

SCIENCE

Butterflies accumulate enough static electricity to attract pollen

The Hindu Bureau

Butterflies and moths collect so much static electricity whilst in flight, that pollen grains from flowers can be pulled by static electricity across air gaps of several millimetres or centimetres. The finding, published in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*, suggests that this likely increases their efficiency

and effectiveness as pollinators.

The University of Bristol team also observed that the amount of static electricity carried by butterflies and moths varies between different species and that these variations correlate with differences in their ecology, such as whether they visit flowers, are from a tropical environment, or fly during the

day or night. This is the first evidence to suggest that the amount of static electricity an animal accumulates is a trait that can be adaptive, and thus evolution can act upon it by natural selection.

That many animal species accumulate static electricity as they fly most likely through friction with the air is already known. What was not known is whether

butterflies, moths, and other pollinators too accumulate sufficient static electricity, and if the accumulated static electricity can indeed attract pollen.

Testing process

To test this, the researchers studied 269 butterflies and moths across 11 different species, native to five different continents and inhabiting multiple different

ecological niches.

"Butterflies and moths accumulate a net electrostatic charge. All individuals measured, from various phylogenetic, ecological and biogeographical groupings, carried a net electrostatic charge, suggesting that electrostatic charging is a universal trait among the Lepidoptera," they write.

"This shows that despite

their wingbeat frequency being about two orders of magnitude lower than most other insects, butterflies and moths are still capable of accumulating appreciable electrostatic charge." Importantly, the magnitude of the net electrostatic charge on the Lepidoptera measured is sufficient to facilitate contactless pollination, they note.

SNAPSHOTS



Basic reproduction number of Mpx under-estimated

A study found that the basic reproduction number of Mpx ranged between 1.37 (Canada) and 3.68 (Germany). The underestimation rates for the high- and low-risk populations varied between 25-93% and 65-85%, respectively. The estimated total number of Mpx cases, relative to the cases, is highest in Colombia (3.60) and lowest in Canada (1.08). Given the Mpx underestimation, surveillance should be enhanced, and campaigns against the stigmatisation of MSM should be addressed.



Link between kneecap shape and debilitating joint disease

The shape of a person's kneecap could be an indicator of whether they're more at risk of developing osteoarthritis, a study found. Women who develop knee osteoarthritis often experience more severe symptoms than men. While the study did not find unique features among the kneecaps of females, variations in the surfaces of the kneecap were more pronounced in people with osteoarthritis. Different joint surfaces of the kneecap change shape with osteoarthritis, and as disease severity increases.



Transition from gliding to powered flight in bats: study

A study that looked at the evolutionary origins of flight in bats has found evidence which supports the hypothesis that bats evolved from gliding ancestors. The researchers analysed a dataset of limb bone measurements that included four extinct bats and 231 extant mammals. Evolutionary modeling offers support for the hypothesis that selection may be strong on forelimb traits, pulling them from a glider towards a flyer adaptive zone in bats.

Kerala breaks free from centralised testing, sequencing

On July 20, the Thiruvananthapuram-based Institute of Advanced Virology tested the Nipah virus sample in four hours and conveyed the result to the State government at 9 am, while confirmation from NIV reached in the evening

R. Prasad

When highly pathogenic virus outbreaks such as Nipah take place, contact tracing and isolation of close contacts become critical to contain the virus spread. Public health responses can begin only when samples are tested quickly.

In a marked departure from earlier four Nipah virus outbreaks in Kerala, on July 20, samples for Nipah testing were sent to NIV Pune and also to the State government's Institute of Advanced Virology (IAV) in Thiruvananthapuram. The Institute of Advanced Virology, which became fully functional in 2022, tested the sample in four hours and conveyed the Nipah positive test result to the health department by 9 am. Kerala waited till evening for Nipah virus confirmation by the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune before making an official announcement of the outbreak.

Even before Nipah was confirmed by NIV, Kerala swung into action to prevent virus spread based on the result from the IAV lab — it set up a control room in Malappuram, the epicentre of the latest outbreak, put in place a 30-bed isolation ward at the government medical college hospital in Manjeri, and imposed travel restrictions in two panchayats. Also, the Nipah patient's route map was published on July 20 night.

Last year, Kerala was permitted to undertake Nipah testing on its own only on September 20, 11 days after the outbreak began

Towards quicker testing and genome sequencing

With many States reporting outbreaks of emerging pathogens, decentralised testing and genome sequencing have become important

- In all the four Nipah virus outbreaks in Kerala — 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023 — samples were sent only to NIV Pune for testing
- In the latest outbreak, samples were sent to NIV Pune and the Institute of Advanced Virology (IAV) in Thiruvananthapuram for testing

- On July 20, the Institute of Advanced Virology, which got the sample at 5 am, tested the sample in four hours. Result from NIV was received in the evening

- Even before Nipah was confirmed by NIV, Kerala swung into action to prevent virus spread based on the result



There has been one death in the latest Nipah outbreak in Kerala.

from the Thiruvananthapuram-based lab

- The Institute of Advanced Virology is equipped to test 83 viruses, including Nipah, Zika, Chandrapura virus and influenza

- IAV undertook partial

sequencing of the Nipah virus genome and found the virus to be similar to previously reported strains from the region

- Data of the partial genome sequence will be posted in a public database as soon as the annotation is completed

and after 323 samples were tested for the virus by NIV. In the latest outbreak, besides the index case, the Institute of Advanced Virology has been testing all the samples of close contacts. In each case, the testing was completed in four hours and the State government was notified immediately. In contrast, it takes about 24 hours to know the result when samples are sent to NIV.

The Institute of Advanced Virology is a BSL-2 facility and follows BSL-3 practices. For Nipah, the lab has a class-3 biosafety cabinet, which has an enclosed 100% negative pressure facility, that is used for virus inactivation, says Dr. E. Sreekumar, Director of IAV. The IAV lab is equipped to test 83 viruses, including Nipah, Zika, Chandrapura virus and influenza. "In a single sample, we carry out 30-35 tests, so we can identify

the pathogen," says Dr. Sreekumar.

"Contrary to many outbreaks where diagnosis and confirmation have been delayed due to the requirement to ship samples to NIV, as in the case of many of the ongoing outbreaks in multiple States, the decentralised model as seen in Kerala can enable quick response to emerging pathogens," says Dr. Vinod Scaria, a senior consultant at the Vishwanath Cancer Care Foundation.

The importance of decentralised testing was brought to the fore recently in Gujarat which had sent samples to NIV Pune following the outbreak of acute encephalitis in children and yet remained clueless about the cause of deaths in many cases. Three weeks into the outbreak, the Gujarat government on July 18 decided to instead send the samples to the Gandhinagar-based

Gujarat Biotechnology Research Centre, which is equipped with a BSL-2 lab facility to carry out whole genome sequencing to identify the virus that is causing the deaths, *Ahmedabad Mirror* reported. Similarly, as NIV was overwhelmed with Zika samples, the Pune Municipal Corporation in early July was considering sending samples to BJ Medical College in Pune for quicker test results.

Genome sequencing

Not only has Kerala's Institute of Advanced Virology taken the lead in Nipah testing, it has for the first time carried out partial sequencing of the Nipah virus genome. "We carried out partial sequencing of the F and G protein-coding regions [of the Nipah virus]. The coding regions showed complete conservation (both nucleotide and amino acid level) with

Long-term study finds COVID-19 increases diabetes risk

Raivee Jayadevan

Diabetes is a chronic disease affecting hundreds of millions worldwide and has multiple risk factors. The more the risk factors present, the higher the likelihood of developing diabetes. Understanding these factors is essential for prevention. A new study published in *The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology* describes a link between COVID-19 and diabetes.

From databases of tens of millions of people in England registered with their general practitioners, researchers examined the risk of developing diabetes following COVID-19. They found a four-fold increase in risk during the first-month post-infection. The risk remained elevated in two-thirds of these individuals in the second year. Early indications came

in 2020 when doctors across the world noted a surprisingly high occurrence of diabetes in previously healthy individuals following a diagnosis of COVID-19. Some required high doses of insulin. A paper published in the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* in October 2022 from Telangana reported similar findings.

However, observations based on small numbers of patients are not always definitive. For instance, steroid use for COVID-19 raises blood sugar levels on its own. Besides, in any population, diabetes exists undetected in a significant proportion of individuals. This might have been unearthed only because of the medical attention they received after contracting COVID. A reverse causality has also been implicated, with people with diabetes



Steroid use for COVID raises blood sugar levels. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

being at greater risk for severe COVID. It was also unclear whether the rise in blood sugars would settle down after the immediate stress of COVID passed. Thus, the link remained a matter of debate, necessitating larger studies over an extended period.

The new study also examined health records from before and after the vaccine rollout, enabling researchers to investigate the impact of vaccination on

diabetes risk. With a follow-up period exceeding a year, they could assess the persistence of newly diagnosed diabetes. Since the study relied on well-maintained databases from before the pandemic, the findings are unlikely to be due to increased testing alone. The persistence of diabetes into the second year indicates that steroid use alone was not responsible. Two key observations

linked the severity of COVID-19 to an increased risk of diabetes. Firstly, the risk was significantly higher among hospitalised patients. Secondly, vaccinated individuals, who experienced less severe COVID-19, had a lower risk of developing diabetes.

When comparing vaccinated and unvaccinated populations, it is important to address demographic differences. For instance, unvaccinated people in England tended to be younger, healthier, and more likely to be of South Asian or Black ethnicity. Although South Asians have a higher baseline risk of diabetes, younger age lowers the overall risk in a population. To ensure accurate conclusions, the researchers adjusted for these factors, eliminating any inaccuracies from comparing unequal populations.

