

Facts alone fall short in correcting science misinformation

The Hindu Bureau

Just the facts may not be enough to overcome misinformation, a recent study indicates. In an experiment, 152 college students, who had been exposed to misinformation, read one of two articles intended to give them the correct, scientifically backed information. Those who read an expository article which had “just the facts” retained more misconceptions than those who read an article with a refutation

— meaning it specifically called out the false claims before presenting the facts.

The study published in *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* adds evidence that a refutation approach may be a better way to combat misinformation than traditional methods of communicating science.

For this study, researchers first tested what the student participants knew about putting fluoride in water.

The students then read two articles: one with false information saying that fluoridation is harmful and another presenting the scientific consensus that fluoridation is safe and prevents dental disease.

The participants all read the same misinformation text, but different groups read an article with the correct information either in a traditional “just the facts” style or one that first refuted the misinformation. The study also tested the effects of having the

participants read the correct article before, or after, the misinformation.

Sorting facts

A post-test revealed that the students still learned under all four conditions — but the group that performed the worst had seen the misinformation first, followed by a “just the facts” type text. Those who had read the refutation article either before, or after, the misinformation had fewer misconceptions. They also had more posi-

tive emotions toward the subject.

With a profusion of information easily available on the internet, it can be hard for many people to sort fact from falsehood. This can cause a problem researchers call “conceptual contamination” — when learning incorrect information interferes with learning the correct information.

The researchers chose fluoridation for this experiment because it is less politically charged than other

scientific topics like climate change or evolution. However, Danielson and his colleagues recently did a meta-analysis published in the journal *Educational Psychologist* of 76 other educational studies.

They found the refutation approach works well for a wide range of topics from noncontroversial issues in physics and chemistry to highly controversial ones including climate change and evolution as well as genetically modified foods and vaccines.

SNAPSHOTS



Social experiences shape song preference learning in finches

A study on songbirds sheds light on the power of social interaction to facilitate learning, insights that potentially apply to human development. Researchers discovered that zebra finches deprived of early social experiences could still form strong bonds with a partner later. Once placed into cohabitation with a male, females that had never heard a mating song before could quickly develop a preference for his melody. This challenges the belief that early experiences alone are critical for learning song preference.



Gut molecule in *C. elegans* worms slows fat burning

Scientists have discovered why, when the *C. elegans* worm eats less, slowly it loses fat. In *C. elegans*, they found one molecule that had a large effect on a form of insulin. In the worms, the insulin molecule made by gut cells was impacting fat metabolism via the brain. Although the exact molecule they identified in the worms has not yet been studied in humans, the study finds the brain and digestive system communicate in both directions to control metabolism based on food availability.



Honey bees may spread viruses to wild bumble bees

Honey bees may play a role in increasing virus levels in wild bumble bees each spring, according to researchers who analysed seasonal trends of parasite and virus transmission in bees. It found that honey bees had higher levels of viruses. While both types of bees had lower virus prevalence in the winter, only bumble bees experienced negligible levels by spring. Honey bees may be re-infecting bumble bees that otherwise would have very low virus prevalence.

IACS scientists discover a new target for cancer treatment

A combination of inhibitors that target different aspects of cell cycle and DNA replication makes it hard for cancer cells to survive, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the treatment

R. Prasad

Using human breast cancer cells, a team of scientists at the Kolkata-based Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) has discovered a new target for killing cancer cells, which can potentially lead to new therapies. This target is used by cancer cells to regulate DNA repair during cell division. The results of the study were published recently in *The EMBO Journal*.

The work sheds light on how cancer cells respond to topoisomerase I-targeted chemotherapy, including how cancer cells sometimes develop resistance to treatment using their intrinsic DNA repair toolbox. These insights could pave the way for precision medicine approaches for cancer patients.

Developing novel anti-cancer therapeutics may become possible through a combinatorial targeting of two key molecules — the CDK1 protein and the TDP1 enzyme. Present anti-cancer drugs — camptothecin, topotecan, and irinotecan — target a molecule (the enzyme topoisomerase I or Top1) involved in DNA metabolic processes like replication and transcription. The role of DNA topoisomerase I is critical for mitosis as it relaxes the DNA supercoil generated in the condensed chromosomes due to transcription.

“For the past decade at IACS, we have been investigating DNA repair pathways that provide resis-

The first step towards targeted chemotherapy

IACS researchers have discovered a new target for killing cancer cells

■ The new target that has been discovered is used by cancer cells to regulate DNA repair during cell division

■ Cancer cells can develop resistance to treatment by using intrinsic DNA repair mechanism

■ A combinatorial targeting of two key molecules — the CDK1 protein and the TDP1 enzyme — may lead to novel anti-cancer therapeutics

■ Currently, anti-cancer drugs target a molecule (Top1) involved in DNA replication and transcription

■ While drugs that target Top1 can disrupt its activity leading to the death of cancer cells, cancer cells can activate their repair mechanisms to counteract the drug effects

■ Targeting another protein (CDK1) that disrupts the Top1-mediated repair process can potentially kill the cancer cells



IACS researchers are currently using mouse models to test the combination drug therapies using *in vivo* tumours

■ Combining CDK1 inhibitors with Top1 inhibitors can prove lethal for cancer cells

tance to camptothecin and its clinical derivatives,” says Dr. Benu Brata Das, Professor at the School of Biological Sciences at IACS and the corresponding author of the paper.

“Our goal is to uncover new methods to target and eliminate these pathways through targeted or personalised chemotherapy, especially in breast and ovarian cancer. We are currently using mouse models to test the combination drug therapies using *in vivo* tumours.”

Treatment strategies

Top1, an enzyme found in all higher organisms, plays a crucial role in maintaining the DNA structure during replication and transcription. Drugs that target Top1 disrupt its activity, leading to the death of many cells, including cancer cells. However, cancer cells can activate repair mechanisms using a protein

called TDP1, which counteracts the effect of the drug.

Understanding the overexpression of various DNA repair proteins like Top1, TDP1, or CDK1 in cancers can provide critical insights into tumour biology.

These can help in diagnosing and predicting cancer outcomes and guide the development of targeted and personalised treatment strategies. Knowing these biomarkers is essential for advancing cancer therapy, understanding resistance mechanisms, and improving patient outcomes, says Dr. Das.

The researchers at IACS have identified a key DNA repair protein — TDP1 — which plays a role in repairing DNA damage in cancer cells. Their study shows that cells switch their repair tools depending on the stage of the cell cycle and the presence of a drug called camptothecin that is

used in chemotherapy. They discovered that a specific change (phosphorylation) in TDP1 helps remove the TDP1 from the chromosomes during cell division. This finding is important because it helps explain how cells accurately divide and how problems in this process can lead to cancer.

The study suggests that targeting another protein (CDK1) can disrupt the Top1-mediated DNA damage-associated repair process, potentially killing cancer cells by causing chromosomal instability and stopping cell division. “We discover a new mechanism where we show CDK1 directly regulates TDP1 through chemical breaks generated by camptothecin, during mitosis thus offering resistance to chemotherapy,” says Srijita Paul Chowdhuri, the first author of the paper.

CDK1 inhibitors — avataciclib, alvociclib, roniciclib, riviciclib, and dinaciclib — are currently in various stages of clinical trials. These inhibitors can be used alone or in combination with other DNA-damaging agents. Combining CDK1 inhibitors with Top1 inhibitors may have a powerful effect on cancer cells, the study finds.

While Top1 inhibitors cause DNA damage, the CDK1 inhibitors prevent the repair of this damaged DNA or stop the cell cycle.

This combination makes it very hard for cancer cells to survive and can enhance the overall effectiveness of the treatment by targeting different aspects of the cell cycle and DNA replication.

Evading treatment

“Cancer cells often develop resistance to single-agent therapies through various mechanisms, such as improved DNA repair pathways or changes in the cell cycle regulation. By using both Top1 and CDK1 inhibitors together, this resistance can be overcome, making it less likely for cancer cells to evade treatment,” says Dr. Das.

“Since the rate of proliferation is higher in the case of cancer cells, there are higher chances of the combination drug being taken up by cancer cells,” says Dr. Das. “The personalised approach of combinatorial chemotherapy will effectively kill cancer cells by bypassing induced chemoresistance. More studies are needed to confirm the lab results,” he says.

The chemical treasury in garlic



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Plants, unlike animals, cannot escape predators. They are literally rooted to one spot. They have overcome this disadvantage by arming themselves with a vast chemical armory as a defense.

Those parts of a plant that are below the ground are particularly vulnerable to attack. Bacteria, fungi, nematodes, larvae, snails, mice — the list of threats is long. Not surprisingly, plants such as onion and garlic, which store food for future growth in underground bulbs, have equipped themselves with defensive chemicals of every conceivable hue and variety.

A recent inventory of the molecular army of garlic, using very sensitive analytical tools of chemistry has shown that there are over 2,300 chemicals in its cloves. Most of them are there for reasons that we do not comprehend yet. Barely 70 of these figures are in today’s nutrition charts. These include manganese, selenium, and vitamin B6: three human nutrients that garlic is particularly rich in.

Many of the other constituents — thiosulfates, lectins, saponins and flavonoids, to name a few — can play protective roles in humans too. It is not surprising that humans have a long history of incorporating garlic into their diets. Sumerian clay tablets from 4000 years ago have recipes that use garlic. And beyond nutritional value, garlic has been used for its medicinal properties in



A fraction: Of the over 2,300 chemicals in garlic cloves, barely 70 chemicals figure in nutrition charts. GETTY IMAGES

many cultures.

In our tradition

In Ayurveda, warm garlic-infused milk, *Lasuna Ksheerapaka*, is beneficial for respiratory conditions such as asthma, cough, and common cold, and for generally improving body strength. Similarly, garlic-infused water (*lasuna phata*) is used as a tonic, improving digestion by stimulating the secretion of digestive enzymes, and by

its carminative properties, which reduce gas formation.

The pungent flavour that is characteristic of garlic and related species comes from a sulphur-containing compound. Allicin is not present in fresh garlic. It is produced when an odour-free precursor called allicin is acted upon by an enzyme. The two are brought together when garlic is chopped, crushed, or even chewed.

Allicin interacts with receptors found on sensory neurons in the trigeminal nerve, which gathers sensations from the mouth and the nose. The pungent taste of garlic is a result of this interaction.

Allicin and other garlic constituents such as diallyl disulfide have an influence on inflammatory processes.

Beneficial effects include the regulation of blood pressure and positive trends in cardiovascular health. Another constituent, the flavonoid luteolin, inhibits the formation and aggregation of amyloid beta plaques, which are major hallmarks of Alzheimer’s disease.

Ongoing research may one day pinpoint the roles played by the many other chemicals in garlic.

Some of these, individually or in combination, may contribute to the bet-

terment of human health. What we know today is that moderation is key to the beneficial use of garlic in our diet, to avoid side effects such as heartburn and diarrhea. Some health practitioners say that four grams every day is about the right amount.

India is the second largest producer of garlic. Impressive varieties of garlic such as the Riya van come from Neemuch and Ratlam in Madhya Pradesh, the largest garlic-producing State.

In South India, Karnataka’s Gadag local varieties, with their strong, pungent flavor and aroma sell very well. And then there are the Kashmiri varieties. No matter what your preferences are, a little garlic may add spice to your life and to your health.

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



Question Corner

Exploiting signals

Do some spiders exploit firefly’s flashing signals to lure more prey?

Fireflies rely on flashing signals to communicate with other fireflies using light-emitting lanterns on their abdomens. In fireflies of the species *Absccondita terminalis*, males make multi-pulse flashes with two lanterns to attract females, and females make single-pulse flashes with their one lantern to attract males. Researchers now have evidence that an orb-weaving spider (*Araneus ventricosus*) manipulates the flashing signals of male fireflies ensnared in its web such that they mimic the typical

flashes of a female firefly, thereby luring other males to serve as their next meal. They found that the spider’s web more often captured male fireflies when the spider was present. The signals made by male fireflies looked a lot more like the signals of free females. Specifically, the ensnared males used single-pulse signals using only one of their lanterns, not both. The findings suggested that the males weren’t altering their flashes as a distress signal. The researchers propose that the spiders alter the firefly’s signal.

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

Will an extended space stay affect astronauts?

Why will Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore have to stay onboard the International Space Station till 2025?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

On August 24, NASA announced that Boeing's Starliner crew capsule that took astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore to the International Space Station (ISS), as part of its first crewed test flight, wasn't safe enough to transport them back. Instead, NASA extended Williams's and Wilmore's stay onboard the ISS until February 2025, when they will return in a SpaceX crew capsule to be launched in September 2024.

How does space affect the body?

While hundreds of astronauts have flown to space (100 km above mean sea level and experiencing microgravity conditions), they don't make up a cohort large enough for researchers to study and reliably elucidate all the effects of spaceflight on their bodies. They have also spent different amounts of time there and reported different symptoms after different trips. Nonetheless, some broad trends have emerged centred on the body's bones, digestion, eyes, heart, muscles and nerves. For example, in microgravity, bones become weaker. Food may move more slowly through the gut and lead to weight gain. Around 70% of astronauts involved in long-duration spaceflight develop a condition called spaceflight associated neuro-ocular syndrome (SANS): more fluids enter the head

and build up at the back of the eye, affecting eyesight. Further, because of the body's weightless experience, the heart is required to do less work and could shrink. Similarly, other parts of the musculature could shed muscle mass and

strength. The blood loses more red blood cells per day than it does on the ground (a 2022 study in *Nature Medicine* quantified the loss rate but couldn't discern the cause), which means astronauts' diets need to be adjusted to deliver more energy for their bodies to make more of these cells. The signals from the body the brain uses to help maintain balance and a sense of place could also be disrupted in space.

What causes these symptoms?

Researchers have identified some important causes, including radiation exposure, confined environments, and gravitation.

Time is also an important factor. The longer astronauts spend in space, the more pronounced the symptoms. The average range of time an astronaut spends in space has increased from one minute to one month in the 1960s to 10 minutes to six months in the 2020s. Each expedition to the ISS can also be up to six months long. By January 31, 2025, Williams and Wilmore will have spent 240 days in space. Whether a mission is short or long, space agencies require their astronauts to adhere to a strict exercise regime and maintain predictable routines while in orbit in order to work the body without incurring stress. Agencies have also developed communication and work-management protocols that keep astronauts engaged as well as relaxed.

How much do we not know?

Our understanding of the effects of spaceflight on humans has many uncertainties. A June 2024 paper in *Nature Communications* said researchers still need to understand which effects of spaceflight are of "health-related importance", avoid over-interpreting data "given the small sample sizes and the small number of studies", establish "suitable ground controls", and find alternative ways to replicate their findings. There are some specific results, however. Researchers are studying whether various nutrients and drugs are metabolised differently in space. They have already identified some changes in metabolic pathways involved in DNA and amino acid synthesis, and a condition in which excess iron in the body presents along with low urinary magnesium.

In a 2022 report, a group at NASA suggested developing a more portable optical coherence tomography machine to check for SANS onboard spacecraft. If it is present, the group recommended studying countermeasures including applying "lower body negative pressure", exposure to artificial gravity through "human centrifugation", and taking drugs that lower the intracranial pressure.

What is "space omics"?

"Space omics" is a set of studies involved in understanding all the ways in which the body can be affected by the space environment. A famous example is NASA's Twins Study, where scientists examined differences in the bodies of two identical twins – astronauts Mark Kelly and Scott Kelly – after the latter spent a year in space. They found around 8,600 genes were expressed differently between them.

Scientists from around the world, including India, are part of the International Standards for Space Omics Processing to develop research and ethics guidelines for space omics.

Why did the Centre alter its pension plan?

What are the main features of the Unified Pension Scheme? How is it different from the current pension system? Why did the government feel the need to bring about this change? How have government employees responded? What will be the cost to the exchequer?

Vikas Dhoot

The story so far:

Last weekend, the Union Cabinet signed off on a major shift in the approach to provide old age income security to Central government employees, with a new Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) to be launched on April 1, 2025. About 23 lakh Central government employees are expected to benefit from the scheme, while employees who are part of an ongoing pension scheme called the National Pension System will have the option to switch to the UPS. States can also bring their employees under the UPS but will need to work out funding from their own resources.

What are the key components of UPS?

There are five major components within UPS benefits, starting with the assurance that government employees will get half their average basic pay over the final 12 months of service prior to retirement, as a monthly pension for life after a minimum service of 25 years. The benefits will be proportionately lower for those with less than 25 years of service, with a minimum pension of ₹10,000 for those who work for at least 10 years. A family pension equivalent to 60% of a worker's pension at the time of her or his demise, is offered to support dependents. To hedge against inflation, these pension incomes will be raised in line with the consumer price trends for industrial workers – akin to the dearness relief offered to serving government employees. Separately, a lumpsum superannuation payout is promised in addition to gratuity benefits at the time of retirement. This will amount to 1/10th of an employee's monthly emoluments as on the date of



New move: East Central Railway Karmachari Union members stage a protest for restoration of the Old Pension Scheme, in Patna on July 12. ANI

Central government employees have broadly welcomed the UPS provisions, but there are reservations

superannuation for every six months of service.

How is it different from the current system?

Government employees who joined service prior to January 1, 2004, are covered by what has come to be known as the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), and was replaced by the NPS for employees who joined in or after 2004.

The OPS offered employees an assured pension at 50% of last drawn salary, with dearness allowance hikes added along the way, an assured family pension of 60% of the last drawn pension, and a minimum pension of ₹9,000 plus dearness allowance. At retirement, employees could commute 40% of the pension as a lumpsum. Moreover, for pensioners or family pensioners crossing 80 years of age, monthly payouts are hiked 20% followed by more hikes every five years. Pensions are also revised in line with salary updates mooted by the Pay Commission. The last such salary upgrade kicked in from 2016. A critical difference between the OPS and NPS as well as the UPS, is that its promises were paid straight from the exchequer's till every passing month. So these liabilities were "unfunded", with no contributions made by employees/employer, as is the case for private sector employees whose retirement savings are governed by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation.

