, disconnect from peers, lack of physical inactivity—the common thread is excessive screen time,” he notes. Author of *Health & Wellbeing in Late Life*, Chatterjee says social media addiction cases are seen in seniors: “What started as an engagement tool is becoming a source of loneliness, lack of physical mobility, memory loss and even depression, especially in the 70+ bracket.”

**PASSIVE CONSUMERS**  
Smartphone in old age is not a monster. Social media has helped them connect with old friends and faraway family, video has brought religious services, social clubs and even doctors home, e-commerce spares them shop visits while entertainment is at the click of a button. And they have the free time to indulge. Dr Samir Parikh, chairperson of Adayu hospital and mental health programme of Fortis Healthcare, says the screen time of seniors is not going up only because of loneliness; access and ease of use have a big role to play. “Access and ease combined with the sheer volume and categories of information available increase screen use. Plus, the algorithm keeps you in a content loop. This way of consuming content makes it necessary to be concerned with everyone’s digital impact, including the elderly,” he says. “It affects everything from posture and physical activity to social engagement, memory, concentration and overall lifestyle.” Balhara notes that the way the elderly engage with technology differs from the younger generation. “While youngsters use tech-

# Who’s Glued to the Screens? Seniors!

It is not just children who are stuck to the phones. The elderly are a new and fast-growing vulnerable group that is addicted to screens



Illustration: ZAHID

nology actively—posting, reacting and creating—seniors are often passive consumers. They are taking in whatever comes their way—without questioning,” he says.

**WATCH AND LEARN**  
Bengaluru-based hospitality professional Sujith Soman, 49, knows about passive consumption. His parents, in their 70s, are living in Thrissur, Kerala. During the pandemic, Soman noticed that they always kept their phones on them, even while going from one room to another. He is also concerned about the medical misinformation that travels via WhatsApp which his mother loves to forward: “Content like managing diabetes without medicines, or ayurvedic herbs for better digestion has real-world implications if they start believing everything they watch.” Digital hygiene for the elderly is a pressing need, says Dr Manoj Kumar Sharma, professor and coordinator of SHUT (Service for Healthy Use of Technology) Clinic at NIMHANS, Bengaluru. The centre mainly revolves around adolescents and gaming addiction, but Sharma has noticed an uptick in cases involving seniors.

He shares the case of a 72-year-old man living alone in Bengaluru. He was binge-watching for three-six hours a day despite showing signs like delayed sleep initiation, physical exhaustion and neglect of daily duties. “Seniors take to screens for various reasons: too much free time, lack of opportunity for communication, minor stress relief and as a coping mechanism. We have had people addicted to OTT content, social media, spirituality content and even online pornography,” he says. They are also noticing a rise in addiction to online trading and gambling. “It’s time this group is studied in terms of their reasons, needs and motives, with policy mak-

ers stepping up before the problem becomes bigger,” he says.

Entrepreneur Ajay Puranik, 43, who runs an e-commerce business out of Bengaluru, would surely like some expert help as he’s struggling to manage the screen-time of his parents. His father is 81 and his mother 74. The

shift happened during the pandemic when they started forwarding “medical advice”. Puranik is worried about what they are consuming digitally on various topics. He says, “A counseling session/ platform on digital hygiene must be available to all senior citizens. I don’t see many seniors enjoying walks in my neighbourhood anymore. I

think there is a need for communities specifically for seniors to coordinate group walks or group yoga.”

**FIND YOUR PURPOSE**  
“I always say, purpose is what separates Narendra Modi and Amitabh Bachchan from a regular 70+,” says Chatterjee. “This is a very disciplined generation. They follow routines. You have to give them tasks that will take them away from their phones besides walking or yoga.” Chatterjee runs an NGO called Healthy Ageing India. Its Intergenerational Learning Centre sends the elderly as educators to government schools in Jharkhand.

Balhara says, “If you can’t answer ‘if not mobile, then what’, you can’t solve the issue with just a conversation.” He says the case of seniors’ screen time comes up during his sessions with adolescents who mention how grandpa or grandma are forever on their phones. “The real question is how to engage them in something meaningful. It requires active participation,” he mentions.