The increased diabetes risk following COVID-19 is believed to involve at least two mechanisms. The receptors used by the virus to attach and enter human cells are also found in the insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas. Therefore the virus might have damaged these cells. Additionally, the widespread inflammation caused by COVID-19 leads to insulin resistance. Besides adding to the body of evidence connecting chronic diseases and viral infections, the study enhances our understanding of the various mechanisms involved in the development of diabetes. In summary, COVID-19 has increased the burden of chronic diseases among survivors in several ways, with diabetes being one of them.

(Raivee Jayadevan is co-chairman of the National IMA COVID task Force)



Question Corner

Flawed research

How reliable are studies that show moderate drinking has health benefits?

Many published studies have linked moderate drinking to health benefits by comparing them with abstainers, leading to the widespread belief that alcohol, in moderation, can be a health tonic, and suffer from fundamental design flaws. The major issue is that these studies focused on older adults and failed to account for people's lifetime drinking habits. So moderate drinkers were compared with "abstainer" and "occasional drinker" groups that included some older adults who had quit

or cut down on drinking because they had developed any health conditions. This faulty comparison led to the conclusion that people who continue to drink look much healthier. Of the over hundred studies that looked at the relationship between drinking habits, a handful of higher-quality studies that included people who were relatively young at the outset and did not consider former and occasional drinkers as 'abstainers' revealed that moderate drinking was not linked to a longer life.

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

FAQ

What's the Budget push for infrastructure?

Which are the sectors in focus? What are the bottlenecks? Why is the private sector reluctant to invest?

Jagriti Chandra

The story so far:

In her Budget proposals for 2024-25, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has set aside ₹11 lakh crore for capital expenditure, comprising 3.4% of the GDP. With the aim to push States to spend on infrastructure, she said ₹1.5 lakh crore was being made available to them in the form of long-term interest free loans.

Which are the sectors on the radar?

According to an analysis by *The Hindu's* data team, the government has sustained its expenditure as a share of the total Budget on infrastructure which was at 13.9% (as compared to 14.3% in FY2024 RE). The transport sector formed the bulk of the expenditure in FY25BE (Budget estimates) at 11.29%. However, transport's share in the total Budget has come down by 0.4% points from last year. Allocations to the power sector has improved marginally from last year. The Ministry of Roads, Transport and Highways received an allocation of ₹2.78

lakh crore for 2024-25. In FY25BE, the outlay for the Railways continues to be over the 5% mark. It received a record allocation of over ₹2.55 lakh crore. Allocations for signalling and telecom work, under which the KAVACH (automatic train protection system) is included, has increased compared with FY24RE (revised estimates). The allocation for the Ministry of Civil Aviation at ₹2,357 crore saw a decline of 20% from last year. With an allocation of ₹2,377 crore, the outlay for shipping has stagnated. The regional connectivity scheme will receive ₹502 crore.

With many projects nearing completion, the focus also needs to shift from asset creation to asset management as well as on maintenance and safety

What is the progress on roads?

According to the Economic Survey 2024, national highways have grown by 1.6 times from 2014 to 2024. The Bharatmala Pariyojana has significantly expanded the national highway network, increasing the length of high-speed corridors by 12 times and 4-lane roads by 2.6 times between 2014 and 2024. The government is developing 11 industrial corridor projects in a phased manner. In order to attract private investment, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has made a slew of changes to the model concession agreement for Build-Operate-Transfer, including construction support, to ensure timely completion of the projects. But industry says the profitability of the new agreements need to be tested. With many projects nearing completion, the focus also needs to shift from asset creation to asset management as well as maintenance and safety, say experts. The industry seeks standard operating procedures for construction of bridges and tunnels to avoid safety incidents such as the Silkyara tunnel collapse in Uttarakhand in 2023.

What are the challenges in Railways?

The capital expenditure for Indian Railways with a network of over 68,584 route km has increased by 77% over the past five years (₹2.62 lakh crore in FY24) with investments in the construction of new lines, gauge conversion, and doubling. Yet, many challenges remain. According to Afaq Hussain, Director, Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF), the skewed freight movement share in favour of roads has to be amended. Long-haul freight transportation through roads is approximately 25-30% costlier than railways for distances less than 500 km, he pointed out. Other issues such as uncertainty in rake supply, delay in providing adequate infrastructure and sharing of lines by passenger and freight trains also need to be dealt with. Smooth entry and exit of freight vehicles is necessary for efficient loading and unloading operations.

What about shipping and airports?

Under the Sagarmala national programme launched in 2015, a total of 839 projects worth ₹5.8 lakh crore have been undertaken across five key areas including fresh development. Till date, 262 projects worth ₹1.4 lakh crore have been completed. Mr. Hussain explains that though there are more than 230 maritime ports, two ports at JNPT and Mundra handle nearly 40% of export, import cargo. Therefore, there is a need to develop a plan for the remaining ports. As for airports, under the second phase of privatisation in 2019, six AAI airports were privatised. There is a plan to privatise 25 more airports.

What about attracting private investments?

According to CRISIL's Infrastructure Yearbook 2023, between FY2019 and 2023, the Centre contributed 49% of the total investments on infrastructure and State governments 29%, leaving the balance to be covered by the private sector. Jagannarayan Padmanabhan, Senior Director at CRISIL, explains that the private sector has been shying away because of the market risks experienced due to delays in completion of projects which impacts returns.

Are enough formal jobs being created?

What are the schemes announced in the Budget to generate employment? How have economists and experts responded to the proposals? Why has the proportion of salaried workers dropped? Why are wages stagnating? Should there have been more focus on the MSME sector?

Priscilla Jebarai

The story so far:

The Union Budget for 2024-25 made it clear that employment was a major priority of the government, with the word getting 23 mentions in the Finance Minister's speech. With many voters expressing their disenchantment with rising unemployment in the recent election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has lent his title to a package of schemes on employment.

What is the current state of employment?

According to the Economic Survey, India's workforce was estimated to be nearly 56.5 crore in 2022-23, of which more than 45% is employed in agriculture, 11.4% in manufacturing, 28.9% in services, and 13% in construction. Officially, the unemployment rate was just 3.2% in that period, but economists note that these statistics do not reflect ground reality, given the large number of underemployed people in the country and the fact that many job seekers continue to work on farms or the unorganised retail sector or as casual labourers. A person is categorised as employed if he pursued any economic activity for at least 30 days in the preceding year.

Almost one in five people in the workforce (18.3%), mostly women, do not receive any wages for their labour, as they are unpaid workers in household enterprises. The urban unemployment rate for the quarter ending March 2024 stood at 6.7%, while youth unemployment stood at 10% in 2022-23. The percentage of people in regular salaried work has dropped from 22.8% in 2017-18 to 20.9% five years later, despite policy efforts to formalise the workforce; many salaried workers do not have access to contracts or social security benefits

'The need is to raise wages and infuse money into micro, small and medium enterprises, which will have a multiplier effect'

that usually define a formal worker. The government cites enrolment in the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) as evidence of formalisation. The EPFO has 7.3 crore contributing subscribers, though total accounts are 30 crore, including inoperative accounts and multiple accounts held by individuals.

What were specific schemes in the package?

Three of the schemes provide employment-linked incentives. The first scheme is meant to support the hiring of first-time employees, with a wage subsidy of up to ₹15,000 paid to the employee, and is expected to cover one crore people. The second is aimed at the hiring of first-time employees, specifically in the manufacturing sector, with wage subsidies to be paid to both employees and employers for four years, with a maximum incentive of 24% of a ₹25,000 monthly wage. The third supports employers who hire new workers, not necessarily first-timers, by reimbursing up to ₹3,000 of their monthly EPFO contribution. In fact, all three schemes are dependent on employees being registered with the EPFO. The fourth scheme aims to upgrade Industrial Training Institutes and boost skilling efforts, with 20 lakh students expected to benefit. The final scheme, which garnered headlines partly because of its similarities to a proposal in the Congress's manifesto, is aimed at on-the-job skilling, with an ambitious target of one crore youth to be given internships in India's top companies with a monthly allowance of ₹5,000 for one year, with the companies bearing training costs and 10% of the allowance.

What is in the fine print?

Economists and small industrialists say the conditions and procedures built into these schemes may create obstacles for effective implementation. For instance, the incentive scheme for first-time employees, which offers a ₹15,000 subsidy is paid out in three instalments; the second instalment is only payable if the employee undergoes a compulsory online financial literacy course. "This is impractical. Why should employees in every unrelated sector be expected to do this? And why should this be a condition for this incentive?" asks Himanshu, who teaches at Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

More worrying is the clause stating that the subsidy is "to be refunded by the employer if the employment to the first timer ends within 12 months of recruitment." If the employee switches jobs in 10 months, he has already received the benefit of the scheme, but the employer is required to bear the costs; labour

experts say few small employers will be willing to take that risk. The scheme for creating jobs in manufacturing has a minimum requirement of hiring 50 people or 25% of their existing strength, which is a significant number of people to be hired at one go for any firm in return for marginal benefits.

How effective are these schemes likely to be?

These schemes essentially attempt to encourage hiring by reducing the cost of new hires. However, economists note that this is not the main constraint preventing employers from hiring new workers. Anamitra Roychowdhury, a labour economist at JNU, notes that India is already a low wage economy, with real monthly incomes falling over the last five years for the majority of the workforce. "Wage costs are a redundant constraint," he says, adding that while skilling is certainly needed, it is not the central issue preventing hiring either.