The NPS, launched by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government after years of debate about the unsustainability of civil servants' pension bills, did away with the 'defined benefits' system of the OPS and switched to a funded 'defined contribution' pension regime. 10% of employees' salaries with a matching contribution from the employer (the Centre, or States as almost all of them switched to the NPS), were pooled and deployed in market-linked securities, with the option of equity investments, by professional fund managers. At the time of retirement, employees were to buy an annuity (that provides a monthly income) with 40% of their accumulated NPS corpus. The Centre had raised its contribution to the NPS to 14% in 2019, but there was no element of certainty offered on pension incomes, like the OPS did.

The UPS combines the defined benefits of the OPS with the defined contribution of the NPS mechanism. While employees' contributions will be limited to 10% of salary, the government will contribute a higher 18.5% of salary with room for revising this rate over time. The Centre will bear any gap between the eventual earnings on these contributions, and its pension promises. It is not clear if the UPS will factor in future Pay Commissions or offer higher pensions

for those over 80 years of age, like the OPS.

Why did the government opt for a change?

Prior to, and after, its launch, the NPS regime had faced a strong pushback from government employees over the loss of assurance about pension incomes, and the contrast in fortunes for post-2004 workers vis-à-vis their predecessors. The clamour against it mounted in recent years, as some NPS entrants with fewer years of service started to retire with relatively lower pension benefits. This restiveness eventually became an electoral issue, with Opposition parties such as the Congress promising a return to the OPS for State employees ahead of some Assembly polls, and effecting the switch after gaining power in a few. The Centre, through the Narendra Modi government's second innings, pushed back against this reversal, terming it fiscally irresponsible. However, in March 2023, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a committee to review the NPS for government employees in a way that balances "their aspirations with fiscal prudence". This panel was headed by former Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan, and although its report has not been made public yet, the switch to the UPS has been informed by its parleys. If there was any doubt that UPS' bouquet of benefits is linked to political considerations ahead of several State polls, Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw laid it to rest. While announcing the UPS, he emphasised that Congress-ruled States which announced a return to the OPS were yet to implement it, while Prime Minister Modi had ensured an outcome that will ensure "inter-generational equity".

How have employees and States reacted?

Central government employees have broadly welcomed the UPS provisions as an acknowledgement of the NPS' problems, but there are still reservations about the contributory aspects of the UPS and the lack of a commutation option like the OPS. Like employee representatives, economists also await more details on the UPS' contours and math. UPS contributions, including arrears for some, are expected to cost an additional ₹7,050 crore this year. Dearness hikes over time will warrant additional funding too. "Assured pensions will add to the government committed expenditure in the future, while reducing the uncertainty for employees. This will have to be built into the fiscal consolidation roadmap going ahead," remarked Aditi Nayar, ICRA's chief economist.

While the immediate impact will only be the additional 4.5% contribution towards the UPS, future payouts will be higher but can be absorbed by higher revenue growth, reckoned Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis. "We can look at this as being equivalent to Pay Commission revisions which are absorbed by the system," he averred.

How will morality law hit Afghan women?

Why has the Taliban announced draconian measures targeting women? Who are the Muhtasib? Did Afghanistan always enforce certain bans for women? What has been the reaction on the ground to the fresh decree? How have the United Nations responded to the new law?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The Taliban last week announced a new law on the "Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" which imposes its interpretation of sharia or Islamic law on the people of Afghanistan. It silences women's voices apart from reiterating bans on bare faces, sparking global outrage, and also seeks to regulate many aspects of daily life.

What does the law say?

The 114-page document published in the official gazette says that women must cover their entire bodies and faces "due to the fear of temptation", in the presence of unrelated men, as well as non-Muslim and "immoral" women. A woman's voice – singing, chanting, or reciting aloud – is considered *awrah* or intimate and must not be heard. "Whenever a grown woman leaves her house out of necessity, she is obliged to cover her voice, face, and body," it said, stipulating that any violation will lead to punishment. Unrelated men and women are not allowed to even look at each other.

Men must grow their beards, and must not wear neckties or have Western-style haircuts. All games and forms of entertainment, even traditional children's games played with marbles



Regressive law: Afghan women in Sangin, Afghanistan on August 27. AFP

The UN issued immediate denunciations of the new law, but said it would continue to 'engage' with the Taliban

or walnuts, are banned as a form of gambling. Travel must be planned to avoid times of prayer, and drivers are forbidden from transporting women who are not accompanied by a related male guardian. The morality police, called Muhtasib, are authorised to mete out discretionary punishment, including up to three days in prison. They can compel people to revere Islamic symbols, and check phones and laptops to ensure there are no images of living beings. They can also ensure that women's voices or music do not emanate from homes.

Is this a new development?

Many of these regulations are already in place in Afghanistan, with some having been declared through Taliban decrees over the past three years, or imposed more haphazardly by local enforcers. Observers fear that the official codifying of these so-called "morality laws", however, will lead to more brutal punishment and give a stronger backing to the Muhtasib.

A look at Afghan history shows the extreme regressiveness of these laws. Afghan women won the right to vote in 1919, and by the 1980s, women had become ministers and judges, doctors and singers, although progress was more limited in rural areas. The Taliban's first stint, from 1996 to 2001, brutally dragged women back to the medieval era, but over the next two decades, a new generation grew up in relative freedom, and many hoped that the Taliban which returned in 2021 had also evolved. "They were portrayed as Taliban 2.0, as more moderate, so we engaged with them," former Afghan lawmaker Fawzia Koofi told *CNN* after the new laws were announced. She noted that even some daughters of Taliban leaders had been educated abroad in the interim period. But since they came back to power, they have been "constantly targeting women" with "draconian measures", she said. Nayanima Basu, an Indian journalist and author of *The Fall Of Kabul: Despatches From Chaos*, says that people in the provinces outside of the "bubble in Kabul" were clear that the Taliban's thought processes had not changed. "There is a disparity between the Taliban leadership in Doha – which has offered assurances to the international community that

exclusive schools and universities for girls will reopen – and the Stone Age thinking of those actually in power in Afghanistan," she said.

How are women in Afghanistan reacting?

Some Afghan women have defied the ban on raising their voices in public, with videos being posted on social media showing them singing, even while covered from head to toe. A few have even reportedly protested on the streets, which "indicates that a small number do not care about their life and death because they do not have anything left to lose", Ms. Koofi told *CNN*.

Others engage in subtler forms of resistance, but with long-term effects. Pashtana Dorani, now in exile, founded a non-profit called LEARN which runs five underground schools within Afghanistan, where 661 girls study clandestinely, in shifts, changing locations when they learn of Taliban surveillance. Videos posted a few days after the new law was announced show girls in burkhas learning science, mathematics and language. "They may shut the doors but they can't take away our dreams," Ms. Dorani wrote.

What has been the international response?

UN Women said the new rules were "oppressive", while the office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights called for the "utterly intolerable" law to be repealed. However, after the Taliban said it would no longer cooperate with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric emphasised that the UN "will continue to engage with all stakeholders in Afghanistan, including the Taliban". "I am a firm believer that political pressure will make the Taliban respond, but that political pressure has never been exerted," Ms. Koofi told *CNN*, noting that the UN had agreed to the Taliban demand to exclude Afghan women from talks in Doha this summer. "So the Taliban thinks the world doesn't really care about women's rights," she said, adding that differences between the global north and south has "further emboldened the Taliban".

Officials in the Ministry of External Affairs shared a statement reiterating India's position. "We have noted with concern the reports in this regard. India has consistently supported the cause of women's education in Afghanistan. We have been emphasising the importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government that ensures equal rights of women and girls to participate in all aspects of society, including access to higher education," he said.

PROFILES

AMMA's moment of reckoning

Association of Malayalam Movie Artistes

The actors' body, which had its share of controversies in the past, is facing its biggest litmus test after the release of the Hema Committee report on the problems faced by women in Malayalam film industry

G. Krishnakumar

As more and more skeletons on sexual exploitation tumble out following the release of the K. Hema Committee report on the problems faced by women in the Malayalam film industry, the Association of Malayalam Movie Artistes (AMMA) is facing its biggest litmus test ever in its three-decade long existence. Nearly a week after the Kerala High Court permitted the Left Democratic Front government to make public the redacted form of the report, the executive committee of the actors' body was dissolved amidst the growing revelations of sexual assault and harassment experienced by women members in the multi-crore industry.

A communication shared with the media after an emergency online meeting of the 17-member committee led by its president and actor Mohanlal on August 27 stated that they were stepping down "following the release of the Hema Committee report and widespread media attention regarding sexual harassment allegations against some office-bearers."

The decision to disband the executive committee was triggered by the resignation of actor Siddique from the post of general secretary on August 25 following allegations of sexual assault levelled by a woman actor. Since then, the actors against whom the Kerala Police have booked cases over sexual abuse allegations included Mukesh, an MLA of the Communist Party of India (Marxist); former general secretaries of the association Siddique and Edavela Babu; and actors Jayasurya, Maniyanpilla Raju and Sudheesh.

The seismic tremors of the revelations brought focus on the association that was launched in 1994 after several actors voiced support for an organisation to protect the interests of the fraternity. A first of its kind in the Malayalam film industry, it was registered under the Travancore Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act. Around 80 actors had participated in its first official meeting held in Thiruvananthapuram in May, 1994.

Actors M. G. Soman and T. P. Madhavan were the maiden president and secretary, respectively. The late senior actor and comedian Innocent was the longest serving president as he remained at the helm of affairs for nearly 18 years since 2000. Veteran actors Mammootty and Mohanlal had earlier served as secretaries. Today, the association has a total strength of 506 members that include 250 women. They enjoy the right to vote at the annual general body meeting to elect an executive committee for a tenure of three years.

According to the association's website, a "person who is into full-time acting in feature films for not less than one year shall become a life member by paying the specified fees". The 17-member executive committee include four women, though none of them had ever been elected as president or secretary till now. It has always tried to "steer clear of the trade union tag by proclaiming its welfare agenda" as reiterated by Mohanlal while addressing the media in the thick of storm on August 31 in Thiruvananthapuram.

Main objectives

As per the association's bye-law, the main objective of the organisation included "promoting better relations between members and other associations; creating and developing fellowship among the members; enriching the economical status of the members; and helping them on retirement/during distress period as per conditions stipulated from the fund separately maintained for this purpose or from any other fund". A stipend of ₹5,000 monthly is provided to nearly 116 members, who are suffering from health ailments and in need of financial assistance. The members are also provided with cashless accident and health insurance coverage. To meet its financial requirements, the association has banked on the 'star value' of its members from its inception and organised several stage shows in the country and abroad towards fund mobilisation.

The association had a smooth run in its initial tenure after the leadership

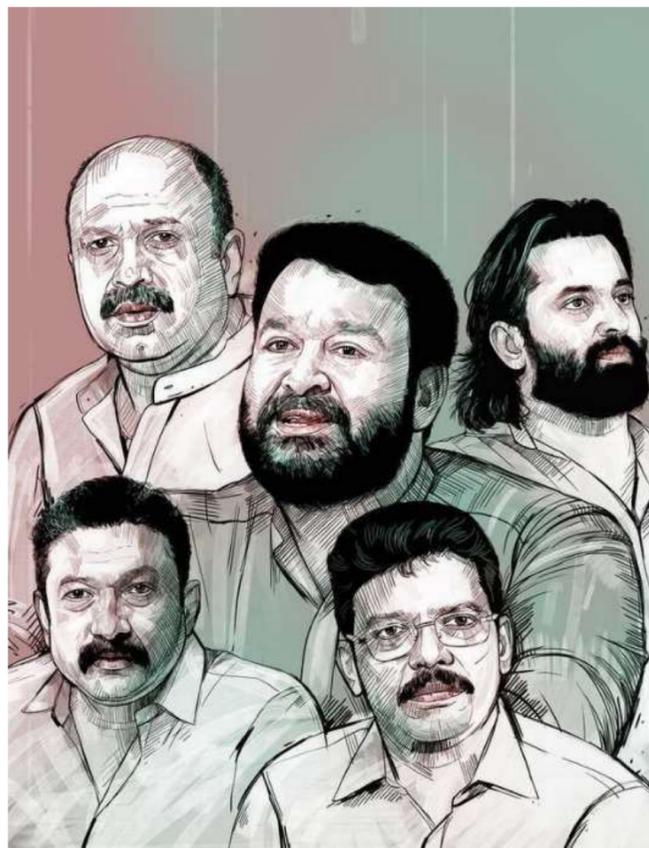


ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

stayed away from major controversies. However, a decision to hold a stage show in association with a private television channel in March 2004 invited protests from the Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce. The apex body in the Malayalam film industry pointed out that the footfalls in cinemas had declined as the audience remained glued to the television to watch such programmes. Despite similar opposition in the later years, the association continued with its shows for television channels to rake in funds for its various activities.

It brought a dent in its public appeal after acclaimed actor Thilakan was expelled in April 2010 for his outbursts

against its functioning and his criticism that a lobby led by the "super stars" had undue control over its functioning. Though it did not divulge the names, the Hema Committee report touched upon the ordeal faced by him and referred to the "existence of a power group in the Malayalam film industry". "If a person, knowingly or unknowingly offend any member of the power group for any silly reason, he may be banned (sic)," it said.

The association suffered a legal setback after the Competition Commission of India (CCI) in 2017 held it responsible, along with the Film Employees Federation of Kerala, for indulging in anti-competitive practices

by asking artistes, technicians, and producers not to work with filmmaker Vinayan. In his plea, the director had sought the CCI's intervention to remove the ban imposed on him by the film bodies for speaking up against its unfair practices. Of the total penalty of ₹11.25 lakh imposed by the CCI on the violators, the association was asked to pay ₹4 lakh.

Tumultuous episodes

A faux pas by the association following the arrest of actor Dileep in connection with the alleged sexual assault of a woman actor in a moving car on the night of February 17, 2017 in Kochi triggered a series of tumultuous episodes from within. Its decision to reinstate Dileep, who was ousted after he was named an accused in the abduction and sexual assault case, resulted in the resignation of the members of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), including the survivor and actors Rima Kallingal, Remya Nambeesan and filmmaker Geetu Mohandas.

The association had opposed a plea by the WCC before the Kerala High Court to set up an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in line with the Vishaka Guidelines and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. It stated that "AMMA is only an association of artistes and not an employer and hence its activities will not fall under the definition of the workplace".

Though the association formed an ICC in March 2022, it was short-lived after three of its women members resigned in May 2022 in protest against the leadership's soft-peddling on actor-producer Vijay Babu, who was accused of raping a woman actor and later revealing her identity. A similar flip-flop was also evident in its position on the Hema Committee report, though a political storm after its release forced the association to come out in its support after being slammed for its perceived silence. As the cries for a safe and non-discriminatory workspace in the film industry turn louder, the actors' body is at a crossroads with a change of course inevitable.

THE GIST

The association that was launched in 1994 after several actors voiced support for an organisation to protect the interests of the fraternity. Today, the association has a total strength of 506 members that include 250 women. They enjoy the right to vote at the annual general body meeting to elect an executive committee for a tenure of three years

As per the association's bye-law, the main objective of the organisation included "promoting better relations between members and other associations; creating and developing fellowship among the members; enriching the economical status of the members

A stipend of ₹5,000 monthly is provided to nearly 116 members, who are suffering from health ailments and in need of financial assistance; the members are also provided with cashless accident and health insurance coverage

The prophet of privacy

Pavel Durov

The billionaire founder of Telegram has been arrested by French authorities over alleged complicity in a range of crimes, from drug trafficking to organised crime

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

G. Sampath

The cause of free speech may have found a new icon in Russia-born tech tycoon Pavel Durov, who was arrested in Paris on August 24. Mr. Durov, 39, is the founder of Telegram, a cloud-based social media and instant messaging service with 950 million active users, which makes it bigger than X (540 million).

French authorities had a warrant out for Mr. Durov and his brother Nikolai as part of a preliminary investigation into allegations that Telegram was enabling criminality through its 'hands-off' approach to moderating content. Mr. Durov, as the owner of Telegram, has been charged with complicity in a range of crimes, including drug trafficking, fraud, money-laundering, organised crime, terrorism, cyber-bullying, dissemination of child pornographic materials, and refusal to cooperate with law enforcement. Though he has been granted bail on a bond of €5 million, he has been barred from leaving France.

Telegram, in a statement, has said "it is absurd to claim that a platform or its owner are responsible for abuse of that platform".

Mr. Durov, who describes Telegram as "a privacy-focussed social media



platform" famously said in 2015, "Privacy, ultimately, is more important than our fear of bad things happening," — a remark that endeared him to free speech evangelists.

Understandably, his arrest has sparked a fierce debate on the fine line between free speech rights and law enforcement. Edward Snowden, the celebrated whistleblower, had no doubt whatsoever, posting on X, "The arrest of @Durov is an assault on the basic human rights of speech and association. I am surprised that Macron has descended to the level of taking hostages as a means for gaining access to private communications."

The French President defended the arrest, stating, "In a state governed by the rule of law, freedoms are upheld within a legal framework."

It has since emerged that Emmanuel Macron had met with Mr. Durov several times, and in 2018, had beseeched him to run

Telegram out of France. Mr. Durov refused, preferring authoritarian Dubai to liberal France as Telegram headquarters. Indeed, Mr. Durov's entrepreneurial career blurs easy stereotypes of 'authoritarian' and 'democratic'. Right now, for instance, while his persecutor is a democracy that takes pride in championing 'Liberte', at the forefront of defending his liberty are two authoritarian regimes — Russia and the UAE.

Fall-out with Moscow

Run-ins with governments are not new for Mr. Durov, whose net worth is estimated at \$11.5 billion. Born in Soviet Leningrad in 1984, he grew up in Turin, Italy. While in university at St Petersburg, he discovered Facebook, which inspired him to create a Russian social network, VKontakte, in September 2006. It became a runaway success, garnering a valuation of \$3 billion and 10 million users by April

2008. But he came under immense pressure from the government to shut down opposition communities. Mr. Durov refused, opting to sell Vkontakte and leave Russia. He then moved to Dubai and founded Telegram.

