

Animals acquire genes from bacteria that can produce antibiotics

The Hindu Bureau

A group of small, freshwater animals protect themselves from infections using antibiotic recipes "stolen" from bacteria, according to a new study. The tiny creatures are called bdelloid rotifers, which means 'crawling wheel-animals'. They have a head, mouth, gut, muscles and nerves like other animals, though they are smaller than a hair's breadth.

When these rotifers are exposed to fungal infection, the study found, they switch on hundreds of genes that they acquired from bacteria and other microbes. Some of these genes produce resistance weapons, such as antibiotics and other antimicrobial agents, in the rotifers. The findings were published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

Prior research found that rotifers have been picking up DNA from their

surroundings for millions of years, but the new study is the first to discover them using these genes against diseases. No other animals are known to "steal" genes from microbes on such a large scale.

"These complex genes – some of which aren't found in any other animals – were acquired from bacteria but have undergone an evolution in rotifers," coauthor David Mark Welch, senior scientist and director of the Jose-

phine Bay Paul Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory says in a release. "This raises the potential that rotifers are producing novel antimicrobials that may be less toxic to animals, including humans, than those we develop from bacteria and fungi."

"When rotifers were challenged with a fungal pathogen, horizontally acquired genes were over twice as likely to be upregulated as other genes – a stronger enrichment than

observed for abiotic stressors," the authors write. "Among hundreds of upregulated genes, the most markedly overrepresented were clusters resembling bacterial polyketide and nonribosomal peptide synthetases that produce antibiotics. Upregulation of these clusters in a pathogen-resistant rotifer species was nearly ten times stronger than in a susceptible species."

Most of antibiotics are produced naturally by fun-

gi and bacteria in the wild, and humans can make artificial versions to use as medicine. The study suggests that rotifers might be doing something similar. The scientists think that rotifers could give important clues in the hunt for drugs to treat human infections caused by bacteria or fungi. One problem with developing new drugs is that many antibiotic chemicals made by bacteria and fungi are poisonous or have side effects in animals.

SNAPSHOTS



Rising antimalarial resistance in Africa needs urgent action

Artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs) have become the cornerstone of malaria treatment and control. However, the emergence and spread of artemisinin-resistance (ART-R) in malaria-causing *Plasmodium falciparum* parasites in eastern Africa has compromised the efficacy of these crucial treatments. To counter ART-R in Africa, researchers recommend using triple ACTs (TACTs), combining an artemisinin derivative with two partner drugs, which have proven effective in Asia.



Spitting cobra venom reveals a promising antivenom

By studying the molecular characteristics of venom from spitting cobras, scientists have discovered that approved drugs called heparinoids can shield against the venom's destructive effects on local tissue. The study in cells and mice suggests that heparinoids could potentially be developed into antidotes for cobra bites. These compounds also don't require refrigeration like most antibody-based antivenoms, making heparinoids useful in remote regions that lack medical infrastructure.



Pig lung transplants can survive sans immune suppression

Researchers have employed gene engineering tactics to boost the survivability of transplanted lungs in pigs while reducing the need for immune-suppressing drugs. The pigs survived for up to two years without immune suppression. Similar tactics could help to promote transplant survival or to wean patients off immune suppressing compounds. Organ rejection occurs when a transplanted organ triggers an intense reaction from the immune system.

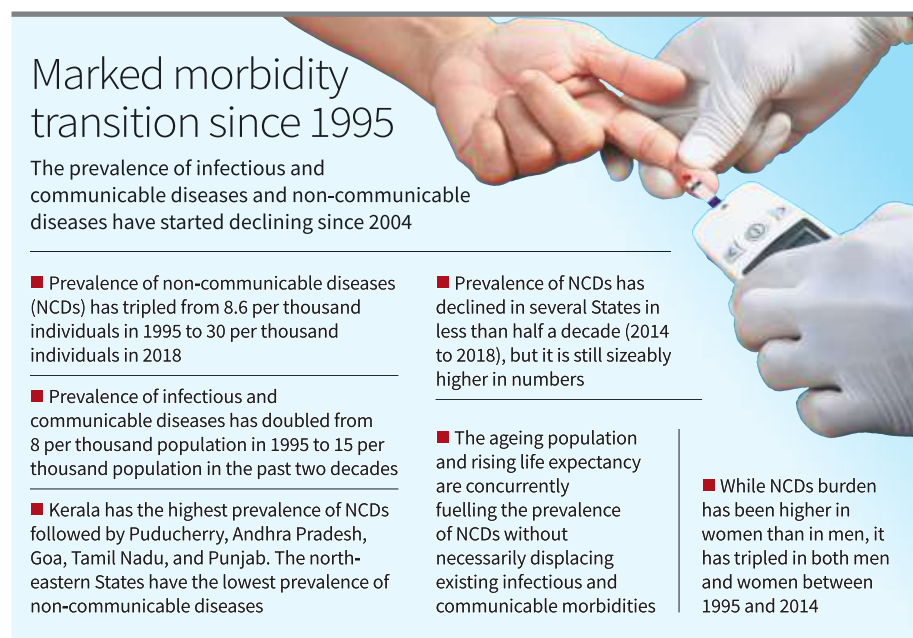
Prevalence of NCDs tripled, infectious diseases doubled

While the prevalence of all types of morbidities doubled from 56 per thousand population in 1995 to 106 per thousand population in 2014, it has dipped to 79 per thousand population in 2018

R. Prasad

A study published recently has looked at morbidity transition across States from 1995 to 2018. The study examines self-reported morbidities in India by relying on the 1995, 2004, 2014, and 2018 data of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). Large number of households were included in each survey – 120,942 households in 1995, 73,868 households in 2004, 65,932 households in 2014, and 113,823 households in 2018. Multiple kinds of diseases and disabilities were collected in each NSSO survey, and the self-reported morbidities were classified into four broad categories – infectious and communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, disability, and injury and other diseases. The study has been published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

There has been a steady upsurge in morbidity prevalence – doubling from 56 per thousand population in 1995 to 106 per thousand population in 2014. However, there has been a considerable decline in 2018 – 79 per thousand population. Compared with 1995, the reported morbidities risk transition significantly increased over successive decades – 1.81 times in 2004, 2.16 times in 2014, and 1.44 times in 2018. Across India, non-communicable diseases gained a prominent share in morbidity trends from 1995 to 2018, with Kerala reporting the highest rates followed by And-



hra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Punjab.

The study found that while the prevalence of all types of morbidities not only increased but actually doubled from 56 per thousand population in 1995 to 106 per thousand population in 2014 (and 95 per thousand population in 2004), there has been a sharp dip in 2018 when the morbidity dropped to 79 per thousand from 106 per thousand population in 2014. In the case of infectious and communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, disability except injury and other diseases the decline started in 2004.

With a prevalence of 30 per thousand population in 2018, non-communicable diseases account for a major share of prevalence; it has increased more than three times from 8.6 per thousand population in 1995. In the case of infectious and communicable

diseases, the prevalence has almost doubled from 8 to 15 per thousand population in the past two decades.

"Kerala consistently stands out with the highest reported morbidity rates, recording figures of 112 per 1,000 population in 1995, 266 per 1,000 population in 2004, 370 per 1,000 population in 2014, and 294 per 1,000 population in 2018. Other States like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Punjab, and others also exhibit noteworthy prevalence rates," the authors write. "Conversely, the northern and eastern states, particularly Manipur, exhibit the lowest prevalence of morbidity conditions. In 1995, Manipur reported a mere seven cases per 1,000 individuals, which increased to 28 per 1,000 individuals in 2004, 29 per 1,000 individuals in 2014, and declined to 19 per 1,000 individuals in 2018."

Kerala has reported the highest prevalence of non-communicable diseases – 118 per thousand individuals in 2004, 185 per thousand individuals in 2014, and 177 per thousand individuals in 2018, followed by Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab. The north-eastern States have reported the lowest prevalence of non-communicable diseases. For instance, Meghalaya reported just 1.7 per thousand individuals in 1995, two per thousand individuals in 2004, 1.4 per thousand individuals in 2014 and 0.2 per thousand individuals in 2018, followed by Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Bihar. "Prevalence of non-communicable diseases has declined in several States in less than half a decade (2014 to 2018), but it is still sizeably higher in numbers," they note.

"As India undergoes concurrent demographic and epidemiological transitions, our study aligns with this dynamic shift. Notably, it highlights significant disparities in reporting morbidity burdens across different States from 1995 to 2018," says Mahadev Bramhankar, a PhD scholar from the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai and the corresponding author of the paper.

"These variations are attributed to distinct demographic, social, and economic determinants characterising each State, contributing to the nuanced landscape of health challenges across the nation."

Morbidity context

Many studies have discussed the epidemiological transition based on various aspects using demographic and morbidity data in India in the recent past. "But our study contributes additional insights by extending beyond a national perspective and conducting a meticulous analysis at the State level and determinants, especially in morbidity context," Bramhankar says.

"The ageing population and rising life expectancy are concurrently fuelling the prevalence of non-communicable diseases without necessarily displacing existing infectious and communicable morbidities. Among all the morbidities over the period of disease transition from 1995 to 2018, non-communicable diseases are most predominantly gaining share," he says.

Rise and shine: morning sunlight and your wellbeing



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

We humans are affected by the cycle of light and darkness that occurs every day. Our bodies have a 24-hour (circadian) rhythm that is translated into physiological processes such as hormone secretion, which in turn drive our actions. To stay in synchrony with the environment, and therefore to perform the right activities at the right time, light serves as an alarm clock. This light synchronisation, photoentrainment, happens in the brain by light signals coming from the eye.

Many other species also depend on light to provide them with cues for their

daily routine. When these light patterns are disrupted, their natural rhythms and behaviours can be affected. An example: tourism operators in the Maldives take boatloads of visitors out at night, and shine bright lights of about 4000 watts on the ocean surface. Biological activity in the water picks up as if it is morning, and tourists get to see whale sharks.

Our vision is enabled by the rods and cones, which are photoreceptor cells in the outer retina. The rods are very sensitive to light but are not colour sensitive and so are most useful in dim light; the cones work best in bright light, giving us colour vision. Rods and cones convert photons of light into electrical signals, which are passed on to retinal ganglion cells. These cells process information from the retina and pass it



A pattern of earlier sleep timing is associated with a lowered risk of major depressive disorder. FILE PHOTO

on to the brain.

Photosensitive cells

About 20 years ago, a new class of cells that could perceive light was found in the inner retina. Called the intrinsically photosensitive retinal ganglion cells (ipRGC), these cells contain a photopigment, melanopsin, that allows them to directly respond to light.

These cells have very important roles in our body's interaction with light that are not related to seeing.

Electrical impulses from the ipRGC travel to areas of the brain that are involved in sleep, alertness and mood regulation. Signals also project to the area of the brain that controls the pupils of the eyes, causing them to constrict in res-

ponse to bright light.

Importantly, electrical signals travel to a part of the hypothalamus that regulates circadian rhythms. This part of the brain has long been known to be the master clock, where your body's internal clock is synchronised with the light-dark cycle in the outside world that is driven by the sun.

Morning birds

Morning diurnal preference is the classification for people who prefer early sleep and who rise early. Peak performance is earlier in the day, and the condition is associated with a reduced risk of obesity as well as better academic performance. Several studies have also shown that a pattern of earlier sleep timing is associated with a lowered risk of major depressive

(Scientific Reports, 12003, 2021).

Stanford neurobiology professor Andrew Huberman, in his popular podcast has pointed to the beneficial effects of low-angle light from the morning sun in resetting the circadian clock. ipRGC cells are most responsive to blue light (480 nm). The morning light has a low ratio of blue to yellow light, just enough to send a message to the hypothalamus marking the start of another circadian cycle. Sixteen hours later, your body is going to be sleepy. So go out and be in the morning light – sunny or cloudy, but don't stare at the sun! Synchronising your clock will improve your health – physical and mental.

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



Question Corner

Zika infection

Does prenatal Zika infection have long-term immune consequences in children?

A new study has found that maternal Zika virus infections can reprogramme foetal immune development, leading to long-term consequences in children's immunity. These changes even occur in children born without the physical characteristics associated with congenital Zika syndrome – suggesting that the 95% of babies born of Zika-infected pregnancies who did not exhibit symptoms may have been affected by the virus with long-term immunological

repercussions. The study used blood samples from newborn and two-year-old children whose mothers were infected by Zika virus during pregnancy. Immune analysis revealed highly elevated levels of inflammation, even two years after the Zika virus infection was cleared. The children's immune systems favored producing one type of T-cell over another, altering their responses to childhood vaccines. These changes left them likely vulnerable to future infections including diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

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

What are the rules for IAS probationers?

Who conducts the examination? Who is responsible for checking details supplied by candidates?

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:

On July 19, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) said it has registered a criminal case against Puja Khedkar, a 2022 batch Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer on probation, and issued a show cause notice cancelling her candidature from the Civil Services Examination-2022. It said she had fraudulently availed attempts beyond the permissible limit under the examination rules by faking her identity by changing her name, her father's and mother's name, photograph and signature, email ID, mobile number and address.

How did things come to a head?

Earlier in July, Ms. Khedkar was transferred from Pune to Washim in Maharashtra following complaints of misuse of power by a senior officer. Ms. Khedkar, posted as Assistant Collector in Pune, allegedly demanded special privileges such as a separate office, house, car, and staff which she was not entitled to. Soon it transpired that the trainee officer, daughter of a retired bureaucrat who also contested the 2024 parliamentary elections from Ahmednagar, allegedly submitted fake disability and Other Backward Class (OBC) certificates to clear the civil services exam. Following the controversy, on July 11, the Department of Personnel and

A person is appointed on probation in order to assess his suitability for absorption in the Service to which he has been appointed. Probation should not, therefore, be treated as a mere formality'

Training (DOPT) constituted a single-member committee, chaired by a senior officer of the rank of Additional Secretary, to verify the candidature claims and other details of Ms. Khedkar.

The committee will submit its report within two weeks. In an order in 2023, the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) said though Ms. Khedkar had successfully cleared the examinations, she skipped six medical examinations to prove her disability before a medical board at AIIMS, Delhi, adding that "her candidature is liable to be cancelled."

The CAT order was in response to a petition filed by Ms. Khedkar in 2021 seeking relaxation of the number of attempts by Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD). Despite the ruling, she was inducted in the services after she reappeared for the exams in 2022 and with a rank of 821 got PwBD reservation benefits under a different category – "visually impaired and hearing loss." In the previous instance, she had applied under the "visual impairment and mental illness" category. Significantly, the DOPT was a respondent in the 2021 petition. By forging her identity, name etc., Ms. Khedkar appeared for the civil services examination 12 times. General category candidates are allowed six attempts till they attain 32 years of age. Those availing OBC and PwBD reservation are allowed nine attempts till the age of 35 and 42 years respectively. Candidates belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are allowed unlimited attempts till 37 years of age.

How are documents scrutinised?

The UPSC conducts examinations and interviews on behalf of the Union Government after which candidates are recommended for appointment by the commission to various Services. At the examination stage, candidates have to submit documents supporting their claims for reservation under various categories – SC, ST, OBCs, Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and PwBD. The first phase of scrutiny is done by the UPSC, which only goes by the documents submitted by the candidates. After the personal interview, all candidates are sent for a medical check-up at government hospitals endorsed by the commission. PwBD candidates have to appear before a medical board at AIIMS, Delhi to determine the level of disability. The files are then sent to the DOPT, which accords the Service after accommodating various quotas.

What is the probation period?

The probation period typically lasts two years, but it may be extended for a maximum of four years if the candidate needs improvement or has been unable to clear the examinations at the training academy. According to DOPT, "A person is appointed on probation in order to assess his suitability for absorption in the Service to which he has been appointed. Probation should not, therefore, be treated as a mere formality."

What disciplinary action can be taken?

A probationer is discharged from service. The discharge can be on account of failure to clear the examinations at the training academy or "if the Central Government is satisfied that the probationer was ineligible for recruitment to the Service or is unsuitable for being a member of the Service." The discharge can also be ordered if in the opinion of the Central Government he/she has wilfully neglected his probationary duties or is found lacking in qualities of mind and character needed for the Service.

What is the gender gap in education?

What do figures from the Unified District Information System for Education and the All India Survey on Higher Education indicate? Are girls more likely to complete secondary education when they have access to it? What needs to be done to ensure girls, and boys, don't drop out?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The World Economic Forum (WEF) report of 2024 on global gender gaps recently ranked India at 129 out of 146 economies, with a decline in the education sector being one of the reasons for India's rank slipping a couple of places this year.

Where does the gap lie?

According to the WEF's June report, updated figures in educational attainment indicators have caused India's gender parity levels to dip from the previous year. "While the shares of women are high in primary, secondary and tertiary education enrolments, they have only been modestly increasing, and the gap between men and women's literacy rate is 17.2 percentage points wide, leaving India ranked 124th on this indicator," the 18th edition of the report said, recording a score of 0.964 in the education category. In the 17th edition, published in 2023, however, India had attained a perfect 1.000 score in terms of educational parity, ranking 26th in that category. The main indicators being tracked are enrolment levels in primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as the adult literacy rate.

Asked about India's regression from the perfect score, WEF's Insight and Data Lead Ricky Li said that source data for Educational Attainment indicators is collected by UNESCO, whose figures are subject to data updates on a periodic basis. "In the 18th edition of the Index, the values used in the computation of India's Educational Attainment gender parity score correspond to [the] 2022 and 2023 periods. The 17th edition included data from 2018, 2021, and

Several States have closed the gender gap in higher classes; there are worries about boys dropping out before completing school

2022," he told *The Hindu*. "An important aspect of the data to consider when interpreting the gender parity is the corresponding period, as a seemingly significant change in score could be reflecting an update in the values corresponding to the indicator," he added.

What do Indian statistics show?

The Union Education Ministry tracks school and college enrolment data using two major collection systems: the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). The UDISE+ report for 2021-22 shows that 13.79 crore boys were enrolled in school, in comparison to 12.73 crore girls, meaning that girls make up 48% of the school population. However, this varies at the different stages of school education. In preschool or kindergarten, girls make up 46.8% of enrolled children. By primary school (Classes 1 to 5), this rises to 47.8%, improving still further in upper primary or elementary school (Classes 6 to 8), when girls make up 48.3% of enrolled children. Clearly, some girls drop out of school at that stage, when the right to free education ends after Class 8. The gender gap widens in secondary school (Class 9 and 10), with girls dropping to 47.9% of enrolled children.

However, girls who do have access to secondary education are more likely to stick to the finish: the higher secondary level (Class 11 and 12) has the lowest gender gap of 48.3%.

That trend continues into higher education, according to the AISHE report for 2021-22. In that year, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for women in higher education – meaning the percentage of the population between 18 and 23 years enrolled in colleges and universities – across the country was 28.5, slightly higher than the male GER of 28.3. Female enrolment in higher education has seen a 32% increase since 2014-15. Neither the UDISE+ nor AISHE have yet published data for 2022-23.

What is the impact of a slew of packages to incentivise girls to get an education?