"There is a bigger structural reason why the economy is not able to create jobs, and that is due to insufficient demand, caused by low consumption... and the lack of private investment. And if that comes up, then these costs won't matter," notes Amit Basole, professor at Azim Premji University. He adds that these schemes need to be pitched to the niche group of employers for whom such costs do matter, usually small firms with small margins. In fact, Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan indicated in an interview with *The Hindu* that this may have been the government's intention behind the scheme, noting that "fiscal incentives have a role at the margin".

With regard to formalisation of the workforce, Mr. Basole points out that apart from new people entering the workforce, there are also large numbers seeking to leave agriculture, petty trade, unorganised retail and domestic service. The need is to create formal jobs to keep up with the pace of the supply, which is not happening, as evidenced by the fact that the proportion of salaried workers has actually dropped slightly over the last five years.

What else is needed to create jobs?

"When we think of where we need to create jobs, it should not be in the top 500 companies which are largely capital intensive, but in the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) sector, in labour intensive sectors, in small towns. The need is to raise wages there, infuse money into MSMEs, which will have a multiplier effect," says Mr. Himanshu, recommending a bottom-up approach. If the urgent requirement is to stimulate demand by increasing consumption, another step could be to raise wages in MGNREGA, the rural jobs scheme, and create a similar employment guarantee scheme for urban workers, says Mr. Roychowdhury. "This would be the more direct approach to kickstart consumption," he says, noting that the Centre has instead curbed MGNREGA funding.



Downward spiral: Job seekers line up to apply for jobs at a private firm in Hyderabad in 2022. NAGARA GOPAL

Should India focus on natural farming?

What are the concerns on yields? What have been the findings on the ground? How did two studies on the yield potential of natural farming differ? What happened when Sri Lanka decided to ban chemical fertilizers, substituting it with natural ones?

Vikas Vasudeva

The story so far:

In her Budget proposals for 2024-25, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that in the next two years, one crore farmers across the country will be initiated into natural farming supported by certification and branding. Implementation will be through scientific institutions and gram panchayats, adding that 10,000 need-based bio-input resource centres will be established.

What is the mission?

As part of the National Mission on Natural Farming (NMNF), the government intends to motivate farmers to adopt chemical-free farming and draw them towards adopting natural farming willingly on the system's merit. The government believes that the success of the NMNF will require a behavioural change in farmers to shift from chemical-based inputs to cow-based, locally-produced inputs. The natural farming scheme under the 'Bharatiya Prakritik Krishi Paddhati' has a total outlay of ₹4,645.69 crore for six years (2019-20 to 2024-25).

What is natural farming?

In natural farming, no chemical fertilizers and

'If we adopt natural farming for wheat and rice, which are India's staples, we shall be able to feed only around one-third of our population'

pesticides are used. It promotes traditional indigenous practices which are largely based on on-farm biomass recycling with a stress on biomass mulching, use of on-farm cow dung-urine formulation; managing pests through diversity, on-farm botanical concoctions and exclusion of all synthetic chemical inputs directly or indirectly. The emphasis is on improving natural nutrient cycling and increasing organic matter in the soil. Grounded in agro-ecology, it is a diversified farming system that integrates crops, trees and livestock, allowing the optimum use of functional biodiversity. Those advocating natural farming believe that it holds the potential to enhance farmers' income while delivering many other benefits, such as restoration of soil fertility and environmental health, and mitigating and/or reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

What are the challenges and concerns?

Agriculture and food experts have their reservations surrounding a large-scale transition from chemical farming to natural farming in a country like India, which has a huge population. Catering to its food-growing needs isn't an easy task, they point out. Recently, an academic paper titled, 'Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF): Implications for Sustainability, Profitability, and Food Security', published by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, pointed out the "sheer disparity" in the outcomes of the two different experiments surrounding ZBNF (now renamed as Bhartiya Prakritik Krishi Paddhati), one conducted by the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) and Institute for Development Studies Andhra Pradesh, and the other by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Indian Institute of Farming Systems Research (IIFSR).

Sandip Das, Mahima Khurana and Ashok Gulati write in the paper the importance of long-term experimentation before declaring natural farming as a nationwide agriculture practice. The paper, which delves into the promising yet contentious realm of natural farming, navigates through contrasting findings

from the two studies, revealing divergent perspectives on ZBNF. While Andhra Pradesh emerges as a forerunner in adopting ZBNF with encouraging results, the IIFSR study raises concerns about the sustainability and yield (productivity) potential of this farming method.

For instance, the paper notes the CESS study has found that in the case of a variety of crops, lower cost of biological inputs suggested under ZBNF has led to improved yields of crops and farmers' incomes, thus increasing the food and nutritional security of farmers practising ZBNF. However, findings of agro-scientists of the ICAR-IIFSR, a government institute, show a 59% decline in wheat yields and a 32% decline in basmati rice yield compared to integrated crop management, adversely impacting food supply.

What are the lessons from Sri Lanka?

It's vital that before launching a large-scale transition from chemical to natural cultivation, extensive studies and assessments are conducted. A couple of years ago, neighbouring Sri Lanka went through economic and political turmoil after it decided to turn completely organic, and banned the import of chemical fertilizers. The government's policy shift had severe consequences with farmers struggling to get natural fertilizers; they faced a reduction in yields of key crops including rice, the staple, putting the country's food security at risk. A sharp price escalation was witnessed in the country, resulting in huge protests and unrest.

What is the way forward?

Noted economist and former professor at the Ludhiana-based Punjab Agricultural University, M.S. Sidhu, asserts that natural farming could be beneficial at a localised level, but in a populous country like India, adopting natural farming at a large scale may not be a successful model. "Food security is a major concern. If we adopt natural farming for cereals, which are mostly staples, we shall be able to feed only around one-third of our population. Wheat and rice are our staple foods, growing these crops through natural farming could result in lower yields, and hence it's not advisable unless scientific studies are conducted on yields". Supplementary foodstuffs may be grown through natural farming, he points out. "Rigorous scientific tests of natural farming, especially surrounding the crop yields should be held before its nationwide implementation to fend off the fear of potential risk to national food security," says Prof. Sidhu.



Hard at work: Workers transplanting paddy seedlings at a field in Palakkad, Kerala on July 13. K. K. MUSTFAH



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

How Kamala Harris has reshaped the US election

In seven days, Harris has shattered the popular caricature around her, infused energy into the Democratic campaign, unified the base and made 2024 an open election. But she has a long way to go

Here are the facts. Kamala Harris is the daughter of an Indian and Jamaican immigrant to the US. Her parents split early. She didn't go to any Ivy League institution. Yet, she rose up from being a district attorney to attorney general (AG) in California. She became the first Indian-American, and only the second Black woman, to be elected to the US Senate. She became the first woman, and the first person of her biracial background, to become America's vice-president. She is now the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. And she is just 59.

Here is the popular caricature about her, fuelled by the Republican machine. Kamala Harris is weak, her personality is awkward, her laugh is cringeworthy, she has no achievements, she is "dangerously liberal", and she is product of only "identity politics". Aided occasionally by Harris's political missteps, public gaffes, a presidential campaign that collapsed before it took off, and the very nature of the vice presidency that leaves the incumbent looking unemployed, this caricature gained ground in the past four years.

Now, here is the new narrative on Harris, propelled by her supporters. She is strong, smart, skilled and persistent. No one with her background has ever made it so far in American politics. No one else has her kind of experience at the apex of the criminal justice system (as AG), of lawmaking (as senator), and executive (as VP). No one has straddled the different worlds that she belongs to — as an Indian-American, an Asian-American, an African-American, the wife of a Jewish-American, and a woman who hasn't shied away from speaking up on women's rights, including abortion rights.

The 2024 election is now as much about the facts of Harris's life, the evolving Republican caricature of her, and the Democratic narrative around her, as it is about Donald Trump. And in the very first week of announcing her intent to compete for president, Harris's story is winning.

Just trace what's happened in the past month. The debate exposed Joe Biden's age-related deficits. The assassination bid made Trump a hero and victim figure. The Republican National Convention showcased his complete dominance over the party. The morale among Democrats was low as they resigned themselves to a second, more radical Trump presidency. And then, last Sunday, Biden withdrew and offered one final gift to his party. By endorsing Harris, he prevented an ugly internal race.

Harris ran with that endorsement. She made 100 calls in 10 hours that Sunday, and won the endorsements of the key progressive, Black and centre-left legislators. Her

potential rivals for presidential nomination rapidly endorsed her, as did other Democratic elders. By Monday night, she had raised \$100 million, with a record \$81 million haul over 24 hours. By Tuesday, Harris had secured the support of a majority of delegates to the Democratic National Convention. She travelled to her campaign headquarters in Delaware where Biden told the team to embrace her, addressed a big public rally in Wisconsin, and went to Texas and Indiana. And on the one foreign policy issue that has divided the Democratic base, she straddled a fine line. Harris refused to chair visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address to the Congress, and in the meeting with him, she made it clear she won't stay silent on Palestinian suffering. But by meeting him, reiterating her support for Israel's security and condemning protesters who waved Hamas flags, she made it clear that she won't tolerate terror and excuses for it.

Harris's candidacy has unified the Democratic base. For them, what's at stake — preventing Trump from returning — has made gender and race perhaps less salient than it would be otherwise. Instead, Harris's identity has been an asset so far. Among the different groups who have got on to separate calls just this week to commit their support are, in tens of thousands, Black women who see Harris as one of their own; Black men who see her as a sister on the cusp of making history; South Asian women, South Asian men, and Indian-Americans more broadly, all of whom take pride in her Indian heritage; White women, who laud her position on



Prashant Jha



Harris's stance on abortion is her biggest strength, and Trump is aware that abortion is the one issue that can cost him this election AP

abortion; and the Democratic-leaning Asian-American, Hispanic and Black political action committees that fund candidates of marginalised backgrounds.