In 2018, Russia banned Telegram after Mr. Durov refused to comply with requests to hand over data of Ukrainian users. The ban was revoked in 2021. Ironically, Telegram is highly popular in both Ukraine and Russia. Both Ukrainian and Russian governments have been using Telegram for propaganda purposes. If France is building a case for Mr. Durov's criminal complicity, it cannot ignore the fact that, as a Russian citizen, he refused to sell out Ukrainians to the Russian government.

Mr. Durov's radical anti-establishment ethos comes through in a 2013 incident where he accidentally ran over a policeman in St Petersburg. In a reference to it, he posted on social media, "When you run over a policeman, it is important to drive back and forth so all the pulp comes out." His arrest is certainly a departure in terms of holding a tech businessman responsible for the content on their platform. But the backlash it has triggered suggests it might remain an outlier event, unlikely to become the norm.

Growing stature

Pacific Island Forum

The grouping, comprising island nations in Oceania, has seen growing attention from big powers such as the U.S. and China in recent years

PHOTO CREDIT: AP

Sruthi Darbhamalla

The island nation of Tonga played host to the annual meeting of the leaders of the Pacific Island Forum from August 26 to 30. More than 1,500 delegates from 40 nations were in attendance at the conference.

A grouping of island nations in Oceania, the Pacific Island Forum has seen an increase in stature over the past few years, as powerful nations seek to peddle influence in the region.

The Forum was founded in November 1971, with Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Tonga and Western Samoa as the founding members.

At present, the Forum has 18 member states. Australia and New Zealand are among the larger nations in the bloc, with some having populations as small as 1,500 people.

Several of the member countries of the Forum are particularly susceptible to environmental challenges, making climate change and sea level rise key focal points for the forum.

A cherished method of dispute resolution central to the Forum is the "Pacific way", which seeks to build consensus and places relationships between the countries of the "Blue Pacific Family" at the centre. The Blue Pacific Family members are linked by



common culture and heritage, and distinguish themselves from the broader Indo-Pacific region.

For this year's summit, China sent the largest delegation in the Forum's history. The U.S. also had a sizeable delegation led by Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

The most pressing issue under discussion at the Forum was the ongoing unrest in the French territory of New Caledonia, where violence ensued between French officers and locals.

The Indigenous Kanak people of New Caledonia have long sought independence from France, which colonised it in 1853. Even though it granted citizenship to all Kanaks in 1957, the demand for independence has continued. The latest unrest followed attempts by the French government to amend its Constitution to expand voting lists in New Caledonia and grant more French residents the right to vote.

The Forum has now

planned to hold an official "talanoa" (dialogue) on the matter later this year.

UN chief Antonio Guterres, in an address at the Forum, supported efforts to raise a climate fund to tackle regional issues. He said people were "treating the sea like a sewer." Water quality has deteriorated in several island nations as natural water sources have been contaminated by rising sea levels and natural disasters.

Police training centre

Under discussion is also an Australian-funded Pacific police training centre, viewed as a measure to counter China's bid to equip the law enforcement agencies of some island nations. The A\$400 million proposal envisages a regional policing plan to improve training and create a multinational crisis reaction force, comprising 200 officers. Four centres will be established across the Pacific with a hub in Brisbane. On August 28, the

Pacific Island leaders endorsed the plan. The recognition of Taiwan at the Forum has caused controversy. China and its allies, including Solomon Islands, have sought to remove Taiwan as a development partner, indicating that it is a part of China. But the final declaration reaffirmed a 1992 agreement, which allowed Taiwan to participate — the section was later removed following criticism from Chinese officials at the Forum.

Initial meeting of the Forum did not garner broad international interest, but this has changed in recent years. Bigger powers have sought to exercise influence over the resource-rich region. Chinese efforts to offer aid and military support in the region have drawn in other powers' interests. In 2022, China signed a security pact with Solomon Islands. It has also pressured nations in the grouping to reject the inclusion of Taiwan, with Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Nauru now accepting this position.

In 2022, amid China's rising influence in the region, the U.S. invited Pacific leaders to a White House summit for the first time.

Earlier, it was Australia and New Zealand which functioned as security partners in the region. Now the region has the attention of great powers.



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

Inserting Pakistan into J&K poll talk makes little sense

J&K politicians demanding restoration of Article 370 and resumption of dialogue with Pakistan need only look at its treatment of POK and Gilgit-Baltistan to understand the irrelevance of such a call

The forthcoming assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) will be the first such election in the Union Territory after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution. The high voter turnout (58.6%) recorded in the UT in this summer's Lok Sabha elections was unprecedented. The revival of democratic processes in the region is welcome. However, the two major parties in the state — the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) — have demanded restoration of Article 370, as well as statehood. They have also called for the resumption of an India-Pakistan dialogue. The attempt to resurrect the old paradigm and re-insert Pakistan into the equation naturally raises questions: How does Pakistan treat Kashmiris on its side of the Line of Control (LoC)? How much power does the elected government enjoy in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) and Gilgit-Baltistan? The government of Pakistan took the northern areas, which account for 85% of the territory of POK, under its direct administra-

tion in November 1947. Its current narrative states that it took over the territory, since re-named Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B), under the Karachi Agreement of 1949 between the Pakistan government and Muslim Conference leaders. The agreement was kept secret because Pakistan had changed the territorial status quo without a plebiscite. This came to light in a historic judgment of the POK high court in 1993, which described Pakistani actions as a violation of the UN Security Council resolutions on Kashmir. The high court asked Pakistan to restore the territory to POK as demanded by all political parties of that territory. Islamabad got the judgment reversed by the POK Supreme Court on merely jurisdictional grounds. It continues to exercise direct control over this territory. While India is criticised for splitting J&K, Pakistan had partitioned the area under its illegal control seven decades ago and absorbed the bulk of its territory.

The first election on the basis of universal franchise was held in POK in 1970. POK got its Interim Constitution only in 1974. This created a system of parallel government where all substantive powers were vested in the Kashmir Council headed by Pakistan's prime minister (PM) while the elected assembly and the government remained powerless. Critics called this rule by proxy by Islamabad. In 2018, under the 13th amendment of the POK Constitution, the Kashmir Council was relegated to an advisory role. However, its powers were not transferred to the elected assembly. The government of Pakistan has

assumed direct legislative and executive powers over 32 subjects within POK.

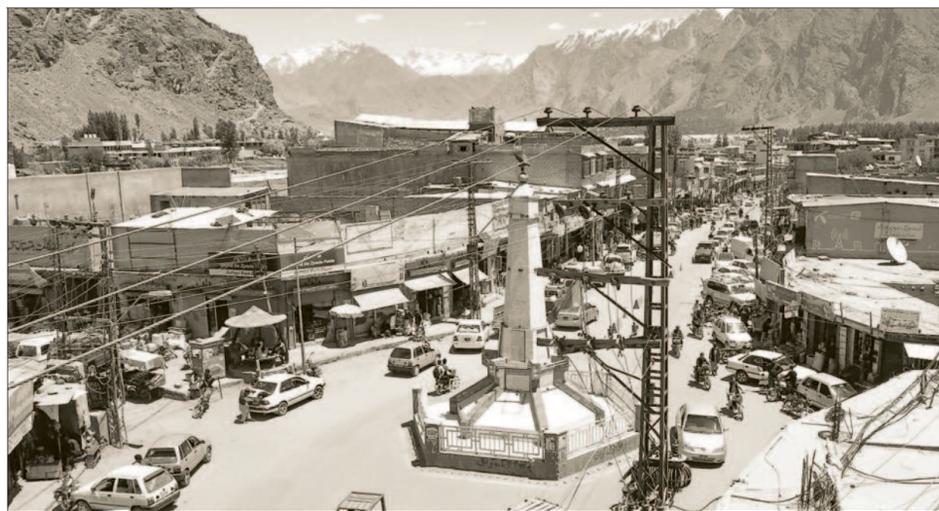
The northern areas or G-B are even more tightly controlled than POK by Islamabad due to its strategic location. This is the region where the Indus River, as well as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), enters Pakistan. This is a Shia-majority area, which was given limited powers by the Asif Ali Zardari government under the G-B order of 2009. The entire list of 61 subjects on which the local government was given jurisdiction was abolished under the G-B order of 2018. This vested all legislative and administrative powers in the PM of Pakistan. The copies of the order were



DP Srivastava

turned in the G-B assembly in the presence of Pakistan's acting PM. The G-B Supreme Appellate Court set aside the G-B order of 2018. The government of Pakistan appealed before the country's Supreme Court, which sided with Islamabad and, in a judgment in 2019, restored the G-B order of 2018 against which the people of the territory were protesting.

Pakistan has always exercised absolute control over POK and G-B. It has now overtly assumed powers within both territories. The far-reaching changes were made in 2018, a year before the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution. They went unnoticed. POK and G-B are controlled more tightly than Pakistan's provinces. The provinces can exercise power over subjects allocated to them. But, in the case of POK and G-B, even powers within the territories are exercised directly by Pakistan. These include water, strategic highways, taxation, police, citizen-



POK and Gilgit-Baltistan are controlled more tightly than Pakistan's provinces. The regional parties there are now at the fringes

ship, and migration. Water and roads are the two key resources of this border region. The 'state subject' is loosely defined to allow demographic change. There are no safeguards for land rights. Pakistan did not seek permission from the people of POK or G-B for the construction of the Mangla Dam or Karakoram Highway or gifting a portion to China.

The drama in G-B showed that Pakistan's Supreme Court exercises jurisdiction over an area that is not part of Pakistani territory under its Constitution. The 2019 judgment was not the first time this was done. The first judgment of Pakistan's Supreme Court came in May 1999. This asked Islamabad to ensure the region got fundamental rights and representative government within six months. Obviously, both were absent. This was at the time when Pakistan had intruded across the LoC to ostensibly "liberate" Kashmiris from Indian "control".

The elections in POK and G-B have resulted in the election of the party in power in Islamabad. There is a complete demise of regional parties. In the last assembly election in 2021, the Muslim Conference that had championed J&K's accession to Pakistan got one out of 53 seats. Power fluctuates between local chapters of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The 2021 election was won by PTI, which was then ruling in Islamabad. After Imran Khan's ouster, POK PM Abdul Qayyum Khan Niazi was replaced by Tanveer Ilyas. He has since been replaced by Chaudhary Anwar-ul-Haq. In G-B, Khalid Khurshid has been replaced by Gulbar Khan as chief minister.

There is, in the meantime, increasing Chinese influence in G-B, where Chinese companies are to build the 4,500 MW Daimar-Bhasha hydropower plant. This will lead to an

influx of migrants from outside. Pakistan has decided to go ahead with the project despite the 2022 floods, which undermined the threat to the region's delicate ecological balance. It will improve power supply for Pakistan. G-B will not benefit as it is not connected to Pakistan's national grid.

Will dialogue with Pakistan enhance democratic rights within J&K? Pakistan is at odds not only with India but its two Muslim neighbours to the west. It has exchanged missiles and fire with both. There have been food riots in Pakistan. POK saw public protests and clashes with security forces over the scarcity of essential items like *aata* (flour) and high electricity prices.

DP Srivastava is a former ambassador and author of *Forgotten Kashmir: The Other Side of the Line of Control*. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



A strange accusation, and malice in Faujiland

Sometimes, it can be a topsy-turvy crazy world. A case of a cartoon from MAD magazine transforming into reality. That's what seems to have happened to the folks next door in Pakistan. Not all of them, by any means. But certainly, the government and the dreaded Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). For the tale I have to tell is so strange, most people wouldn't even find it credible as fiction. And yet, believe me, it's true.

Youtubers in Pakistan, papers like *The Express Tribune*, the country's ministry of information and broadcasting and, even, the minister himself have declared I'm anti-Pakistan, close to the Narendra Modi government and hand-in-glove with the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Now, this will certainly come as a surprise to my critics, who have for decades accused me of being partial to Pakistan. But across the border, the men in uniform, their civilian government and their snoopers seem to have swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

Let me try to explain how this has happened. A few weeks ago, the Pakistani authorities arrested Raouf Hasan, information secretary and spokesperson of Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf. Determined to accuse him of treason and lock him up, they accessed his phone, emails and WhatsApp messages. There they found a few messages he had — as far back as November 2022 — exchanged with me. Ah ha, they said, he's talking to people in India. That makes him anti-national. Worse still, he's commenting on the way Imran has been treated, discussing Pakistan's politics and, even, the army chief! This is definitely anti-Pakistan.

Now, to clinch their case, I had to be presented as a Pakistan-basher. It wouldn't serve their purpose to acknowledge that I've known and interviewed many of their dictators and prime ministers, frequently visited the country and have a long list of close friends in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. It would certainly be counter-productive to accept Benazir Bhutto was a dear friend, Nawaz Sharif asked to meet me when he last visited in 2014, and Shehbaz Sharif and I sat and chatted amicably — if vacuously — at the Pakistani High Commissioner's, when he was chief minister of Punjab. No, that would have demolished the case they want to build against Raouf.

So, in an official statement, the Pakistani ministry of information and broadcasting claimed: "The careless messages of Raouf Hasan to Indian journalist Karan Thapar are very alarming. Defence analysts say this messaging was actually a precious asset of information for R&AW officers, backing Karan Thapar. They said through these messages, the PTI spokesperson conveyed the country's sensitive information to an Indian for fanning anti-Pakistan propaganda." Attaullah Tarar, Pakistan's I&B minister, told *The Express Tribune*: "Hasan's communication with an Indian journalist, known for anti-Pakistan sentiments, has further revealed PTI's disloyalty to the country."

Consequently, Raouf's brief, infrequent and utterly harmless exchanges with me — and the fact I've interviewed him — were transmogrified into a threat to the sovereignty, integrity and the very future of Pakistan. No doubt this will be used to persecute him. Of course, they'll call it justice.

The truth is beyond our perfunctory exchange over WhatsApp, the odd interview and maybe a couple of conversations to arrange it, I don't know Raouf. And he

doesn't know me. We're strangers to each other. So, it has always been. Actually, if they'd accused his boss, Imran Khan, of confabulating with me, they could have built a better case. I've interviewed him several times. Not just in Bani Gala or Delhi. On one occasion, I even travelled to London and did it in the gardens of his former in-laws' mansion in Richmond! Wouldn't that look incriminating on a Pakistani charge-sheet? Worse, Imran even claimed the army chief would be subordinate to him if he ever becomes prime minister. And he wasn't smiling when he said it.

As a dear friend in Pakistan said to calm my ruffled feathers: "You're familiar with Alice in Wonderland. Now, welcome to Malice in Faujiland!"

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

INFREQUENT AND UTTERLY HARMLESS EXCHANGES WITH A POLITICIAN ACROSS THE BORDER, AND THE FACT THAT I INTERVIEWED RAOUF, HAVE BEEN TRANSMOGRIFIED INTO A THREAT TO THE VERY FUTURE OF HIS NATION

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Moving the needle on property governance

A key missing piece in India's sustainable economic growth puzzle is the land and property market. Information gaps hinder the fair and optimal use of resources to transform this sector. Central programmes such as the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP) have tried to address some of these gaps. However, DILRMP is mostly aimed at rural India, and not urban and peri-urban areas, where the bulk of transactions occur and where massive spatial and other changes are anticipated.

In this context, the new measures proposed by the Centre this July, as part of a possible incentive-linked package for reforms in land and property information systems, should help. While a new programme has not been announced, some fiscal support for states, especially for urban areas, is expected. Up-to-date land and property records could improve urban governance, land markets, municipal finance as well as ease of living and doing business. It could also reduce property disputes, and enable better infrastructure planning, transparent land acquisition as well as equitable policy and investment decisions. However, the three-year time frame announced may be ambitious given the complexities involved. The biggest takeaway here may be the explicit recognition of states as primary actors in land and property governance. This is important, given the diversity of practices across states as well as variations among states and cities in matters of land and property. The proposed framework could offer states the flexibility to frame context-specific approaches, without being hemmed in by a uniform one-size-fits-all approach. At the same time, it is unclear what form this fiscal support will take at the state level, especially for urban areas.

For rural areas, the proposed reforms will have a renewed spatial focus, including digitising maps and surveys of land related sub-divisions. This is an opportunity to build on the significant progress achieved in textual land records modernisation in rural India and extend it to other forms of land records. If implemented systematically, georeferenced maps could become a part of online property documents, improving transparency and ease of transactions for the average citizen. The focus on spatial data is further reflected in the

proposed allocation of a geo-spatially derived unique land and property number or "Bhu-Aadhaar". This could well be the opportunity to generate unique property IDs that can be connected to property-related processes and databases, including litigation registries. Some states are already moving in this direction with available technologies.

In urban areas, the very recognition of the need for improved urban land and property governance itself marks a notable policy shift. Colonial era prioritisation of agricultural regions, driven by land revenue considerations, neglected documentation in non-agricultural areas, whose legacy continues to be reflected in the ambiguity around institutional

roles and records for urban property across India's cities. As a result, urban records are outdated and incomplete, or maintained in rural formats in many cities and towns. They are unable to capture specific urban complexities, including basics such as recording apartments and building permissions.

The proposed reforms include digitisation of records in urban areas with GIS mapping and establishment of an IT-based system for property record administration to enable regular updating and better tax administration. Integrating databases (currently with various authorities) using unique property IDs could also improve citizen services. However, this is not easy, given the institutional fragmentation between various authorities in urban India. In the states, such coordination will require the involvement of the revenue department, urban development, development authorities, municipalities, planning authorities and housing boards. This can be enabled with policy directions at state level.

States now have the opportunity to invest in upgrading land and property information systems, especially in cities and towns, drawing valuable lessons from the DILRMP implementation in rural India. At the same time, the Centre should remain sensitive to particular aspects that arise on the ground, given the complex histories surrounding land and property. Appropriate institutional structuring and strengthening is a matter of political will.