The biggest impact has come from simply building more schools. If a primary school exists within one or two kilometres of a child's home, parents are more likely to enrol their children, especially girls. "There has been enormous growth in the number of schools, especially since the mid-90s, which is when you also saw a spike in the enrolment of girls nationwide," says Vimala Ramachandran, a former Professor at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration and the first national director for Mahila Samakhya, a flagship Central

government programme on education for rural girls and women. She notes regional differences, pointing out that in Gujarat, where the government built few secondary and higher secondary schools, leaving these largely to the private sector, girls make up only 45.2% of students in secondary classes, far behind much poorer States like Jharkhand (50.7%), Chhattisgarh (51.2%), Bihar (50.1%) and even Uttar Pradesh (45.4%).

Another important factor is the presence of women teachers. An adviser on child rights to a State government which has made progress in enrolment says the areas with low enrolment are mostly those with primary schools employing only one or two teachers. "If a school has only a male teacher, parents are not comfortable sending their daughters there," he said.

Transport to and from school can also be a barrier, and free bus passes for schoolgirls in States like Haryana, Punjab and Tamil Nadu, as well as schemes to give free cycles to girls in Bihar and other States have improved enrolment, though it did not work as well in Rajasthan. Sanitation issues remain a major obstacle for girls education in higher classes, especially after puberty, and may cause a large number of dropouts after Class 8. Though the Union and State governments have funded the construction of washrooms in schools, there is no funding for cleaning and maintenance, which is often left to lax local bodies.

What is the next challenge?

A number of States have successfully closed the gender gap in higher classes, to the extent that there are worries about boys dropping out before completing school. In West Bengal for instance, girls make up 55.7% of higher secondary students, and there are similar situations in Chhattisgarh (53.1%) and Tamil Nadu (51.2%). The State government adviser notes that this could partly be attributed to the Right to Education Act stipulating that students cannot be failed till Class 8. "Girls who make it to Class 9 are usually interested in studying, but some boys who make it to the secondary level and then fail simply drop out. There may also be higher pressure on poorer boys to earn a living," he says, warning that boys must not be allowed to slip through the cracks.

At the college level, although the female GER is higher than the male GER, the picture changes when looking at regional and discipline-wise data. For instance, women students make up only 42.5% of those enrolled in STEM subjects from undergraduate to Ph.D levels, and the challenge lies in encouraging more girls to opt for these disciplines. Adult literacy is also still a matter of concern, with only 64.63% of women who are literate, in comparison to 80.88% of men, according to the last Census data from 2011. This calls for steps to improve foundational literacy in schools as well as to take education to rural women to close the gender gap.



Moving up: Girl students with their bicycles in Mandya in 2018. FILE PHOTO

Will local job quotas pass the legal test?

What does the Constitution say? Why is the constitutionality of the Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, being doubted? What is the status of similar laws in other States such as Haryana?

K. Venkataramanan

The story so far:

The Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, which aims to provide reservation for Kannadigas in the private sector in the State, has been put on hold after severe backlash from business leaders and industry representatives. The Bill was cleared by the Cabinet, but is yet to be introduced in the Assembly. The government has promised wider consultations with stakeholders before it takes the next step. The legality and constitutionality of such quotas for local candidates, however, are in doubt, as similar steps elsewhere have run into legal impediments.

What does the Bill propose?

The Bill made it a rule that any factory, industry or establishment must appoint local candidates to 50% of its managerial category and 70% of its non-managerial category.

'Local candidate' is defined as anyone born in Karnataka, domiciled for at least 15 years in the State, and who can read, write and speak Kannada. Candidates not possessing a secondary school certificate with Kannada as a

Business and industry feel such reservations will drive out companies from Karnataka

language must pass a Kannada proficiency test prescribed by a nodal agency.

Where qualified or suitable candidates are not available, the Bill gives three years to the establishments to train and engage local candidates. They may also apply to the government for relaxation of norms, but the relaxation cannot be less than 25% for management category and 50% for non-management category.

Why is industry opposed to it?

Business and industry responded with alarm on hearing of the features of the proposed Bill. They felt that such measures would drive out companies from the State and impact foreign investment. NASSCOM, the national lobbying body of the software industry, said it was deeply disturbing. The Bill, it felt, would "hamper the growth of the industry, impact jobs and the global brand for the State". Many expressed concern over the impact of such measures on Karnataka's leading position in technology and described it as regressive and short-sighted.

What about similar laws in other States?

Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Jharkhand are among the States that have tried to bring in legislation to mandate reservation for domiciles or local residents in the government or private sector. The Andhra Pradesh Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries/Factories Act, 2019, sought to introduce 75% reservation for local people in any industry, factory, joint venture or project taken up in the public-private partnership mode. It also gave a three-year period for training and engaging local candidates, if suitable candidates were not available. The Act has been challenged in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, but the government itself has not been zealously implementing its provisions so far.

The Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Act, 2020, was struck down by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, and the matter is now before the Supreme Court. It provided for 75% reservation in the private sector for jobs that entailed a salary of up to ₹30,000 a month. It also came with a sunset clause that said it

would lapse after 10 years. The court held that the law violates fundamental rights and that it is beyond the State Assembly's purview to legislate on the issue. It said such enactments would result in States putting up "artificial walls" throughout the country.

The Jharkhand Definition of Local Persons and for Extending the Consequential Social, Cultural and Other Benefits to such Local Persons Bill was passed in 2022. Jharkhand Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan returned the Bill with comments to the effect that providing for 100% reservation for locals in Class III and Class IV employment opportunities may be unconstitutional. The Hemant Soren government, however, got it re-enacted in the Assembly in December 2023.

What are the constitutional issues that arise?

In broad terms, these issues arise from the absence of any provision in the Constitution for private sector job reservation, the absence of legislative power in State Assemblies to prescribe residential criteria for employment, the constitutional guarantee of freedom from discrimination on grounds of place of birth or residence and the fundamental right to practise any profession, or carry on any occupation, trade or business.

Article 16 lays down that there shall be equality of opportunity in public employment. It prohibits discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence with respect to any employment or office under the state.

Article 16(3) allows Parliament to make any law prescribing a requirement as to residence within a State or Union Territory prior to employment or appointment to a public office in that State or Union Territory. Article 35(a) says Parliament alone, and not any State legislature, will have the power to enact such a law as to a residential requirement.

Another constitutional issue is the effect local quotas have on the freedom of movement of citizens throughout the territory of India, guaranteed by Article 19(1)(d). Any curbs on people belonging to one State to seek employment in another will inevitably impinge on their right to reside and settle in another State, enshrined in Article 19(1)(e).

As far as individuals are concerned, the restriction on hiring people of their choice may violate their right under Article 19(1)(g) to carry on any occupation, trade or business.



At an impasse: Karnataka Chief Minister Siddharamaiah speaks at a press conference in Belagavi. P. K. BADIGER

PROFILES

Trump's heir apparent

J.D. Vance

The 39-year-old Republican candidate for U.S. Vice President, hailing from a working class family in America's Rust Belt, has emerged as an ideologue and champion of Donald Trump's right-wing nationalist movement

Varghese K. George

Millions have lived the life of precarity that J.D. Vance was born into in 1984 but rarely has the story of hillbillies – a pejorative reference to unsophisticated rural white population – been told like he did in his memoir published when he was all of 31, in 2016.

Mr. Vance, now the Republican candidate for U.S. Vice President, “grew up poor, in the ‘Rust Belt’, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope,” he recounts in *Hillbilly Elegy*, a book that Barack Obama would recommend to understand the social upheaval in the U.S. by 2016, which was partly the result of his own ascent to the highest office in the country. Hillbillies were earlier labourers, sharecroppers, coalminers, and factory workers in later decades. “Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family,” Mr. Vance writes.

They were once the backbone of U.S. manufacturing and largely supported the Democratic Party. As finance and technology sectors in New York and California, respectively, became the two poles of the U.S. strategy and economy, the factories in the Midwest, comprising States such as Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, shuttered and rusted; and the people there fell into despair and addiction.

Their link to the national life of America was increasingly limited to enlisting as soldiers for global wars that they grew to detest. In the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, their plight found a voice in national politics as Donald J. Trump and Bernie Sanders questioned the shared orthodoxy in the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively, on trade and war. Mr. Trump could turn the white working class grievance into anger and win the Presidency, but he barely knew the life of the dispossessed Americans that he was claiming to represent.

Mr. Vance lived all parts of that life, and managed to climb the pinnacle of elite education in the U.S., graduating

from the Yale Law School in 2013. From 2003 to 2007, he served in the U.S. Marines, of which six months were in Iraq, in a war which he considers needless. Earlier in his life, Mr. Vance barely managed to avoid the fall into the abyss of addiction that surrounded him. Even today, on and off, he gets a call announcing the death due to overdosing of someone he knew.

Mr. Vance credits his survival to his tough grandmother – ‘mamaw’ as he called her – and his growth to a strong Christian inspiration. He could not “squander God-given talent,” and hence “had to work hard”. “I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it. I needed to forgive, not just for my mother’s sake but for my own. I should never despair, for God had a plan,” he writes. His life is about what he escaped, as much as what he made of it – a remarkable one that fits into the stereotype of American Dream. He is white America’s answer to Barack Obama. He resented Mr. Obama and was inspired by him. He “gave me hope that a boy who grew up like me could still achieve the most important of my dreams,” Mr. Vance wrote in 2016. Mr. Vance’s portrayal of his life as a member of the rural hill people and the working class has been questioned by various scholars and from different perspectives – which in progressive lexicon could be termed gaslighting. His book sold three million copies and was turned into a film. In the book and interviews, Mr. Vance comes across as a deeply reflective person, who honestly confronts the decadence, anger, frustration, and alienation, in his community and even himself, without judgement or bitterness.

Grandmother’s influence

Mr. Vance’s single mother had many love interests, and her addiction led him going into the care of his grandmother – a tough woman who read her Bible and feared her God, generally despised the church, liberally used the F word, and loved her guns. The grandmother was born in Jackson, Kentucky, and the family moved to Ohio for work. Young Vance



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

would accompany mamaw during her visits to Kentucky. He still owns a cemetery plot in Kentucky where five generations of his ancestors were laid to rest, and that hillside is what Mr. Vance calls home. “I and Usha (his wife who is of Indian-origin) will be laid to rest by our children in that same place,” he said, accepting the Republican nomination.

“America is not merely an idea, though it is founded on strong ideas. It is home for us. Nobody fights for an abstract idea. But everyone fights for their home,” Mr. Vance, now a strong champion of American nationalism,

told the Republican convention in Milwaukee in Wisconsin. Wisconsin, Ohio, Detroit and Pennsylvania, where Mr. Trump was nearly killed by an assassin on July 13, are key swing States that determined the outcomes of the 2016 and 2020 presidential contests by narrow margins. With Mr. Vance on his side, Mr. Trump hopes to turn it all his side this time around. “You are going to enjoy this ride,” Mr. Trump addressed Mr. Vance in his closing speech at the Convention.

Mr. Vance’s current political positions might be rooted in the life that he remembers. His grandmother

had 19 loaded guns in her home when she died in 2005, one within reach wherever she stood. “That’s the American spirit,” Mr. Vance said in his acceptance speech. In her youth, the grandmother shot and nearly killed a thief who tried to steal a cow – a prized possession of the family. “There is nothing lower than the poor stealing from the poor,” she would tell Mr. Vance later.

Against illegal immigration

Mr. Vance argues that illegal immigrants are threatening the lives and livelihoods of the poorest Americans. He argues that new entrants into the community should be admitted on the terms of the current members – like the parents of Usha who immigrated from India. Mr. Vance is an opponent of abortion, and he will be questioned on this issue by the Democrats who hope to make it a key campaign issue. The VP candidate is a critic of U.S. aid to Ukraine, and aid in general though he strongly supports aid to Israel. He thinks the U.S. strategy should focus on Asia and China, and bother less about Europe and Russia.

The white world of Vance was very distant from the world of ‘white privilege’ that is often skewered in diversity discourses. Mr. Vance’s initiation into high society routed through Yale and was aided by Usha.

As the story goes, elite law firms would test the social skills of candidates before making an offer, often at a dinner setting. Mr. Vance, for the first time in life, had to make choices about wines, and figure out what to do with multiple spoons, knives and forks on the table. In panic, he ran to the restroom and called Usha – his “spirit guide.”

Mr. Vance landed the job, and now, he connects the world of wealth and privilege with that of the countryside. He counts Peter Thiel and Eric Schmidt among his backers. Mr. Vance believes communities cannot be rejuvenated by financial support alone, but they need leadership and organisation. Regardless of the election outcome, J.D. Vance is set to be a central figure in U.S. politics in the coming decade.

THE GIST

Vance’s single mother’s addiction problem led him into the care of his grandmother – a tough woman who read her Bible and feared her God

Vance lived all parts of a tough life, and managed to climb the pinnacle of elite education in the U.S., graduating from the Yale Law School in 2013

He is a critic of U.S. aid to Ukraine, and aid in general though he strongly supports aid to Israel; he thinks the U.S. strategy should focus on Asia and China, and bother less about Europe and Russia

A digital storm

CrowdStrike

The U.S.-based company says a defect found in a content update of Falcon, its security platform, was what caused the global digital outage

Sahana Venugopal

“Yesterday, CrowdStrike released an update that began impacting IT systems globally. We are aware of this issue and are working closely with CrowdStrike and across the industry to provide customers technical guidance and support to safely bring their systems back online,” posted Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella on X on July 19.

The statement did not capture the hours of global chaos, fear, and frustration that preceded his words. That day, airports in India switched to giving stranded flyers hand-written boarding passes while airlines in the U.S. grounded flights. Shoppers in Australia could not carry out digital payments and U.K. hospitals had to cancel patient appointments. The outage also affected thousands of everyday users who rely on Windows or other Microsoft offerings.

The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, CERT-In, issued a severity rating of ‘Critical’ for the incident. In the U.S., the White House said President Joe Biden was briefed about the situation.

At the centre of this digital mayhem was CrowdStrike, a U.S.-based cybersecurity company. Its CEO George Kurtz announced



later a defect was found in a Falcon content update for Windows hosts, meaning Mac and Linux hosts were not affected during the outage. Falcon is CrowdStrike’s security platform. The company “quickly identified the issue and deployed a fix”.

Outage to outrage

The CrowdStrike CEO stressed that the incident was not a cyberattack as many had feared, though he warned that “adversaries and bad actors” could still try to exploit the incident.

While most might think of scammers impersonating CrowdStrike company officials, the incident was instead exploited for political gain. Users on X quickly found CrowdStrike’s pro-diversity messaging and its recent posts celebrating the LGBTQ+ community. Many replied with homophobic and racist comments, blaming the IT outage on the company’s DEI (Diversity, equity, and in-

clusion) policies. Some users also posted anti-Semitic abuse targeting Mr. Kurtz.

Founded in 2011 by Mr. Kurtz, Dmitri Alperovitch, and Gregg Marston, the company is based in Austin, Texas, and provides cybersecurity solutions across areas such as generative AI workflows, data protection, endpoint security, threat intelligence, real-life simulation exercises, and cloud security. Mr. Kurtz has held significant positions at McAfee.

On June 24, CrowdStrike said it will be added to the S&P 500 Index. The company has around 8,000 employees and operations in over 170 countries. CrowdStrike has worked with Intel, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Target, Amazon, Google, and the U.S. government.

In May, CrowdStrike announced the launch of its Falcon for Defender offering, supporting Microsoft’s Defender deployments, so that it could hunt the threats missed by Micro-

soft’s own security solution.

“CrowdStrike’s proven AI-powered detections, enriched with industry-leading threat intelligence, identifies the threats that Microsoft Defender misses,” said CrowdStrike at the time, noting that Falcon for Defender would deploy without reboots and would run “silently” along with Microsoft.

Despite the partnership, CrowdStrike markets itself aggressively and does not shy away from pitting itself against rivals – including Microsoft. On the company’s website, CrowdStrike says, “Microsoft’s security products can’t even protect Microsoft. How can they protect you?”

On July 19, CrowdStrike shares fell by more than 10%, but the company is still up by 100% compared to this time last year. For the quarter ending April 30, 2024, it announced a total revenue of around \$921 million.

On the CrowdStrike website, Mr. Kurtz apologised to customers and partners, but only after users criticised the absence of a public apology during the early hours of the outage.

Others question whether too many critical companies, sensitive organisations, and governments are delegating their security and operational needs to too few providers.

Spring of the patriarch

Paul Kagame

The Rwandan leader, known for both his economic modernisation drive and repressive policies at home, won a fourth term in power with ‘99%’ votes

Priyali Prakash

Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, won his fourth term as the leader of the country with more than 99% votes last week. The outcome of the election was never in doubt. Mr. Kagame, 66, beat his own previous record of 98.79% votes, which he polled seven years ago, to continue his three-decades long rule of Rwanda.

“The results that have been presented indicate a very high score, these are not just figures, even if it was 100%, these are not just numbers. These figures show trust, and that is what is most important,” he said after the election.

Even though Mr. Kagame became the President of Rwanda in 2000, he was the country’s de facto leader since 1994, as its Vice President and Defence Minister. Mr. Kagame is widely recognised for ending a genocide in Rwanda in 1994, in which around 8,00,000 people were killed by government-backed extremists.

Rwanda was already in the clutches of a civil war when a plane carrying the then-President, Juvénal Habyarimana, was shot down over capital Kigali in 1994.

Habyarimana belonged to the majority Hutu community, and Tutsi rebels were blamed for killing



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

him. Hutu extremists killed Tutsis across the country for months.

After months of violence, Mr. Kagame’s Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which was founded in 1988 in Uganda, played a key role in ending the genocide.

Economic development

As the de facto leader since 1994, Mr. Kagame has championed economic development in Rwanda. One of the areas where the East African country has made remarkable progress under Mr. Kagame is the healthcare sector. Mr. Kagame is often credited for improving the standards of the country’s medical sector. His administration has emphasised building community-based healthcare services to reduce the “walking time” to the nearest health centres. The walk that previously took an average of 95 minutes was reduced to 47 minutes in 2020, the World Health Organisation noted.

Mr. Kagame also oversaw faster economic growth. Rwanda’s economy grew by 7.6% in the first three quarters of 2023, according to the World Bank, even though efforts towards poverty reduction had mixed results.

Through the Rwanda Education Quality Improvement Programme, the Kagame regime aims to improve learning among students. “The future of billions of children and young people across the world depends on overcoming the challenges of inclusion and quality of instruction, particularly as we recover from the pandemic,” Mr. Kagame said at the 77th UN General Assembly in 2022. Focal points of his government’s educational initiatives include digital literacy for all by 2035, and for Rwanda to become a high-income country by 2050.

The focus on economic development is only one side of the story. Critics accuse Mr. Kagame of being a

ruthless dictator. In 2015, Rwanda amended its Constitution to allow Mr. Kagame to extend his rule by a seven-year term that started in 2017, followed by two more five-year terms.

A major blot on Mr. Kagame’s term was the blame for the death of Patrick Karegeya, who was Rwanda’s former chief of external intelligence. He was found dead in a hotel room in Johannesburg on January 1, 2014. He had fled to South Africa in 2008 after falling out of favour with Mr. Kagame’s regime and had helped found the Rwanda National Congress, an opposition group in exile.