Harris has become a GenZ star. She has managed to energise Silicon Valley that was witnessing a growing exodus to Trump's camp as well as Hollywood. And the momentum is getting reflected in the polls, with the *New York Times/Siena* poll showing Harris trailing Trump by just one percentage point. For context, Trump was leading Biden by six percentage points.

But while Harris has unified the base and made this a competitive election by throwing the carefully laid Republican plans that revolved around attacking Biden's age into disarray, this is only the beginning of a 100-day sprint. This election will boil down to which of the two candidates succeeds in ensuring that their party base turns up, and winning over the vote in swing states. To do so, Harris has to overcome at least four challenges, some of which stem from misogyny and racism. One, most American voters may

know Harris's name but don't know her, and she has just the next few weeks to introduce herself to the nation before the Republicans end up defining her. This will also mean capitalising on Biden's record, while carefully distancing herself from his failures, including inflation.

Two, she has to carefully define her position on the border, for Republicans have cast as her the "border czar" who failed to stem illegal immigration. Dispelling this impression and proving her commitment to American sovereignty is particularly important for a Black woman who is the children of immigrants to appeal to the White working class and elderly voters, the only two groups where she has less support than Biden.

Three, the Republicans are framing this election as a battle between Trump, the strongman who stood up defiantly after being shot, versus a weak woman who the world will mock. How Harris projects her authentic self, promises to care, while showcasing strength (including by leaning into her past as a tough prosecutor as she is

doing) will be key in the campaign. Four, Harris's stance on abortion is her biggest strength, and Trump is aware that abortion is the one issue that can cost him this election. That is why Republicans will seek to recast the gender debate away from abortion and towards sexuality, particularly trans rights, and portray Harris as "woke". She will have to find a way to retain her commitment to both abortion and the rights of sexual minorities, without feeding into the Republican-manufactured paranoia that America's children are under threat.

Trump vs Harris is the most honest expression of America's political divide and the robustness of both its conservative and liberal political worlds, both almost equally strong. Both parties are not being apologetic about who they are. As the New York White real estate baron and the Black *desi* lawyer from California take on each other and fight for their vision of America, the world's oldest democracy has regained its vitality.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Glimpses of British summertime cheer

On a hot, sunny summer day, there's no country to beat Britain. Not just the weather, but the place itself feels transformed. Actually, idyllic. Like lambs frolicking in a field, the natives flock to London's parks, where they play and gambol in the sunshine, the men usually in shorts and often stripped to the waist — whilst the women could be even more scantily clad — and both sexes oblivious of the world around them.

Thus it was last Friday, after weeks of blustery rain. According to Google, London was warmer than Delhi. At 5pm, it was 32 degrees in St James's Park. At the same time, in Safdarjung, it was only 29. It's the sort of detail that can bring a cheery smile to the most stiff upper-lipped of British faces.

The paradoxical truth is you feel the heat a lot more in London. That's why

memories of grey skies, persistent drizzle and sodden pavements can vanish in minutes. If you're shopping on Regents Street or Bond Street, the blazing sun feels scorching. The heat radiates off the roads and the grand buildings, trapping you in its stifling embrace.

Indoors is breathless. No matter how many windows you open, the incoming wind doesn't seem to cool you. No matter how little you wear, it still feels as if you have put on too much. And, anyway, who wants to stay in when the sky is a clear bright blue, without even a hint of a wispy cloud. It looks like a Constable or Turner painting come alive.

In Holland Park, a long stone's throw from where I was staying, there was an unending crowd around the ice-cream van. On the grounds, there were carefree couples picnicking in whatever shade they could find. And everywhere, there

were children laughing and playing, the merry ring of their mirth echoing across the green grass.

In the English countryside, with hedgerows in brilliant blossom, verdant fields stretch as far as the eye can see on either side. Look more closely and you can spot the young plucking strawberries. Fresh punnets are on sale everywhere. With cream and a spot of caster sugar, strawberries are a British summer delight.

The other countryside pleasure is a visit to a village pub. A pint of bitters — the Brits are not lager drinkers — and a few crisps in the courtyard, as the wind picks up and tussles your hair, is an unforgettable experience. Chances are you'll want it to continue and never end.

Was it Coleridge or was it Browning — Google suggests it could have been either or both — who first said, 'Oh to be in England now that spring is here?' Actually, summer is a better time. But you can forgive the Brits for mixing up the two. A good summer in Blighty can be rare. Till last Friday, it seemed this year, there wouldn't be one.

My hosts that evening wanted their guests to sip champagne on the lawns of Ennismore Gardens, where they live. As the day cools, it can feel like paradise to be out in a garden in the golden evening light. But, alas, the *desis* amongst us, unaccustomed to such pleasures, preferred to stay indoors. It brought home to me a subtle but telling difference between

WAS IT COLERIDGE OR WAS IT BROWNING WHO FIRST SAID, 'OH TO BE IN ENGLAND NOW THAT SPRING IS HERE?' ACTUALLY, SUMMER IS A BETTER TIME. BUT YOU CAN FORGIVE THE BRITS FOR MIXING UP THE TWO. A GOOD SUMMER IN BLIGHTY CAN BE RARE

the Brits and us. They revel in the sun. They want as much of it as they can get. Even if it's blistering hot. We shelter from it. We prefer air conditioners to the fresh summer air.

The next morning, summer was over. The clouds were back, the rain had begun, and jerseys were starting to replace shorts. Outdoors, broleys had taken the place of reverse seebath caps. No doubt, Blighty might be another warm sunny day, but it could be weeks away. By then, autumn may be breathing its chill blasts down uncovered necks. Which is why I'm so glad I was there on that one day of summer.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



WASHing away the climate crisis risks

The climate crisis has brought with it profound challenges for women, among them the impact on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Women in rural and peri-urban areas face significant risks related to water access during extreme weather events. Many rely on water tankers, which may not be enough if there are prolonged disruptions. Water sources can be contaminated during floods or dry up during heat waves.

A study in Bhubaneswar and Jaipur looks at the impact on WASH in women-headed households in informal settlements, women categorised as vulnerable due to age and disabilities, and the urban poor. The study was conducted by the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) and supported by Water for Women and Australian Aid. Akhila Sivasadas, executive director, CFAR, said: "The aim is to prioritise interventions and strategies that address the needs of the most affected groups so that we develop people-centric solutions together with all stakeholders."

The study provides enough data to frame scalable solutions. In Bhubaneswar, nearly half of the women-headed households were situated near drains and canal roads (48.7%), making them susceptible to waterlogging and flooding during rains and cyclones. Similar risks afflict 18.3% of households, which are in low-lying areas, and 1%, which are on riverbanks. In Jaipur, households in hilly terrains (20.2%) risk landslides during heavy rains, while those in low-lying areas (22.3%), near drains and canal roads (14.9%), and riverbanks (3.2%) are prone to flooding. Those near dumping grounds (4.3%) face higher health risks.

In Bhubaneswar's Ward 43, Jhuna Naik secured support from CFAR-facilitated experts and financial support from Slum Development Association (SDA) to reconstruct toilets in her low-lying slum. The effort included installing concrete roofs and raising septic tank heights to withstand heavy rainfall and flooding. Her initiative

exemplifies effective localised adaptation strategies, showing community resilience against extreme weather events. In Ward 5, Sambhari Puri and local officials overcame the challenge of open defecation by constructing toilets that have elevated pans and heightened side walls, to prevent waterlogging/overflow during cyclones and rains.

In many of Jaipur's settlements, community-driven initiatives have pinpointed vulnerable households and strengthened WASH practices. Residents, including Manju from Katputli Nagar and Vijay-lakshmi Kanwar, spearheaded efforts to combat water scarcity and mitigate extreme weather impacts. These initiatives include water conservation campaigns in Bhojpora, where partnerships with local authorities have improved water accessibility. In Ganeshpuri and Bandha Basti, women-led projects are constructing permanent barriers to protect against floods.

With flooding come a host of infectious and vector-borne diseases. Given the vulnerabilities faced by women due to the climate crisis, localised adaptation strategies, enhancing infrastructure resilience, and ensuring community awareness and consensus must be prioritised. Increased collaboration among local authorities, civil society, and technical experts is essential.

The important finding from this study is the need to increase women and marginal communities' participation in decision-making bodies like slum development committees, so that they can also contribute to the solutions and help in the implementation of localised solutions at the community level, like construction of water storage facilities with the help of ward-level representatives. Continuous follow-up, monitoring and tracking of the implementation of the programmes and actions can ensure that the climate crisis does not add further to the health and livelihood burden women already face.

The views expressed are personal

Away from the spotlight, a remarkable President

R Venkataraman was certainly among the few luminaries who have graced the Rashtrapati Bhavan (RB). I had the privilege of serving as his press secretary during his presidency (1987-1992). Venkataraman brought unprecedented experience to that office. He was a member of the Constituent Assembly, a pioneering decade-long minister for industries in the Tamil Nadu government, a four-time member of the Lok Sabha, and a Union minister, at different times, of finance, industry and defence. In 1984, he became Vice-President, and in 1987, the President.

As a person, he was exceptionally polite, carrying his many distinctions lightly. In his work style, he was a bureaucrat-politician. The President has no formal office and usually operates out of one of the formal drawing rooms. But Venkataraman wanted a regular office and converted a smallish room called Shanti Niketan into one. He followed a strict schedule and was a great stickler for time. In the rooms of his senior officers, a light would come on when the President entered his office. It was always at 10am sharp.