Deepika Jha is with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements. The views expressed are personal



Deepika Jha

English, and India's legacy of languages

Kenyen Nobel Laureate professor Wangari Maathai once told me that it was only the colonial rulers who truly understood the importance of a language. That is why it is the first thing they took away. In India, the undisputed architect of this colonial policy was Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), who, in 1834, joined the Supreme Council to govern India. His policy to impose English on the "natives" was so spectacularly successful that the British could well have put his statue in the canopy at India Gate!

Interestingly, Macaulay almost did not succeed in his mission. The Committee of Public Instruction set up by the British had been deadlocked for some time because it was divided five against five. One set of five members wanted education in India to be based on what were then recognised as classical languages — Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic; the other five wanted elementary education to be in the "vernacular" languages with English coming in at the higher levels. The linguistic destiny of India fell into the lap of Macaulay when he was made the president of the Committee in January 1835 to break the impasse.

He took little time to do so. On February 2, 1835, he recorded his infamous Minute on Education, and in one rhetorical flourish, rubbished the entire civilisational heritage of India. Macaulay was convinced that English was the language of a superior civilisation, and that the culture of the natives was not only primitive

but beyond redemption. How could the British teach at public expense, he asked, "medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier — astronomy which would move laughter in the girls at an English boarding school — history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long — and geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter."

It was the most uninformed caricature of the achievements and refinements of the great Indian civilisation. Macaulay knew that his absolute and superficial condemnation could be challenged by the

researched appreciation by some of his own previous peers, such as Sir William Jones, Sir John Shore and others, who had founded the Asiatic Society. In 1786, Jones had declared that "the Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure: More perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either." But Macaulay couldn't care less because his real intent was different: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern: A class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect."

He succeeded beyond his wildest imagination, for he already had powerful allies among the ruled. On December 11, 1823, the great Sanskrit scholar and reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, had written a petition to governor-general Lord Amherst against the teaching of Sanskrit: "The Sanskrit language", he wrote, "so difficult that



As we emerge from Macaulay's legacy, we are still adrift from our mother tongues and retain a sense of heenta or inferiority about our own languages

almost a lifetime is necessary for its perfect acquisition, is well known to have been for ages a lamentable check on the diffusion of knowledge." In time, what did emerge was an English-speaking elite, largely restricted to the administrative and professional classes, and an army of clerks who knew rudimentary English. The Webster dictionary still defines a babu as "a native clerk who writes English". The writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote caustically in 1873: "The babus will be indefatigable in talk, experts in a particular foreign language, and hostile to their mother tongue... (they) will consume water at home, alcohol at friends', abuses at the prostitutes' and humiliation at the employers". This is not a diatribe against English,

an international language we could benefit from, but a background to how it came to play such a dominant role in post-colonial India.

As we emerge from Macaulay's legacy, we are still adrift from our mother tongues, and retain a sense of heenta or inferiority to our own languages. There is also the new danger that we may fall into the trap of pitting one Indian language against another. The answer to this threat is to respect all our languages, for there is perhaps no other country in the world which has a linguistic heritage as rich as ours.

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY LETTERS

A message of brotherhood

This is with reference to "Nationalism versus sense of community" by Anuradha Vellat (Aug 25). It is a great message from two mothers in neighbouring countries. It is reminiscent of the line from the Sikh scripture: "Manus ki jaat ek ho pehchan vo" (All humans have a common identity).

BM Singh

K Hema panel report must lead to change

This is with reference to "Shroud of silence and fear over Kerala movie industry" by CS Venkiteswaran (Aug 25). The damning report is an eye opener and a watershed moment in the Malayalam film industry. A safe and secure environment must be created for female artists.

Bal Govind

Natwar Singh's connection with Forster

This is with reference to "The man who knew how to retrieve lost moments" by Karan Thapar (Aug 25). A fortuitous acquaintance with EM Forster shaped Singh's intellectual orientation and personal values.

Sanjaya Chopra

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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POLITICAL PARTIES, including the ruling party at the Centre, and chief ministers find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. It is on the question of pension. Not all citizens of India of a certain age get a pension. There is no social security scheme in India that offers a pension to a citizen. Millions of persons employed in the private sector do not get a pension on retirement. Even short service commissioned officers in the Indian defence forces do not get a pension.

PENSION WINS ARGUMENT

As long as life expectancy was low, pension was of little consequence. Few got a pension but fewer lived for long after retirement. In 1947, when India became independent, the life expectancy was under 35 years. Today, it is slightly over 70 years. The obligation of pension will, on average, remain for 10-12 years after retirement and may continue to the spouse if there is the concept of family pension. That is why most employers are wary of pension. The employees have a powerful case: pension is a *right* earned through long and loyal service; or pension is a *deferred wage*; or pension is the path to the right to *live with dignity* after retirement.

In the case of government employees, the 'right to pension' won the argu-

ment and that was the right verdict. To those who pointed to the sections of the people that do not have a right to pension, the answer was that the right to pension must be extended to them too. In fact, there should be a universal pension scheme open to all sections of the people.

As pensions for government employees took root, the concept of an assured minimum pension also took root. The concept settled at 50 per cent of the last drawn basic salary and dearness allowance.

CHANGED DYNAMICS

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2024-25 is Rs 2,43,296 crore. According to media reports, as of March 2023, NPS had 23.8 lakh central government subscribers and 60.7 lakh state government subscribers. In 2024, the numbers may be a little more or a little less, but we know the ball park figures. It is a fraction of the population of India.

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eral central trade unions have opposed the *contribution* of the employee to the pension fund.

FUNDING, WHO AND HOW?

It is a perfect dilemma for governments, political parties and employees' associations. Speaking from a purely fiscally-conscious point of view, the UPS ought not to be rejected out of hand. Some questions, however, remain:

1. Will the difference between the employee's contribution and the government's contribution, now 8.5 per cent, widen in the future?

2. Mr T.V.Somanathan said that "the government will make good the shortfall". Is this not just a step away from "pay as you go"?

3. While the 10+10 per cent of the contributions will be entrusted to approved Pension Fund managers, will the 8.5 per cent contribution be invested and, if so, by whom and where?

4. The additional funds for the first year of Rs 6,250 crore appears to be understated; is that true?

5. Were the state governments consulted before UPS was approved by the Cabinet? Will the employees' associations come on board?

Let's see how the stakeholders get off the horns of the dilemma.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter: @tavleen_singh



Rahul and the question of caste

OF LATE, I have started paying close attention to the ways and wiles of Rahul Gandhi. I follow him on Instagram and pay heed to the speeches he makes. He is very active on social media and has taken to posting all sorts of things. Last week, he posted reels of himself chatting with Kashmiri girls in Srinagar and performing a martial art called jiu-jitsu. Many of his posts have nothing to do with politics and many of his statements are positively goofy. When he said some days ago that you would never find a Dalit, Adivasi or OBC girl competing to become Miss India, I was not sure what he meant. Becoming Miss India is not a government job that can be reserved based on caste. It is a private competition in which any Indian woman can compete? So, what did he mean exactly?

His fixation with people's castes is not just baffling, but inane. When the Ram temple was inaugurated in Ayodhya, he said that he was disappointed not to see more Dalits, Adivasis and OBC people in attendance. Did he not notice that the Prime Minister conducted the religious ceremony, and that he comes from an OBC (other backward classes) caste? Rahul's preoccupation with people's castes has led him to say a lot of peculiar things. Not long ago, he declared that it saddened him to see lower castes unrepresented in Bollywood. Becoming a movie star is also not a government job. It is the box office that decides who becomes a star. It becomes hard to take the Leader of the Opposition seriously when he says things like this.

Yet, he must be taken seriously. A recent Mood of the Nation poll by *India Today* revealed that Rahul is seen as the man most suited to become prime minister after Narendra Modi. According to this poll, he is still some distance behind Modi, but ahead of Amit Shah, Yogi Adityanath and Nitin Gadkari. This indicates that he has come a long way from those days when he could barely make a speech in Hindi and when he did make speeches, he said confusing things like how India was not a country but a beehive. This statement was used by Modi in the 2014 elections to make the Dynasty's heir-apparent sound unpatriotic. The country that we think of as our mother has been described as a beehive, he would declare fervently at public rallies to huge applause from the crowds.

It has taken Rahul Gandhi a decade to reach a point when he must be taken seriously as the second-most important political leader in India. But he needs to refrain from sounding eccentric because he is up against a very skilled politician who never misses a chance to rubbish him. Last week in Maharashtra, Modi reminded the vast crowd that had gathered to listen to him that there were people who went around questioning the patriotism of great patriots like Veer Savarkar. He did not name Rahul, but everyone knew who he meant.

Personally, I confess to being impressed by how Rahul Gandhi has cultivated an image of being a political leader who is the exact opposite of Modi. He has succeeded in portraying himself as a man of the people and not the princeling that he once was. He has done a good job of portraying Modi as a man who lives at such exalted heights that he has lost touch with ordinary Indians. There is no question that the reason why Modi failed to win a full majority in the Lok Sabha was because of some of what his main challenger said rang true. The charge that under Modi the country's atmosphere had become infused with religious hatred, rage and hate crimes had a special appeal to Muslims.

What Rahul Gandhi needs to start worrying about, though, are his courtiers. Ever since he has emerged as the main challenger to Modi, the courtiers are back in Delhi's drawing rooms, boasting about how sure they are that their man will become prime minister before the next general election. Some of these courtiers are apolitical gossips, but some are more serious people whose words are listened to carefully in political circles. They all belonged once upon a time to the Durbar that encircled the Dynasty, and they drifted away when Modi won his second term. They are back now in full force, bringing with them the worst memories of that older time.

It is a good thing that there is now an Opposition leader who can keep Modi on his toes, but if that old arrogance and those old courtiers return, it will not be long before Modi succeeds in revising his image. For the moment, his magic and his appeal are so diminished domestically that it is to overseas Indians he turns for reassurance that those rallies in foreign cities that he so loves to address. But now he has competition. Next month, he travels to the United States for another 'mega rally'.

Rahul Gandhi will be going there too and, now, as Leader of the Opposition. If he refrains from banging on about the evils of caste, he will be taken more seriously. He needs to notice how insincere he sometimes sounds. If he felt so passionately about caste inequalities, he could have uplifted the lower castes decades ago when his family reigned over India.

The writer is an author and an attorney based in Karachi

On the horns of a dilemma

Bollywood's worst-kept secret: 'compromise'

She SAID

DEEPA GAHLOT



IN THE film industry, they call it "compromise" without the faintest trace of irony. Maybe the word assuages some of the guilt in the man and the humiliation of the woman, for what is, more often than not, a quid pro quo. If you want to get work in films, compromise is part of the deal. Everyone knows about it, but nobody talks about it, except in salacious gossipy whispers — which filmmaker or star called which female actor to which hotel room. It is also true that when they find no other way to get into the movies, women (and men) are willing to take that offer of compromise and live with the consequences.

The Hema Committee report on sexual exploitation in the Malayalam industry came as a surprise to nobody; even now, very few women are willing to talk about their experiences, because they will be judged for their morals, not the man who took advantage of his power.

The Mumbai film industry's Producers' Guild had set up a committee back in 2018 to address the issue of sexual harassment in the industry. It was a progressive and well-intentioned move in an industry notorious for its disrespect towards women. The A-list women actors may be spared the propositioning, groping, cat-calling, slut-shaming, lewd comments on their appearance and many other kinds of male depravity that women have to put up with, or be called uppity, fussy, bad sport, etc. There was a time when female actors had their mothers accompany them on shoots as a shield against harassment.

The aftermath of the worldwide movement had some impact in India — at least the top production companies ensure a safe working environment for women, as well as basic amenities like changing rooms and toilets. But the malaise runs much deeper in areas where the light has not yet reached. The Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act of 2013 lists guidelines. The Mumbai and Kerala film industries have taken steps to recognise the problem and today, if a woman makes a complaint, at least she is believed. She may not have a career to return to, but she will have sympathy and support for whatever it is worth. The war is far from over yet.

The writer is a senior journalist, author and critic

history HEADLINE

SHYAMLAL YADAV



BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 and October 1, 2024, Jammu & Kashmir will see its first Assembly elections in five years — a first since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019.

Elections to J&K's 90 Assembly seats, being held along with the Haryana Assembly polls, are similar to the 1962 Assembly polls in the state-turned-union territory. The 1962 polls were held simultaneously with Lok Sabha and state Assembly elections across the country between February and April that year. Despite being J&K's third elections since Independence, the 1962 polls were the first to be conducted there by the Election Commission of India (EC).

Before 1962, the EC was not responsible for conducting the J&K Assembly polls in 1957 or those for the Constituent Assembly (a body of representatives elected to formulate the Constitution of J&K) in 1951. On November 17, 1956, the Constituent Assembly adopted the Constitution of J&K under the Constitution of India. This decision came into effect on January 26, 1957, even as preparations for general elections across India were on. Though the J&K Assembly polls were also held in 1957, as per the state Constitution, they were overseen by the Election Commissioner appointed by the Sadr-i-Riyasat (President of the state). On January 26, 1960, the state Constitution was amended to hand over election work to the EC.

While the 1962 elections were by no means an easy feat for the EC, J&K was not in the limelight that it finds itself under in 2024. With 71 returning officers and 40 assistant returning officers managing the polls, there were over 18 lakh eligible voters. The Legislative Assembly had 100 members by direct election, but 25 seats were kept vacant and the area of J&K under Pakistani occupation was excluded from delimitation.

Interestingly, till 1957, there were 67 single-member constituencies and four two-member constituencies in J&K. But in 1961, as in other parts of the country, two-member constituencies were abolished, and reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was provided only on single-member seats. In J&K too, the four two-member constituencies were split into eight one-member seats, taking the total number of seats to 75.

For the EC, the biggest hurdle while fixing the 1962 poll schedule was the weather in J&K. The other challenge was holding these elections simultaneously with the Lok Sabha and state Assembly polls across India. Though the EC realised that April was the most suitable month to hold elections in the

1962 elections: a third for J&K and a first for EC



Sadr-i-Riyasat Karan Singh (right) administers the oath of office to then PM of J&K Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad. Express Archives

snow-capped state, the Jammu region went to polls on February 24, while the Kashmir and Ladakh regions exercised their universal adult franchise on March 15, 1962. It was decided that the entire election process would be completed before March 31.

In the 1957 Assembly polls, candidates — all from the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), the prime political party in the state — returned unopposed on 43 seats. Of 75 Assembly seats in that election, the JKNC won 69, the Praja Parishad five and the Harijan Mandal one. The JKNC's election symbol was the same as that of the Congress — a pair of bullocks carrying a yoke. The Praja Parishad's election symbol was the rising sun, while the Harijan Mandal's was a standing lion.

In the 1962 polls, JKNC candidates returned unopposed on 34 seats. In 41 other constituencies, 140 candidates contested. In these 41 seats, the JKNC won 36, Praja Parishad three and two Independents won the remaining two seats. The other parties lost their deposit. In some polling stations in four constituencies, fresh polls were ordered due to allegations of serious irregularities. The expenditure incurred by the state on the election, including preparation of the electoral rolls and setting up of 1,223 polling stations, was just Rs 2,92,649.

With the JKNC sweeping the polls, J&K PM Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad continued to lead the state. However, these elections were not free of their share of controversy. Some Opposition parties threatened to boycott the polls, alleging that they were not "free and fair". The Praja Socialist Party and G M Sadiq's Left-leaning Democratic National Conference (DNC) had issued a joint statement that the "ruling National Conference was fanning feelings of provincialism and regionalism" and announced that they were boycotting the polls. However, the Praja Socialist Party ended up

contesting from six seats and the DNC from 20 — both failed to secure a single seat.

In the 1962 polls, the Praja Parishad — which would merge with the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the precursor to the BJP, in 1964 — contested from 25 Assembly segments, all in the Jammu region. After the party won just three of 25 seats, the BJS remarked that despite the EC conducting the Assembly polls in the state for the first time, "the malpractice, so much usual in Jammu and Kashmir elections, could not be stopped".

Criticising the BJS for its remarks, Inder Malhotra, the Congress MP from Kathua, said in the Lok Sabha on March 23, 1962, "Regarding the elections, I want to conclude by making the remark that the political parties and persons who were defeated in the general elections should take their defeat in a sporting manner. They cannot say that the elections in India have not been fair, merely because they have been defeated in the elections."

In September 1964, a large group of JKNC leaders decided to join the Congress. Meanwhile, the Praja Parishad merged with the BJS. The year 1964 was significant for another reason — Sheikh Abdullah, dismissed as the state's PM in the famous Kashmir Conspiracy Case and sent to jail in 1953, was released after 11 years by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in April 1964.

Abdullah would end up negotiating between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, including visiting Pakistan to talk to President Ayub Khan. Even as the logistics of Khan's India visit were being worked out, Nehru passed away on May 27, 1964. For Abdullah, Nehru's death came at a heavy cost — he was once again put in jail by Nehru's successor Lal Bahadur Shastri. In fact, Abdullah's incarceration would be continued by the Indira Gandhi government. He would spend the next decade in and out of jail, under house arrest or in exile.

Next DOOR

RAFIA ZAKARIA



IT IS difficult to be anything but aghast at the grotesque facts of the rape and murder of the trainee doctor at Kolkata's R G Kar College and Hospital. What took place after she had been killed is equally blood-curdling: The condition of her body, the alleged attempt at a cover-up, the parents having to wait three hours to see their child, and the hurried autopsy and cremation.

Since then, Indians, women in particular, have taken to protests. The Reclaim The Night movement is calling attention to how patriarchal systems of thought routinely deny women safe working conditions. Many have asked the pertinent question: Is

Pakistan to India, the same misogyny

it the absence of laws or the persistent misogynist mindset that is to blame here? Across the border, in Pakistan, the ground reality is the same. Here too, getting one of the few slots in medical schools is a chance at a better life for a student. When these students graduate, they have to work at government hospitals with no safety mechanisms. In May 2022, a woman doctor was assaulted by a patient's kin at Karachi's Abbasi Shaheed Hospital — a common occurrence, as patients come in with scores of attendants who threaten the lone doctors trying to provide care for many patients.