Reporters Without Borders calls Mr. Kagame a “predator” and says that even three decades after the genocide ended, “censorship continues, and self-censorship has become the rule, for those who want to avoid becoming government targets”.

Mr. Kagame’s alleged autocratic policies, however, do not take away from his seemingly positive imagery at international platforms. He is the current chairperson of the Commonwealth. He headed the African Union from 2018 to 2019, and the East African Community from 2018 to 2021. Rwanda also has significant female representation in Parliament, with 61.3% women in the Chamber of Deputies and 37.4% in the Senate.



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

The morality of reading, or not reading, Alice Munro

A specific social process of modernity liberates scientific knowledge from the constraints of morality. But art does not have this easy way out

Stories are essential for our existence. We read stories because they matter to us in our everyday lives. They influence us, give us joy, evoke sadness, and exemplify courage. Among all other forms of art, it is stories that make us realise that we are part of the world of others; they are also a way of bringing others into our lives. I begin with these thoughts as a response to the controversy surrounding Alice Munro, the celebrated Canadian Nobel Prize winner in literature. Her daughter, Andrea Skinner, wrote an essay in the *Toronto Star* a few weeks ago, about the fact that she was sexually abused as a child by her stepfather. This abuse was known to her mother who aligned with the man against her daughter. The revelation about the abuse was not a secret, as Skinner had filed a police complaint in 2004, following which her stepfather was given a suspended sentence. Munro was awarded the Nobel in 2013. Apparently, this episode did not affect the decision of the Nobel committee.

Skinner's article has led to a churning in the academic as well as the literary world. Should Munro be taught in class? Should we read her books now? Do her stories represent the attitude that made her behave in this reprehensible manner with regard to

her daughter? Should we show our solidarity with feminists and survivors of sexual abuse by censoring her work in our classes, or expunge it completely as a form of post-humous censure?

A line from Skinner's essay is illustrative. She writes that after she told her mother of the abuse, her mother was not supportive of her. Munro had written a story with a similar plot line of a girl being abused by an adult. Skinner points out that "in spite of her sympathy for a fictional character, my mother had no similar feelings for me."

This comment captures an important facet of writing fiction. Good writers produce characters who go beyond the frailties of their own lives. Stories are a form of reflection, both for the writer and the reader. Storytelling is not merely a reproduction of one's own life, although that life can often be the foundation for the narrative.

The controversy now is more than a judgement of her personal life and is about the artistic merit of her work. Despite the successes of the characters in her stories to alert and move readers about certain issues, should she be deemed unworthy of reading and teaching because of her personal failure as a mother/woman/human?

One of my friends refuses to buy anything from a well-known chain because he believes that they follow unethical business practices. It is as if the objects for sale in that shop are tainted by the immorality of the company which owns that shop.

There were some prominent musicians who were accused in the #MeToo movement in music. Many listeners boycotted these musicians as they felt that their

music itself was stained by their actions in their personal lives.

On the contrary, famous scientists who have produced great work have not had their work boycotted or rejected because of their immoral personal behaviour. Arguably, the greatest immorality in scientific work was in producing the theory and technology of nuclear bombs. Yet, all those scientists are not only revered but their work has been valorised and developed even today.

Similarly, many famous figures in philosophy have not had their work cancelled or even questioned even though their personal life was built on practices of misogyny, racism and casteism. Philosophy departments around the world teach these thinkers as if their views can be effortlessly decoupled from their regressive and dangerous beliefs and prac-



Sundar Sarukkai

tices.

These examples illustrate a split in the responses to the relation between what is produced and the moral quality of the producer. Modern academic disciplines are built on the assumption that knowledge that is produced should be differentiated from the moral qualities of the individual. This belief was not always held and is part of a specific social process of modernity to liberate scientific knowledge from the constraints of morality.

But art does not have this easy way out. Art has always had a close relation to the world of feeling rather than that of reason. Art moves us in ways that science and philosophy texts don't. We share a greater familiarity with music and other arts, than with academic disciplines. Because of this



Good writers produce characters who go beyond the frailties of their own lives, even though stories are a form of reflection REUTERS

aspect, art, particularly stories, are much closer to us and impact us much more than other knowledge productions.

Art has had its share of immoral artists to the extent that the term "monstrous" has now become common in referring to them. There is a long list of famous writers, filmmakers and other artists whose moral lives are "monstrous".

The problem with these "monstrous" artists is that they produce what is seen as great work but once we hear of their infamous life practices, our reaction, reception and judgment of their artwork gets distorted.

But the conflict rages on between those who think that artworks are independent

of the moral qualities of the artist and should be seen as such. When they say this, they are basically converting artworks into pieces of objective knowledge, as in the academic disciplines.

Can art really be seen in this manner? After all, an artwork gets its value through a social process. One becomes a famous writer due to a variety of social factors, the most important of which is the support of a group of people who promote a person's work. But this aspect is hidden when the value of an artwork is reduced to some independent aesthetic qualities present in the artwork.

But these aesthetic qualities that presumably define great art are as much a

product of a community of critics, friends, magazines, socialites and others. An artist who depends on the social world for her legitimacy cannot, when inconvenient, say that they cannot be held accountable to society.

Art has the capacity to show us a world through its own filters. I will read Alice Munro now, not for her stories but to see what those stories can tell me about the terrible human capacity to hurt others around them.

Sundar Sarukkai is the founder of Barefoot Philosophers and author of the novel *Following a Prayer*. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



Why we say clip-clop, and never clop-clip

I can't compare myself to Henry Higgins, but the delightful rules of the English language never cease to fascinate me. For instance, the letters of the alphabet that are never pronounced, the turns of phrases you cannot fathom, and, of course, cockney rhyming slang that no one other than them can understand. However, let me today introduce you to something that's truly amazing. In fact, you could even call it peculiarly British. The rule of ablaut re-duplication. In a recent email, my dear friend Mala Gupta reminded me of it and examples of how it works should cheer up the grimmest and hottest Sunday.

Have you ever wondered why we say tick-tock and not tock-tick, or ding-dong not dong-ding or, even, King-Kong and not

Kong-King? As Mala's message explains, "it turns out it's one of the unwritten rules of English that native speakers know without knowing".

A BBC article explains further. "If there are three words then the order has to go I, A, O. If there are two words then the first is I and the second is either A or O." This explains why we automatically and very comfortably say mish-mash, chit-chat, dilly-dally, shilly-shally, tip-top, hip-hop, flip-flop, tic-tac, sing-song and ping-pong. Try it the other way around and your tongue will probably get stuck to your palate: dally-dilly, song-sing, chat-chit, mash-mish. Frankly, it's too troublesome to carry on!

There's another aspect of the rule of ablaut re-duplication. It determines the order in which you should use multiple

adjectives. For example, it's Little Red Riding Hood, not Red Little Riding Hood or little green men and not green little men. Here's the rule: "Adjectives in English absolutely have to be in this order: opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose-noun. So you can have a lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife. (Re-read that sentence and you'll see the order of the adjectives is exactly as this quirky professorial rule requires). But if you mess with that word order even in the slightest, you will sound like a maniac. (And here's proof. This version sounds horribly wrong: old rectangular silver lovely little French green whittling knife)."

If you have doubts about this order of using adjectives, try using adjectives in a different order. It will confound your listeners and readers. For example, this makes sense: "I've just bought a beautiful, large, old, rectangular, black, Rajasthani, cotton dupatta. This does not: I've just bought a black, old, beautiful, rectangular, Rajasthani, cotton, large dupatta."

Actually, it's a lot kinder to your audience or readership if you use fewer adjectives or break it into two or three sentences. But the rule is there for those who insist on saying it all in one. But I'd advise against it!

Now, there could be occasions when

you will spot that the rule hasn't been obeyed and it still makes sense. For instance, we say 'Big bad wolf' not bad big wolf as the rule would require (opinion before size). But if you recall the other part of the rule of ablaut re-duplication, you'll at once see why this is okay. I'm referring to what you could call the I-A-O order. As Mala's message explains: "That rule seems inviolable".

The BBC puts it most pithily: "All four of a horse's feet make exactly the same sound. But we always, always say clip-clop, never clop-clip".

Now tell me, honestly, did you know of this rule? Indeed, could you have even imagined it existed? And, yet, once you've found out about it, doesn't it make perfect sense? This is why I find the English language fascinating. Perhaps this is also why it's the world's preferred lingua franca, yet so many of us never get it quite right. By the way, nor do the Brits.

Finally, the rule of ablaut re-duplication does not apply to Punjabi who rhyme their words for extra emphasis. For them, *Khana-shana, drink-shink and paisa-waisa* will always be correct, even when the language they're speaking is intended to be English!

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

Formalising care work can pay gender dividends

New data paints a sobering picture of progress towards gender equality. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), it will take 134 years for the world to achieve gender parity. That's five generations from now. India's overall position in the WEF's 2024 Global Gender Gap ranking — despite policies such as the Women's Reservation Act — dropped by two spots from the rankings' previous edition, to 129th out of 146 countries. Central to this reality is the low level of economic participation among Indian women. Less than half of Indian women are currently in employment, one of the lowest figures globally.

That said, signs of change are visible, and Indian women certainly have come a long way from the earlier reality. In the recent general election, women voters turned out in equal numbers to men. As per the WEF Global Gender Gap Report, India has made strides in educational attainment and health, with index scores in the high 90s out of 100. However, the overall ranking shows the persistence of deep-seated economic inequalities. Addressing these will not only improve the lives of women and girls but also drive economic growth for all Indians.

There is an approach through which we can hit two birds with one stone — freeing women and girls from unpaid labour and creating new jobs to grow the economic pie for everyone. This unique opportunity lies in the formalisation of the nascent Indian care economy. Women in paid employment take on around six times more unpaid care work than employed men, according to a recent strategy paper. This unpaid work is estimated to account for 15-17% of India's GDP. Tied up at home, this prevents women from working and a more formalised care sector materialising.

The opportunity here is vast. Recent estimates suggest that an investment of just 2% of GDP in the care economy could yield 11 million new jobs for India. Such enormous societal shifts require a rare 'trifecta effect' where market, social, and political forces align to drive deep and sustainable change.

India is no stranger to such shifts. Our remarkable march towards financial inclusion is one example of this rare 'trifecta effect'. Let us learn from this blueprint and write the next chapter of women's economic empowerment in India by applying it to the care economy. Almost a decade ago, the government's Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) programme set the guardrails, prioritising the establishment of individual bank accounts over household accounts. This was a crucial gender-responsive adjustment to previous programmes. At that time, just 43% of Indian women had a bank account.

PMJDY allowed the private sector to compete on a level playing field. The government set the rules of play, and then it was upon the private sector to innovate. Fintech start-ups and traditional banks began competing for a new customer base to grow their operations. At the same time, civil society came together to improve digital literacy among women and girls and expand access to mobile phones. The 'trifecta effect' was in full force, allowing India to leapfrog developed nations on universal financial inclusion.

We have yet to realise the opportunities unlocked by the powerful trifecta of government, market, and civil society when it comes to the care economy. There is impressive momentum generated by India's civil society. Organisations like Mobile Crèches, the Self Employed Women's Association, CHETNA, and many more are leading the way with innovative approaches to formalising a care economy. Yet the private sector is lagging behind. As one example, in privatised childcare, there are still outdated curricula and meals lacking nutrition. Here, there is a need for government to set the guardrails and encourage further innovation and growth.

For India, the care economy is the promise of another leapfrog moment. The latest data from the WEF should provide us with the impetus to tackle this enormous task.

Shagun Sabarwal is regional director (Asia), Co-Impact. The views expressed are personal



Shagun Sabarwal

In death, a Pashtun poet's message rings a lot louder

Millions of Afghans on both sides of the Durand Line and across the globe are mourning the death of Gilman Wazir, a Pashtun poet, activist, believer in non-violence, and member of the Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM).

Wazir was attacked in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, on July 6 and succumbed to his wounds three days later. Born in 1994, he grew up near the Durand line in northern Waziristan, a part of the region formerly known as FATA, or the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. This region was governed by the inhuman British-era



Baitullah Hameedi

law, Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), between 1901 and 2018. Growing up under the FCR, Wazir's childhood and teenage life was further affected by the presence of numerous terrorist groups, including the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaida, apart from American drone strikes and the Pakistani army's brutal military operation, making Waziristan the "most dangerous place in the world." Life there deprived Wazir of school education after third grade. Yet, he learned about politics, war, terrorism, and injustice firsthand. Beheaded bodies, kidnappings, bombing of villages and towns, and repeated displacement were the bitter experiences of his life. Despite growing up in the shadow of war and terrorism, he became a voice for peace, democracy, and human rights. In an interview, he explained how, growing up, he and others from Waziristan used to be treated as terrorists.

Like many others from his region, Wazir was sent to Bahrain by his family in his

early 20s to ensure his safety and to support them financially. While in Bahrain, he used social media to advocate for the PTM and raise funds for their peaceful resistance movement against what they saw as "extrajudicial killing, forced disappearance, and state-sponsored terrorism in the region." His support for PTM led to his imprisonment and subsequent deportation from Bahrain. Upon being sent to Pakistan as a prisoner, his Pakistani passport was confiscated by the government.

Wazir became a more active member of the PTM thereafter. He participated in every rally and sit-in, reciting his poetry, challenging the Pakistani establishment for its support of terrorists, and urging people to raise their voices for peace. What made him famous among Afghans was his fondness for the shared history of Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line, his advocacy for Afghan women's rights, and his love for the Afghan national flag. He would recite his poetry during

rallies and sit-ins, as well as post them on social media—all to have his voice heard. He was strident about the alarming impact of Pakistan's policies in the tribal areas, the presence of terrorists in the region, and the Taliban's treatment of Afghans, especially women. His message was clear, and his poetry resonated with the masses, reaching millions across social media platforms. "God, dismantle your regime, Girls confined, whisper pain," he wrote. "You barred the doors to girls' education, May God close Paradise's doors in retaliation."

With the Afghan flag in the background, Wazir once recited on social media, "My limberness blooms from love for her so



Gilman Wazir stressed on the shared history of the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line. This made him famous among Afghans PAKHTUN1103/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

deep. In dreams, I sing of Afghanistan's keep. You asked who cloaked the Pashtuns' minds in shade, with whispered breath, I spoke of Mullahs' blade."

In another video, he can be seen in Waziristan, where Pakistan had bombarded a Pashtun Jirga led by Ghazi Mirzali Khan, also known as the *faqir* of Ipi, in 1949. Mentioning the incident, Wazir claims that "Pakistan was founded on shedding Pashtun blood."

Wazir was repeatedly jailed by the Pakistani army. His latest imprisonment was between July 2023 and February 2024. He endured six months of torture before being released. "They would torture me and ask me why you call yourself Afghan," Wazir told the media upon release.

After the news of the attack on Wazir spread, Afghans from all social classes and across the globe — especially Pashtuns — including former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, and vice president Amrullah Saleh expressed grief and concern. It was the first time that Afghan politicians, athletes, artists, religious figures, army personnel, men, and

women came together to honour the political struggle of a young Pashtun non-violence activist.

The news of Wazir's death prompted a strong show of solidarity to honour his work and life. Many people across Pashtun lands mobilised to stand against state-sponsored terrorism. From Islamabad to Peshawar and all the way to Waziristan, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to pay their respects while Wazir's hearse drove past, chanting "Yeh jo dehshtagardi hai, iske peche wadi hai" (Those in uniform are behind terrorism).

Wazir, the youngest among nine siblings, left his young wife and five children behind. He was buried in his village, his coffin covered in the Afghan tricolour as per his will. Tens of thousands participated in his funeral, and his mother was the only person who told Manzoor Ahmad Pash-teen, the leader of PTM, "Stay strong. Onward, I will accompany you myself."

Baitullah Hameedi is a New York-based scholar and former lecturer at Kabul University. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY LETTERS

Mark of efficient governments

This is with reference to "Three lessons from Indian politics from British polls" by Karan Thapar (July 14). The author has rightly pointed out that the defeated party must accept the loss gracefully. The winner must resume work quickly without wasting time and money in a spectacular ceremony

J S Saluja

Lawmakers must fix monsoon woes

This is with reference to "Learning from Delhi-uge: Cosmetic plans won't do" by Narayani Gupta and Narayan Moorthy (July 14). Our representatives hardly take remedial action so that residents are not compelled to face the same situation the next year.

Subhash Taneja

The life of an extraordinary artist

This is with reference to "Poet and policeman: Art of Keki Daruwalla" by Vappala Balachandran (July 14). It is indeed remarkable that a "multi-hatted" police-intelligence man like Keki became a renowned poet.

Sarvesh Mehta

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Across THE AISLE



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Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

Look for things that you may not find

LIKE MANY other earnest well-wishers of the economy, I always read, reflect and write on the eve of the annual Union Budget — and leave Parliament House often disappointed on Budget day.

Afterwards, I go back to the people and speak to persons from different walks of life including MLAs, economists, businesspersons, farmers, women, youth and, above all, party activists. The last-named give me feedback from the ground, especially the chatter in the local markets. In practically every year during the last 10 years, I found that the Budget 'announcements' vanished without a trace in 48 hours, and the chatter ceased.

DAUNTING CHALLENGES

The main reasons for the disappointing outcome are because the Budget makers lose touch with reality and fail to make an objective assessment of the economic situation. Let's take 2024-25 for which the Budget will be presented on July 23, 2024. An objective assessment of the economic situation will reveal that:

■ **Unemployment** is the biggest challenge to youth, families and social peace. For a few dozen vacancies or a few thousand posts, millions of candidates apply and write an examination or appear for an interview. Question papers leak. Bribes are paid. Some examinations or interviews are cancelled at the last minute causing great distress. These are the direct consequences of an explosive unemployment situation. According to CMIE, the all-India unem-

ployment rate is 9.2 per cent. So-called jobs have increased in Agriculture (really, disguised unemployment), Construction (irregular) and the gig economy (insecure).

Youth want regular jobs with a modicum of security of tenure and fair wages. Such jobs are available in the government and government-controlled bodies. At the beginning of 2024, there were 10 lakh vacancies in such posts but there is no evidence that the central government is keen to fill the vacancies. Such jobs can also be created in a vibrant manufacturing sector and in high-value services like financial services, information technology, shipping, air transport, hospitality, healthcare, education, and research and development. Manufacturing output has stagnated at 15 per cent of GDP because Indian promoters have shown extreme reluctance to invest. The rapid expansion of manufacturing and high-value services requires a radical re-set of economic policies and a bold embrace of foreign investment and foreign trade.

■ **Price rise or inflation** is the other major challenge. Wholesale price inflation, as measured by the government, is at a high of 3.4 per cent. CPI inflation is 5.1 per cent and food inflation is 9.4 per cent. Since India is not a common market with free flow of goods and services to every part of the country, the rates vary from state to state and, within a state, from well-connected districts to poor and remote districts. Except perhaps the top 20-30 per cent of the population, every family has been hurt by inflation. Some are grumpy,

most are angry.

Based on your degree of satisfaction that the Budget speech and the allocations have outlined credible steps to tackle unemployment and price rise, you may allot up to 50 marks.