My daily time to meet him was at 10.45am, to brief him on any interesting news items and editorials that merited his attention. These meetings became a great learning experience because, often, while hearing a particular point of view on politics or economics, he would launch into a mini-tutorial on the subject. I was also his speechwriter, and his comments or

changes to the draft were always illuminating. He took decisions strictly within the ambit of the Constitution, on which he was an expert, working with four Prime Ministers and appointing three. "The President is like an emergency light, which comes into play only when needed," he would often quip.

Like all great men, Venkataraman too had his idiosyncrasies. When I first met him, he said, "Please remember, I do not want publicity." This aversion sometimes led him to shun media coverage even when it was necessary. An example of this was his State visit to China in 1992, the first by any Indian President, when he decided no media delegation would accompany him.

I disagreed and consulted joint secretary Gopalkrishna Gandhi, who knew the President like few others did, having served with him since he was Vice-President.

His view was that on this matter, the President was unlikely to budge. However, I felt it was my duty to try. When I did, his immediate response was a flat "no". It required courage to persist, but I sought permission to do so: "Sir, your visit to China is not a personal one. It is, in fact, a historic visit. The nation would be interested in knowing about it. I agree we should not take the usual media delegation, but would you agree to consider five or six senior journalists, whom you know well?" He was taken by surprise, and asked, "Who do you have in mind?" I was prepared. "Sir, I was thinking of Dileep Padgaonkar, editor of *Times of India*, HK Dua, editor of *Hindustan Times*, KK Kat-



R Venkataraman was exceptionally polite, carrying his many distinctions lightly. In his work style, he was a bureaucrat-politician

HT ARCHIVE

yal, veteran journalist of *The Hindu*, Saeed Naqvi, well-known columnist, Prem Prakash, chief editor of the ANI news agency, and, of course, *Doordarshan* and *All India Radio*. He was silent for a while, and then said, "Go ahead." As a result, and much to his satisfaction, his China visit received widespread and front-page coverage.

Venkataraman was very health-conscious. At the age of 80, he would walk briskly for an hour, play badminton thrice a week, and golf on Sundays. It was, of course, "Presidential golf", where if he hit a bad shot, another ball was placed before him!

Once, on a visit to Rohtang Pass at 14,000 feet, he needed no oxygen support, while much younger members of his

entourage did. His great love was Indian classical music, and often, he would ask me to find a rare recording in the archives of AIR. The small concert hall in RB became a vibrant hub of the best classical artists. He was a vegetarian, did not drink, and believed that if you live a balanced life, you will — according to our *shastras* — live for 100 years. Prophetically, he died in 2009, at the age of 98.

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). Just Like That is a weekly column where Varma shares nuggets from the world of history, culture, literature, and personal reminiscences.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Reflecting on the nature of art

As a long-time reader of Alice Munro, I am faced with a difficult choice. Should Munro's works be excluded from academic and literary circles due to her personal failures? There is a complex relationship between an artist's moral character and their artistic output, after all.

Srijit D

Care work can bolster empowerment

This is with reference to "Formalising care work can pay gender dividend" by Shagun Sabarwal (July 21). The author has rightly pointed out that the care economy is holds the promise of a leapfrog movement. The latest WEF data should provide India with an impetus.

Suresh Kumar Lau

English lessons on a Sunday

This is in reference to "Why we say clip-clop, and never clip-clip" by Karan Thapar (July 21). The writer, apart from writing serious articles, can also bring joy to readers by teaching English lessons.

Eric Rasquinha

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Across THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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Wake up to transactional government

IN NORMAL life situations, we find that many humans are transactional in their behaviour.

What is a transactional relationship between two humans or two human groups? It is 'you do me a favour and I will do you a favour'.

Colloquially, it is called 'quid pro quo'. Bribes for official decisions are transactional. Money for leaked questions papers are transactional. The Modi government elevated transactional behaviour to a high level: electoral bonds for government favours done or to be done.

Everyone understood the basis of the electoral bonds scheme. The Supreme Court, rightly but belatedly, struck down the whole scheme but maintained restraint in commenting on the intentions behind the scheme.

KURSI BACHAO

On July 23, the NDA government elevated transactional behaviour to a new, higher level. The major motivation behind the Budget for 2024-25 was 'how to save the government'. It was a *kursi bachao* budget. The author of the Budget, Finance Minister Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman, did her job unapologetically. Her and the Secretaries' post-budget explanations of Budget proposals exposed the crude attempt to win the support of two allies. In return for 16 votes (TDP) and 12 votes (JD-U), the two states got 'support (for) development' of industrial nodes, connectivity projects and power plants in Bihar and for the Polavaram irrigation project, industrial corridors and

grants for backward regions in Andhra Pradesh. The most curious assurance was that external assistance will be "expedited" or "arranged", a promise of a pie in the sky.

In the grand bargain between the three (the Union government, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh), the states that voted against the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections lost out. The states that were cheated — according to the MPs of the states concerned — are West Bengal, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab, and the U.T. of Delhi.

YOUTH CHEATED

Besides the states, the vast majority of the people of India were given short shrift. The worst hit were the youth. Unemployment is rampant and the youth are desperate. According to CMIE, the all-India unemployment rate was 9.2 per cent in June 2024. Among graduates, it is nearly 40 per cent. The Periodic Labour Force Survey revealed that only 20.9 per cent of the employed earned a regular salary and, ironically, the least educated were the least unemployed. The Budget Speech promised an Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) scheme under which 290 lakh persons will be placed in jobs by giving monetary incentives to employers and, over a 5-year period, to impart skills to 20 lakh youth, and to provide internship to 1 crore persons in only 500 companies. The gigantic numbers pointed to another gigantic post-election *jumla*.

In the bargain, there was no whisper

of the 30 lakh vacancies in the central government and government-controlled bodies. It is also possible that the much-touted Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, on which several thousand crore of rupees have been spent with no measurable outcomes with regard to jobs, may be quietly junked. There was no reference to the universal demand for loan forgiveness in respect of the unpaid educational loans that have pushed students and their families to the edge of despair. There was also no reference to the fate of the *Agnipath* scheme that discriminated between one soldier and another.

POOR CHEATED

The other large section of the people who felt cheated were the poor. Apparently, the finance minister shares the view of the CEO of the NITI Aayog — hold your breath — that the poor in India may be no more than 5 per cent of the population. The government's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) had measured the Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) in the country at current/nominal prices. The median MPCE were Rs 3,094 in rural areas and Rs 4,963 in urban areas — meaning that 71 crore people of India lived on Rs 100-150 or less per day. If we go down fractile by fractile, the picture gets gloomier. The bottom 20 per cent lived on Rs 70-100 per day and the bottom 10 per cent lived on Rs 60-90 per day. Are they poor or not?

The finance minister handed out 'relief' to the people:

■ she described the current inflation as "low, stable and moving towards the 4 per cent target";

■ she gave relief of "up to Rs 17,500 in income tax" to a salaried employee who moved to the new tax regime and to pensioners.

The 71 crore people in the bottom 50 per cent of the population are neither salaried employees nor government pensioners, and the finance minister could not spare a thought for them. They too pay taxes in the form of indirect taxes like GST; as many as nearly 30 crore are daily/casual labourers; and their wages in real terms have stagnated in the last six years.

There are ways in which relief can be given to the poor. The minimum wage for every kind of employment (including for work under MGNREGA) could be raised to Rs 400 per day. With enhanced allocation of funds to MGNREGA, the average number of days of work could be increased from the current about 50 days per year to near the promised 100 days; and the issue of inflation could be dealt with greater seriousness.

The prime minister and the finance minister should remember that the youth and the poor, among other citizens, have a powerful weapon in their hands — the vote. They severely warned the BJP in the LS elections, 2024. They gave a tight slap in the 13 by-elections in June 2024. Elections are around the corner in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand followed by more in 2025. The youth and the poor will not forget that they were cheated on July 23, 2024.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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Grow up please

INDIAN DEMOCRACY is full of surprises. The exit polls were a surprise. Then the results were a nasty surprise for those who did the polls. There it should have ended. But now there is yet another surprise. It seems as if neither side has understood the mandate. The Prime Minister continues to behave as if he won a full majority. And the newly elected leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha behaves as if he has already become prime minister. The message that Indian voters sent was that they wanted neither side to become arrogant or entitled. Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi have both exhibited these traits in the past but there is no point in dwelling on history. It is present realities that are a consequence of not respecting the mandate that we should worry about.

Last week the Prime Minister made two speeches that sounded ominous. The first was on the first day of the Budget session. He stood on the steps of Parliament House with a cohort of his partymen and in somber tones declared that the 'voice of the prime minister was throttled for more than two hours' and that this was undemocratic. It took me a few moments to realise that what he referred to was the heckling that came from the opposition benches when he made his unending speech the week before. The heckling was rude and rowdy but cannot be described as 'throttling his voice'.

The second speech was on Kargil Day when he went to commemorate those who gave their lives in that war forced on us by Pakistan's military rulers twenty-five years ago. In this second speech he charged the Congress Party with failing the armed forces, for decades, by spending more time making money from arms deals than on providing our troops with vital equipment. Our soldiers did not have bullet-proof jackets, he said. It was not clear which war he was speaking of but if it was Kargil, then he needs to remember that the prime minister then was from his own party. More importantly, Modi needs to remember that he was not given a full mandate this time. And that there now is for the first time in ten years a Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

There are unlearned lessons on the other side as well. Since the opposition parties have done well enough to form a solid block in the Lok Sabha, it is time for them to realise that it should be inside the house that they raise their voice. Not outside it as they did before with placards and slogans and protests under statues. So far there is no indication that they have understood that they are strong enough to not need to spend more time in the gardens of Parliament House than inside.