One month ago, a medical student at Avicenna Medical College was found dead under mysterious circumstances. The administration said it was a case of suicide. However, protesters alleged that a profes-

sor, Masood Nizam Tabassum, had been harassing her in the weeks before her death. They also accused the college chairman, retired army officer Abdul Waheed Sheikh, of abusive tactics. But nothing has been done to bring the perpetrators to justice. Just this week, a five-year-old was raped by a sanitation worker at Lahore's Ganga Ram hospital. Doctors there have been protesting over the lack of safe conditions to little avail.

Having faced similar conditions, Pakistani women stand with Indian women as they take to the streets and social media to draw attention to the dangerous conditions faced by women in their workplaces. Both India and Pakistan have laws criminalising sexual assault. However, in both countries, these incidents continue to occur with impunity. The vast majority are not reported

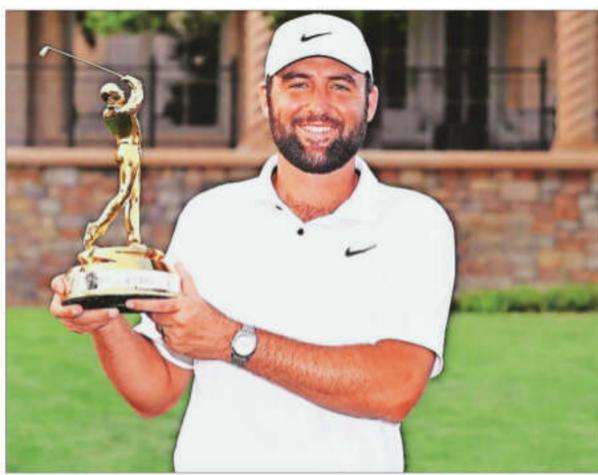
because families feel ashamed to admit that such an attack occurred. When they are reported, there may be initial actions against the accused but consequences rarely follow. It is true that rapes occur across the world and that these cases are notoriously difficult to prosecute. In the US and the like too, this is true — defence lawyers routinely try to shame survivors by revealing their private sexual history. However, the fact that men are predators everywhere is not an excuse for the larger misogynistic mindset that fuels such crimes. All societies can produce a world that is safe for all. However, such an outcome can only occur if there is an open debate about why men in India and Pakistan think that women, particularly those who work in public spaces, are targets to harass. The root cause of rape is not

sexual desire; it is power: The male desire to teach a woman who does not submit a lesson. This, in turn, stems from a deep-seated hatred of women that many South Asian men seem to carry within them. If a world that is safe for South Asian women is ever to be realised, the men must look at the darkness that lies within them, that sees women with ambition, women in workplaces, women with their own views as an attack on their self-esteem. Women are not going to back down. For every Ahbaya that perishes, millions of others are finding their voices and they will not stop on this side of the border or that one — until they are heard and understood.

The writer is an author and an attorney based in Karachi

Opinion

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2024



Scottie Scheffler has made a rapid journey to the top of the golf world

INSTAGRAM

All bets are off

Thirty players and a \$100-million season finale to the 2024 FedEx Cup

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

IT'S TOO CLOSE to call, the FedEx Cup is. And that's a good thing: it would be pretty anticlimactic if the results of the season-long competition were a done deal before the final event in the playoffs—the Tour Championship—had teed off. The ante has been significantly upped—this year's FedEx Cup winner will take home \$25 million while all 30 players will make no less than half a million dollars for making it to the Tour Championship.

Just to recap, the Tour Championship is the last of three playoff events that conclude the FedEx Cup in which players accrue points based on their performances through the season. Unlike other events, those points determine a starting score for every player. Scottie Scheffler, on the back of an extraordinary season in which he's won six times—including the Players Championship and The Masters Tournament—started right on top at ten-under par, followed by his closest rival, Xander Schauffele at eight-under. The first playoff—St Jude Classic—winner Hideki Matsuyama began at seven-under, while last week's BMW Championship winner, Keegan Bradley was at six-under. Wunderkid Ludvig Aberg got five shots while Rory McIlroy, Colin Morikawa, Wyndham Clark, Patrick Cantlay and Sam Burns were bunched up together at four-under. The rest of the field started within 10 strokes of Scheffler—formidable odds, but certainly not insurmountable. That changed rather quickly as the tournament got underway: Scheffler shot a pair of scintillating rounds to lie at 21-under going into the weekend, extending his lead to four shots over Morikawa at 17-under. Schauffele lies a further shot adrift, while the rest of the field has fallen off the map. No other player is within nine shots of Scheffler. Morikawa shot an astounding nine birdies enroute to a second round 63. The fact that Scheffler's 64 in the second round barely found a mention in the media just highlights the level of play everyone has come to expect from the world number one.

By the time you read this, the last stretch—the final round—will be about to tee off. With so much money on the line, it's hard to overstate the significance of these 18 holes. As far as Scheffler and Schauffele are concerned, the PGA Tour's 'Player of the Year' trophy is on the line. As things stand now, with his Olympic Gold to go with the six victories, Scheffler will probably edge out Schauffele who's won two Major Championships. If Schauffele wins the FedEx Cup then that could tilt things in his favour. If Scheffler wins then that eight-win season is unlikely to be

equalled. Neither of the players has won a FedEx Cup.

An aching back and his distaste for the playoff format had raised some concerns about Scheffler's prospects: he has a history of struggling in the FedEx Cup Playoffs, and his recent performance at the BMW Championship raised some eyebrows: he entered the Tour Championship with the two-stroke lead the past two seasons and finished those respective tournaments runner up and in a share of sixth place. Schauffele, on the other hand, is clearly on song and likely to continue that run on a course where he won in his debut in 2017. In 2023, Schauffele gave Viktor Hovland a run for his money before eventually finishing second in the FedEx Cup. Most experts agree that while Scheffler has undoubtedly been the best player of 2024, Schauffele is the one on a streak at the moment.

The fan favourite—Rory McIlroy—is nearly out of the running at eight-under. The Irishman loves this golf course and pulled off the greatest comeback in FedEx Cup Playoffs history two years ago, but he's just not recovered from some of his tough losses this year, none more so than the US Open. What would really make it an ending befitting a historic finale would be if an underdog came and stole the Cup. And it is possible: Keegan Bradley entered the playoffs in 50th (last) place and won the BMW Championship last week. Bradley is out of the running this week, but Morikawa whose game has been on and off all season seems to have got it together at the right time. The American put on a show on the first day by sinking six birdies in a row on the back nine and then followed it up with that remarkable 63 on day two. It's the second time that Morikawa finds himself playing well after a lull, and chasing Scheffler on a big stage. Earlier, in April 2024, Morikawa entered the Masters Tournament in a bit of a slump but discovered some feel on the range and played out of his socks to finish tied third behind Scheffler and Aberg.

But this time around it will take some help from Scheffler for Morikawa or Schauffele to catch up. There's no precedent for that though, Scheffler has always won with a lead of four or more strokes going into the weekend.

Which is not to say it can't happen. Nine shots adrift at 12-under, Sahithi Theegala, Adam Scott and Wyndham Clark lead the pack trailing the trio. Scott is in the middle of a purple patch showing an impressive resurgence in form. Clark is one of the few players to have won an event in which Scheffler contended (The Players Championship) and finished second to him at another (Arnold Palmer Invitational). There are plenty of scenarios being discussed at online forums; mostly fans trying to drum up support for their favourite player. But there's only one player they'll put their money on.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



As long as life expectancy was low, pension was of little consequence. Few got a pension but fewer lived for long after retirement. In 1947, when India became independent, the life expectancy was under 35 years. Today, it is slightly over 70 years. The obligation of pension will, on average, remain for 10-12 years after retirement and may continue to the spouse if there is the concept of family pension. That is why most employers are wary of pension

POLITICAL PARTIES, INCLUDING the ruling party at the Centre, and chief ministers find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. It is on the question of pension. Not all citizens of India of a certain age get a pension. There is no social security scheme in India that offers a pension to a citizen. Millions of persons employed in the private sector do not get a pension on retirement. Even short service commissioned officers in the Indian defence forces do not get a pension.

Pension wins argument

As long as life expectancy was low, pension was of little consequence. Few got a pension but fewer lived for long after retirement. In 1947, when India became independent, the life expectancy was under 35 years. Today, it is slightly over 70 years. The obligation of pension will, on average, remain for 10-12 years after retirement and may continue to the spouse if there is the concept of family pension. That is why most employers are wary of pension. The employees have a powerful case: pension is a *right* earned through long and loyal service; or pension is a *deferred wage*; or pension is the path to the right to *live with dignity* after retirement.

In the case of government employees, the 'right to pension' won the argument and that was the right verdict. To those who pointed to the sections of the people that do not have a right to pension, the answer was that the right to pension must be extended to them too. In fact, there should be a universal pension scheme open to all sections of the people.

As pensions for government employees took root, the concept of an assured minimum pension also took root. The concept settled at 50% of the last drawn basic salary and dearness allowance.



Government employees protest against the New Pension Scheme in Gujarat

FILE PHOTO: NIRMAL HARINDRAN

On the horns of a dilemma

Changed dynamics

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At the time of writing, most state governments have not commented on UPS. Major political parties, including the Congress, are deliberating over UPS. However, several associations of central government employees and several central trade unions have opposed the *contribution* of the employee to the

pension fund.

Funding, who and how?

It is a perfect dilemma for governments, political parties and employees' associations. Speaking from a purely fiscally-conscious point of view, the UPS ought not to be rejected out of hand. Some questions, however, remain:

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2. Mr TV Somanathan said that "the government will make good the shortfall". Is this not just a step away from 'pay as you go'?

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Let's see how the stakeholders get off the horns of the dilemma.

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FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

Rahul and the question of caste

OF LATE, I have started paying close attention to the ways and wiles of Rahul Gandhi. I follow him on Instagram and pay heed to the speeches he makes. He is very active on social media and has taken to posting all sorts of things. Last week, he posted reels of himself chatting with Kashmiri girls in Srinagar and performing a martial art called jiu-jitsu. Many of his posts have nothing to do with politics and many of his statements are positively goofy. When he said some days ago that you would never find a Dalit, Adivasi or OBC girl competing to become Miss India, I was not sure what he meant. Becoming Miss India is not a government job that can be reserved based on caste. It is a private competition in which any Indian woman can compete? So, what did he mean exactly?

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Yet, he must be taken seriously. A recent Mood of the Nation poll by *India Today* revealed that Rahul is seen as the man most suited to become prime minister after Narendra Modi. According to this poll, he is still some distance behind Modi, but ahead of Amit Shah, Yogi Adityanath and Nitin Gadkari. This indicates that he has come a long way from those days when he could barely make a speech in Hindi and when he did make speeches, he said confusing things like how India was not a country but a beehive. This statement was used by Modi in the 2014 elections to make the Dynasty's heir-apparent sound un-patriotic. The country that we think of as our mother has been described as a beehive, he would declare fervently at public rallies to huge applause from the crowds.

It has taken Rahul Gandhi a decade to reach a point when he must be taken seriously as the second-most important political leader in India. But he needs to refrain from sounding eccentric because he is up against a very skilled politician who never misses a chance to rubbish him. Last week in Maharashtra, Modi reminded the vast crowd that had gathered to listen to him that there were people who went around questioning the patriotism of great patriots like Veer Savarkar. He did not name Rahul, but everyone knew who he meant.

Personally, I confess to being impressed by how Rahul Gandhi has cultivated an image of being a political leader who is the exact opposite of Modi. He has succeeded in portraying himself as a man of the people and not the princeling that he once was. He has done a good job of portraying Modi as a man who lives at such exalted heights that he has lost touch with ordinary Indians. There is no question that the reason why Modi failed to win a full majority in the Lok Sabha was because of some of what his main challenger said rang true. The charge that under Modi the country's atmosphere had become infused with religious hatred, rage and hate crimes had a special appeal to Muslims.

What Rahul Gandhi needs to start worrying about, though, are his courtiers. Ever since he has emerged as the main challenger to Modi, the

courtiers are back in Delhi's drawing rooms, boasting about how sure they are that their man will become prime minister before the next general election. Some of these courtiers are apolitical gossips, but some are more serious people whose words are listened to carefully in political circles. They all belonged once upon a time to the Durbar that encircled the Dynasty, and they drifted away when Modi won his second term. They are back now in full force, bringing with them the worst memories of that older time.

It is a good thing that there is now an Opposition leader who can keep Modi on his toes, but if that old arrogance and those old courtiers return, it will not be long before Modi succeeds in revising his image. For the moment, his magic and his appeal are so diminished domestically that it is to overseas Indians he turns for reassurance at those rallies in foreign cities that he so loves to address. But now he has competition. Next month, he travels to the United States for another 'mega rally'.

Rahul Gandhi will be going there too and, now, as Leader of the Opposition. If he refrains from banging on about the evils of caste, he will be taken more seriously. He needs to notice how insincere he sometimes sounds. If he felt so passionately about caste inequalities, he could have uplifted the lower castes decades ago when his family reigned over India.

ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE





Man's inhumanity to man is only surpassed by his cruelty to animals

George Bernard Shaw

BALLOT TO BUDGET: VOTE ACQUISITION FUNDED BY TAXPAYER

In the introductory chapter of his seminal essay, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Karl Marx says, "History repeats itself, once as tragedy, and again as farce." In India's political landscape, history repeats itself first as farce and then as a mockery of farce.

On Friday, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu informed the state Assembly "I am suspending mine and state ministers' and CPS' salary allowances for two months." The reason: his government was making efforts to increase its revenue and reduce unproductive expenditure. It isn't clear what is deemed "unproductive expenditure" but the "symbolic gesture" would save the state barely ₹2 crore.

The price of political profligacy has come home to roost. Data released by Reserve Bank of India shows between 2014 and 2024 the total outstanding liabilities of Himachal Pradesh has shot up from ₹33,877 crore to ₹94,992 crore; it currently spends over ₹5,400 crore per year in interest payments. That a state once held up by the World Bank as a model for development finds itself in this plight is indeed a tragedy.

It's not just Himachal. Every election season, parties march to the tune of new sops and top-up schemes. In the run up to the Lok Sabha elections, the Eknath Shinde regime announced the Namu Shetkari Mahasamman Nidhi Yojana—a top-up of ₹6,000 to the ₹6,000 paid to farmers under the PM Kisan Samman Yojana. This month, in preparation for the assembly elections, the Maharashtra government initiated the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana, which promises ₹1,500 a month to 10 million women across the state. The scheme will cost the state exchequer ₹46,000 crore. Already, in 10 years, the outstanding liability of Maharashtra spiralled from ₹3.09 lakh crore to ₹7.22 lakh crore, and has cost the state over ₹47,000 crore in interest payments.

Start-up entrepreneurs deploy proof of concept to launch products and raise funds. For politicians, the proof of concept is electoral success. Madhya Pradesh, under Shivraj Chouhan, propelled the fortunes of his party with the Ladli Behna Yojana; soon enough, others followed suit. At least 10 states have active schemes or are working on prototypes—this election season has Jharkhand and Haryana (besides Maharashtra) announcing schemes.

The cost estimates for cash transfers to women voters merit attention. Karnataka's Gruha Lakshmi costs the state ₹32,000 crore, MP's Ladli Behna around ₹19,000 crore, West Bengal's Lakshmi Bhandar ₹12,000 crore, Tamil Nadu's Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thogai ₹12,000 crore, Telangana's Mahalakshmi scheme ₹3,800 crore, Jharkhand's Maiya Samman Yojana around ₹5,000 crore, Delhi's CM Mahila Samman ₹2,000 crore—and the list goes on. The use of taxpayer monies to acquire votes is not limited to one scheme. The Congress's five guarantees in Karnataka cost the state around ₹65,000 crore.

Costs have consequences. The total outstanding liability of all states has rocketed from ₹25.10 lakh crore to ₹83.32 lakh crore. The total outstanding liability of the youngest state, Telangana, is up from ₹72,658 crore in 2015 to over ₹3.89 lakh crore, costing the state ₹22,244 crore in interest payments. The top 10 states on the list of outstanding liabilities are: Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh.

Indeed, in 2022, the RBI cautioned on the risks to state finances, "New sources of risks have emerged in the form of rising expenditure on non-merit freebies, expanding contingent liabilities." States are spending on vocal constituencies—the bill for wages and salaries rose from ₹4.25 lakh crore to ₹8.78 lakh crore between 2014-15 and 2022-23. The latest state finance report reveals that 19 states are running revenue deficits. The warnings have not awakened fiscal accountability.

Taxpayer-paid vote acquisition comes at the cost of essential services—in the decade since 2014, outlay for education (states and UTs) edged up from 2.6 to 2.7 percent of GDP, and health allocation crawled from 0.8 to 1.1 percent of aggregate expenditure. The reason urban India is wallowing in floods and lament year after year is that development expenditure is only 11.9 percent and capital outlay is barely 2.9 percent of GSDP across states.

Ironically, the embrace of sop populism has been amplified by two major reforms aimed at better governance. The digitalisation of welfare, thanks to Aadhaar, Jan Dhan and direct benefit transfers, allows governments to initiate a programme at the launch of a code—the NPCI platform has over 3,000 codes registered for state government schemes. And the money needed to pay for the sops is made available by assured and predictable flow of GST revenues—now averaging at ₹1.7 lakh crore a month collected from taxpayers.

The myth of responsible politics was shattered long back. In 1989, Janata Dal came to power propped by BJP and CPI(M). Soon after taking over as prime minister, V P Singh declared "the coffers are empty". That did not stop his finance minister, Madhu Dandavate, from announcing ₹1,000-crore loan waivers for farmers. Neither did allies dare object despite the circumstance.

Engineering solutions is difficult. Sops are easier: It is scarcely surprising that every election season witnesses sop innovations. As the American playwright Eugene O'Neill said, "There is no present or future—only the past, happening over and over again—now."