TWO OTHER CHALLENGES

The remaining 50 marks may be allotted under the heads of **education, healthcare** and other **people's priorities**. India will not become a developed country as long as we have sub-standard education and healthcare. **Education**, especially school education, is undoubtedly widespread but of poor quality. The reality is that a child spends, on average, 7 to 8 years in a school. Nearly one-half of the children are unable to read or write a simple text in any language and are numerically challenged. They are not fit for any skilled job. There are thousands of one-teacher schools. The schools have huge deficiencies of classrooms, toilets and teaching aids, not to speak of libraries or laboratories. The central government must drive — and help — the states to address these fundamental problems and not waste its resources and time on pushing a controversial NEP or a scandal-ridden NTA/NEET.

Healthcare is better but not sufficient. Public healthcare is growing quantitatively but not in quality. Out of pocket expenditure is still about 47 per cent of total health expenditure (NHA, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare). Private

healthcare is growing both in quantity and quality but is absolutely beyond the reach of the vast majority of people. Overall, there is a grave shortage of doctors, nurses, medical technicians, and diagnostic equipment and machines. The central government's expenditure on healthcare has declined to 0.28 per cent as a proportion of GDP and to 1.9 per cent as a proportion of total expenditure (Tol dated July 15, 2024). Public satisfaction with public healthcare is low.

HARD, HARDER SLAP

Other **people's priorities** are stagnant wages, rising household debt, falling consumption of wage goods, legal guarantee for MSP, burden of education loans and the **Agnipath** scheme. These challenges have **solutions**: minimum wage of Rs 400, legally guaranteed MSP, education loan forgiveness, and abolition of **Agnipath**.

Neglect, bordering on derision, of these issues caused the disastrous slide in the number of seats won by the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections of 2024. The BJP is not repentant. Nor, going by public statements, is it willing to reconsider its model: crony capitalist, trickle-down, capital biased and protectionist. The people gave the BJP a harder slap in the 13 Assembly by-elections in July: the I.N.D.I.A. bloc won 10 of them and increased their vote share dramatically (The Hindu dated July 17, 2024). Will the Budget respond to the warnings on the wall? Keep your fingers crossed.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter: @tavleen_singh



Leaders must listen

IN RECENT days, I have found myself wondering more than once if the higher echelons of the Bharatiya Janata Party have mysteriously become completely deaf. There seems to be no other reason why the message that voters sent in the Lok Sabha elections is being ignored. The sharpest rebuke came from Uttar Pradesh and it has remained completely unheard. Last week, the Chief Minister's Deputy made his rebellion against the senior leadership loud and public. He reminded those at the top that there was a need for some deep introspection about the state of the party.

The rebellion was quickly squashed. But then the RSS chief made a speech last week, in which he said men should not think they were gods because this would lead to them thinking that they were God himself. Were they listening in the BJP headquarters? Apparently not. They appeared to convey to the Prime Minister that they were certain it was panic created by the opposition's 'false narrative' that was to blame for the party returning to power without a full majority. They should ask themselves why the opposition parties were successful in convincing voters of their narrative and why the BJP failed.

Instead, they decided that the way to take on the 'false narrative' about the Constitution being changed was to commemorate the Emergency by declaring June 25 as 'Samvidhaan Hatya Diwas'. They forgot that it was through a provision in the Constitution that Indira Gandhi suspended democracy. It might have been more appropriate to celebrate the end of the Emergency instead. What commemorating 'Murder of Constitution Day' indicates is that the BJP's top leadership has not realized that it was more than fears of the Constitution being changed that turned voters hostile.

At the top of my list is the atmosphere of hatred and fear that has become normal since Narendra Modi became prime minister. This is evidently something that nobody has told him or there would not have been that sickening edict in Uttar Pradesh last week that orders shopkeepers to write their names outside their shops. Ostensibly, this was done because of the Kanwar Yatra in which Hindus trek hundreds of kilometres to the Ganga to carry home pots of its sacred water. Ostensibly, this is to ensure that there is no communal tension along the route of the pilgrimage. But this Yatra has taken place for decades without trouble, so why this monstrous new edict?

Monstrous because it recalls Germany in the thirties, when a similar edict by the Nazis set off the events that led to the Holocaust. Muslim leaders have pointed out the ominous similarity, and they are right. For me, it was both chilling and sad to see 'Anifruiti' scrawled in shaky letters on the side of a pavement shot that will certainly ensure that Hindu pilgrims avoid buying Muslim mangoes. The owner of the rickety barrow probably makes enough to survive the day and the pilgrimage would have helped hugely. The Hindu owner of a dhaba was reported on social media to have been ordered to suspend his Muslim employees for the period of the pilgrimage. This is shameful. But is anyone up there listening?

There has been an orchestrated economic boycott of Muslim businesses for ten years now. And one message that Uttar Pradesh voters tried to send was that people were sick of the hatred and fear that seemingly has official backing. This time, it is a pilgrimage that is the excuse. There is always some excuse. Before this Yatra, it was beef, cow slaughter and 'love jihad'. The wounds left by this campaign of hate are deep.

It is not as if BJP chief ministers cannot find better things to do. One of the biggest failures of the past decade has been the failure of Modi's chief ministers to improve government schools. They are so bad that in most countries they would not be considered schools at all. They churn out students who are barely able to read and count, and this handicaps them when they seek higher education and jobs. Unless there is revolutionary reform, there is no chance at all that India will benefit from our vaunted 'population dividend'.

If the BJP wants to win the state elections that happen in the next few months, its leaders will need to show that they have heard the message that voters sent by denying the party a full majority this time. This can best be achieved by BJP chief ministers showing that they can bring real change in the lives of ordinary people by improving schools and healthcare, and by showing that they can govern better. There is much constructive change needed and it is needed desperately.

Why then is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh allowed to continue poisoning the communal atmosphere in his state? Has he not noticed that it was his state that was most responsible for the Prime Minister being denied a full majority in his third term? It truly is as if the top leaders of the BJP have suddenly become hard of hearing or as if they are pretending to be deaf. That is worse still. Modi may have managed to become prime minister for a 'historic' third time, as he likes to tell people on his foreign travels, but he must know that things have changed for him. A little introspection will go a long way.

Watching the American polls, one debate at a time

Dalitality SURAJ YENGDE

Twitter: @Surajyengde



SITTING IN the US, in my apartment, I saw the live debate between US presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald J Trump. Biden's performance was unimpressive. I was expecting the debate to be more animated since it included Trump. I remember his past presidential debate with Hillary Clinton in 2016. I was in Chicago, visiting a Telugu Dalit family of business folks. The hosts, who favoured the woman candidate, saw Clinton being ripped to shreds by Trump's scathing attacks.

As he attacked, it was clear that he was not going to play by the rulebook. He presented himself as the captain of the boys' club who treated anything that challenged his whimsical views as an affront. Though he began his speech on July 18 — his first since surviving an assassination attempt on July 13 — by striking an unusually conciliatory tone amidst calls for national unity, he quickly veered towards familiar territory by raising the bogey of "invasion" from the southern border and talking of how Biden would usher in World War III. Thus, so far, it's the same ol' Donald vs the same ol' Joe.

The architect of Trumpian appeal is former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, who noticed a striking gap in the conduct of American politics, which he identified as "elite" and "alienated". He was later thrown out by Trump from his administration. Bannon was recently interviewed by New York Times columnist David Brooks. Bannon introduced his movement as the "Army of the Awakened" who are trained online and go after the elites on social media. Bannon has also created the nationalist appeal of America First. While almost every country in the world prioritises its own citizens, one thing that America does fantastically is to merge the global image of self-sustenance with local resources.

Bannon holds the view that the visa regime is exploited by foreign students, particularly those from India and China. Besides wanting them to return within a couple of weeks after completing their coursework, he wants to reduce foreign student intake by 50%. He pitched this against the lack of rep-

resentations of Black and Hispanic groups. He is sensational but shortsighted. When the David Cameron-led UK government tried to restrict foreign student access, the burgeoning middle class in developing countries sent their pupils to the US, Canada and Australia, instead.

Liberal White friends from Massachusetts came over for dinner. One was an attorney, the other a professor. Both are retired and had houses in a plush neighbourhood in Greater Boston. They hated Trump's guts and his unflattering remarks on various groups they considered needed protection. They said that no matter Biden's performance — they thought of him as "incapable" in his current state — they swore they wouldn't switch to the Republican side.

After the debate, a senior journalist living in the Boston area told me that he was concerned about Biden but cautioned against playing too much into Trumpian attacks. Still, the journalist was consistent in his support as an "anti-Trump candidate". Ever since the debate three weeks ago, a lot has changed. All of a sudden, Biden's promise to lead a second term is being met with suspicion. Even the donor class of the Democrats has started questioning his ability to win. His strongest supporters, former President Barack Obama and ex-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who would pop up in YouTube ads daily asking for a donation of \$5, have urged him not to run again.

Ironically, his rival Bernie Sanders endorsed him in an op-ed in the New York Times. While the endorsement was like a lifeline for the Biden poll panel, one can certainly reckon that he himself is ready to call it quits. Two candidates could win the baton — Vice-President, Kamala Harris, and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. We cannot say for sure what the future holds, as we prepare for the next couple of months to decide the fate of this messy economy that is in the hands of leaders with bureaucrats who are hated by the Republican vote bank and an autocratic leader with the impulse control of a toddler.

But I am not going to think about it, as I am currently in Kenya. The tribal caste groups here and their animosity over caste nepotism held by President Ruto is being challenged by Gen-Z. We should see what happens here.

Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality, and has returned to Harvard University

history HEADLINE

ANAND MOHAN J



IN THE heart of Madhya Pradesh's Dhar city, around 250 km from Bhopal, lies the tomb of Chishti saint Kamal al-Din, a follower of Farid-al Din Ganj-i-Shakar and Nizam al-Din Auliya. Adjacent to this tomb stands a spacious hypostyle mosque constructed primarily from "reused" temple parts.

The Bhojshala Temple-cum-Kamal Maula mosque complex in the district has been at the centre of a dispute dating back to the demolition of Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh's Ayodhya in 1992. While Hindus regard the Archeological Survey of India (ASI)-protected complex in Dhar as a temple dedicated to Goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati), Muslims consider it the site of the Kamal Maula mosque.

An ASI survey report on the disputed site, submitted in Madhya Pradesh High Court on July 15 this year, stated that its scientific investigation had revealed the "existing structure was made from parts of earlier temples". The report was submitted following a PIL filed before the High Court by the 'Hindu Front for Justice' that had challenged an ASI order dated April 7, 2003, that permitted puja at the complex on Tuesdays and namaz on Fridays.

The July 15 report was met with much enthusiasm by the state's Right-wing outfits, which have been demanding the closure of the Kamal Maula mosque, a ban on Friday namaz and installation of a Saraswati idol in the Bhojshala complex since December 1992. Right-wing groups here have also claimed that Paramara dynasty's Raja Bhoja — who has become their potent symbol of late — built the temple at the disputed complex.

The Kamal Maula mosque at the disputed site has been referred to in the writings of English author John Malcolm in 1822 and Major General William Kincaid in 1844. While they documented popular legends associated with Raja Bhoja, they never identified the 'Bhojshala'.

According to a 2012 research paper by Michael Willis, published by the Royal Asiatic Society, the Bhojshala (the Hall of Bhoj) was a centre for Sanskrit studies associated with Raja Bhoja. Willis noted that the mosque adjacent to Kamal al-Din Chisti's tomb had been identified as the Bhojshala since the early 20th century, turning it into "a focal point of religious, social, and political tension".

In his paper, titled "Dhar, Bhoja and Sarasvati: from Indology to Political Mythology and Back", Willis traced the first reference to Bhoja by Alois Anton

A find, a conundrum & naming of a Bhojshala



The Kamal Maula mosque at the disputed site. Wikimedia Commons

Fuhrer, a German Indologist, who worked for the ASI. Fuhrer travelled to Central India in 1893 and recorded the mosque complex using the term "Bhoja's school". However, he was dismissed from his position in the ASI after an investigation uncovered an enormous degree of bad scholarship.

On the invention of the term 'Bhojshala', Willis had argued that a small archeological department office was established in Dhar in 1902 by the British government under the charge of Superintendent of State Education K K Lele. At that time, Lele had found "two serpentine inscriptions giving the alphabet and grammatical rules of the Sanskrit language". This posed a conundrum for Lele who, in a bid to explain the mosque at Kamal al-Din as a "reused" Hindu building with a Sanskrit basis "invented" the term Bhojshala, since Sanskrit refers to educational institutions as *vidyalaya*, *vidyapeeth* or *janpith*.

Known for the love story of Malwa's King Baz Bahadur and shepherdess Roopmati, Dhar soon came under the shadow of communal politics that continues to surround Bhojshala even now. Tensions first broke out at this site in 1952, when Hindus decided to celebrate Bhoja Diwas. This prompted the Muslims to celebrate an *urs* (the death anniversary of Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti) in 1953. Over the next few decades, Muslims would continue to offer namaz at the site on Friday, while Hindus gathered there to celebrate Basant Panchami.

After the demolition of Babri Masjid, Right-wing outfits in Madhya Pradesh started demanding opening of the site for Hindu worship. In 1994, on the second anniversary of the demolition of Babri Masjid, a curfew was imposed in the district after the VHP threatened to hoist a

flag on the monument. In years that followed, local peace committees worked out a formula to ensure both communities gained access to the site, and even worked out an agreement on the Tuesdays and Friday prayers.

This agreement was flouted in 1997. Once again, a curfew was imposed in the district after the VHP threatened to hoist a flag atop the site. In 2003, an election year for the state, around a dozen policemen were injured in Dhar and several police vehicles torched by a mob protesting against the alleged "high-handedness" of the district administration in handling the Hindu Jagran Manch's plan to enter the site on Basant Panchami. In February's Lok Sabha session that year, the controversy found its way to Delhi, where senior BJP leaders called for the opening of the Bhojshala. Former CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan, then an MP from Vidisha, informed the Lok Sabha that "the State government had banned the entry of Hindus in Bhojshala by suppressing the feelings of Hindus".

In March 2003, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government waded into this controversy after Union Tourism Minister Jagmohan Malhotra asked the Digvijaya Singh-led Congress government to allow Hindus to pray at the site from sunrise to sunset, and to permit Muslims to offer namaz between 1 pm and 3 pm on Fridays. This differed from the formula set by the Congress government, which stipulated that Hindus would be allowed to offer prayers at the site for two hours on Tuesday.

In 2003, the disputed site became a campaign issue for the state BJP unit. Uma Bharti, then the BJP campaign incharge for Madhya Pradesh, had in the run-up to the polls trained her guns on the Digvijaya government that had tried to troubleshoot this hotspot for past communal incidents. The Hindu Jagran Manch meanwhile mobilised voters in the region on the Bhojshala issue. These events gave Bharti the momentum she needed to unseat the Digvijaya government. She would take over as CM in December 2003. In 2022, the Shivraj-led BJP government promised to bring back the Saraswati idol from the British Museum, further fueling the political discourse.

Decades later, even as Bharti, now sidelined by the BJP, did not contest the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the Bhojshala remained an election issue in Dhar, where Right-wing outfits still dream of turning the site into MP's Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

She SAID

SHALINI LANGER



HOW DOES one continue to love Alice Munro? But, how does one not? How does one reconcile she, the chronicler of women's invisible everyday lives, with she, the enabler of her daughter's sexual assaulter? But, really, can we not? Munro's biggest crime for the world will always be that she remained silent. However, how many of us are not guilty of that very same failing, in one way or another, and live daily with this knowledge?

Like the memory seared in me of the oily ponytail of the Sanskrit teacher at my school, proudly wearing his Brahmin ho-

Alice Munro, her silence and ours

liness on that little tuft of hair, as he stood in front of me and made loaded innuendos, while I shrank further and further into my chair. No, I did not speak; and neither did anyone else in that classroom.

Like the recollection of every detail of being grabbed out of the blue while walking down the street by a young man, part of a laughing group, or in a crowded public bus by a leery co-passenger. The public assault left me stunned, and feeling all alone, though also teaching me a lesson to instinctively lean back on, on how to "safely" navigate such spaces.

Like the betrayal of being groped by an uncle in my own home, trying to raise the issue and being told to forgive this "momentary lapse". Years have passed, but I live it every time he genially joins us

for family events. Does he remember, as I do? And how can I see him in ever kinder light, like I do now? What does it make me?

My silence, or ours, doesn't in even a tiny little way absolve Munro's abandonment of her daughter Andrea Skinner, in her own words, at every stage of her life — from when she was nine to when she became a mother with young children of her own. Neither does it hide the shock one feels, particularly as a mother, that Munro could choose to love and live with a man who had harmed a child so utterly defenceless.

No, this is only an effort to understand the author who understands us so acutely, and an admission that — like her — very few among us are not complicit in

silences. And were Munro's women not all about that? Bound by silences that allowed some to do what they wanted, and others to not do anything at all?

Yes, the world has moved on. Only a couple of days ago, all it took was a thread of social media posts to bring down a corporate honcho accused of molestation. However, not all of us have it in us to be avenging heroes. The omertà we choose after all is part of our lifelong endeavour for "normalcy", to push our boundaries and still have our feet on solid, unshakable grounds.

I even find myself questioning if this social media trial is not mob justice in another form, playing judge, jury and executioner. And then wondering if all this has to do with my guilt regarding my own si-

lence, and the failure to do anything about it.

I want to believe — and I do — that Munro carried that weight too, and particularly the weight of the fact that she couldn't deny her love for the man who had assaulted her daughter.

Women aren't supposed to make that choice, especially mothers. But Munro's women have told us all along to look, look beyond. Her women were never perfect moms, wives, daughters, or girlfriends, just people carrying on the best they knew how, with what little they had.

So we judge her the harshest, and not other adults around Andrea who also chose to carry on with their lives, brushing past an abused nine-year-old.

And that there is another silence.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 21, 2024



The 2025 Ryder Cup captaincy is the highlight of Keegan Bradley's career that previously peaked with a win at the 2011 PGA Championship

Captain's pick

He missed out in 2023, but Keegan Bradley will captain the US squad for the 2025 Ryder Cup

OVER THE TOP
Meraj Shah

NICE GUYS FINISH last. In an unscripted and particularly poignant scene during the sixth episode of Netflix's *Full Swing* (Pick Six; Season 2), American golfer Keegan Bradley receives a phone call from his peer, Zach Johnson. Viewers are already aware of what is about to unfold: Johnson, who is leading the US squad for the 2023 Ryder Cup, has made his 'Captain's Picks', and Bradley isn't one of them. Bradley made a valiant effort late in the season — winning the season-ending Travelers Championship — to make the team on points

The 37-year-old has just missed out on an automatic slot but is considered a shoo-in nonetheless. As Johnson conveys his regrets, Bradley is remarkably poised and composed: He wishes the team good luck and tells Johnson that he understands the decision. What makes Bradley's demeanour even more striking is that this entire drama is being captured live by a camera crew. Earlier in the episode, Bradley opened up on camera about how much a spot on the team would have meant to him. It's heartbreaking, even for the viewer.