It is also possible to make opposition voices heard without heckling and taunts. It is because this happened so often in the past that the prime minister has been able to say more than once that it is the opposition that has made Parliament dysfunctional because they have nothing to say. Not true. But also true that there has been too much yelling and screaming and too many walkouts. Why not try a new strategy? Why not try keeping the government in check by staying in Parliament? In Modi's second term, too many laws were passed without debate and some of these laws were flawed.

This must not happen now. Rahul Gandhi made some important points in his first speech as Leader of the Opposition. One of them was on the Agniveer issue. From my own conversations with military men, I have gleaned that this recruitment of short-term soldiers is beset with problems. This could be the reason why in his Kargil speech last week Modi spent much of it explaining why the *Agnipath* programme was good for the army.

If opposition leaders believe it is not good, then it is time that it was discussed inside the Lok Sabha. Instead, too many opposition leaders are threatening to end the whole scheme as soon as they come to power. This is something they believe will happen in the next few months and not five years from now. If that happens, a new story begins. But for the moment, the only thing gained by banging on about it is that it creates uncertainty that is guaranteed to make foreign investors flee.

Instead of wasting time denigrating each other, it is time for both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to sit down for a friendly chat to decide what is needed to allow Parliament to function. One good first step would be to order party spokesmen on TV to express their views without screaming abuse at each other. As someone obliged to listen to these TV 'debates', I have noticed that the spokespersons take their lead directly from what their leaders say. They listen carefully to what is said by Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi and then weaponise their words on national television.

There is almost no democratic country in which so much venom is spat at each other by the TV spokespersons of political parties. If it happens so much in our dear Bharat Mata, it is only because our political culture and democratic norms need to change for us to be seen as a mature democracy.

inside TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



CUTTING DOWN RIVALS

POWERFUL LEADERS tend to cut down potential rivals and alternative power centres. Even PMs Pandit Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi ensured that possible challengers in the party were systematically put down. Narendra Modi follows the mould and this characteristic became more pronounced after his 2019 victory.

In 2014, when Modi first won an absolute majority for his party, he swiftly pensioned off seniors like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani and M M Joshi, removing them from the party's powerful decision-making parliamentary board. In his first term, there was a restraining influence in the late Arun Jaitley who tried to induct a spirit of moderation. Jaitley, formerly their lawyer, mentored Modi and Amit Shah as they navigated the labyrinths of the Capital's corridors of power when they first arrived. But by 2018, ill-health forced Jaitley and Goa's Manohar Parrikar, another progressive face in the BJP, to bow out. Other seniors considered liberals, such as Yashwant Sinha, Jaswant Singh and Arun Shourie, quit the BJP after differences with Modi.

UNCHALLENGED BOSS

After Modi's spectacular 303 Lok Sabha seats in 2019, his position was impregnable and he believed that the party's phenomenal success was entirely due to him. Gradually, he settled scores with seniors who had once opposed the Gujarat CM's march to Delhi. Sushma Swaraj was not included in his 2019 cabinet. Allies like Uddhav Thackeray, Sukhbir Singh Badal and Nitish Kumar were steadily downgraded and left the NDA (even if a much enfeebled Nitish has since rejoined). CMs, beginning with those from Modi's home state Gujarat, were discarded ruthlessly. Former party president Nitin Gadkari, always viewed as a potential threat, was stripped of his charge of the shipping ministry after 2022 and dropped from the parliamentary board. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, heavyweights Vasundhara Raje and Shivraj Singh Chouhan were not re-appointed CMs and faceless individuals took charge of the two key BJP-ruled states. At election time, the Delhi high command arbitrarily selected politicians at will as a method to fight anti-incumbency and also send the message

that the party was basically a one-man show. This was accentuated in the 2024 ticket selection, when high-profile MPs not considered malleable, including V K Singh, Varun Gandhi and Jayant Sinha, were dropped, as were loyalists like Poonam Mahajan, Sadhvi Pragya, Parvesh Verma and Ramesh Bidhuri. Recommendations of the CMs and even the party organising secretary were largely ignored.

ENEMY WITHIN

Probably the last BJP CM remaining with individual political clout, apart from Assam's Himanta Sarma who is not originally from the Sangh *biradari*, is Uttar Pradesh's Yogi Adityanath. The power tussle between Yogi and the Delhi high command is now public. Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya, considered close to Shah, has been sulking since Adityanath stripped him of all powers, and has been voicing his discontent openly. The inquiry committee investigating the UP parliamentary poll debacle pointed a finger indirectly at Yogi. BJP allies, who recently criticised the UP government's actions, appear to have the tacit support of the Centre. The CM in turn blames "overconfidence" for the UP setback, a hint that his views were ignored in ticket distribution. For Yogi to prove his mettle, the test case is the by-election to 10 Assembly seats. But since half the seats are SP strongholds, his challenge is tough. But can the party really afford to lose Yogi, a charismatic figure for Hindutva zealots and Thakurs? Unlike the Vajpayee-Advani era, when there were three distinct leadership tiers and promising talent was harnessed and experience rewarded, today's second- and third-rung party leaders are increasingly faceless and without political heft.

As long as Modi delivered the vote at the elections, no one questioned his unilateralism. But with Modi's once magical charisma and pulling power diminishing after the poll results, bottled-up resentment in the BJP and RSS is surfacing. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent remark that no one should assume that he can be a superman, suggests that all is not well in the undivided Hindutva parivar, which seldom displays its internal dissent publicly. J P Nadda, though a minister, continues as interim party president since the selection of his successor is proving contentious. Modi's first test of his popularity is the approaching Assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand, where, judging by the parliamentary polls, he has a tough fight on his hands. While speculation on the longevity of the Modi government is generally pegged to the conduct of allies, it is probably more dependent on managing simmering disensions within his own flock.

History HEADLINE

ARJUN SENGUPTA



Ujjain to Greenwich: brief history of prime meridians

NCERT's new social sciences textbook for Class 6 mentions an Indian prime meridian, "a reference for calculations in all Indian astronomical texts". The Greenwich Meridian, the text says, "is not the first prime meridian" and that "many centuries before Europe, India had a prime meridian of its own", which passed through Ujjain.

The first mention of the Ujjain meridian can be found in Sanskrit treatise *Surya Siddhanta* likely composed between the 4th and 8th centuries, and containing complex ideas regarding astronomy, geography and mathematics. As per *Surya Siddhanta's* own mythology, the text was a revelation made by the Sun God (Surya) to the *asura* Maya. "I will give thee the science upon which Time is founded, the grand system of the planets," Surya told Maya, per a translation by Rev Ebenezer Burgess in 1860.

The concept of a prime meridian (simply termed *rekha* or 'line' in *Surya Siddhanta*), is introduced in the text's first chapter in reference to the method to calculate planetary positions. "Multiply the daily motion of a planet by the distance in longitude of any place, and divide by its corrected circumference. The quotient, in minutes, subtract from the mean position of the planet as found if the place be east of the *rekha*, add, if it be west; the result is the planet's mean," say verses 60 and 61.

Verse 62 provides the *rekha's* location: "Situated upon the line which passes through the haunt of the *rakshasas* (mythical Lanka) and the mountain which is the seat of the gods (Mount Meru, axis of the world in Hindu cosmology), are Rohitaka (possibly Rohtak) and Avanti (Ujjain)."

Scholars believe Ujjain's location *vis-a-vis* ancient trade routes was behind the prime meridian passing through it. "Of all the centres of Hindu culture, it lay nearest to the...ocean-route by which... (during the early CE) so important a commerce was carried on between Alexandria, as the mart of Rome, and India... That the prime meridian was made to pass through this city proves it to have been the cradle of the Hindu science of astronomy," Burgess wrote.

Since the time of *Surya Siddhanta*, Indian astronomers and geographers have widely used the Ujjain meridian. This is possibly why Maharaja Jai Singh II built one of his five observatories ('Jantar Mantars') in Ujjain in 1725.



The sundial at the Ujjain observatory. Wikimedia Commons

A prime meridian is selected to represent zero degrees longitude, from which all locations east and west can be measured. Throughout history, astronomers have chosen them based on convenience or symbolism. For instance, 2nd century Alexandrian polymath Ptolemy drew his prime meridian through "Fortunate Isles" (present-day Canary Islands), off Africa's west coast. This was likely because negative numbers were not yet in use in the West, and these isles were at the edge of the known-world.

However, at the time of Ptolemy's *Geographia* and *Surya Siddhanta*, prime meridians — and indeed all astronomy — were esoteric concerns with no practical impact on people's lives. Natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset, and the passing of seasons, sufficed as markers of time.

Church and public clocks began coming up in Britain 14th century onwards, but it wasn't till the 1700s, with the Industrial Revolution, that clock-time assumed practical significance. The modern factory made it important not only to keep time, but also to make the most of it. British historian E P Thompson wrote: "Diffusion of clocks and watches is occurring... at the exact moment when the industrial revolution demanded a greater synchronisation of labour".

But there was not yet any standardisation in time, nor the need for it. Each factory or church clock tower set its own time.

Things changed in the 19th century as railways, steamships and the telegraph greatly interconnected the world.

"Universal and uniform time... was to permit seamless flow of people, goods, and ideas," Vanessa Ogle wrote in *The Global History of Time 1870-1950*. "Like uniform weights and measures based on the decimal system... uniform time would establish commensurability and comparability."

The first round of standardisation necessitated the creation of national meridians. This was seen as a means of national unification at a time nation states were in their infancy and asserting control over colonial possessions. Thus, France had the Paris Meridian, Germany its Berlin Meridian, the British the Greenwich Meridian, etc. Each colonial power made its own prime meridian the reference point for the rest of the world — symbolically putting itself at the centre of the planet.