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HIMANTA SARMA



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

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If religion is the opium of the masses, it is the cocaine of populists. It is piety that anoints political pygmies as national icons. The 55-year-old Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam's 15th chief minister has become Hindutva's new high priest *du jour*. His roots are in the Congress, the historical vanguard of secularism. But he owes his national prominence to the BJP, which took him into its fold.

Previously, Sarma was secularism's anti-Sangh savant for an over a decade. Ironically, his first visit after he became Assam's BJP CM was to the RSS headquarters in Guwahati. From the day he joined the party in 2015, the saffron depth of Sarma's ideological identity became deeper than any longstanding Sangh activist's convictions. Sarma raves more about mandirs, Muslims, maulvis and madrasas than about his government's record. Because of his flexibility, amiability and accessibility, he could get everyone on board to get his party a second term in 2021. Called 'Mama' by Assamese youth, Sarma's saffron avatar makes him the uncrowned monarch of the north-eastern political arena.

Sarma's hoary Hindutva hyperbole indicates he has unlearned all he had absorbed from the Congress culture. Since Assam is troubled by illegal immigration from Bangladesh and has seen aggressive minority politics for three decades, Sarma is the region's messiah determined to marginalise local Muslim influence in state politics. As a continuation of his shrewd legislative and administrative strategy, recently he got the highly debatable Assam Repealing Bill and Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim

Marriages and Divorces Bill 2024 passed in the assembly, seeking to repeal and replace the Assam Moslem Marriages and Divorces Registration Act of 1935. Though the new legislations, Sarma is in a way attempting to introduce his own blueprint of a regional uniform civil code.

A week ago, he combated the opposition in the assembly with remarks about minorities: "I will take sides. What can you do? Will not let Miya Muslims take over Assam." He reeled out data about democratic imbalances in the state. He also claimed, "Changing demography is a big issue for me. In Assam, the Muslim population has reached 40 percent today. In 1951, it was 12 percent. We have lost many districts."

Predictably, the Congress-led opposition excoriated him for inciting communal strife. In the words of Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah: "There are 18 opposition parties in Assam who have jointly filed a police complaint against the CM. Since the Lok Sabha poll results, the Assam CM is trying to create communal riots and making sensitive statements even inside the assembly. We will also write to the president." The next day, opposition parties met the governor and demanded Sarma's resignation. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh fumed: "Assam CM said is unacceptable and condemnable. A sick mind and a loud mouth are a toxic combination." Sarma retorted: "Let [the opposition] compete for minority votes. I am not in the competition."

He never leaves a chance to assert his Hinduism and corner Islamists and political opponents. Last year too, he red-flagged Assam's Muslim population growth, claiming it was going vertical at a stratospheric rate of 30 percent per decade as against 16 percent for the Hindus. He predicted: "By 2041, Assam will be

come a Muslim-majority state. It's a reality and nobody can stop it."

Sarma has been targeting Muslim institutions that he feels breed fundamentalism. In January, he closed down all state-run madrasas and announced: "Private madrasas are protected by the Constitution, as it is written that the government cannot touch minority-run educational institutes. They don't even fall under the RTE Act. But having said that, the Assam police and education department are working together so that we can reduce at least 1,000 private madrasas. From 3,000, it will come down to 2,000 and we are negotiating this with the private madrasa bodies."

Sarma welcomes bombastic battles that upgrade his Hindutva credentials. He uses any pushback by opposition parties as an opportunity to further turbocharge his agenda. As a Congressman, he had learned the art of breaking parties, hosting defectors by toppling governments and demolishing rivals. His speed-learning skill has enabled him to learn the saffron ropes fast. He has mastered the grammar and verse of the Sangh parivar's language of nationalism.

A favourite of Amit Shah, who inducted him in the party when Shah was BJP president, Sarma has proved his worth to his mentor. In 2021, he translated a book on Shah, *Amit Shah and the March of BJP*, to Assamese. Sarma also enjoys a good rapport with Narendra Modi and the top RSS leadership. His detractors cringe at his braggadocio, while his admirers adore his propinquity to hardcore Hindutva—the Northeast's own Modi-Yogi combo who keeps Muslim fundamentalism in check through aggressive posturing and administrative action.

This mojo is reflected in Sarma's strategic savvy in various political missions where he weeded out anti-BJP, Con-

gress-led governments from most north-eastern states. He was responsible for BJP's Tripura victory. He is a master of coups and an astute alliance fabricator. He expanded the BJP footprint in Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. In Odisha, he mobilised cadres and played the Hindu card to the hilt with the "Jai Jagannath!" war cry. He has been made co-in-charge for the upcoming Jharkhand elections. His first move was to break the ruling JMM by pulling former CM Champai Soren. He had already set the agenda for polarisation in the state. He told the media in Ranchi on May 16, "*Hindu ko thanda mat karo. Hindu abhi garam hua hai, garam rehne do. Abhi logo ne 'Jai Shri Ram' bolna shuru kiya hai bahut saalo baad.*" (Don't calm Hindus down. Hindus have just woken up, let them rise. They have just started saying 'Jai Shri Ram'.) These secular people will try to cool us down and not let us chant 'Jai Shri Ram'. Can they stop namaaz?"

Since the BJP leadership loves ideologically toxic diatribes against the Congress, Sarma hasn't let them down. During the Lok Sabha elections he fumed: "Voting for Congress means encouraging the 'Babars' in the country. When Congress gets votes, Aurangzeb's get vitamins. If Congress wins, the Babars and Aurangzeb will start their atrocities on our people all over India. Congress won in Karnataka, and I don't know from where the Babars and Aurangzeb got oxygen, the chaos started.... We have to reject the Hindutva of '*chunavi*' (election-minded) Congress."

Naturally, Sarma has emerged as Modi-Shah's most trusted and tested pongo. While breaking the Uddhav Thackeray's government, all Shiv Sena rebels including the current CM Eknath Shinde were sequestered safely in Assam until the saffron government took charge. Sarma's talent lies in his rare combination of rigid ideology, flexible statecraft and pragmatic politics. Seen by his promoters as the future Hindu '*hriday samrat*' (king of hearts) because the sun rises in the east, Sarma's star is rising in Modiverse, too. The jury is still out on whether he is a superstar or just a comet of strife.



A CASE FOR MECHANICAL TEMPLE ELEPHANTS



OPINION

NANDITHA KRISHNA

Historian, environmentalist and writer based in Chennai

ACCORDING to the Heritage Animal Task Force, 540 people were killed from elephant attacks during temple processions in Kerala and 742 individuals injured between 2007 and 2024. This year, an elephant attacked a tourist at Amer Fort in Jaipur. Another injured four people at the Bhagavathy Amman temple in Chavakkad. At a temple festival in Pattambi, an elephant injured one person and killed two cows. During the Arattupuzha Pooram festival in Thrissur, an elephant charged at and chased another, causing panic. At Sree Ramaswami Temple in Vaikom, an elephant killed a mahout. In West Bengal, a mahout was killed at Iskcon's Mayapur temple by his elephant. At a safari park in Idukki, an elephant crushed a mahout to death.

The systems of capturing and training elephants have evolved variously in different regions of the country—from the use of female elephants as decoys to the use of nooses concealed on the ground. The only thing they have in common is

cruelty. Domesticated elephants in India are supposed to be subject to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. The Prevention of Cruelty to Draught and Pack Animals Rules, 1965 prohibit the use of elephants for drawing a vehicle or carrying a load for more than nine hours a day. At Amer, elephants go up and down the hill carrying tourists all day.

The law prohibits the use of any sharp equipment for driving an elephant. But the ankusa or goad is still used to prod the animal to obey. Cruelties to elephants include beating, over-riding, over-loading, torture, subjecting them to unnecessary pain, wilfully administering injurious substances, confining them in a cage constricting movement and not providing sufficient food, water or shelter. In North India, they are commonly used for entertainment or begging. They are chained continuously on cement floors, developing foot-rot and arthritis. This naturally makes the animals suffer acute pain, and become frustrated. When the largest mammal on earth gets angry, it can be devastating.

So what is the solution? As a practising Hindu who has read the shastras, I know that no scripture requires the use of elephants in rituals. The elephant is Lord Ganesha, to be loved and worshipped. Kautilya's instructions for managing elephant forests and the *Gaja Shastra* relate to the battle elephant.

To prevent injuries and deaths, three temples in Kerala and one in Mysuru have adopted a novel alternative: the mechanical elephant. Irinjadappilly Sree Krishna temple in Thrissur has Raman;

Thrikkayil Mahadeva temple in Kochi has Mahadevan; and Pournamikavu temple in Thiruvananthapuram has Baladhasan, while Jagadguru Sri Veerasimhasana Mahasamsthana Math in Mysuru has Shiva. Tamil Nadu got its first 'robotic' temple elephant in 2024 at the Shivan temple in Devarshola.

The mechanical elephants are 3 metres tall, weigh 800 kg and are made of rubber, fibre, metal, mesh, foam and steel; they run on electric motors. They

Laws protecting elephants are observed more in breach. They are chained, beaten and over-worked. Tragedies occur when they retaliate. A few temples in Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have adopted a better option: life-like mechanical elephants

are super-realistic and look just like the living animal. A mechanical elephant looks, feels and is used like a real elephant. It can shake its head, move its ears and eyes, swish its tail, lift its trunk and even spray water. It can be climbed upon. It is mounted on a wheelbase, allowing it to be moved around for rituals and circumambulation. To run the motors, a small generator is moved along with it. Presently, three vendors manufacture mechanical elephants: two in Kerala and one in Maharashtra.

Kerala's temple elephants are male; when they come on heat, there are terrible battles and injuries among the pachyderms. Guruvayoor's Anakotta houses 60 elephants trained for puja.

Tamil Nadu's temple elephants are solitary females, possibly the worst punishment for a social animal. There are frequent complaints about ill-treatment by the mahouts. Many develop diabetes and become overweight. The animals are controlled by threatening them with weapons and being shackled. Each animal spends about 15 hours on average within an enclosure, wearing leg chains round-the-clock.

In 2021, after a video of an elephant being repeatedly beaten with sticks at the Thekkampatti rejuvenation camp went viral, the Tamil Nadu Hindu religious and charitable endowments department suspended the mahouts, who were subsequently arrested. Frustrated captive elephants often kill their mahouts. Apart from the examples above, such tragedies have been recorded in Madurai and Tiruchirappalli too.

The Indian elephant enjoys more legal protection now, but enforcement of the laws is terrible. The trading of elephants at the Sonepur fair in Bihar disregards the law every year.

No formal census of captive elephants has been attempted—the 750 counted in North India, 700 in South India and 460-660 in the Northeast are presumed and underestimated numbers.

The elephant is unsuitable for cities as well as villages. And the mechanical elephant is a much better alternative.

QUOTE CORNER



Rest assured, tonight, no storming of the Bastille, no guillotine, because tonight the most beautiful revolution starts—the paralympic revolution... What makes you revolutionaries is that, when they told you 'no', you continued.

Tony Estanguet, Paris 2024 president, at the opening of the Paralympics

My values have not changed. It's very important that we take seriously what we must do to guard against the clear crisis in terms of the climate.

Kamala Harris, US vice-president and Democratic nominee for presidency, on what made her change her position on a fracking ban

I play Asian [Champions] League—don't forget that.

Cristiano Ronaldo, Champions League top scorer with 140 goals, on whether he will return from Saudi Arabia to play the European Champions League again

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Progress momentum

Ref: *Much more needed to make workplaces safer for women* (Aug 31). It's good that the top executive of India, apart from the highest judiciary, is speaking out against crimes on women these days. The Kolkata doctor's rape and murder has stirred the nation's conscience. The momentum for ensuring a better world for women should continue. Inefficient investigations, legal illiteracy and delayed trials should be addressed comprehensively before expecting remarkable change.

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Mixed schools

To reduce crimes against women in the workplace, the suggestion of sensitising boys and inculcating values of mutual respect is worthwhile. More mixed schools should be encouraged so that the man-woman relationship becomes more natural.

Dharmarajan A K, Thalassery

Coalition dharma

Ref: *Moving towards a better coalition culture in India* (Aug 31). The role of the executive is paramount for effective governance. The majoritisation of legislatures and ministerial councils should not influence the executive. Even institution heads, though appointed politically, are subject to judicial review and are under the supervision of the executive. But the law is not taking its own course. That's why the author favours coalitions, so that checks and balances are there.

Jayachandran C, Chennai

Intersectional identity

Ref: *Mutlinal claims on Kamala* (Aug 31). While the idea of a mixed-race female candidate having Indian roots as the next US president might sound empowering, does intersectional identity necessitate progressive change? The euphoria after Rishi Sunak's election could not help lower the disappointment after his downfall. With many stakes at work, Indians shouldn't expect too much.

Aparna Vats, email

Gaza peace

The inclusion of 'peace, justice and strong institutions' in UN's sustainable developmental goals seems merely a theoretical aspiration. It's almost a year of ravaging in one of the world's densest strips of land, Gaza. Even a ceasefire seems an illusion. Other neighbours are now walking into the battlefield against Benjamin Netanyahu's tooth-and-claw attitude. When two nations enter a war, the rest of the world just takes their sides, rather than urging them to unfurl peace flags.

Jayasivakumar S P, Chennai

Taxing super-rich

Ref: *Shah Rukh Khan makes to Hurun rich list* (Aug 30). India, often dubbed a poor nation at the bottom of the hunger index, is emerging as the wealth creation engine for Asia. It's adding a billionaire every fifth day. Nothing can be more paradoxical, though there should be no grouse against it. But when someone amasses so much wealth, should the nation also not tax him at a much higher rate?

P Mangalachandran, Kannur

Pakistan talks

Ref: *Era of uninterrupted dialogue over, says Jaisankar* (Aug 31). While it is commendable that Indian foreign policy played a crucial role in exposing the true nature of Pakistan's state patronage of terrorism in the global arena, completely shutting doors to talks won't be prudent. Any attempt to ensure regional stability excluding Pakistan won't be viable in the larger interests of the region.

M Rishidev, Dindigul

Creamy conundrum

On August 1, the Supreme Court allowed states to sub-classify SCs and STs and exclude their creamy layers. But the Centre seems reluctant to spell out the states' power on this. Eyeing the upcoming elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand, which have sizeable Dalit populations, the BJP is dilly-dallying on the order. But the Centre, being bound to obey the court's mandate, should convene an all-party meeting including Dalit groups and start broad talks to find an amicable solution.

Rajamani Chelladurai, Palayamkottai

Idiom of common heritage



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

LANGUAGES and their dialogue within a social and political context are a fascinating area and one that engages me deeply both as a writer and translator. The encounter of different languages has spawned not just a new idiom (such as *Hinglish*), but is often weaponised by political parties to create communal discord. As Javed Akhtar says, Urdu is an Indian language but by declaring it the language of Pakistan, we have destroyed those registers of cordiality and warmth that bound our communities together for centuries, enriching our understanding of each other's lives and beliefs. Thankfully, organisations such as Rekhta and the revival of *dastaangoi* have renewed an interest in Urdu.

This is why when I was recently invited to attend a seminar on translations, called *Bhashavaad*, jointly hosted by Ashoka University and the New India Foundation, I was delighted to meet and hear some of our country's finest writers and translators. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, there has been an explosion of exchange of languages as different as Kashmiri, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu, Odiya, Bangla, Punjabi, Nagamese, Bhojpur and countless others. What is more, there is a growing interest in new writing in languages that were neglected or dismissed as 'too regional', whatever that meant.

It is to the credit of progressive universities, such as Ashoka in Sonapat, that a special centre for translation studies was established and nurtured by well-known writers and academics to supervise the quality and choice of texts.

Their efforts have now begun to bear fruit. A series of impressive poetry translations by Amit Chaudhuri and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra were some early publications. Now, there is a long line of translations in the making and over the next few years, a wide range of subjects from fiction to biographies, short-story collections and plays are planned. Since Ashoka University has a high reputa-



Grandmothers and old family retainers were champion story-tellers, now often replaced by digital or interactive tools in many urban nuclear families

tion among academic institutions abroad, we can look forward to a deeper penetration of our *bhasha* literature.

Up until a few years ago, translations were mainly limited to classics (Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, Ananthamurthy *et al*), but what I heard from the young translators and publishers warmed my heart. These are students who have a thorough grounding in language studies and many are writers or poets themselves. Naturally, they have brought a freshness to the range of translations that was missing so far.

While on this subject, I have to add that most of our literature was based on an oral tradition, so performance, recitation, songs, prayers and reading aloud (the *kathavachak* and *dastaangoi* traditions, for instance) brought it to even those who could not read the Sanskrit or Persian texts. This is why there are so many versions of the *Ramayana* and no Indian is unaware of the story and legend of Rama. This rich oral tradition lost its voice when we made script and writing so important. I can say with confidence that even an unlettered Indian villager is a fund of knowledge that we have

not been able to tap. Rhythm, music, facial expressions and hands transfer that knowledge, whereas reading in silence in your own room or library has destroyed the pleasure of a synaesthetic experience that is still alive in animated story-telling. Grandmothers and old family retainers were champion story-tellers, now often replaced by digital or interactive tools in many urban nuclear families.

In this age of mobiles, Google translator and AI, where the future of any literature lies is difficult to predict, but the pleasure of the spoken word far exceeds that which one gets from the written word. During my student days, I remember a series called *Penguin Modern Poets* that introduced us to Polish, Italian, French and Russian modern writers. Many are still with me and a source of perennial joy. So, I hope schools and universities continue to acquaint students with the classic works of Kabir, Tulsidas, Tagore and the great Sangam writers from the Dravidian tradition side by side with the exciting experimental works available to those who write in languages other than English.

Over lunch and coffee breaks, I met several eminent writers who are proficient in English, but still prefer to write in their native tongues. The reason is that the warmth and immediacy of the spoken word in its own world is attached to a long history of associations that are virtually untranslatable into English. However, they transfer seamlessly into another Indian language and that's a thought to keep in mind. The problem is that regional identities are so intermingled with sub-regional jingoism that even though many understand Hindi, their fear of being wiped out by its hegemonic presence keeps them isolated in small pockets. While one can perfectly understand their concerns, keeping their own language confined to their own state is not the way to share it widely.