Bradley was one of the surprise heroes of the popular television series. Despite a great deal of public disquiet over his not making the team, Bradley never complained publicly, going as far as supporting Johnson. "There is no wrong decision for who is on the team, everyone is such a great player," he said. Later in the season, Bradley was shown rooting passionately for the team during the Cup cementing his image as a genuinely likeable athlete. As events were to bear out, no amount of support could help the American team. What was essentially a bunch of great players, did not come together as a cohesive force and were pulverised by the Europeans.

It was hard for those of us who watched the television series not to feel a lingering sense of injustice for Bradley who has spoken about being a bit of an outsider on tour. It was clear, even from what was captured on screen, that there's a close friendship and camaraderie between Johnson, Justin Thomas, Rickie Fowler, and Jordan Spieth. Both Fowler and Thomas were Captain's Picks in the squad. Not insinuating that they were chosen on any criteria besides their previous Ryder Cup experience (both have stellar records), but fans did wonder about whether Bradley was genuinely short-changed. The man himself vehemently dismissed that speculation. "I love these guys, and one of the main reasons I wanted to make this team is I wanted to be around these guys, the energy that they have." He went as far as to support Justin Thomas' inclusion. "I see the way

IT (Justin Thomas) prepares and practices, and if I was a captain, I would want him in my locker room". Considering that Thomas' selection was despite the golfer being in a slump throughout the season, it was a classy thing to say. End of story? Not quite.

Nearly a year later, on June 30, 2024, Bradley got a phone call. It was Zach Johnson, with a bit of news, that completely blindsided Bradley. The 38-year-old had been chosen to captain the US squad for the 2025 Ryder Cup. "I don't think I'll ever be more surprised by anything in my life," Bradley said at his introductory press conference in July 2024. Bradley was even more gobsmacked because he got no official intimation even to check whether he'd like to take on the captaincy. "I felt funny after the call," Bradley said. "I don't think I reacted the way they thought. I was in complete shock."

Bradley wasn't asked because there was no doubt in anyone's mind. From whatever we've seen of, and heard from Bradley over the last few years, including his two appearances in the Ryder Cup and that fervent dash to make the team in 2023, one thing is clear. This man personifies the passion and spirit of the Ryder Cup.

It's tempting to think (it certainly makes for a great story), that this latest event is some kind of recompense for what happened last year: righting a wrong so to speak. The fact that Johnson made the call to Bradley is no coincidence either: it's a call that Johnson must have wanted to make. But it would be too dramatic to surmise that the reasons for Bradley's appointment have anything to do with what happened to him at the 2023 Ryder Cup, but rather, it's about what went down for the entire team at the biennial trophy. This is not about atonement or assuaging feelings. It's an out-of-the-box move to try and wrest back the Ryder Cup for the US.

In this context, Bradley knows the venue for the 2025 Ryder Cup—Bethpage Black — intimately. He played the course regularly as an amateur when he was a member of the St John's University golf team. He's got a 4-3 record in the two Ryder Cup teams he was part of (2010 and 2012). He's not divisive — everyone loves Bradley — and should do a great job of pulling the team together.

Personally — and he's spoken about how much he wanted to be a part of the team in 2025 — this captaincy is the highlight of a career that previously peaked with a win at the 2011 PGA Championship. This is a man who has famously not opened the bag he brought home from the defeat the US suffered at the 2012 Ryder Cup. He's vowed not to open it until he's part of a winning team. That opportunity will present itself in 2025, and he won't just be a part of the team, but at its helm. But Bradley being who he is probably won't care about personal legacy, as long as the team wins. Promises to be fun to watch.

Golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



Neglect, bordering on derision, of these issues caused the disastrous slide in the number of seats won by the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections of 2024. The BJP is not repentant. Nor, going by public statements, is it willing to reconsider its model: crony capitalist, trickle-down, capital biased and protectionist...

LIKE MANY OTHER earnest well-wishers of the economy, I always read, reflect and write on the eve of the annual Union Budget — and leave Parliament House often disappointed on Budget day.

Afterwards, I go back to the people and speak to persons from different walks of life including MLAs, economists, businesspersons, farmers, women, youth and, above all, party activists. The last-named give me feedback from the ground, especially the chatter in the local markets. In practically every year during the last 10 years, I found that the Budget's announcements vanished without a trace in 48 hours, and the chatter ceased.

Daunting challenges

The main reasons for the disappointing outcome are because the Budget makers lose touch with reality and fail to make an objective assessment of the economic situation. Let's take 2024-25 for which the Budget will be presented on July 23, 2024. An objective assessment of the economic situation will reveal that:

- **Unemployment** is the biggest challenge to youth, families and social peace. For a few dozen vacancies or a few thousand posts, millions of candidates apply and write an examination or appear for an interview. Question papers leak. Bribes are paid. Some examinations or interviews are cancelled at the last minute causing great distress. These are the direct consequences of an explosive unemployment situation. According to CMIE, the all-India unemployment rate is 9.2%. So-called jobs have increased in Agriculture (really, disguised unemployment), Construction (irregular) and the gig economy (insecure).

Youth want regular jobs with a modicum of security of tenure and fair wages. Such jobs are available in the government and government-controlled bodies. At the beginning of 2024, there were 10 lakh vacancies in such posts but there is no evidence that the central government is keen



Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman is set to unveil the Union Budget for FY 2024-25 on Tuesday

FILE PHOTO/REUTERS

Look for things that you may not find

to fill the vacancies. Such jobs can also be created in a vibrant manufacturing sector and in high-value services like financial services, information technology, shipping, air transport, hospitality, healthcare, education, and research and development. Manufacturing output has stagnated at 1.5% of GDP because Indian promoters have shown extreme reluctance to invest. The rapid expansion of manufacturing and high-value services requires a **radical re-set** of economic policies and a **bold embrace** of foreign investment and foreign trade.

- **Price rise or inflation** is the other major challenge. Wholesale price inflation, as measured by the government, is at a high of 3.4%. CPI inflation is 5.1% and food inflation is 9.4%. Since India is not a common market with free flow of goods and services to every part of the country, the rates vary from state to state and, within a state, from well-connected districts to poor and remote districts. Except perhaps the top 20-30% of the population, **every family** has been hurt by inflation. Some are grumpy, most are angry.

Based on your degree of satisfaction that the Budget speech and the allocations have outlined credible steps to tackle unemployment and price rise, you may allot up to 50 marks.

Two other challenges

The remaining 50 marks may be allot-

ted under the heads of **education, health-care** and other **people's priorities**. India will not become a developed country as long as we have sub-standard education and healthcare. **Education**, especially school education, is undoubtedly widespread but of poor quality. The reality is that a child spends, on average, 7 to 8 years in a school. Nearly one-half of the children are unable to read or write a simple text in any language and are numerically challenged. They are not fit for any skilled job. There are thousands of one-teacher schools. The schools have huge deficiencies of classrooms, toilets and teaching aids, not to speak of libraries or laboratories. The central government must drive — and help — the states to address these fundamental problems and not waste its resources and time on pushing a controversial NEP or a scandal-ridden NTA/NEET.

Healthcare is better but not sufficient. Public healthcare is growing quantitatively but not in quality. Out of pocket expenditure is still about 47% of total health expenditure (NHA, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare). Private healthcare is growing both in quantity and quality but is absolutely beyond the reach of the vast majority of people. Overall, there is a grave shortage of doctors, nurses, medical technicians, and diagnostic equipment and machines. The central government's expenditure on healthcare has declined to 0.28% as a

proportion of GDP and to 1.9% as a proportion of total expenditure (*ToI dated July 15, 2024*). Public satisfaction with public healthcare is low.

Hard, harder slap

Other **people's priorities** are stagnant wages, rising household debt, falling consumption of wage goods, legal guarantee for MSP, burden of education loans and the **Agnipath** scheme. These challenges have **solutions**: minimum wage of ₹400, legally guaranteed MSP, education loan forgiveness, and abolition of **Agnipath**.

Neglect, bordering on derision, of these issues caused the disastrous slide in the number of seats won by the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections of 2024. The BJP is not repentant. Nor, going by public statements, is it willing to reconsider its model: crony capitalist, trickle-down, capital biased and protectionist. The people gave the BJP a harder slap in the 13 Assembly by-elections in July: the INDIA bloc won 10 of them and increased their vote share dramatically (*The Hindu dated July 17, 2024*). Will the Budget respond to the warnings on the wall? Keep your fingers crossed.

Website: pchidambaram.in
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ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



FIFTH COLUMN TAVLEEN SINGH

Leaders must listen

IN RECENT DAYS, I have found myself wondering more than once if the higher echelons of the Bharatiya Janata Party have mysteriously become completely deaf. There seems to be no other reason why the message that voters sent in the Lok Sabha elections is being ignored. The sharpest rebuke came from Uttar Pradesh and it has remained completely unheard. Last week, the Chief Minister's Deputy made his rebellion against the senior leadership loud and public. He reminded those at the top that there was a need for some deep introspection about the state of the party.

The rebellion was quickly squashed. But then the RSS chief made a speech last week, in which he said men should not think they were gods because this would lead to them thinking that they were God himself. Were they listening in the BJP headquarters? Apparently not. They appeared to convey to the Prime Minister that they were certain it was panic created by the opposition's

'false narrative' that was to blame for the party returning to power without a full majority. They should ask themselves why the opposition parties were successful in convincing voters of their narrative and why the BJP failed.

Instead, they decided that the way to take on the 'false narrative' about the Constitution being changed was to commemorate the Emergency by declaring June 25 as 'Samvidhaan Hatya Diwas'. They forgot that it was through a provision in the Constitution that Indira Gandhi suspended democracy. It might have been more appropriate to celebrate the end of the Emergency instead. What commemorating 'Murder of Constitution Day' indicates is that the BJP's top leadership has not realised that it was more than fears of the Constitution being changed that turned voters hostile.

At the top of my list is the atmosphere of hatred and fear that has become normal since Narendra Modi became prime minister. This is evidently something that nobody has told him or there would not have been that sickening edict in Uttar Pradesh last week that orders shopkeepers to write their names outside their shops. Ostensibly, this was done because of the **Kanwar Yatra** in which Hindus trek hundreds of kilometres to the Ganga to carry home pots of its sacred water. Ostensibly, this is to ensure that there is no communal tension along the route of the pilgrimage. But this Yatra has taken place for decades

without trouble, so why this monstrous new edict?

Monstrous because it recalls Germany in the thirties, when a similar edict by the Nazis set off the events that led to the Holocaust. Muslim leaders have pointed out the ominous similarity, and they are right. For me, it was both chilling and sad to see 'Arif Fruit' scrawled in shaky letters on the side of a pavement shop that will certainly ensure that Hindu pilgrims avoid buying Muslim mangoes. The owner of the rickety barrow probably makes enough to survive the day and the pilgrimage would have helped hugely. The Hindu owner of a **dhaba** was reported on social media to have been ordered to suspend his Muslim employees for the period of the pilgrimage. This is shameful. But is anyone up there listening?

There has been an orchestrated economic boycott of Muslim businesses for ten years now. And one message that Uttar Pradesh voters tried to send was that people were sick of the hatred and fear that seemingly has official backing. This time, it is a pilgrimage that is the excuse. There is always some excuse. Before this **Yatra**, it was beef, cow slaughter and 'love jihad'. The wounds left by this campaign of hate are deep.

It is not as if BJP chief ministers cannot find better things to do. One of the biggest failures of the past decade has been the failure of Modi's chief ministers to improve government schools. They are so bad that in

most countries they would not be considered schools at all. They churn out students who are barely able to read and count, and this handicaps them when they seek higher education and jobs. Unless there is revolutionary reform, there is no chance at all that India will benefit from our vaunted 'population dividend'.

If the BJP wants to win the state elections that happen in the next few months, its leaders will need to show that they have heard the message that voters sent by denying the party a full majority this time. This can best be achieved by BJP chief ministers showing that they can bring real change in the lives of ordinary people by improving schools and healthcare, and by showing that they can govern better. There is much constructive change needed and it is needed desperately.

Why then is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh allowed to continue poisoning the communal atmosphere in his state? Has he not noticed that it was his state that was most responsible for the Prime Minister being denied a full majority in his third term? It truly is as if the top leaders of the BJP have suddenly become hard of hearing or as if they are pretending to be deaf. That is worse still. Modi may have managed to become prime minister for a 'historic' third time, as he likes to tell people on his foreign travels, but he must know that things have changed for him. A little introspection will go a long way.



Create a sense of safety, a sense of feeling comfortable in a city. It is no use having good surroundings if you are afraid all the time

Lee Kuan Yew

BUILD NEW CITIES TO CREATE JOBS, BOOST GROWTH

"We will initiate building 100 new cities; enabled with the latest in technology and infrastructure—adhering to concepts like sustainability, walk to work etc, and focused on specialised domains."

— BJP election manifesto, 2014

BUDGET 2024, to be presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday, is effectively a grand challenge on how to spend a bonanza of ₹1 lakh crore. To appreciate, consider the timeline of events and facts. The interim budget of February 2024 defined revenues and allocations to craft the pathway to a Viksit Bharat by 2047. It allocated over ₹11.11 lakh crore for capital expenditure, expanded welfare payments and promised to reduce fiscal deficit to 5.1 percent of GDP. The balancing act triggered hosannas for economic conservatism.

The political and economic landscape has since shifted. On May 22, the RBI approved a transfer of Rs 2,10,874 crore to the government—more than double the sum assumed in the budget, creating headroom for a spend of ₹1 lakh crore. This was followed by the June 4 verdict and an altered political reality. It is likely that allocation of the trillion-rupee bonanza is informed and defined by the response to the diminished tally.

This has fuelled a binary narrative on how the bounty of ₹1 lakh crore (and more from higher tax collections) must be allocated. In the blue corner are folks who argue for a response to the cries of distress from the bottom of the pyramid that influenced the verdict. Those in the red corner advocate a hike in capital expenditure on infrastructure to boost growth and revenues.

It is argued that expansion of welfare—tax cuts for the middle class, a national cash transfer scheme for women, an urban employment scheme and higher payout under PM Kisan Samman Nidhi—will prop consumption. Yes, money in the hands of people could spur consumption, but conditions apply. The question is who gets how much. Will a few thousand rupees assuage tax payers? And not all payouts deliver electoral dividends—the Maharashtra government's May 30 gambit, the Namu Shetkari Scheme promising ₹6,000 as top-up on PM Kisan, didn't quite deliver.

The statute of limitations also applies to the advocacy of higher infrastructure spending. The allocation of ₹11.11 lakh crore, higher by 11 percent, is nearly a quarter of the total government spend. The challenge before the government—as Nitin Gadkari has often pointed out—is not raising resources, but finding the capacity for executing infrastructure projects. There are only so many roads, ports, airports and rail lines that can be added in a year.

Of course, not all boxes are ticked in India's development paradigm. Consider the state of urbanisation. The 2014 BJP manifesto promised to "initiate building 100 new cities". Tragically, the idea sputtered as it morphed into the so-called Smart City programme, leaving urban Indians to deal with inadequacies. It is intriguing that the imperative which found bold articulation in the document has not found a place in the development agenda.

Cities spur innovation, the interaction of firms and workers improves productivity and the platform of skill and moolah propels growth. The opportunity to leverage the potential has been waylaid by systemic apathy. India is home to 3,892 census towns—habitats and people stranded between definitions left without administrative support. In 2015, Venkaiah Naidu, then the urban development minister, asked states to convert them to "statutory urban local bodies". That was not to be, and millions suffer the consequences of unplanned amoebic urbanisation.

Urbanisation merits urgent investment of political capital. The surplus of ₹1 lakh crore—at least a part of it—could be used as seed capital and blended with public-private partnership initiatives for creating new cities. The government could announce a contest, with states pitching in to convert at least one census town. New cities could also be located in the census towns in aspirational districts, or along the new industrial corridors. The new cities need not all be based on census towns—Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu could present an IT-enabled Amaravati. Maharashtra could locate a new hyper-city next to the new airport off the trans-harbour link.

Construction is located at the intersection of rural and urban economy, and can absorb low-skilled labour off farms. It has a multi-dimensional impact across segments of consumption. Revaluation of land engenders transfer of capital and creates prosperity. A contest for new cities across the country will help spread the opportunities wider.

New cities will also lift living standards by affording access to cleaner sustainable solutions in water management, connectivity and walk-to-work ecosphere. The creation of such cities could trigger a demonstration effect across states. India is on the radar of global investors—ranging from financial services and manufacturing to global tech capacity centres. Lifestyle options is and will be a key parameter for investors.

The creation of new cities offers an opportunity to blend ease of living, business and governance. A UN study estimates India will add over 400 million dwellers to the urban populace by 2050. Nearly half of India's billion-plus population will be living in urban areas. It is time to exit undefined agglomerations and create new habitats. If there is one idea with omnipotence—social, economic and political—it is the need to create new cities.

MODI CHOOSES CONTINUITY OVER CHANGE



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com
Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

EXCEPT in the quirky quantum world, continuity and change are calamitous contradictions if forced to collide. The first is an uninterrupted force and the other is discrete in nature. Schrödinger's cat comes to mind in the quantum world of Indian politics: alive and dead at the same time. Indians voted for continuity in the 2024 elections, giving Narendra Modi the third consecutive thumbs-up. The verdict also tinkered with the previous model of governance from single-party rule to a coalition where Modi is the first among NDA equals. The decisions and actions of the Modi government in the past few weeks indicate the cat metaphor has mutated: continuity has eclipsed change.

The council of ministers has changed colour for sure. Yet the contours, constitution, thrust and trajectory of India's strategic, economic and diplomatic kinetics reflect continuity rather than major modulation. Even if the politics of the Congress was defeated thrice, its style of economics and diplomacy finds place of pride even in the new dispensation. The economists owing allegiance and fame to the Nehruvian regime have been given more prominence than they got during the previous governments. For example, last week, when the PM announced the reconstitution of the NITI Aayog, it exemplified continuity of the administrative thought process. All of its five full-time members were retained—vice chairman Suman Bery, Vijay Kumar Saraswat, Arvind Virmani, Ramesh Chand and Dr V K Paul.

BJP politicians have an upper age limit of 75 years, but it doesn't apply to the NITI Aayog phalanx. The vice chairman

enjoys a cabinet minister's status and the rest are at the minister of state level. A couple of new Union ministers were added as members and special invitees to assuage coalition compulsions, but the core team remained. Bery, Virmani and Saraswat have celebrated their platinum birth anniversaries. Barring Ramesh Chand and Paul, the rest were associated with the UPA regime and were directly and indirectly connected with internal organisations and the defence establishment.

Bery fits the typical elitist multinational meritocratic mould produced by the Congress ethos, starting his career at the World Bank. He was a consultant to the Reserve Bank of India and a member of the Economic Advisory Council under

PM Manmohan Singh. He was associated with energy company Shell and worked as a fellow at the Brussels-based think-tank Bruegel, whose members include Accenture, Apple, Facebook, Google, HSBC, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, Huawei and Amazon. Virmani, another economic whizkid whose ideology is his career, served under Congress governments and is an IMF maven. He was once the chief economic advisor to the UPA regime.