The push to create a global prime meridian began in the 1870s, born of the need to standardise ship and railway timetables. In 1884, at the International Meridian Conference in Washington DC, 26 countries agreed to "adopt a single prime meridian for all nations". The British meridian, which passed through Greenwich Royal Observatory was adopted, reflecting the late 19th century's geopolitical reality.

Adoption, however, was not immediate nor universal. For instance, Ogle points out that India saw significant nationalist opposition to adopting the Greenwich Mean Time. What finally paved the way for near global adoption of the Greenwich meridian were the two World Wars.

On the LOOSE

LEHER KALA

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DISGRACED PROBATIONARY IAS officer Puja Khedkar was assessed for psychiatric illness under the Indian Disability Evaluation and Assessment Scale in January 2021 and certified to be depressed. Prior to this, the Ahmednagar district hospital had issued Khedkar a visual disability certificate in 2018. The authenticity of these certificates has been verified. Undoubtedly, myopic degeneration in both eyes in one's 20s would be enough to shatter anyone. It is worth noting though, this double whammy of vision impairment and a perturbed state of mind didn't diminish Khedkar's thirst for the superficial trappings of power, a *laal batti*

Wearing your mind on your sleeve

on her card and a separate office — entitlements she didn't qualify for.

Mental health professionals are always at pains to dispel the irritating myth about depressed people, that they're hopelessly wallowing in self-pity 24/7. We imagine despair to be a visible, angst-ridden state but dysfunction can hide in plain sight. There's no specific way a sad person looks or behaves. Depressed people are just people, both good and bad. It seems puzzling that you can claim to be choking on your own misery, yet soldier on with a routine — or if you're Khedkar, ruthlessly grabbing every opportunity to seize whatever extra's on offer. One wonders that if she was depressed, then she should be on a suicide watch now; every rule she bent is being poured over in humiliating detail, making even the most jaded cynic sit up

in alarm at her shameless quest to game the system.

Some decades later, when scholars are analysing the defining trends of the 21st century, the mainstreaming of mental illness and depression is likely to feature prominently. Unlike diabetes or heart disease that can be definitively tested, gauging the extent of depressive disorders is more challenging. The inner workings of the brain remain a mystery that cannot be evaluated with 100% accuracy. Two psychiatrists may differ vastly on diagnosis for the same patient. This makes the scope for misuse huge when it comes to disability quotas, raising the logical question of whether it's even fair to include mental disorders in governments' affirmative actions. Considering how many pressured IIT and UPSC aspirants are driven to sui-

cide routinely, it's hardly surprising that many feel compelled to succumb to fraud.

It is worth noting, the previous generation went to great lengths to conceal emotional troubles because even a hint of instability carried stigma. Nobody would hire you, forget finding a spouse. Now, we live in a culture that pathologises everything. People feel emboldened to wear PTSD, ADD and other labels on their sleeves because there's no particular detrimental effect, and in some situations, great advantages. It's progress, certainly, that the aura of shame around normal frailties is diminishing. However, medicalising "feelings" has become so normal we forget, nine times out of ten, our wildly inconsistent emotions flare up or down, and come and go.

Rationally speaking, every human be-

ing will experience despair. Our lives are disrupted by tragic loss, illness and uncertainty; the news around us is full of sorrow. No thinking person can be ecstatically happy for long without descending into gloom, eventually. Unceasing happiness is a laughable myth, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is Sigmund Freud's humble goal, to transform a default setting of neurotic misery into common unhappiness. For the vast majority of us, melancholy is existential, something to be experienced and hopefully overcome but never cured. To quote Hamlet, "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles?" Can't fight the fact that both beautiful and terrible things will happen in this one life.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 28, 2024



Biggest show on earth is upon us

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

ANY BIG VENTURE has its detractors and cannot be undertaken without creating uncertainty, unease, and discomfort for some.

The Olympic Games are probably the biggest logistical undertaking confined to a limited geographical area, and hence it was understandable that some Parisians were less than enamoured over its impending arrival in the City of Lights.

The impurities in the Seine, the river that runs through the French Capital, the various restrictions to movement, the security arrangements, and the huge influx of visitors from around the globe were concerns that plagued the average citizen.

The sabotaging of the French rail network and the bomb threat at an airport on the Swiss border added to the anxiety.

But Friday night's unprecedented opening ceremony — which dragged into the early hours of Saturday in India — staged not just in a stadium but throughout the host city, put Paris in the best light in front of the whole world. The procession of national contingents on the river, the showcasing of French culture, ingenuity, and hard work, and their love and respect for sporting greats not just their own made it worth missing sleep for.

The focus has now shifted to the sporting arenas, where the best athletes in the world will aim to outdo each other to bring laurels to their country. But the inauguration reminded us of what the Olympics are all about at the foundation level — bringing countries around the world together and celebrating the best that humanity can achieve. Not everyone who gets to the Olympics expects to get on the podium, but the experience is something that won't be forgotten in a hurry, and who knows, they may be in the mix for honours at future Games.

India — at least the ruling establishment — hopes to host the Olympic Games in 12 years' time, and for that, apart from the organisational and logistical mountains that need to be moved, the athletes need to excel and climb up in the medal tally.

Need to improve

Seven podium finishes in Tokyo three years ago were unprecedented riches, but the most populous country in the world — it was the second-largest in 2021 — ended 48th on the points table. Hopes are always high, buttressed by India surpassing the 100-medal mark at last year's Hangzhou Asian Games, but the level at the Olympics is just another ball game.

India is far from being among the big hitters in Olympic sport, and the margins at this level are often minuscule. India's biggest contingent this time is in shooting, and one shot slightly off centre can be the difference between a medal and nothing.

Athletes toil tirelessly for years for their chance under the sun, and institutional and government support has improved over the years, to the extent that it's now an envy of several other countries. The inundation of awards and rewards for a notable achievement, not necessarily a medal, can often scarcely be believed.

All this also puts a lot of pressure on the competitors and prevents them from being at their best when the stakes are at their highest. The two Indian pairs in the qualification rounds of the 10m air rifle mixed team event faltered when matching the scores they had managed in the recent past would have, in all likelihood, taken them into medal contention.

But one has to feel for those flying the flag at the Olympics. These opportunities come once in four years — three in this instance — and athletes have to make such an effort just to be there. Once on the big stage, they can revel in their status as Olympians, but the pressure to deliver when the eyes of the whole world are on them — which may not be the case in the qualification events — makes it all the more difficult.

That's what makes the achievements of Olympic icons such as Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson, Usain Bolt, and Michael Phelps such outliers. They were the ones with a target on their backs but instead of freezing on the big day, they embraced the occasion and reached for the stars.

The story of Simone Biles, who has returned to the top after struggling with her mental health at Tokyo and playing her part in bringing a sex offender, who preyed on young female gymnasts, to justice is a particularly inspiring one. Biles is one of the greatest ever in her sport and one of the icons of the Olympic games, and all eyes will be on her when the gymnastics competitions begin.

Indian prospects

One Indian athlete at these Games who knows the feeling of being among the red-hot favourites is discus thrower Neeraj Chopra. The Olympic champion has won almost everything there is to win since he made history in Tokyo, and is again on the shortlist. But the man from Haryana seems composed, taking everything in his stride and having his sight firmly on the big prize. Not distracted by all the talk about his perceived inability to breach the 90m mark, Chopra is aware of the maxim that 'you don't have to run faster than a cheetah, but just faster than the other competitors.'

The badminton men's doubles duo of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have broken the hegemony of East and Southeast Asians and clinched some of the top titles on the circuit. They starred as India did the unimaginable, winning the Thomas Cup, and also rose to the No. 1 world ranking. They seem destined to finish on the podium and the top step is also not beyond them. But the competition is stiff and matches often go down to the wire.

Weightlifter Mirabai Chanu has been beset with injuries in the recent past, but if she is anywhere close to her best, the Manipur athlete, who returned from Tokyo with a silver, will be in the reckoning for another medal.

There are several others from whom a lot is expected. Boxer Nikhat Zareen is one of the best in her weight category, while nobody will begrudge women wrestlers like Vinesh Phogat — who braved a lot of adversity outside the mat — and Antim Panghal — who has struggled with injuries for a considerable period — if they reach the podium.

Hockey is another sport where India have to be at their best to be challenging for medals, but having these many athletes being spoken of in the context of medals proves that Indian sport has definitely taken a step forward in recent times.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



On July 23, the NDA government elevated transactional behaviour to a new, higher level. The major motivation behind the Budget for 2024-25 was 'how to save the government'. It was a *kursi bachao* Budget. The author of the Budget, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, did her job unapologetically...

IN NORMAL LIFE situations, we find that many humans are transactional in their behaviour.

What is a transactional relationship between two humans or two human groups? It is 'you do me a favour and I will do you a favour'.

Colloquially, it is called 'quid pro quo'. Bribes for official decisions are transactional. Money for leaked questions papers are transactional. The Modi government elevated transactional behaviour to a high level: electoral bonds for government favours done or to be done.

Everyone understood the basis of the electoral bonds scheme. The Supreme Court, rightly but belatedly, struck down the whole scheme but maintained restraint in commenting on the intentions behind the scheme.