Chatterjee says he substitutes his father’s phone time with a task like doing something for the grandkid or an activity like getting groceries. Puranik engages his parents in conversations so that they put their phones down. But not everyone has that privilege.

Mumbai-based techpreneur Devendra Rane, for instance, lives away from his parents who are in Nashik. They continue with their walking routine, but they pick up the phone right after breakfast. Recently, his mother had an episode of vertigo which, he feels, could be related to phone overuse. He seeks a network and community for his parents that would reduce their phone time.

Delhi-based Sneha Bhattacharjee too lives away from her parents and in-laws, all in the 60-75 years age bracket. She says con-

**The digital impact on elderly is something one needs to be concerned about as we are about children. It affects everything from posture and physical activity to social engagement, memory and concentration”**  
**Dr SAMIR PARIKH**, chairperson of Adayu hospital and mental health programme, Fortis Healthcare

**This age group (60+) are passive consumers of content. They are not participating or creating but consuming whatever comes their way. This makes them vulnerable to algorithms and content loops, something they don’t fully understand. Only now are we seeing manifestations of screen use by the elderly”**  
**Dr YATAN PAL SINGH BALHARA**, professor, psychiatry, AIIMS, Delhi

**In my practice, I am noticing patients coming in with reduced attention spans, slower reaction times and loss of vocabulary or numerical abilities. There’s a rising incidence of dementia in the 65+ and a common thread in most cases is increased screen time—be it TV or phones”**  
**Dr PRASUN CHATTERJEE**, chief of geriatric medicine, Artemis, Gurgaon

Ayushi Gupta-Mehra

Who would have thought that a century-old Chinese game of tile and tactics would find a chic resurgence in urban India? What began as a casual curiosity for a few has turned into a full-blown cultural moment. Mahjong is no longer a quiet pastime but an obsession and, surprisingly, a restorative form of self-care. No matter how long the day or how loud the mental clutter, I’m never too tired to play. There’s something self-soothing about sitting at the table, running my fingers through the cool, smooth tiles and letting their rhythm reset my mind. At its heart, mahjong thrives on contradictions. It demands focus yet rewards intuition, encourages patience but punishes hesitation. Each game unfolds across four “winds”—East, South, West and North—with the rules shifting subtly across regions and even cities. American Mahjong, for instance, plays by its own scorecards, while in Mumbai, Mahjong Gita reigns supreme—a homegrown version devised by the late Gita Patel, an ardent enthusiast whose love for the game led her to craft an ingenious set of rules that now govern the most competitive play.

**TILE TRAVELLERS**  
Fortunes in mahjong shift as swiftly as the shuffle of tiles. Four players draw and discard, balancing strategy with serendipity, as they race to rearrange a random set of tiles

# How Mahjong is About Finding Yourself in the Soft Clatter of Tiles

Its popularity in urban India mirrors a longing for tactile connection in a digital age, for order amid chaos



**Originating in Qing-dynasty China, mahjong once travelled the world, tucked away in lacquered boxes, enchanting Western drawing rooms in the 1920s, before finding its way into the barracks of India where it became both a social ritual and an exercise in quiet intellect for army wives**

something out of nothing. Of course, mahjong isn’t a solitary pleasure. Originating in Qing-dynasty China, mahjong once travelled the world, tucked away in lacquered boxes, enchanting Western drawing rooms in the 1920s, before finding its way into the barracks of India where it became both a social ritual and an exercise in quiet intellect for army wives. Its revival in urban India feels like a full circle, mirroring not just a broader cultural longing for tactile connection in

### ELDERLY WATCH

- Currently, **12%** Indians are aged 60 and above; this will rise to **19%** in 2050
- 41%** elders own smartphones; 13% use social media
- Among elders who are online/digital-device users, **34%** use it for entertainment & social media; **12%** use for payments or utility bills

Source: HelpAge India

### Early Warning Signs

- Staying up late glued to the phone
- Excessive forgetfulness
- Watching for two hours at a stretch
- Reduced interest in offline hobbies or socialising
- Irritability when asked to pause/put the phone down
- Always discussing what they have watched or read online
- Repeated forwarding of messages
- Complaints of headaches, eye strain, poor sleep