Saraswat, considered an eminent scientist, was also a secretary in the UPA government and a DRDO honcho, in a post once held by A P J Abdul Kalam. Controversies dogged his tenure. In 2012, the UPA imposed certain restrictions on his financial powers after an internal audit and scrutiny by the auditor general red-flagged some of his decisions. Though he was denied an extension, a year later, the same Manmohan Singh government awarded him a Padma Bhushan. Even B V R Subrahmanyam, a former IAS officer who served as private secretary to Manmohan Singh, has been retained as CEO.

Schrödinger stands vindicated because soon after the BJP came to power in 2014, he was inducted as a member of the newly-created NITI Aayog. Paul and Chand didn't have such luck with the UPA. Dr Paul headed the department of paediatrics at AIIMS for nearly a decade. But he wasn't crowned with the laurel wreath of directorship for unknown reasons. Good luck came in the form of the BJP sarkar: he was appointed a NITI Aayog member in August 2017 to oversee the health, nutrition and human resource verticals. He is now around 70 years old. Chand, the youngest member, has a PhD in agricultural economics and monitors the agricultural sector.

But change is in the stars, indicating how the NITI Aayog will think and deliver. As a member of its governing council, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu will be a game-changer. So far, the council has met less than a dozen times over the past decade. Naidu, like Modi, is a man of ideas and thinks big. Advised by domain experts, he is likely to present alternative developmental growth models that would accelerate real development in the states with enhanced private participation. He wouldn't let babus and young foreign-trained professionals dictate the narrative. His neighbour in power, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, is raring to participate in his first meeting of the council. He, along with the two other Congress CMs, will push for significant alterations in the current supply-side policies of the NDA government.

Apart from at NITI Aayog, Modi has chosen continuity over change in key positions in his office and diplomatic assignments, too. His principal secretary P K Mishra and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, both over 75 years old, will stay put, having set the record of any

civil servant or advisor staying beyond a decade in the same office. Both have been spectacularly efficacious in implementing Modi's policies. During their earlier stints in various capacities, the Double Doyens showed effective administration skills using innovative strategies. Both enjoy a Union cabinet rank. While allocating portfolios to his ministers, too, the PM has preferred continuity over change in sensitive ministries such as finance, home, defence, external affairs and infrastructure. All incumbents will break the record for staying in the same chair for more than five years.

Sticking to the continuity clause in diplomacy, Modi chose the outgoing Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra as India's 29th ambassador to the US. For the first time in South Block's history, the ministry of external affairs is headed by a former foreign secretary who was the Indian ambassador to both China and US for six years. Previously, experienced, senior political leaders were India's foreign ministers, high commissioners to Britain or ambassadors to the US. The deviation happened in the past two decades when successive prime ministers opted for Indian service officers to lead missions in both the key countries Kwatra is the 10th IFS officer to be appointed ambassador in a row. Of the 29 ambassadors to the US, 10 were from the IFS, three from the IAS and four from the elite Indian civil service founded by the British. For the UK, the last 14 high commissioners were drawn from the foreign service; of the 29 high commissioners since independence, half were from the IFS, while the IAS had just one.

The reshuffle of the bureaucracy, appointment of new advisors and restructuring of various academic, scientific and economic institutions are a work in progress. One thing is abundantly clear: electoral verdicts may alter ideological affiliations, but continuity of bureaucratic supremacy will retain its vice-like grip over policy formulations. Gauging from the ideological and institutional profiles of the talent chosen so far, and likely future picks, continuity is the Modi mantra. The minimal change is the exception that proves the rule. The rest have no choice but to be content with the quantum of solace.



ANI



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India* (shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

It is argued that expansion of welfare—tax cuts for the middle class, a national cash transfer scheme for women, an urban employment scheme and higher payout under PM Kisan Samman Nidhi—will prop consumption. Yes, money in the hands of people could spur consumption, but conditions apply. The question is who gets how much. Will a few thousand rupees assuage tax payers? And not all payouts deliver electoral dividends—the Maharashtra government's May 30 gambit, the Namu Shetkari Scheme promising ₹6,000 as top-up on PM Kisan, didn't quite deliver.

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The creation of new cities offers an opportunity to blend ease of living, business and governance. A UN study estimates India will add over 400 million dwellers to the urban populace by 2050. Nearly half of India's billion-plus population will be living in urban areas. It is time to exit undefined agglomerations and create new habitats. If there is one idea with omnipotence—social, economic and political—it is the need to create new cities.

HAND ROCKING THE CRADLE CAN CHANGE INDIA



OPINION

GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN
Former bureaucrat and author, most recent, of *The Spell of the Rain Tree*

HERE was a recent report that a multinational firm in Chennai had taken a policy decision against recruiting married women. The matter is being investigated by the authorities. It is welcome that such discrimination, which is encountered by lakhs of women in the labour market, is considered news. With constitutional guarantees of equality in education and employment, women in India have achieved success in educational and professional fields when provided with opportunities. However, a large proportion of women do encounter subtle biases when professional merit is overlooked during recruitment or promotion, and their domestic responsibilities influence decisions.

The female labour force participation rate in India, which refers to women aged 15 and above who are either working or looking for a job, was at 32.8 percent for 2021-22, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey. While this is below

the global average of 47 percent, it has been steadily rising for several years. Structural changes such as a decline in fertility rates and expansion of women's education account for this increase. However, obstacles still exist due to bias and societal norms. This squanders the potential of a sizeable percentage of citizens being employed, leading to a substantial loss in economic productivity. The survey also highlighted that 44.5 percent of the women not in the labour force stayed out due to 'childcare or personal commitments in home-making'.

One peculiar situation underlines the dilemma faced by working women. In rural areas, a decline in women's employment has been observed, when there is a scarcity of water in summer months. If women go to work, the family goes thirsty. According to the NGO International Development Organisation, Indian women spend 150 million workdays every year fetching water. The government's measures to provide piped water to rural households have mitigated this problem to an extent.

In a large majority of cases, marriage nips promising careers in the bud. It is not uncommon that in arranged marriages, conditions are laid down that the woman will discontinue employment after marriage. Women are expected to be carers and homemakers in the marital home. Non-working, however, does not mean a life of leisure. About 90 percent of all housework falls on women, even while they remain invisible and voiceless. The Supreme Court has recently

observed that women who perform endless household chores need to be given access to financial resources and partake in financial decisions.

Domestic responsibilities continue to be lopsided even when both partners in a household work full-time. While family dynamics determine specific outcomes, society upholds normative gender roles that burden working women. Many women report facing 'weaponised incompetence', a sense of helplessness in men, when they step in to share domestic

Women often encounter biases during recruitment and promotion when professional merit is overlooked and domestic responsibilities are gender-linked. Flexible work and childcare support can go a long way in boosting India's economy

chores. In such circumstances, it is quicker and efficient for women to complete the chores themselves. Women of an earlier generation who pursued career goals with enthusiasm were shamed for neglecting the family. This is probably one of the reasons why younger women are opting out of or delaying marriage, or preferring to be in a DINK (double-income, no kids) situation.

Denying women access to jobs has held

back India's economy. The skewed labour force affects distribution of wealth between genders. Working women are more likely to take decisions on allocation of disposable incomes and spend more on the well-being of their children.

An ILO study has pointed out that, globally, women are paid 20 percent less than men on an average. This gap widens even as women climb the corporate ladder. Claudia Goldin, the Nobel-winning economist, has highlighted that 'greedy jobs', where longer working hours are disproportionately rewarded, are the ones that women tend to lose out on.

Flexibility in the work place and childcare support are ways forward to a more equitable work environment. The government has taken the lead by providing maternity leave of 180 days and childcare leave of up to two years to female employees. Upskilling and reskilling will benefit women returning to work after a gap due to childcare. There is also a requirement for crèche facilities to be made available in organisations that have more than 50 female employees. Organisations should conduct periodical audits to identify gender disparity in pay and promotional opportunities, and rectify institutional biases, if any.

Being employed and financially independent are empowering experiences. It gives women a sense of identity other than that of being a mother, daughter or wife, and expands their sphere of influence. To tweak an old saying, the hand that rocks the cradle can change the world.

QUOTE CORNER

She is an inspiration and a six-time world champion. I don't think I can break her world championship record. Chasing that in today's time is impossible. But hopefully, I will try my best at the Olympics to get to the final round and fight for a silver or gold medal. Mary Kom and Lovlina Borgohain won bronze medals; I want to change the colour of the medal.

Nikhat Zareen, 28-year-old Indian boxer who has won two World Championships gold medals, on comparison with M C Mary Kom before the Paris Olympics

Israel is under an obligation to provide full reparations for the damage caused by its internationally wrongful acts to all natural or legal persons concerned.

International Court of Justice, the highest UN court, while declaring Israel's occupation of West Bank and East Jerusalem illegal in a non-binding advisory opinion

I knew this mad man would soon be back. He's incapable of unifying peanut butter & jelly.

Eric Swalwell, US Representative and a Democrat, responding to Donald Trump's rants after calling for national unity following the attempt on his life

MAILBAG WRITE TO letters@newindianexpress.com

Trust deficit
Ref: *Lessons from India's midnight tryst with fiscal destiny* (Jul 18). When states agreed to share GST with compensation for losses, the Union government stealthily added to its kitty through cesses. There must be an independent body to implement the agreed formula. As the author rightly said, democracy can achieve great results if states and the Centre work together without a trust deficiency.
Jayachandran C, Chennai

Dairy development
Ref: *Waiting for the bulls to come home* (Jul 20). While amazingly tracing our efforts to improve dairy yields by careful breeding of cattle from the mid-1930s to the present-day Gokul Mission, the writer has rightly emphasised the need to focus on better breeds so that Indian milk yields can become three times higher than what it is at present.
N Rama Rao, Chennai

Trump trouble
Ref: *Existential peril not always a trump card* (Jul 20). Many considered Donald Trump becoming the US president in 2017 an aberration in history. If Trump gets elected again, it will be disastrous not only for the US but also for the whole world order. Can the US afford to entrust the nuclear button to Trump, who is led more by instincts and intuitions?
C G Kuriakose, Kothamangalam

Religious laws
The Supreme Court's decision that a Muslim man should pay alimony to a divorced Muslim woman under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code has reiterated the position the court had taken in the Shah Bano case. The decision has been cavilled by some elements. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board has objected, saying they are required to follow their personal law. If they want sharia laws to be sacrosanct for Muslims, will they allow Hindus to follow the Manu Smriti, which Hindus may regard as sacrosanct?
K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Hygienic food
The mandate to display the name and number of eatery owners along the routes of kanwar yatras in UP, Uttarakhand seem malafide. Rather than giving the choice of picking an eatery by religion or caste, it is rather more important to give safe and hygienic food to the pilgrims. The authorities should be more particular about the health and hygiene aspects and that the pilgrims are not exploited.
Krishnaprasad S, Palakkad

MLAs' attendance
I was shocked to read the arrangements made by the speaker of the Karnataka assembly to enable our so-called honourable state legislators to attend proceedings of the House. This is the height of arrogance from our elected representatives. These people promise anything while contesting elections and forget everything after getting elected. Shame on these MLAs. I would like to suggest to the speaker to cut their salary and perks whenever they don't attend the assembly for a part or a full day.
Anand Joshi, Hubballi

Left arrogance
The Kerala CPI(M)'s haughtiness is showing from the local to higher levels. The term 'Communist arrogance' has become common in Kerala after the LDF's Lok Sabha defeat, also seen as a reason for the losses. The recent Students' Federation of India and CPI(M) atrocities in Koyilandy, Kariavattom and Thiruvananthapuram are incidents of the same sort. Urgent fixes are needed for the party. It seems they have forgotten they are now limited to governance in a single state.
Mohammed Shafi, Kozhikode

Budget hopes
We hope that Nirmala Sitharaman does not fall into the familiar trap of doling out freebies while delivering her budget speech on July 23 and continues along the path of fiscal prudence, like she has tried to do over the last five years. We also hope that the budget will not be stealing Paul to pay Peter in the outlays this time.
Akhilesh Krishnan, Navi Mumbai

REFLECTIONS

Election, wedding, disgust

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

HERE are weeks when I don't know what to do as I sit down to write my column. Nothing happens and the world seems to be asleep. However, this time, there is such a surfeit of events that I don't know where to start. So let's begin with the drama unfolding in the US. After the high-octane national elections here, all those suffering from withdrawal symptoms were delighted to plug into another political battle. Initially, it seemed like a pow-wow between two well-defined political actors who had nothing but hot air to offer. We giggled at the gaffes that a doddering Biden made and, after his disastrous performance in the first presidential debate, political chatter shifted to whether he was even fit to be a candidate. Then came the ear-splitting din created by the gunshot that rang out at Trump's rally where he escaped literally by a hair's breadth. Memes were created and shared widely, each one funnier than the last. Seriously, though, the consequences of this election are going to affect the rest of the world in the coming years, so it's no laughing matter any more. The latest is that Biden has tested positive for Covid. God save America is all I can say.

Come now to the Ambani wedding that soaked up all the oxygen in India and large parts of the world. The sheer scale of the vulgarity, shameless display of wealth and bad taste left many of us swooning. No matter how hard one tried to escape it, virtually every national channel (many owned by the Ambanis), social media sites and gossip columns made sure that you were compelled to see it, week after week. The size of the emeralds

(bigger than *tindas*) Nita Ambani wore, the designer *lehengas* and *sherwanis* the rest of the assembly wore (no matter how comical they looked), the long roster of celebrity guests from around the world, the gifts received by the newly-weds — all are by now public knowledge, thanks to the well-oiled PR machinery that was pressed into service.

Jokes apart, could there have been a more dignified way of celebrating a wedding in the House of the Ambanis? The answer is an unqualified yes, but in a country that is now staring into its phones all the time, the wonder of the spectacle trumped (sorry for this word) all such considerations. Look around your-

As drama unfolds in the US, the Ambani wedding *tamasha* keeps India engrossed, and an iconic Canadian writer's sordid story leaves one stunned

selves and tell me which Indian family has the courage today to hold a quiet, private wedding? From our helpers to our family, friends and colleagues, Indian parents pay a fortune to the beauticians to lather their daughters with fistfuls of lightening creams and make-up, to the caterers who provide the multi-cuisine feast laid out and for the clothes, jewellery and cash that they have to cough up as dowry — the difference lies only in the scale. In the aspirational society that we have created, austerity and modesty are unknown concepts. Add to that the serials and films that celebrate *tamashas*, there can be no going back to those days when wedding feasts were cooked at home by a *halwai* and the bride wore her mother or grandmother's wedding *sari*. In the Punjab of the Seventies and Eight-

ies, I recall being almost stupefied by the scale of the weddings in a land where the quiet dignity of an *Anand Karaj* ceremony was only a small part of the *chikan-shikan* and *dance-doonce* at other accompanying parties. Naturally, a huge industry has cropped up for curating such mega events and rare is the family that can afford to buck this trend.

I want now to shift to a topic that has made me so sick that I cannot even begin to register my disgust. Alice Munro, the iconic feminist writer, died in May this year at 92 and reams were written about her insightful gaze that revealed the lives of women in provincial Canada. It was the kind of prose that touched you deeply because it was written from the heart. Then, in a recent shocking article written by her daughter, Munro was revealed as a woman who her readers did not know.

Munro's daughter, from her first marriage, lived with her and the stepfather and was sexually abused by the stepfather over years. Like all little girls (she was just nine when this happened first), she found it difficult to speak of it. Eventually, when she did, Alice Munro refused to confront her husband and told her daughter she could not live without him. The sordid story finally reached the court and although he was indicted and convicted, the case was hushed up and never made it to any newspaper or public platform. It was as if there was an unspoken omerta in Canada to not sully the famous writer who had been awarded its first Nobel Prize!

This story has many dimensions. The lack of space restricts me from writing a fuller account of how many girls are groped or sexually abused at some point in their early life by a family member or helper. In our childhood, many such girls were shushed up by their mothers. However, the MeToo movement lifted the veil of shame that had made silence mandatory until then.

I promise my readers I will write about this one day but until then, think about what women undergo for the sake of preserving their family's honour.

British Gen's artist wife and the muse



Sybilla Barrow's paintings of Subedar Major Mauji Ram (left) and as she imagined he would have looked as a recruit. Both are displayed at Jat Regimental Centre, Bareilly.

COL ASHOK AHLAWAT

THE air was getting warmer by the day and the hot weather was coming. Soon it would have full sway over the plains of India, from Peshawar to Calcutta. The offices of the Eastern Command headquarters at Lucknow started packing up for the annual move to the cool hills of Nainital for the summer. They would halt at Bareilly en route.

Sybilla Barrow's husband was the army commander and Nainital held a special attraction for the family. He was born there in 1864. His father had also been a General in the British Indian army.

A carriage was driving the two to a bungalow in Bareilly when she asked him, "George, who are these boys in native costumes?"

"They are the fresh recruits who have arrived for their military training," the General replied.

Sybilla Barrow was an artist with a sensitive eye. She wanted to paint one of those young men she had seen. She got her art box and laid out her painting materials in a room with lots of natural light.

"Would you mind calling a few of those young boys? I would like to make a portrait of one of them," she told her husband. "Bilkul," he replied. He spoke good Hindustani.

He sent a message across to the centre commandant, who conveyed it to the Subedar Major of the Jat Regimental Centre. Soon, a couple of recruits in *dhoti* and *kurti* reached the bungalow.

She sketched for some time and then threw down her pencil, before dismissing the recruits, "Some boys came and I tried to sketch them. They won't do," she told her husband.

The next day, the Subedar Major sent some more recruits to sit for her. One or two were selected, but were sent back again.

A puzzled centre commandant called the Subedar Major. "She wants to draw an ideal young Jat, why can't you select them?"

"*Sahib*, I have sent a fair sample of young men from all over. I have sent boys from Bikaner, Rohtak, Hisar, Meerut. I don't know what the *Mem-*

sahib is looking for?"

Colonel Warden, the centre commandant, told Subedar Major Mauji Ram to go the bungalow himself and find out. Like her husband, Mrs Barrow spoke Hindustani and had a deep affection for India and its people.

"*Memsahib*, what kind of recruits are you looking for? I have sent you the finest recruits," he told her.

Sybilla Barrow took a long look at him, her artistic instincts fully deployed. The Subedar Major was a fine looking man, 6 feet 3 inches tall, with a clean-cut sculpted face. He stood there, a picture of soldierly dignity that long years of service had imparted to him.

"Would you mind if I ask you to go and sit on the chair?" she told him and started sketching the Subedar Major soon enough.

"But *Memsahib*, I am an old man," he protested.

"Never mind, I think you will do perfectly," she shot back.

Many sittings later, the two paintings were complete. Mrs Barrow imagined how he would have looked as a young recruit and drew him out of the sheer power of her imagination.

Both the paintings of Subedar Major Honorary Captain Mauji Ram, Order of British India (OBI), are displayed at the Jat Regimental Centre, Bareilly. The portrait of the young Mauji Ram acquired a symbolic aura; today, it is embossed as the regimental escutcheon and is an iconic symbol of the Jat soldier.