What we need to do now is build respect and openness towards all Indian languages and think about translating from one Indian *bhasha* into another. Until this becomes a widely accepted movement, we will continue to live in linguistic silos of our own. Apart from other languages, stirring writing from Dalits, women, the marginalised and cloistered lives need to be found and celebrated. English has an assured place in India, it is time we promoted our own languages and those stories that speak to us in the idiom of our common cultural heritage.

Ensure the safety of women patients too



CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

THE brutal rape and murder of a young trainee doctor, while on duty at the RG Kar Medical College Hospital in Kolkata, shocked the entire nation and brought to the fore the absence of workplace safety for medical professionals not just in Kolkata, but around the country. What added to the consternation and outrage was the way the principal of the college dealt with the heinous crime, putting a big question mark over the impartiality of the investigation and justice to the victim and her family. Thanks to the agitation by resident doctors in Kolkata and the solidarity expressed by fellow professionals across the country, the case has been handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation.

The Supreme Court also took immediate cognisance of the matter and constituted a high-powered National Task Force (NTF) to formulate effective recommendations to remedy the issues pertaining to their safety, working conditions and well-being.

Referring to another issue of concern — frequent cases of violence against resident doctors by irate relatives of patients — the Supreme Court commented that several states, including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, had enacted legislations to protect healthcare service professionals from violence. "However, these do not address the institutional and systemic causes that underlie the problem," the court observed. It has asked the NTF to come up with an action plan for an enforceable national protocol for dignified and safe working conditions for interns, residents, senior residents, nurses and doctors. Given their working hours and the threat that they face in the absence of proper security measures, this is a highly welcome step.

While on this important issue, I would urge the Supreme Court to enlarge the scope of the NTF to encompass the safety of female patients, too, given the large number of cases of rape and molestation of female patients in hospitals — both government and private. Many of the security measures like CCTV cameras, restrictions on the entry and exit of people, proper lighting and security guards would help the patients, but only to a limited extent. Their protection requires additional measures such as pre-employment checks by hospitals on the antecedents/track records of all male staff and restrictions on the entry of male staff into female wards.

From the reported cases of rape of patients, the intensive care units

(ICU) require special attention because that's where the relatives are not with the patient and since both male and female patients are admitted there, male workers have access. And, this is where patients are doubly vulnerable on account of their health status, which might require sedation.

In July this year, a 51-year-old patient from Kazakhstan was allegedly raped by a hospital attendant at Artemis hospital in Gurugram while she was under sedation. Following the complaint, the Gurugram police said strict instructions would be given to all hospitals about not allowing any male attendant to enter the room of a female patient, unless accompanied by female staff.

SC needs to enlarge scope of the National Task Force, set up to suggest safety norms for healthcare staff

In February, a male nurse was arrested for sedating and raping a female patient in the ICU of Harish Hospital in Alwar, Rajasthan. The accused reportedly entered the ICU at 3.30 am and tried to molest her. When she protested, he administered a sedative and raped her.

In July, the director of Ashish Hospital, Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh, was booked on charges of allegedly raping a 25-year-old patient while she was in the operation theatre in an unconscious state. The woman had undergone surgery for a lump in her breast and was discharged after the procedure. She was later called back to get her bandages changed and the allegation was that the doctor drugged and raped her. The same month, a male physiotherapist at the Kozhikode District Hospital was accused of molesting a female patient.

In April 2021, a 43-year-old Covid patient, undergoing treatment at the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre, was raped by a male nurse. The woman's condition worsened after that and she was put on a ventilator, but did not survive. The culprit had earlier been suspended for drinking on duty. In 2019, a woman admitted to a private hospital in Meerut for a liver ailment was drugged and gangraped by three ward boys in the ICU.

There are so many such media reports that it makes for painful reading. Unfortunately, these cases do not get enough attention to bring about reforms to protect patients who are seeking healthcare at hospitals, and are highly vulnerable. The Supreme Court would be doing a great service to the cause of patients by bringing their safety too under the ambit of the NTF, and directing all the hospitals in the country to enforce those measures to ensure the safety of patients, as well as health professionals.

Stolen pistol and a wild ghost hunt

MAJ GEN JS KATARIA (RETD)

IN the mid-1970s, I was posted along the Line of Control (LoC) in the Chhamb sector of Jammu and Kashmir. Bunkers and tents were our abode and also the place to secure weapons and other warlike materials. During the monsoon, frequent flooding demanded quick relocation of troops and stores. Hurricane lamps and rum bottles filled with kerosene were the only source of illumination. We lived in harmony with nature, like hermits!

The security of weapons kept in a tent was always a challenge. In those days, the ubiquitous pistols were always on the radar of mischief mongers, to smuggle one away to the gangs of Chambal. To prevent any theft, the weapons were counted every evening and the area was sealed off. During one such inspection, it came to light that a pistol had been whisked away. The loss of a weapon is a blot

on the unit. The reaction was swift. All movement out of the area was immediately prohibited and an investigation was launched.

The night rolled over, but the pistol remained elusive. Desperate situations at times lead to unusual and uncharacteristic responses. This was certainly the case here. A soldier from another battalion, who proclaimed to have magical powers, was confident he could locate the pistol.

Upon his arrival, he prepared a place for 'havan' and started recitation of *mantras*. He kept his eyes closed with a black band. During the recitation, he often rose and went around hopping trenches like a maverick. We all looked at his antics with near disbelief.

As darkness gripped the area, he announced that the pistol was 160 miles away. He would summon a ghost, he announced, as he sought a volunteer who would ride on the ghost's back and fetch the pistol!

There was an eerie silence; it seemed like a scene from one of the ghost movies of Bollywood. Seeing a smile on the maverick's face, I declared my willingness to ride on the ghost's back. The ghost, of course, didn't oblige. I then called our super-heavyweight wrestler and ordered him to ride on the maverick's back till the ghost appears. The maverick's facade fell apart.

We swung back to our systemic process of interrogation. After working the whole night, we narrowed down our probe to two suspects. In the morning, we gave everyone a break for an hour. I retired to my tent. After half an hour, my buddy found a slip dropped closed to my tent, giving the location of the pistol. Employing metal detectors, we pulled out the pistol from the ground, buried under a tree.

With the pistol secured, the maverick ghost-caller unveiled and the culprit in the net, we heaved a sigh of relief.

SOURABH PUNDIR

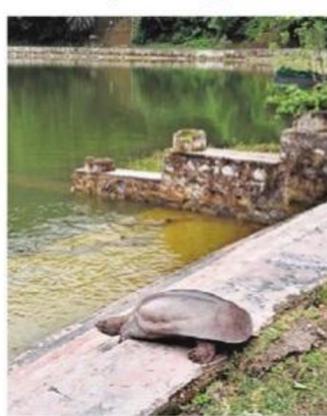
IMAGINE being a species so old as to be called a 'living fossil', which has outlived dinosaurs only to be imperiled in anthropocene because of plastic and beautified stone-pitched water bodies. The species under discussion here is the turtle, which is among the most endangered vertebrates. But, why should we worry about these toothless reptiles which we rarely encounter in our day-to-day lives? Who has the time to think about the turtles when we already have problems as huge as climate change and water crisis to solve? But, what if the turtles are a part of the solution to these problems? Yes, as rare as these magnificent chelonians are, the turtles can help us in saving our wonderful planet.

To understand their role in resolving the water crisis, let us imagine a world without vultures. Smelly, dirty and sick with unknown diseases. This is what will happen to our aquatic ecosystems if turtles go extinct. That's because like vultures, freshwater turtles act as scavengers of water bodies and keep these clean and free of diseases by feeding on the dead and decaying organic matter. In addition to dead fish and other invertebrates, tur-

tles also feed on algae and aquatic vegetation whose excessive growth in water bodies can choke these due to lack of oxygen.

Recognising the importance of freshwater turtles as scavengers, they were employed under the Ganga Action Plan in the 1980s. About 40,000 turtles were released into the river to address the issue of decomposing human remains in its water.

The ecological importance of turtles has been rightly acknowledged in Hindu mythology, where Lord Vishnu is believed to have been incarnated as 'Kurmha', the Turtle God. And, it is no surprise that the 'Land of Gods', Himachal Pradesh, home to about 17 freshwater turtle species, has pristine and clean aquatic ecosystems. Renuka Lake, one of the three Ramsar wetlands of the state and an important pilgrimage site of Hindus, exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between the turtles and their ecosystem. Despite receiving a significant organic load from the offerings of lakhs of pilgrims, particularly during the week of the annual fair, the lake's water remains substantially clean. This resilience of the lake ecosystem can be attributed to the rich diversity of turtles, which help to break down and recycle



An Indian softshell crosses a paved embankment to reach back to a pond after laying eggs across the road. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

these nutrients and maintain the ecological balance. In turn, the turtles benefit from the healthy and protected ecosystem of the lake, thanks to the diligent protection and regular monitoring efforts by the Forest Department.

As the world faces the challenges of

global warming, the importance of turtles and their role in balancing the wetland ecosystems cannot be overstated. Healthy wetlands can help mitigate the effects of global warming as these are carbon sinks and aid in absorbing and storing carbon dioxide. Additionally, wetlands act as sponge by absorbing and holding excess water while acting as the source of water during water scarcity. This function of wetlands is going to be extremely important in protecting our ecosystems from natural disasters like floods and droughts. Such extreme climate events are becoming more and more frequent and intense as a consequence of global warming.

Sadly, instead of rewarding the turtles for their services with clean wetlands, we are forcing them to survive in water bodies choked with plastic waste, sewage and washed-off fertilisers. Turtles ingest plastic by mistaking it for food and, are consequently, dying of blockage. It seems unlikely that the turtles can reproduce fast enough to compensate for such deaths, thanks to the 'beautified' stone-pitched water bodies where we have left no place for them to lay eggs. From fatal traffic to predation by feral animals, the breeding females face numerous perils while tra-

versing these concretised banks and roads. The poor hatchlings have a snowball's chance in hell of reaching back alive after crossing these paved hardscapes.

Turtles are able to deceive natural predators like monitor lizards by laying eggs in one of the 10 holes they dig. Unfortunately, they are not able to protect their eggs and hatchlings from the increasing presence of feral dogs and cats, ironically fed by humans. Eggs and hatchlings are even more vulnerable to predation in the human modified habitats.

Though it seems like we humans are their enemies, we can actually be the greatest allies of turtles. All we have to do is reduce the use of what is harmful, even to our own existence — plastic and fertilisers. And control the population of feral dogs and cats, which threaten not only turtles but our ever-so depleting biodiversity at large. Lastly, why keep confining nature within lifeless borders of concrete? Instead, let's trust the untamed wilderness. As we stroll along these embankments, we might just find hope in the sight of little hatchlings making their way back home.

— The writer is Assistant Zoo Biologist with the HP Wildlife Wing at Renukaji Mini Zoo

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion"
— Dalai Lama



MOSCOW FILM FESTIVAL KICKS OFF WITH FOCUS ON INDIAN CINEMA

Laapata ladies and *Kalki* resonate with Russian audience, opening up huge possibilities for Indian cinema in Russia, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**



The Moscow International Films Week, an event that has become a significant cultural bridge between Russia and the world opened up in Moscow with much fanfare at Khudozhestvenny Cinema and with people from film fraternity from around the world in attendance at the gala event. On the first day of the Film Week, screenings of both foreign and domestic films took place, including the nationwide premieres of the Indian sports drama *Field* and the philosophical-mystical drama *Alzheimer* from Iran. This year it is an Indian-themed week with focus on Indian cinema and celebrating Indian art of storytelling on celluloid. The film festival is hosting films from more than 40-countries but the flavour of the festival is completely Indian. The second day was completely dedicated to Indian cinema, with Russian artists performing on Indian songs and Indian cuisine being served at the venue with

Bollywood songs playing in the background. The Indian segment of the festival is dedicated to celebrating the richness and diversity of Indian cinema, offering Russian audiences a taste of India's cinematic brilliance through a curated selection of films. Among the highlights are two remarkable Indian films, *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki*, which have captivated the Russian audience with their unique storytelling and cultural nuances. Indian cinema has long been admired in Russia, with classics from Bollywood making their mark in the past. Ra Kapoor was a household name in Russia and 'mera joota hai Japani, an all-time hit. The Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is a testament to the enduring connection between the two cultures. This year's selection is not just about showcasing films; it's about highlighting the shared human experiences and emotions that transcend borders. As one Russian filmmaker quipped, "Indian and Russian films are made with heart, the most striking similarity between Indian and Russian films is that the songs are woven into the storyline." This is despite the fact that much is lost in translation and language barrier remains a significant impediment. But that is about to change as Swapna Dutt, the co-producer of *Kalki*, told the Pioneer that they would be releasing the film dubbed in Russian. "Indian films were once very popular in Russia, we want to open that bracket again. I am sure Indian films have a huge market here," said Swapna Dutt.

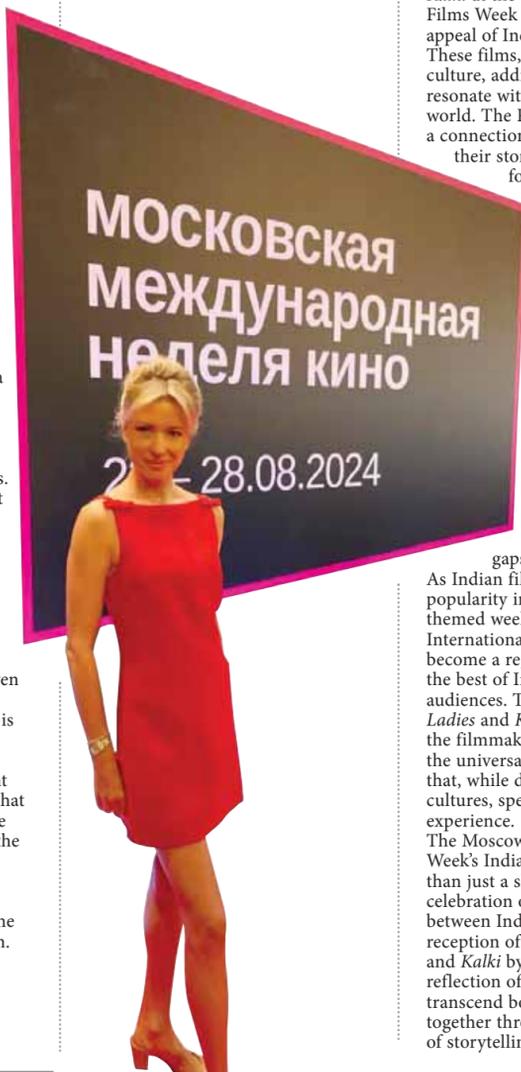
THE INDIAN SEGMENT OF THE FESTIVAL IS DEDICATED TO CELEBRATING THE RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF INDIAN CINEMA, OFFERING RUSSIAN AUDIENCES A TASTE OF INDIA'S CINEMATIC BRILLIANCE THROUGH A CURATED SELECTION OF FILMS. AMONG THE HIGHLIGHTS ARE TWO REMARKABLE INDIAN FILMS, "LAAPATA LADIES" AND "KALKI," WHICH HAVE CAPTIVATED THE RUSSIAN AUDIENCE WITH THEIR UNIQUE STORYTELLING AND CULTURAL NUANCES

Laapata Ladies, a film that delves into the complexities of womanhood in contemporary India, has struck a chord with Russian viewers. The film's narrative, which intertwines humor with social commentary, offers a glimpse into the challenges and aspirations of Indian women. The Russian audience, known for its appreciation of nuanced storytelling, has responded positively to the film's portrayal of universal themes such as identity, freedom, and societal expectations.

Kalki, another standout film screened on the second day, explores themes of mythology and modernity, blending them in a way that is both thought-provoking and visually stunning. The film's exploration of Indian mythology, set against the backdrop of modern societal issues, has intrigued Russian viewers. The film's ability to weave together the old and the new, the mythical and the real, resonates deeply with a culture that values its own rich historical and cultural heritage. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* at the Moscow International Films Week highlights the growing appeal of Indian cinema in Russia. These films, while rooted in Indian culture, address universal themes that resonate with audiences across the world. The Russian viewers have found a connection with the characters and their stories, appreciating the films for their depth, creativity, and the way they tackle complex social issues.

The Indian-themed week has also opened doors for cultural exchange, with discussions and workshops that allow Russian audiences to engage more deeply with Indian cinema. This exchange of ideas and cultural narratives fosters a deeper understanding between the two nations, reinforcing the importance of art in bridging cultural gaps.

As Indian films continue to gain popularity in Russia, the Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is likely to become a regular feature, showcasing the best of Indian cinema to Russian audiences. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* is not just a win for the filmmakers but also a testament to the universal appeal of Indian stories that, while deeply rooted in their own cultures, speak to the shared human experience. The Moscow International Films Week's Indian-themed week is more than just a showcase of films; it's a celebration of the cultural connections between India and Russia. The warm reception of films like *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* by the Russian audience is a reflection of the power of cinema to transcend borders and bring people together through the shared language of storytelling.



I DON'T SMOKE, DON'T DRINK MUCH, AND GO TO THE GYM FIVE TIMES A WEEK. I LIVE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE AND FEEL GREAT. I CAN RUN A MARATHON, YOU KNOW
—SARAH MICHELLE GELLAR



From leading corporate giants to shaping culinary excellence, PAWAN SONI'S journey is a celebration of passion and innovation in the food industry, says SAKSHI PRIYA

FROM CORPORATE SUCCESS TO CULINARY STARDOM A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF FOOD BLOGGING AND AWARDS

In the culinary world, where flavours tell stories and meals become cherished memories, Pawan Soni has forged an extraordinary path. A former Vice President at global giants like HSBC and GE Capital, Soni made a bold yet passionate shift from the corporate boardroom to the vibrant food scene. Driven by his love for discovering hidden gastronomic gems, he founded Indian Food Freak, a blog that has since grown into one of India's most influential food and travel platforms. His journey took a remarkable turn in 2014 when he launched The Big F Awards, a celebration of culinary excellence that has now become one of Delhi NCR's most prestigious events. Now entering its 11th year, The Big F Awards have distinguished themselves with an unwavering

commitment to transparency and integrity. Built on the principle of not imposing any financial burden on nominees, these awards have earned a reputation as a fair and respected platform for recognising excellence in the food industry. Over the past decade, they have become synonymous with culinary credibility, highlighting the region's finest dining establishments and championing new talents, including home chefs and bakers who bring fresh flavours and creativity to the table.