### How Can You Help

**FIND A REPLACEMENT:** Create a viable offline ritual that they would follow

**ENFORCE MICRO RULES FOR ALL:** No phone during meals, or 1 hour before bedtime, or the first hour after waking

**USE WISELY:** Install larger fonts (for less eye strain), screen-time limits and spam filters

**CHANGE THE TONE:** Don’t say “Stop doing this,” say “Let’s do this together”

**SHIFT FOCUS:** Encourage real connection like calls with grandkids, community groups

**SUGGEST BETTER CONTENT:** Point them towards content that is not problematic, mainly trusted sources or something that helps them upskill

**SANITISE THE FEED:** Once a week, tweak the algorithm by blocking accounts that could be the source of misinformation

versations about the rights and wrongs of screentime and content cycle are the only way out. Balhara says a world without phones is not possible, so the elderly need to be taught proper device-use behaviour: Chatterjee says being on screen for two hours at a stretch is a red flag, but his thumb rule is to not let them watch in the evening. For Sharma, early indicators of excessive screentime are losing sense of time, lack of communication and prioritising tech use over other commitments. He adds, “Other warning signs are musculoskeletal issues like pain in the neck, wrist pain or tennis elbow, or eye strain, caused by spending four-five hours on screen. Or, when they show signs of nomophobia (fear of being without a mobile phone) or zero-inbox syndrome where they have to read and respond to everything. All these are signs of high scrolling behaviour.” If screentime takes precedence over regular responsibilities, including personal care, it is time to pull the plug on the phone. Lack of sleep is one of the best indicators of excess screentime, says Chatterjee. “The elderly generally face a sleep crisis and screentime makes it worse.” He says there needs to be awareness about digital hygiene like no phone close to bedtime and app-based timers: “Change your phone from a tool for entertainment to a device to learn something new.”

**DIGITAL CONTROL**  
Bengaluru-based psychologist Jayiyant Cavale says not all screentime is bad: “In fact, some amount of screen (mainly active usage) is actually helpful to keep the brain stimulated when elderly people lose interest in other activities. But the screen—especially of phones—can be a maladaptive coping mechanism when usage is problematic or excessive.” Cavale recommends evaluating elderly individuals regularly for neurocognitive problems such as dementia. The bottom line is safe and healthy use of technology, says Balhara. Sharma suggests following good practices like building digital control (use screen for 30-40 minutes, then take a break to walk and stretch), indulging in non-screen-based activities, developing hobbies, learning about cyber frauds and observing digital fasting. The siren song of the screen is difficult to resist. For Samaddar, her parents’ screentime worked as a wake-up call for her. “I have since sanitised all my social feeds and reduced time spent online.” The seniors’ screentime, reaching a tipping point now, is a cautionary tale of how it’s time to screen the screens.

nupuramarnath@etimesofindia.com

a digital age, but also a voracious appetite for mentally engaging pursuits in a doom-scroll era.

**GAME FOR ALL AGES**  
Everyone seems to be playing it these days—from long-time loyalists like my Nani to new wave of enthusiasts. Perhaps that’s part of its modern allure. In an era when our attention spans are splintered, mahjong brings people together, bridging generations, lifestyles, professions and even temperaments. My sessions with the girls are the most cherished part of my week. Sometimes we sip tea, most often wine. Sometimes competition is light, other times ruthless—but there is always an unspoken camaraderie that only comes from a shared obsession. Between shuffles and discards, we swap life updates, vent about work and moan about the perils of parenting today. Over time, I’ve realised that the lessons from the table extend far beyond it. Mahjong is a lesson in patience—you can’t force the right tiles to come to you. It rewards observation—what’s discarded often tells you more than what’s kept. You find beauty in strategy, luck in surrender and above all, resilience—because sometimes, even after the perfect setup, the winds shift and you start again. In the end, mahjong is about more than just finding order in chaos. It’s about finding yourself in the soft clatter of those tiles.

The writer is an economist and founder of The Foodie Diaries