Belonging to Dhandlan village in Jhajjar district of Haryana, he died in 1960. His son, Major Ran Singh Ahlawat, joined his father's battalion. It was part of the British empire forces that surrendered to the Japanese in 1942. Taken a prisoner of war, on the raising of the Indian National Army, he volunteered to join the INA, becoming a staff officer of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Maj Ahlawat's son, too, joined his regiment as an officer.

Two of Subedar Major Honorary Captain Mauji Ram's great grandsons are serving Army officers in the Special Forces.

A third great grandson, Maj Raghunath Ahlawat, also of the Special Forces, died in a counter-terrorist operation in Uri in 2022.

42 hours in an elevator, what it tells

CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

KERALA resident Ravindran Nair's 42-hour ordeal, trapped in a dark and dingy elevator, is really the stuff nightmares are made of. One must really appreciate the man's tenacity for surviving the horror — without food, water, light, or any means of communication with the outside world!

The ghastly incident draws attention to the poor state of elevators in many of our public, commercial and even residential buildings, and more particularly, to the absence of an effective, foolproof system of communication and rescue operations in emergencies. A good alarm and communication system is the lifeline in case of an emergency, where every minute counts — but this is the most neglected part of elevators in India. Nair's experience is typical. He kept on pressing the alarm or the emergency button provided in the lift, but there was no response! There was no other means of communication in the lift to contact anyone trained for rescue in such cases. The lift displayed emergency numbers, but there was no response from any of

them when he called from his cell phone!

Even as he was desperately re-dialing those numbers, his phone fell and stopped working. So, he was stuck in the lift of the Thiruvananthapuram Government Medical College from noon on Saturday till Monday morning, when the liftman reported for duty!

In March this year, 44-year-old Sahabuddin Molla's leg was trapped in the gap between the floor and the elevator shaft at the Alipore treasury building in Kolkata, for two-and-a-half hours. As the lift door opened on the fifth floor and he was stepping out, the elevator jerked and went down a little, trapping his leg. In this case, too, the emergency alarm did not elicit any response. There were 10 people other than Molla, stranded in the lift. Finally, they called the police, who in turn called the fire service and the state disaster management authority — it took them two hours to free the 10 people and another half an hour to extricate Molla's leg.

In such emergencies, delays could cost a life or a limb and that's the reason why the emergency communication system must be infallible and the response immediate. Besides, many of these entrapments are tricky and the rescue operations should be handled by those trained for the job. If there is an alarm, it should be heard at a place where someone is always available 24/7, maybe where the security staff are located. If there are emergency numbers, those calls should go simultaneously to at least three first responders entrusted with the job.

More importantly, the emergency communication should not be dependent on the elevator

user's cell phone, because the person may not have it, or it may not work. So, there must be a provision for two-way communication at a height that is easily reachable by even a short person, or someone sitting in a wheelchair. Besides analogue, there should be a VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) phone so that if one fails, the other would be available.

Today, many countries are mandating the most advanced communication technologies, keeping in mind the safety of elevator user. In fact, the International Building Code now requires emergency phones in elevators to provide for two-way video and text communication (through a keyboard), keeping in mind those who may have hearing problems or speech impairment. And our lifts do not even have basic phones, and nobody responds to emergency calls or the alarm bells — a gross violation of the consumers' right to life and safety! This must change. Those regulating the elevators should not only ensure reliable communication systems, but also mandate that they be checked regularly. Failure should invite hefty penalties, and the victims should seek compensation and punitive damages from all those responsible for the upkeep of the lift, including the enforcement agencies.

I must also emphasise the need for liftmen/security personnel in public and commercial buildings to always check the lifts before locking the building. If only the liftman at the medical college in Kerala had followed this drill, 59-year-old Nair would not have had to go through that terrifying experience.

Mahlya is dead, the entire village mourns

KULBHUSHANSINGH SURYAWANSHI

WHEN I woke up from my afternoon siesta on a hot summer afternoon, the words that I kept hearing all around were, "Mahlya is dead." Apparently, he had been hit by a car while he tried to cross the highway.

My eight-year-old daughter said, "I was there. He had a small streak of blood at the corner of his mouth. The rest of his body seemed fine. How did he die of such small injury? How did a whole car hit him and he had only a little blood at the edge of his lips?" I tried to explain internal bleeding and haemorrhaging to her, but I was also distracted by all the parallel conversations going on among the people of our village.

When I asked her if she was afraid, she said, "His hands were just like mine, and his eyes too. He looked a little like me. That's why I was not scared when I saw him dead."

"I did not know he was dead when I first saw him. I thought he was just lying down," she added quickly.

"Tatya (her grandfather) buried him behind the Maruti Mandir (Hanuman temple). Lots of people from the village came to see him," she said.

Mahlya was not unpopular in the village, but people were tired of his stealing. He was always perched on the *neem* tree at the edge of the village and made a run for whatever he could get his hands on: a kernel of maize from someone's field, raw mangoes plucked from the tree, bitten into and then dropped to the ground, half-eaten guavas. He never touched *sitaphal* (custard apple). The skin was too bitter for him.

The first time I saw Mahlya was on the terrace of our house on the farm. I have a little room on the terrace, which I use as an office. I was in a meeting on Zoom when I heard a loud crunching sound outside. I came out to find Mahlya munching on the *Kabuli chana* that my mother had spread on a bedsheet to dry.

He stared at me with his golden eyes and dark face. His black hands were frozen mid-air between the floor and his mouth, with a few *chanas* held firmly. His



Mahlya was big, but not threatening.

lips were slightly apart and his canines were clearly visible. His long silver tail was now caught behind his back, arching like a question mark.

I made the first move. I tried to shut the door of my room. Two ripe mangoes were next to my laptop, and I was worried that my computer might get dam-

aged if Mahlya lunged for them. When I turned back after closing the door, Mahlya was already halfway to the parapet of the terrace. In one jump, he made it to the *cassia* tree next to the house and then on to the tamarind tree, and then he jumped to the ground where our dog Mowgli tried to chase him.

I knew it was Mahlya the langur the moment I saw him. He was big but not threatening. I had seen threatening langurs before; I had even been attacked, but Mahlya was not like that. He stole food but he was tolerated by the village. He was not liked by anyone, yet everyone cared for him.

They often left a *chappati* or *jowar roti* in the backyard, knowing that Mahlya would come and eat it.

At first, Mahlya was not his name. My father explained that in rural Marathi, Mahlya meant the alpha male of a langur troop, *morkhya vanhar* (lead monkey).

But our Mahlya did not have a troop and so it became his name. He was ousted from his position as Mahlya in his troop by another large but younger male only a few days before the Forest Department sent a

monkey catcher to our village at the behest of the panchayat. The troop was a nuisance. They had become bold enough to enter houses and steal warm *jowar roti* from right next to the earthen *chulha*.

Some langurs chased little kids if they had food in their hands, and others jumped on the tin roof, which would cave in from the weight.

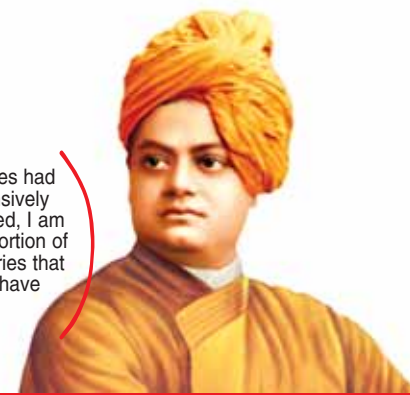
The monkey catcher got everyone, but Mahlya escaped. He was still licking his wounds outside the village at the edge of the forest. The troop and the new alpha male were taken to the Gyanganga wildlife sanctuary, some 60 km away, never to be seen again.

When people from my village saw Mahlya after that, they recognised him and felt sorry for him and perhaps a little ashamed of their actions, and so the guilt meant them care for him.

But now, he was dead. He had been hit by a car and my father and daughter had buried him, and many people from the village came to see him, a langur, one last time.

— The writer is director of the India Programme of the Snow Leopard Trust

"If faith in ourselves had been more extensively taught and practiced, I am sure a very large portion of the evils and miseries that we have would have vanished"
— Buddha



A MODEL FOR INDIA'S SMART CITY ASPIRATIONS

From integrating advanced technologies to fostering community engagement, New Taipei City offers a wealth of lessons that can guide Indian cities towards a smarter and more sustainable future, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

New Taipei City, Taiwan's most populous city, has emerged as a leading example of smart city development, integrating advanced technology, sustainable practices, and citizen-centric services. As India embarks on its ambitious Smart Cities Mission, there are valuable lessons to be learned from New Taipei City's approach to urban planning and management.

One of the biggest achievements of New Taipei City is its involvement of citizens in various facets of planning and execution and participation. New Taipei City actively involves its citizens in the planning and decision-making process. "Through public consultations, digital platforms, and community programs, residents are encouraged to participate in shaping the city's future. This collaborative approach has fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among citizens," says Dr Tih-Ju Chu, deputy mayor of New Taipei City, Government of Taiwan.

As far as the Indian smart city concept is concerned, it has been a bureaucratic exercise where citizens have had hardly any role to play. Engaging citizens in the smart city development process is crucial for ensuring that the initiatives meet the needs and aspirations of the people. Indian cities should leverage digital tools and community engagement strategies to involve residents in planning, implementation, and monitoring of projects. We embarked upon making Varanasi into Kyoto but have reached nowhere. Perhaps the biggest reason for this has been the government's top-down approach where people come last. Local people know their city better than any bureaucrat or politician and their input can go a long way in preserving the cultural heritage of the city and modernising it at the same time.

New Taipei City fosters a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, providing support for startups and encouraging technological advancements. The city has established innovation hubs, incubators, and co-working spaces

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF NEW TAIPEI CITY IS ITS INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS IN VARIOUS FACETS OF PLANNING AND EXECUTION AND PARTICIPATION. NEW TAIPEI CITY ACTIVELY INVOLVES ITS CITIZENS IN THE PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. “THROUGH PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS, RESIDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN SHAPING THE CITY'S FUTURE”



that nurture talent and drive economic growth. Encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship should be a priority for Indian smart cities too. By creating supportive ecosystems for startups, providing access to funding, and facilitating collaboration between academia, industry, and government, Indian cities can become hubs of innovation and economic development. After all, no city can thrive without a robust locally sustained economy. People must find jobs and reasons to settle in a smart city, else it may end up like several ghost cities of China. Yet another initiative that makes New Taipei City a model is sustainability. "The city mayor places a strong emphasis on sustainability, incorporating green building practices, renewable energy, and

efficient waste management systems. The city has extensive green spaces, promotes the use of public transportation, and encourages eco-friendly practices among residents," says Dr Tih-Ju Chu. Indeed, sustainable urban development should be at the core of India's smart cities initiative. By prioritising green infrastructure, renewable energy projects, and comprehensive waste management systems, Indian cities can reduce their environmental footprint and enhance the quality of life for their residents. New Taipei City has implemented intelligent transportation systems (ITS) to enhance mobility and reduce traffic congestion. These systems include smart traffic signals, real-time traffic monitoring, and integrated public transportation

networks. The city's focus on multimodal transportation options has made commuting more efficient and accessible. Unfortunately, traffic and commuting are one of the biggest challenges. In a city like Bengaluru, India's IT hub, commuting is a nightmare. To address urban mobility challenges, Indian smart cities should invest in ITS, including smart traffic management, real-time public transport information, and infrastructure for non-motorized transport. Developing a comprehensive and efficient transportation network can alleviate congestion and improve the overall commuting experience. One of the cornerstones of New Taipei City's success is its adoption of cutting-edge technology to

streamline governance. The city has implemented an integrated digital platform that connects various departments, enabling real-time data sharing and decision-making. This has resulted in efficient public service delivery, reduced administrative costs, and improved transparency. Indian smart cities can benefit from creating unified digital platforms that foster inter-departmental collaboration, enhance service delivery, and promote transparency. Investing in robust ICT infrastructure and data analytics can drive more informed policy decisions and optimize resource allocation. Situated in a region prone to natural disasters, New Taipei City has prioritised building resilient infrastructure and robust disaster management systems. The city employs advanced monitoring and early warning systems, conducts regular drills, and has developed comprehensive emergency response plans. Implementing early warning systems, conducting regular drills, and involving communities in disaster management plans can significantly reduce the impact of disasters.

Let us face it, India's smart city project faces several significant challenges that hinder its progress. Foremost among these is the bureaucratic approach that often sidelines citizen participation and local insights, resulting in top-down planning that lacks community buy-in. Additionally, there is a persistent lack of robust infrastructure and technological integration, impeding the development of effective digital platforms and smart solutions. Moreover, coordination between various government departments and private stakeholders is often fragmented, leading to inefficiencies and delays. Without addressing these fundamental issues, the ambitious vision of India's smart cities may remain unfulfilled. We must be open to such initiatives outside of India and there would be no harm in trying the best practices from around the world. The lessons from New Taipei City serve as a blueprint for India's smart cities to follow, ensuring that they meet the needs of their residents while addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES INDIA AND CHINA BEYOND BINARIES

There is more to India and China relations that meets the eye and a lot goes behind the curtain in the people's republic of China writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

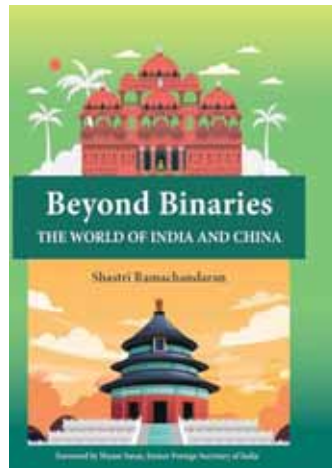
The book "Two Binaries: The World of India and China" by Shastri Ramachandran has generated significant interest. It explores several issues confronting the two countries and their bilateral relations. The author has ostensibly analysed why they behave as they do and what prevents the two countries from coming closer. Shastri Ramachandran is a journalist and well-versed in Chinese culture, having spent considerable time there, which makes him an authority on the subject. Indeed, he knows more about China than many so-called experts here. Although I haven't read the book, I recently participated in a discussion organised by the publishers to promote the book and initiate an informed debate. The discussion was chaired by Professor Madhu Bhalla, with veteran journalist Paranjay Guha Thakurta and Professor Arvind Yelery as other panelists.

The discussion certainly achieved its purpose and initiated a debate on Indo-China relations and our skewed understanding of China as a country beyond TV news and newspaper articles, often superficial in nature. China is always on the minds of most Indians. We have a love-hate relationship with it: we love it when we use its cheap products and buy them to profit in the domestic market. As Paranjay Guha Thakurta pointed out, most businesses would struggle without Chinese imports. Most pharmaceutical companies use raw materials from China, as do many car companies which import Chinese spares.



Indeed, India and China represent 40 percent of humanity and wield enormous power by sheer population size. However, coming together requires overcoming many obstacles. Shastri has the benign notion of making this the Asian century, which is not possible without India and China burying their hatchet. But that is easier said than done. They have historical and geographical factors that keep them apart. Shastri sees Western influence, amplified by our media, as a root cause of strained relations. He praises the Chinese people and believes it is possible to bridge the divide between the two peoples, as we are more than two countries – two

civilizations. However, there is a problem with perception. He sees China as a country painted by the West as evil, and we are expected to accept that view. We do so happily, gulping down Western propaganda as the gospel truth. There is some truth in that. The West has a powerful media with unparalleled reach, capable of making or breaking anyone's image. But that is only part of the truth. Giving China a clean chit is definitely oversimplifying the situation. Let's put it this way: China and the Chinese government are two separate entities often at cross purposes. When you interact with Chinese



people, you encounter individuals who are nice, like people anywhere else. However, when you deal with China as a nation, you deal with its government, which is reactionary and dictatorial. Shastri makes a distinction between Chinese and Arab dictatorships in their construct, but the end result is the same: an oppressive, intolerant, and regressive structure focused on self-preservation. Simply assuming a communist facade does not make one truly communist. Let's face it: Stalin was a dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu was a dictator, Kim Jong Un is a dictator, and so is Xi Jinping. Having a party like Hitler's doesn't

qualify one to be called a Communist (a much-abused term, but I would think of Lenin as one). A fun fact here: Hitler's party was officially called the National Socialist German Workers' Party! On October 22, 2022, Hu Jintao, former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, was escorted out of the hall at the closing ceremony of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. He was pulled from his seat by two men while Xi maintained a stoic face. Was it a Western construct? When Shastri says, and I quote, "Nancy Pelosi leads a delegation to Dharamshala with business stakes in Taiwan, and the Dalai Lama

receives treatment in the US, making clear what is happening," he trivializes the Tibetan struggle and casts aspersions on the Dalai Lama's credentials. The human rights violations and systemic cleansing in Tibet are beyond the scope of this piece. It is not just about Tibet; the Uyghur province, dominated by Muslims, has seen enough misery. The Uyghur province of China has witnessed a series of human rights violations. It includes mass arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, forced labour, sexual violence, and violations of reproductive rights. Many of the cases are well documented. And by the way, there is nothing capitalist about the students' protest in Hong Kong. I wish someone on the panel had spoken about these issues too. Most of them were fixated on Doklam and Galwan and relished Chinese cuisine and the great economic strides China made and how everyone wants to have a piece of the Chinese pie. Interestingly, after taking advantage of Chinese largesse, many African and Asian countries are now waiting their turn to go bankrupt. China's Belt and Road Initiative is turning out to be a noose around hapless economies. China is doing in the 21st century what the West did in the 19th. Do we have a locus standi in criticising China's human rights violations when we have skeletons in our cupboard? Sure, we do. Martin Luther King Jr. said, and I quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!"

INSPIRATIONS BEHIND ZAIRA AND AUTHORSHIP JOURNEY

Professor **VINITA DHONDIYAL BHATNAGAR** shares the personal inspirations behind her novel **ZAIRA** and reflects on her journey from literature scholar to published author

What inspired you to write *Zaira*? Were there any personal experiences or specific events that sparked the idea for this novel?

Zaira was inspired by many events and incidents. I saw a terrible accident on a flyover near my office. The young man was hurled across the parapet and crashed onto the road below. The blood was trickling from his head like a rivulet. This scene has stayed with me and informs one of the most pivotal moments in the plot.

The awareness as a mother and as a college teacher about the vulnerability of our young population also played a part. This is the age of experimentation and exploration, which is fantastic. But they should not fall prey to addictions or to habits that endanger their lives and their futures. This inspired me to write about the cynical, profiteering men who might make a fortune by luring people into consuming drugs.

Can you share your journey as a writer? What were some of the key moments or turning points that led you to become a published author?

I have been studying literature since 1985 and have a PhD in literary studies. So I have a long history of reading. It took guts to jump into writing especially because in my mind I kept comparing myself to the literary greats I had studied. I kept writing and kept getting rejected. Part of the problem was that my characters were not gripping enough. My father passed away in 2010 and his last words to me were not to give up. I am going to keep to that. The publishing industry has changed drastically in the last few years. Maybe my time was now. My editor friend, Kaneez, told me of Book Bakers, my literary agent and they helped place my book.

How do you balance your roles as a professor and a writer? Do you find that your



academic work and storytelling complement each other?