This year, The Big F Awards embark on an exciting new chapter by expanding their reach to encompass the entire Delhi-NCR region, reinforcing their vision of inclusivity and growth. This grand event will showcase a diverse array of culinary talent, with new categories that reflect the latest trends and celebrate the art of both dining out and home cooking. Attendees can look forward to an immersive experience where innovation, artistry, and passion are celebrated in a truly memorable way. At the heart of this celebration is a distinguished jury, featuring some of India's most renowned culinary experts, such as Chef Kunal Kapur, Chef Nita Mehta, Rocky Singh, and many others. These esteemed judges will rigorously evaluate each nominee, visiting the restaurants and sampling the dishes before casting their votes. This commitment to fairness ensures that the awards remain a beacon of trust and excellence in the food industry.

For Pawan Soni, The Big F Awards are more than just an event, they are a community and a platform for supporting genuine connections and inspiring culinary creativity. As he prepares for the upcoming awards in September, Soni envisions an evening that brings together the best of Delhi NCR's food scene, offering an opportunity to celebrate, connect and elevate the standards of culinary excellence. With a legacy of integrity and innovation, The Big F Awards continue to shine as a cornerstone of the region's vibrant food culture.

Founded in 2014, The Big F Awards have become a symbol of credibility and fairness, consistently upholding the highest standards in the industry. This year's edition promises to build on this legacy, with new surprises, new talents, and new stories to be told. Join Pawan Soni and his esteemed panel in this grand celebration of culinary brilliance, where the finest in food artistry come together to create an unforgettable experience.

A CONVERSATION WITH PAWAN SONI

Pawan Soni shares insights into his transition from corporate life to food blogging, the challenges he faced in

the early days and his commitment to transparency and excellence in The Big F Awards. He provides valuable perspectives on the growth of his blog, the influence of his corporate background and what to expect from this year's prestigious event.

You left a successful career as Vice President at MNCs like HSBC and GE Capital to follow your passion for food. What motivated this career shift, and how did your corporate experience shape your approach to food blogging and awards?

Back in our day, social media wasn't a thing. Like many, I followed the conventional route—completing an MBA and then diving into the corporate world. But food was my escape. Traveling the world, I discovered hidden culinary gems and started writing for newspapers and magazines. Eventually, I launched my own blog, Indian Food Freak. Before I knew it, my passion for food had grown into a full-blown career.

MY CORPORATE EXPERIENCE WAS THE YEAST THAT HELPED INDIAN FOOD FREAK RISE. THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN ORGANISING THE AWARDS WAS SECURING SPONSORS WHO BELIEVED IN THE VISION BUT DIDN'T INFLUENCE THE RESULTS.

In foodie terms, my corporate career was a recipe for success, but my love for food was the secret ingredient. I traded PowerPoint for paprika and now, I'm serving up a plate of purpose. Jokes aside, my corporate experience was invaluable. It taught me critical skills in sales, operations, and more, which I still use in my second career. Having worked with ethical companies, I've always prioritized transparency. Even after 11 years of running the food awards, I ensure there's no money exchange involved, whether for nominations, attending the awards or in any other aspect.

When you started Indian Food Freak food blogging was relatively new in India. How did you introduce the concept to an unfamiliar audience, and what strategies did you use to build your initial following?

Introducing food blogging to India was like adding a new spice to a traditional recipe—initially unfamiliar, but now indispensable. I focused on creating content that was relatable, authentic, and sprinkled

with humor. I remained honest and objective in all my reviews, even if it meant ruffling a few feathers among friends in the industry. By avoiding fancy jargon and staying true to my readers, I built trust and loyalty. My guiding principle has always been to write for my readers, not for the restaurants.

How did you address the skepticism or resistance from both the public and industry professionals during the early days of food blogging, especially when it was an emerging field?

Skeptics are like stale spices - they need to be replaced with fresh perspectives. I proved that food blogging wasn't just a flash in the pan by consistently delivering quality content and building a loyal community. Facebook played a significant role in this, as I created a space where food enthusiasts could exchange opinions and learn from each other.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in creating content for your blog in the early days, and how did you overcome issues related to resources, technology or audience engagement?

The early days were like cooking with limited ingredients—creativity was key. I tackled challenges by infusing my content with storytelling, leveraging social media, and engaging with my audience like a master chef. Content was never an issue because food is something we encounter daily. To improve the visual appeal, I invested in a DSLR. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Indian Food Freak has grown into one of the largest food and travel blogs in India. What were some of the initial challenges you encountered when starting your blog and organising The Big F Awards, and how did your corporate experience help you navigate these obstacles?

My corporate experience was the yeast that helped Indian Food Freak rise. The biggest challenge in organizing the awards was securing sponsors who believed in the vision but didn't influence the results. My sales and marketing skills were crucial here. Convincing people of the brand visibility that our awards could offer was key, and looking back, I'm proud to say that I delivered on those promises.

This year, The Big F Awards has expanded to cover the entire Delhi-NCR region. What motivated this expansion, and what new opportunities and challenges do you anticipate?

Expanding The Big F Awards to Delhi-NCR was like adding a new course to the menu—a natural progression. Since it takes nearly six months to organize the awards, with our jury visiting each restaurant to taste the food before

delivering a verdict, venturing into other cities wasn't feasible. However, Delhi-NCR should be treated as one city, with people frequently traveling for work and pleasure. Including Delhi has given us broader and, in some cases, better choices, helping foodies make informed decisions when they dine out.

The introduction of categories for home bakers and home chefs is a unique and thoughtful addition. What inspired these new categories, and how do they reflect current trends in the food industry?

Home bakers and home chefs are the new spice merchants—they're driving innovation and shaping trends. These categories reflect the democratisation of food and the rise of culinary entrepreneurship. I'm pleased to see that home chefs and bakers are now taken seriously. Not only have their businesses expanded, but many new ventures are focused solely on this segment, helping them grow by organising pop-ups at five-star hotels, developing apps for delivery, and introducing them to wider audiences.

Winning the Best Influencer Award by BBC Good Food in 2018 is a significant achievement. How did this recognition impact your career and the growth of Indian Food Freak and The Big F Awards?

We all seek acknowledgment and appreciation. Winning the award was a validation that I was on the right path. It boosted my morale and increased confidence in the products and content I deliver.

The Big F Awards are known for their transparency and integrity. How are you ensuring these values are upheld in this year's expanded edition, especially with the addition of new categories?

Transparency and integrity are the secret ingredients in The Big F Awards' recipe. We ensure fairness by using a robust judging process, clear criteria, and a commitment to accountability. From selecting the right jury to deliberating each result, we remain steadfast in our dedication to honesty and transparency.

As you prepare for the 11th edition of The Big F Awards, what are your personal goals for the event, and what do you hope attendees and participants will take away from this year's awards?

My personal goal for The Big F Awards is to foster a culinary community that's the icing on the cake. I hope attendees and participants leave inspired, with new connections and a renewed passion for the food industry. People don't mind losing as long as they know they lost to a worthy opponent. Our aim is to be fair and just while building camaraderie among all industry professionals.

PAWAN SONI
Food critic and founder of the Big F Awards



A TRIBUTE TO TRADITION

GURU SHOVANA NARAYAN'S 75 YEARS OF KATHAK MASTERY

Sharanyam, a heartfelt tribute to the legendary Guru SHOVANA NARAYAN on her 75th birthday, beautifully celebrated her extraordinary journey in Kathak. The evening was a touching tribute to her life's work, showcasing the profound impact she has had on the art form and her disciples, says SAKSHI PRIYA



Photo: Pankaj Kumar

In the world of Indian classical dance, few names resonate with as much reverence as Padmashri Guru Shovana Narayan. Her journey is not just a tribute to her unparalleled dedication to Kathak but a living legacy that has inspired generations. As she steps into her 75th year, the Asavari Centre for Kathak honoured this icon with an evening titled "Sharanyam," a celebration as vibrant and profound as Guruji herself. Padmashri Guru Shovana Narayan is a celebrated icon in Kathak, with a remarkable career spanning over six decades. Her innovative approach and deep understanding of Indian culture have redefined the art form. With prestigious awards like the Padma Shri and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, her influence extends beyond performance to visionary choreography, dedicated teaching, and cultural leadership. On this unforgettable evening, the Stein Auditorium at India Habitat Centre in New Delhi was transformed into a space of dance and devotion. The evening was not just an event; it was a vibrant expression of love, respect and admiration from her disciples worldwide. Each performance honoured not just Kathak but the essence of Guru Shovana Narayan - the artist, the mentor and the visionary. From the moment the lights dimmed and the

first note echoed through the auditorium, it was clear that this evening was extraordinary. The performance of "Taal Pancham Sawari" was a masterful display of rhythm and precision, perfectly embodying the discipline and expression that Guruji has always emphasised. Beyond the technical brilliance, it was the sheer emotion that captivated the audience. "Chaand" was not just a dance; it was a poetic journey that moved everyone present. Similarly, "Malika" seamlessly fused song and dance, creating a blend of beauty that felt almost otherworldly. One of the most memorable moments of the night was "Moonlight Impressionism," a performance that seemed to slow time itself. The dancers moved with such grace that the stage became a peaceful space, where the silence of moonlight was captured in every gesture and step. The soft strains of the piano added an extra layer of

elegance, making it feel as though the audience was witnessing a dream come to life. The evening was a reflection of the profound bond between Guruji and her disciples, a connection that was evident in every movement and gesture on stage. This wasn't just a series of performances; it was a living reflection of the relationships built through years of shared passion, dedication, and mutual respect. As the video presentation played, featuring heartfelt birthday messages from her students, the emotion in the auditorium was overwhelming. These messages were more than just words of



“ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS OF THE NIGHT WAS 'MOONLIGHT IMPRESSIONISM,' A PERFORMANCE THAT SEEMED TO SLOW TIME ITSELF. THE DANCERS MOVED WITH SUCH GRACE THAT THE STAGE BECAME A PEACEFUL SPACE, WHERE THE SILENCE OF MOONLIGHT WAS CAPTURED IN EVERY GESTURE AND STEP.”

admiration; they were living proof of the deep, enduring love and gratitude that have grown over the years - a love that extends far beyond the art of Kathak. As the evening drew to a close with the powerful performance of "Dhwani-Pratidhwani," the energy in the auditorium reached its zenith. The audience's applause was more than just appreciation; it was a collective outpouring of respect, love, and admiration for a woman who has devoted her life to the pursuit of art and the nurturing of others. In the words of Guruji's first disciple, Shruti Gupta Chandra, "Sharanyam is a small tribute from all of us who have learned so much from Shovana Didi - dance in its purest form and, with it, many life lessons. And the learning continues..." Guruji herself reflected on the evening with emotion, saying, "The air rebounded with the pure love and sublime devotion of all the disciples that touched every heart and left everyone emotional. The programme was meticulously planned and executed." As her disciples paid tribute through their performances, it was clear that Guru Shovana Narayan's influence extends far beyond the stage. She has touched lives, instilled values, and inspired a generation of dancers who carry forward her legacy with pride and reverence. For them, she is not just a guru; she is a mother, a confidante, and a guiding star. Guru Shovana Narayan represents both tradition and innovation. She embodies the continuity of creativity, demonstrating that art is not just about preserving the past but about creating a future rooted in tradition yet open to new possibilities. As we celebrate her 75th year, it's evident that Guru Shovana Narayan is much more than a dancer; she is a visionary whose life has been dedicated to Kathak. Her legacy extends beyond performances to the hearts of her students and the countless lives she has touched. She is not just a mentor and guide but an inspiring figure whose dedication continues to elevate the art form and inspire those who learn from her.

A CELEBRATION OF INDIA'S TIMELESS CRAFTSMANSHIP

Naayaab highlights India's rich craftsmanship through over 100 masterpieces by renowned artisans. This exhibition blends tradition with innovation, presenting a unique cultural celebration, writes SAKSHI PRIYA

Naayaab, a groundbreaking exhibition platform, is set to become a beacon of India's rich heritage, showcasing over 100 masterpieces by the nation's most celebrated artisans. Spanning three major cities New Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai. This exhibition is more than just an exhibition, it is a profound celebration of India's artistic legacy, bringing together over 40 traditional art forms under one roof.

A SHOWCASE OF INDIA'S ARTISTIC DIVERSITY

Naayaab's significance lies in its ability to bring together an extraordinary collection of art forms, each representing a unique aspect of India's cultural fabric. With works from over 70 master artists, including several Padma Shri and Shilp Guru awards, this exhibition is a rare opportunity to witness the pinnacle of Indian craftsmanship. The exhibition highlighted the exceptional craftsmanship of several renowned artisans. Sudarshan Sahoo captivated with his intricate stone carving while Jai Prakash Lakhiawal impressed with his detailed miniature paintings. Khaleel Ahmad showcased his exquisite kilim carpets and Bhuri Bai presented her vibrant Bhil art. Durga Bai Vyam contributed her intricate Gond paintings. The visionary leaders behind Naayaab were Ajay A Singh, Founder Director and Akansha Dixit, Founder & Chief Curator. One of the most captivating pieces is the Inlay Artistry Chest by



Rupan Matharu, a work that exemplifies the exhibition's ethos of blending tradition with modernity. Crafted from Indian rosewood using traditional Hoshiarpur inlay techniques, Matharu's chest replaces the historically used ivory or bone with acrylic, making it both environmentally conscious and a stunning piece of art. The intricate patterns and meticulous detailing make it a true testament to the mastery of Indian artisans. Another powerful piece is Durga Bai Vyam's Gond Painting "Climate in Crisis", which uses symbolic imagery to address the resilience of nature in the face of human activity. This painting not only showcases the intricate detailing typical of Gond art but also delivers a poignant message about environmental conservation. Jai Prakash Lakhiawal's Shrinathji in Tanjore and Miniature Fusion painting is another highlight, merging Tanjore and Pichwai styles

to create a resplendent depiction of the Hindu deity. The use of gold leaf and natural pigments elevates this piece to a new level of artistic brilliance. The Heritage Red Sozni Shawl by Bashir Ahmed Bhatt is a must-see for those interested in traditional Indian textiles. This exquisite shawl, with its intricate embroidery of 600 stitches per centimeter, took four years to complete and is a tribute to the time-honored skills of Kashmiri Sozni artisans.

MASTERPIECES OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Among the many remarkable pieces, Shiva Kumar's Tri Panel Mythic Tales stands out as a masterpiece of wood inlay and carving. Spanning six years in the making, this wooden set depicts narratives from the lives of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna across three panels, showcasing scenes like Sri Rama Pattabishekam,



Vishwaroopa and Krishna Leela. The craftsmanship is so intricate that concealed handles reveal a hidden third panel, an engineering feat in itself. The use of different woods and seashells for vibrant hues, along with hand-carved Yali motifs on the outer frame, make this artwork a true marvel. Another notable piece is Mukesh Kumar Soni's Maharaja Brooch Pendant, a stunning example of Meenakari on gold. Inspired by the regal bearing of Rajput personages, this pendant cum brooch combines uncut diamonds, baroque freshwater pearls, glass, spinels, and gold to create a piece that is both opulent and refined. The intricate designs on both sides, along

with the use of vibrant enamel colors, reflect the rich tradition of Meenakari, an art form passed down through generations since the Mughal era.

A PLATFORM FOR PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION

Naayaab is more than just an exhibition; it is a movement aimed at preserving and reviving India's traditional art forms. The long-term vision of making Naayaab an annual event, both in India and globally, is commendable. By doing so, the organizers hope to inspire the next generation of artisans and ensure that these invaluable skills continue to thrive. As an art enthusiast, witnessing Naayaab is both a privilege and a profound reminder of the richness of Indian heritage.



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

The exhibition not only showcases the exceptional talent of Indian artisans but also serves as a platform to elevate these crafts to the global stage, ensuring they are celebrated for generations to come. Naayaab is not just an exhibition, it is a celebration of India's artistic heritage, a platform for master artisans and a beacon of hope for the future of traditional crafts. In an age where digital and mass-produced art often takes center stage, Naayaab stands as a beautiful contradiction, a reminder of the beauty of handcrafted excellence and the importance of preserving cultural legacies. For collectors, connoisseurs and art lovers alike, Naayaab offers a rare opportunity to connect with the soul of Indian culture, to witness the legacy of its artistic heritage, and to support the artisans who dedicate their lives to preserving these traditions. It is an unmissable event that promises to leave a lasting impact on anyone

who values the intersection of history, culture and creativity. Naayaab is not just an exhibition but a profound celebration of India's rich artistic heritage. By bringing together over 100 masterpieces from acclaimed artisans across the country, it offers a unique platform that honors and revives traditional crafts. The intricate works displayed, from the innovative Inlay Artistry Chest to the evocative Gond Painting, illustrate the extraordinary skill and creativity of Indian artisans. This event is a tribute to the enduring significance of these art forms and serves as an inspiring reminder of the beauty that emerges when tradition meets innovation. Naayaab stands as a pivotal moment for both art lovers and cultural enthusiasts, marking a significant step in preserving and promoting India's invaluable artistic legacy.

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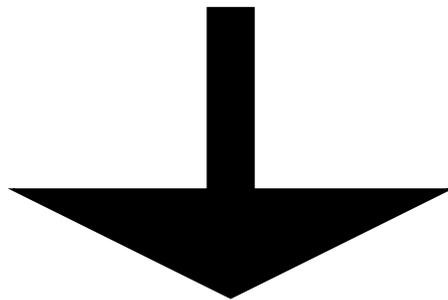
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