In my fantasies I would have been a full time writer, locked up in a room with my thoughts for company. In reality I am juggling a home, and a job in which I have seventy young people in a classroom and they come from far off places and with distinctive personalities and life stories of their own. I now recognise this as strength. It may give me less time to write but it gives me deeper compassion and understanding. I teach communication skills and my purpose in writing is primarily to communicate rather than impress. My book has been written primarily for the type of people I teach.

The characters in *Zaira* are richly detailed and complex. Can you share your process for developing characters like *Zaira*, Rajyawardhan and Jai? Did any of them change significantly from your initial concept?

Thank you! As you know characterization is what I struggle with the most. So your words are a healing balm to my soul. Frankly, *Zaira* is based on a friend of mine who is like a daughter to me. The story is not hers. The

character is. I asked her at points "What would you wear to this?" or "What would you eat?" "Since I understood her well I could imagine what her responses might be in certain circumstances. Rajyawardhan is based partially on my favorite film star. I saw him on VIP road in Bhopal and I said to myself, "This man will be a legend." I think he is on his way to becoming one. I won't say more or I might be sued! With Jai I was thinking of the migration of the Sindhis to Bhaingarh near Bhopal after partition. A character carries the history of his people and I hope some of that is reflected in Jai's story. What changed significantly throughout the course of the writing was the relationship outcome of Jai and *Zaira*'s story. I was so keen to write a romance. Alas!

***Zaira* is filled with unexpected twists and suspenseful moments. How do you approach plotting a story to maintain tension and keep readers engaged?**

My professor Malashri Lal suggested I start storytelling to live audiences. It's a very difficult art. Listeners get restless and children are bound to say "I am bored" when they are bored. That gives my writing urgency. I don't want to bore you. I don't want to waste your precious

time and attention.

The book touches on serious issues like drug trafficking and personal trauma. What kind of research did you conduct to ensure these aspects were portrayed accurately and sensitively?

I didn't do specific research on these topics but I have always stayed aware of these issues in society. I listened to ex-drug addicts speak about the fear of slipping back into the habit and of the humiliating lives they had led when they were in the grip of addiction. I knew a fantastic young man who just slipped away. It makes me sad. It makes me angry. We are letting our younger generations down if we don't do enough to protect and inform them. I was in the process of losing my mother as I wrote the book. I didn't know it then at a conscious level. But at a subconscious level, something inside me was preparing to let go. That rawness, that vulnerability and ache found itself on to the pages.

Fyodor Dostoevsky works often explore deep psychological and moral issues. How has Dostoevsky influenced your writing, particularly in *Zaira*? Are there specific aspects of his work that resonate with you?

During my MPhil days at Delhi University, I attended a seminar course of Russian Literature. (I must tell you the first four years of my life were spent in Russia. They believed then that the only privileged class should be children and I was treated accordingly.) I think I am obsessed with him because my uncle once dismissed somebody else's writing as "He is no Dostoevsky" Since then he has become my standard of good writing!

As a storyteller, are there any elements of Fyodor Dostoevsky's work that have influenced your writing, particularly in *Zaira*?

Ha Ha! I am arrogant enough

to really crave that comparison. Dostoevsky doesn't bother with facts as much as with states of mind. I find it difficult to add irrelevant details just to enhance the literariness of the language or story. He explores the two radically opposing sides of a character or situation. When I read his morally ambiguous characters I feel "This could be me, I could respond like this in this situation." I am hoping readers will feel the same way about my work.

You've mentioned that no change is possible unless the story touches the hearts of its readers. How do you ensure your stories have this emotional impact?

Even as a teacher I am aware miracles can happen and mountains can move if you can touch the hearts of your students. I do have a worldview, an urgent sense of how I think things should be. If I wrote them in a pamphlet it would be thrown away. So I weave a story. One of my favourite writers just revealed that he cried through the writing of his book. He knew the reader could feel the emotion because he felt it first. That is my greatest challenge. Years of struggling with literacy issues of theme, character, plot and conflict means I have a head first approach. I have to get in touch with my own heart to write. When we communicate heart to heart, we understand each other better. That's all I am hoping for.

What do you hope readers will feel or think about after finishing *Zaira*? Is there a particular message or feeling you want to leave them with?

I am hoping they will feel energised and empowered. Mistakes happen. So what? Why be afraid of heartbreak and betrayal to an extent where we forget to live? There are possibilities and opportunities all around us. We have a story to live. Let's make it grand!

BOOK REVIEW

A GRIPPING TALE OF AMBITION, THRILLER AND SELF-DISCOVERY

Zaira is a gripping thriller that blends suspense with societal critique, following a young woman's perilous journey through Bollywood and drug trafficking to uncover the truth behind her idol's death, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

ZAIRA by Prof. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar is a compelling young adult thriller that masterfully blends suspense with social commentary. Set against the glamorous backdrop of Bollywood and the dangerous world of drug trafficking, the novel follows the journey of *Zaira*, an ambitious college student from Bhopal, as she navigates the complex intersection between her dreams of fame and the traditional expectations of her family.

The book introduces key characters like Jai, who provides stability and support to *Zaira* and Rajyawardhan Singh, Layla's charismatic lover whom *Zaira* admires. Rajyawardhan's presence adds complexity to the story, intertwining with *Zaira*'s ambitions and the dangers she faces. Bhatnagar skillfully portrays *Zaira*'s internal conflict as she navigates her relationship with Jai, initially a source of joy and comfort, which becomes a lens for her own desires and aspirations. Jai plays pivotal roles in shaping *Zaira*'s journey, enriching her character development. Rajyawardhan also influences *Zaira*'s decisions, adding depth to the narrative dynamics.

One of the most striking aspects of the book is its exploration of societal pressures and their impact on individuals, especially women. *Zaira*, initially portrayed as a somewhat naive and idealistic young woman, faces judgment and ridicule from her peers for her choices. The dialogue between Shikma and Deepa, who mock *Zaira* for her slipping grades and newfound relationship, highlights the harsh scrutiny that women often face. This criticism is not merely about academic performance or personal relationships but is deeply rooted in societal expectations and the pressure to conform to traditional roles.

The book grips you from the first page to the last, urging you to finish it in one sitting as you delve into every character and their stories. Author beautifully portrays *Zaira*'s journey, creating a remarkable reading experience. The subplot involving

Rajyawardhan Singh adds suspense and danger, *Zaira*'s involvement in a dangerous drug trafficking investigation and the subsequent threats to her life bring a sense of urgency and tension. Her time in isolation, grappling with fear and turmoil, showcases her inner strength, particularly in her struggle to maintain sanity and self-awareness.

Bhatnagar's writing is engaging and evocative, drawing readers into *Zaira*'s world from the first page. The pacing is well-managed, balancing the thriller elements of the drug trafficking investigation with moments of introspection and character development. The author's ability to weave together personal growth, suspenseful plot

twists and broader societal issues is commendable. The novel's exploration of the complexities of human relationships and emotions adds depth to the narrative. *Zaira*'s evolving relationships with her family members, her romantic entanglements and her changing perception of Layla (whom she initially idolizes) all contribute to a human connection and growth.

ZAIRA is more than just a thrilling page-turner; it's a profound exploration of personal growth, societal pressure and the quest for justice. Bhatnagar's nuanced

characters, engaging plot and evocative writing create a story that resonates long after the final page is turned. Once you start reading, you'll be eager to finish it in one go, drawn to explore every character and their stories. The book is highly recommended for readers who enjoy emotionally rich narratives combined with cultural authenticity and suspenseful elements. *ZAIRA* stands out as a remarkable contribution to contemporary Indian literature. It offers a thought-provoking experience that prompts readers to reflect on their own life choices and the societal forces that shape them. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar has crafted a novel that is both a gripping thriller and a sensitive portrayal of a young woman's journey to self-discovery, making it a must-read for fans of the genre and beyond.



LOBSTER LOVE

PAWAN SONI discovers how Delhi is experiencing a culinary renaissance with new venues offering world class ingredients



PAWAN SONI
Food critic and founder of the Big F Awards



Getting high-quality lobster in Delhi can be quite a challenge. This is why I make it a point to attend most crab and lobster festivals in the city, where the freshness and quality of these exquisite sea creatures are guaranteed.

I have enjoyed several memorable meals at Shang Palace, Shangri-La Eros Delhi, and the ongoing 'Clawsome Chobster' meal was no exception. This special menu features dishes made with both chicken and lobster, likely to appeal even to those who don't typically enjoy shellfish.

We began with a lobster and mango salad, a perfect summer dish. The sweetness of the lobster meat and fresh mangoes, combined with the coconut sauce, was perfectly complemented by the texture of lettuce and the acidity of lemon. For those who enjoy Chongqing chicken with its bullet chili heat, the lobster version is a must-try. The lobster, with its meat still clinging to the shell, is truly a palate pleaser. After tasting this, I wonder if I'll ever enjoy the chicken version as much. The only chicken dish we tried in starters was the bang bang chicken. Coated with panko/breadcrumbs for the extra crunch for this juicy chicken breast filling, it surely had the bang. Though for the sauce, I missed the mayonnaise in the dip which is normally

mixed with sweet chilly sauce. In the dim sum selection, we tried the kaffir lime lobster dumplings served with oscietra caviar. Though the kaffir lime flavor was somewhat subdued, these beautifully crafted dumplings were delightful. The lobster and chicken siu mai were expertly made with thin skins and juicy fillings. Feeling quite full after the starters, we decided to skip the carbohydrate dishes, which

included fried rice with lobster, chicken, and egg. Another intriguing option was the Chobster, a whole grilled chicken served with lobster rice. This dish, as our server mentioned, requires about 45 minutes to prepare, so we opted for the chili pepper lobster tail instead. During our meal, Mr. Abhishek Sadhoo, General Manager of the hotel, stopped by, and we exchanged pleasantries. When

asked about the sourcing of their lobsters, he proudly shared that they are flown in from Canada. I am eagerly anticipating their new festival offerings, which will feature an abundance of lobster, reflecting their commitment to bringing top-quality seafood to India. Shhh... keep this secret between us. Delhi is experiencing a culinary renaissance, with new venues offering world-class

ingredients. If you love seafood as much as I do, don't miss this special menu, available only until July 21, 2024.

(Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com)

Address: Shang Palace, Shangri-La Eros, 19 Ashoka Rd, Janpath, Connaught Place, New Delhi, Delhi
Phone: 011-41191919



A CULINARY COACH

Introducing Capital Diner, a unique restaurant located in a refurbished railway coach, providing travelers and locals with a nostalgic and immersive dining experience at the New Delhi Railway Station

Nestled within the bustling confines of New Delhi Railway Station lies Capital Diner, an enchanting escape that seamlessly blends the nostalgia of old-world train journeys with the flair of contemporary dining. This innovative restaurant, housed within a meticulously refurbished railway coach, promises an unforgettable culinary experience for travelers and locals alike. Stepping into Capital Diner is equivalent to embarking on a journey through time.

Capital Diner offers a unique blend of history, ambiance and exquisite cuisine, making it an ideal spot for travelers and locals alike. Upon entering Capital Diner, guests are transported back in time, as the restaurant's design combines the charm of American diners with the luxury of old-world train journeys. The interior, fashioned from a retired Indian Railways coach, exudes an air of elegance and charm reminiscent of the bygone era of train travel. Rich brown vertical stripe wallpaper, evoking memories of the legendary Orient Express, complements plush mallard shade suede booth seating and tasteful mosaic tiling. Soft beige LED lighting strips cast a gentle, starlit glow, enhancing the ambiance with a touch of luxurious warmth. Beyond its captivating aesthetics, Capital Diner delights diners with a diverse menu that celebrates both traditional Indian flavors and international cuisines. From hearty kadhai paneer paired with freshly baked naan to creamy penne tomato pasta with succulent chicken, every dish is crafted with meticulous attention to detail and premium ingredients. Each bite is a witnessed to the culinary expertise of the restaurant's dedicated chefs, ensuring a gastronomic journey that satisfies even the most discerning palate.

"We are delighted to introduce Capital Diner, where the romance of



railway travel meets the sophistication of modern dining," shares Mr. Harish Kumar Arora, Founder of Capital Diner. "Our aim is to create a dining experience that not only tantalises the taste buds but also evokes cherished memories of train journeys past."

Capital Diner stands as a testament to innovation in the culinary landscape of New Delhi, offering more than just a meal but an immersive experience that celebrates the cultural heritage of India's railway history. Whether seeking a quick bite before catching a train or a leisurely dining experience amidst the station's vibrant atmosphere, Capital Diner promises an unparalleled fusion of nostalgia and culinary excellence.

So, next time you find yourself at New Delhi Railway Station, don't just pass through - immerse yourself in the allure of Capital Diner. Indulge in the ambiance, savor the flavours and rediscover the magic of train travel through a dining experience like no other.

FAST FACTS

Circulating Area, New Delhi Railway Station, Near Ajmeri Gate, Connaught Place, New Delhi. Hours: 11 AM to 11 PM
Price for Two: INR 600 Instagram: @capital.diner

EMBRACING VEGANISM IN ZURICH

When considering a trip to Switzerland, famous for its chocolate and cheese, you may question if it suits vegans. Yet, surprisingly, Switzerland is an exciting destination for vegans, offering unexpected delights. In Zurich, there are chances to explore innovative sustainable dining options

BY AKANKSHA DEAN

Switzerland pleasantly surprised me with its vegan options. Local supermarkets carry a variety of vegan products such as plant milk, tofu, lentils, and Swiss vegan brands like New Roots Cheeses and Planted Vegan Meats. The cities like Zurich, Geneva, Lugano, Bern, and Lucerne offer many vegan-friendly restaurants listed on Happy Cow. Zurich and Geneva stand out in the vegan scene, but other cities also provide for vegans. Be sure to check food labels for hidden dairy ingredients. Swiss cities feature diverse vegan eateries like Tibits and Hiltl serving global cuisine. Do try the traditional Swiss dish Rösti. During my month-long stay in Zurich following a vegan diet, I discovered the city's vibrant vegan scene, surprising given its reputation for banking and luxury shopping. Haus Hiltl, the world's oldest vegetarian restaurant on Sihlstrasse 28, 8001 Zurich, offers classic dishes like house-made meatballs and rich Bolognese bowls. Guests can enjoy a la carte options or the vegetarian buffet, allowing them to savour various flavours. Hiltl Sihlpost near the main train station offers buffet options for breakfast and other meals. One remarkable aspect of Haus Hiltl is its carefully curated menu, making it a top choice for those with specific dietary needs like gluten-free, nut-free, or soy-free preferences. Discover and savour these top dining destinations in the city.

REDEFINING GASTRONOMY

Zizi Hatab, a Moroccan immigrant raised in a multicultural setting near the Mediterranean coast of Spain, is redefining gastronomy with plants. Despite starting with a background in Spanish fishing gastronomy, Zizi's journey led her to Barcelona for engineering studies, where she balanced hosting dinners in her student dorm with exploring tapas venues. Transitioning to a corporate engineering role in Switzerland, Zizi's passion for cooking persisted. Without professional culinary experience, she boldly approached top Swiss chef Andreas Caminada, securing an internship at his renowned restaurant, Schloss Schauenstein. Returning to Zurich in 2019 to prepare for the launch of her debut restaurant, KLE, Zizi made a bold decision to offer an exclusively plant-based menu and lifestyle. Despite scepticism from various quarters, Zizi remained steadfast in aligning her values with her culinary vision, believing in the transformative power of a plant-based diet and food's ability to connect people. Through KLE, Zizi aims to inspire a change in consumer habits by offering a culinary experience based on love, innovation in plant-based cuisine, and sustainability. Emphasizing locally sourced ingredients and sustainability, Zizi creates a welcoming atmosphere for both her teams and guests, fostering memorable dining encounters. Her pioneering work in plant-based



fine dining at KLE has garnered recognition both locally and internationally, solidifying her influence in the gastronomic realm. Her second establishment, DAR, swiftly became recognized and was highlighted as a top spot by The 50 Best. Particularly noteworthy is DAR being awarded a distinguished Green Michelin Star in 2022. This accolade marks Zizi as the first Swiss vegan chef to attain such an honour, affirming her status among the global culinary leaders. In the same year, Zizi was honoured as one of the 10 emerging chefs influencing the evolution of gastronomy in the 50 Next prestigious list.



ELEGANT YET APPROACHABLE FINE DINING AT KLE

Located in the vibrant District 3 of Zurich, KLE's diverse team brings a multicultural flair to Zurich's dining landscape, creating an intimate and welcoming ambiance. An inviting outdoor terrace provides a charming setting for open-air dining when the weather is pleasant. Recently awarded both a green and red Michelin star, KLE stands out as Switzerland's first plant-based restaurant to receive such recognition, a testament to the chef's dedication to culinary excellence. Each dish emphasizes quality ingredients, such as the 'black pearl mushroom' with a

sauce crafted from 25 locally sourced elements like Weggis lemongrass. The house bread, reminiscent of Moroccan buns, served with egg-free aioli made from 'aqua-faba' and Moroccan hummus, along with unique pickled vegetables, showcases the chef's inventive twists on traditional flavours. Sauerklee, a cherished ingredient in various cuisines, highlights KLE's blend of local and global culinary influences, inviting diners to savour a sensory exploration of the chef's culinary heritage.

DAR & ITS COCKTAIL BAR

My visit was truly eye-opening. DAR, meaning 'to give' in Spanish, fuses Moroccan and Spanish influences to create a remarkable plant-based dining experience. The menu showcases fresh seasonal vegetables, artisanal bread, and delectable desserts, inviting diners to explore global flavours like salted lemon mustard buns and turmeric-infused roasted beets. Opting for the chef's selection treats guests to a well-curated array of snacks, entrees, and sweets that leave a lasting impression. Reserving ahead is essential for a table at DAR, especially for the popular weekend vegan brunch featuring delightful honeycomb-shaped pancakes. Adjacent, the Cocktail Bar offers sustainably crafted vegan drinks that embody the vibrant tastes of Spain and Morocco. This 'slow fast food' concept extends to enjoying homemade vegan burgers while respecting the environment.

DAR's atmosphere celebrates guilt-free pleasures that blend taste, tradition, and ethical dining, offering a truly gratifying experience.

PINXTOS AND WINE AT COR

Cor on Weststrasse is a hidden treasure in the heart of Zurich, offering a cosy atmosphere where wine and tapas are the stars. Zineb and Bernd Vogel's love for Catalan cuisine is evident in the carefully crafted plant-based tapas and pinxtos. The wine selection, featuring mainly Spanish and French wines, adds elegance to the experience, promising a diverse culinary journey with each bottle. Savouring delights like stuffed peppers and 'pa amb tomaquet' reveals Cor's dedication to organic, local ingredients. What distinguishes Cor is its innovative wine menu, constantly evolving to complement the diverse menu offerings. Whether for an impromptu aperitif or a relaxed dinner, Cor's charming ambiance and delicious offerings make it a top choice in Zurich's dining scene. A visit to Cor promises a delightful blend of flavours, setting, and warmth that truly elevates the dining experience in Zurich.

AKANKSHA DEAN is an independent food & travel writer, a chef and a catalyst and is the first Indian to have trained at Osteria Francescana, in Modena, Italy, rated as the world's best restaurant in the World's 50 Best Restaurants, in 2016 and 2018 and currently in the Best of The Best Category.