Kursi bachao

On July 23, the NDA government elevated transactional behaviour to a new, higher level. The major motivation behind the Budget for 2024-25 was 'how to save the government'. It was a *kursi bachao* budget. The author of the Budget, Finance Minister Ms Nirmala Sitharaman, did her job unapologetically. Her and the Secretaries' post-budget explanations of Budget proposals exposed the crude attempt to win the support of two allies. In return for 16 votes (TDP) and 12 votes (JD-U), the two states got 'support (for) development' of industrial nodes, connectivity projects and power plants in Bihar and for the Polavaram irrigation project, industrial corridors and grants for backward regions in Andhra Pradesh. The most curious assurance was that external assistance will be "expedited" or "arranged", a promise of a pie in the sky.

In the grand bargain between the three (the Union government, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh), the states that voted against the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections lost out. The states that were cheated — according to the MPs of the states concerned — are West Bengal,

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Cutting down rivals

POWERFUL LEADERS TEND to cut down potential rivals and alternative power centres. Even PMs Pandit Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi ensured that possible challengers in the party were systematically put down. Narendra Modi follows the mould and this characteristic became more pronounced after his 2019 victory.

In 2014, when Modi first won an absolute majority for his party, he swiftly pensioned off seniors like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani and M M Joshi, removing them from the party's powerful decision-making parliamentary board. In his first term, there was a restraining influence in the late Arun Jaitley who tried to induct a spirit of moderation. Jaitley, formerly their lawyer, mentored Modi and Amit Shah as they navigated the labyrinths of the Capital's corridors of power when they first arrived. But by 2018, ill-health forced Jaitley and Goa's Manohar Parrikar,



Opposition MPs led by Congress protest inside Parliament premises alleging discrimination in Union Budget 2024

Wake up to transactional government

Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab, and the UT of Delhi.

Youth cheated

Besides the states, the vast majority of the people of India were given short shrift. The worst hit were the youth. Unemployment is rampant and the youth are desperate. According to CMIE, the all-India unemployment rate was 9.2% in June 2024. Among graduates, it is nearly 40%. The Periodic Labour Force Survey revealed that only 20.9% of the employed earned a regular salary and, ironically, the least educated were the least unemployed. The Budget Speech promised an Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) scheme under which 290 lakh persons will be placed in jobs by giving monetary incentives to employers and, over a 5-year period, to impart skills to 20 lakh youth, and to provide internship to 1 crore persons in only 500 companies. The gigantic numbers pointed to another gigantic post-election *jumla*.

In the bargain, there was no whisper of the 30 lakh vacancies in the central government and government-controlled bodies. It is also possible that the much-touted Production-Linked Incentive (PLI)

scheme, on which several thousand crore of rupees have been spent with no measurable outcomes with regard to jobs, may be quietly junked. There was no reference to the universal demand for loan forgiveness in respect of the unpaid educational loans that have pushed students and their families to the edge of despair. There was also no reference to the fate of the *Agnipath* scheme that discriminated between one soldier and another.

Poor cheated

The other large section of the people who felt cheated were the poor. Apparently, the finance minister shares the view of the CEO of the NITI Aayog — hold your breath — that the poor in India may be no more than 5% of the population. The government's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) had measured the Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) in the country at current/nominal prices. The median MPCE were ₹3,094 in rural areas and ₹4,963 in urban areas — meaning that 71 crore people of India lived on ₹100-150 or less per day. If we go down fractile by fractile, the picture gets gloomier. The bottom 20% lived on ₹70-100 per day

and the bottom 10% lived on ₹60-90 per day. Are they poor or not?

The finance minister handed out 'relief' to the people:

■ she described the current inflation as "low, stable and moving towards the 4% target";

■ she gave relief of "up to ₹17,500 in income tax" to a salaried employee who moved to the new tax regime and to pensioners.

The 71 crore people in the bottom 50% of the population are neither salaried employees nor government pensioners, and the finance minister could not spare a thought for them. They too pay taxes in the form of indirect taxes like GST; as many as nearly 30 crore are daily/casual labourers; and their wages in real terms have stagnated in the last six years.

There are ways in which relief can be given to the poor. The minimum wage for every kind of employment (including for work under MGNREGA) could be raised to ₹400 per day. With enhanced allocation of funds to MGNREGA, the average number of days of work could be increased from the current about 50 days per year to near the promised 100 days; and the issue of inflation could be dealt with greater seriousness.

The prime minister and the finance minister should remember that the youth and the poor, among other citizens, have a powerful weapon in their hands — the vote. They severely warned the BJP in the LS elections, 2024. They gave a tight slap in the 13 by-elections in June 2024. Elections are around the corner in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand followed by more in 2025. The youth and the poor will not forget that they were cheated on July 23, 2024.

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ODD & EVEN

ROHNIIT PHORE





A city is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time

Patrick Geddes

FLOODED CITIES: URBAN INDIA DROWNS IN POLITICAL APATHY

JULY 26, 2005. Every monsoon reminds the people of Mumbai of the day when man-made blunders and nature conspired to devastate. The disaster left nearly a thousand dead, the loss of homes and livelihoods, and scars of untold grief. The catastrophe exposed everything that was wrong with India's urbanisation—from planning to execution, from authority to accountability, from expenditure to outcomes.

This week, Mumbai found itself marooned in misery once again. In 2005, Mumbai was devastated by 900 mm of rain; in 2024, barely a third of the volume of rainfall shut down the city. Schools and colleges were closed, businesses downed shutters, the fire brigade and police had to brave the elements and rescue people. Nearly half a dozen Indian cities wallowed in water. Pune, once crowned a 'smart city', a hub of start-ups, had to call for two army columns to rescue people. Residents of Baner and Khadki found basements flooded—thanks to the fact that storm water drains are non-existent—and electricity cut off.

The 2005 disaster was followed by a fact-finding committee led by Madhav Chitale. The findings: excess rain, blockages caused by a lack of desilting, a non-operational disaster management plan, lack of communication and coordination, poor weather warnings and more. In December 2005, the UPA government came up with Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission "to encourage reforms and fast-track planned development". The mission listed many ideas but found no place for the term 'floods'. Five years later, after repeated episodes, the National Disaster Management Authority recognised the scourge of city floods, recommended steps, and listed dos and don'ts. A parade of committees and commissions since have paid lip-service to urban renewal.

THE THIRD EYE
SHANKAR AIYAR
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Have things changed? Not really. In 2021, just in south India over 30 cities across five states were affected by flooding. Flooding is an annual event when residents pay the price for systemic sloth. Expectations are so low that failure is normal—and anger spills out every budget as more is taken for less. This monsoon, over a dozen cities reeled under floods. A dry-and-thirsty Bengaluru was followed by a hot-and-harried Delhi. Members of parliament living in Lutyens' Delhi tweeted for help. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor joked he may need a boat, while Samajwadi Party MP Ram Gopal Yadav needed a VIP lift to leave his house.

Quintessentially, policy response in India focuses on the consequences of any event or disaster, while the cause is left for another day. Hope arrived in July 2014. In his maiden budget speech, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley highlighted the state of affairs. He said, "Unless new cities are developed to accommodate the burgeoning number of people, the existing cities would soon become unlivable." He added, "The prime minister has a vision of developing 100 Smart Cities as satellite towns of larger cities, and by modernising existing mid-sized cities." Cities have become more and more unlivable.

The smart cities mission that followed the Jaitley budget didn't list flood prevention as a priority. Mind you, the Smart Cities mission has funded over 8,000 projects worth ₹1.64 lakh crore in 100 cities, but hasn't focused on floods. The AMRUT mission has the potential to address one aspect—lack of drainage—but its track record reflects lack of scale: till 2023, only 719 projects worth ₹1,622 crore were completed.

Flooding is caused by excessive rainfall, but turns into a disaster in the wake of poor drainage, high levels of silt, encroachment of river beds and water bodies, destruction of wetlands in coastal cities and deforestation. It is obvious that planning—and satellite imaging of topography to enable drainage and protect water bodies—is critical for prevention. Yet, poor planning is not considered a cause of urban flooding. It is easier to blame nature.

India's cities are trapped between political apathy and systemic chaos. Typically, the authority of design and the accountability for execution are divorced. The design of policy is with the Union; states have little say. Implementation is with states over which the Union has little sway. Ergo, answers to questions in parliament are prefaced with the disclaimer "urban development including urban planning is a state subject". What makes it worse is that the states have denied form, function and funding to urban bodies.

Historically, India's political parties are invested in a rural bias—after all, rural India casts more votes. It may be useful to illuminate the political landscape with economic context. The world over, urbanisation is a force multiplier for growth and accounts for over 80 percent of global GDP. India is rapidly urbanising and is expected to add over 400 million to its urban population by 2050. Its cities occupy only 3 percent of the land mass, but contribute over 60 percent of GDP. Each percentage rise in urban population in a district ramps up the district GDP by 2.7 per cent.

Budget 2024 mentions urbanisation as one of the nine priorities, but lacks details beyond defining cities as growth hubs. That is necessary but not sufficient. India needs a well-funded policy to prevent catastrophic flooding, enable expansion along corridors and public-private partnerships for greenfield cities.

How about re-investing some of the returns from the urban economy back into the cities? The aspiration of an advanced economy status calls for a review of the political stance and economic policies.

AKHILESH REDEFINES & REINVENTS HIMSELF



POWER & POLITICS
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ONCE upon a time in India, there lived a great wrestler named Mulayam Singh Yadav of Uttar Pradesh. He was adept at chakra daav, the art of deftly throwing an opponent off his feet. He went on to win bigger wrestling matches in the treacherous political akhada of UP by creating the Samajwadi Party, and later, playing referee in many national political competitions.

His son Akhilesh Yadav has understood the secret of stardom: be seen and heard by 141 crore Indians and 543 MPs. Many young MPs are making friends and forgoing foes to elevate their political stature. Akhilesh is more than just an MP—he was a chief minister. By sitting on dharna organised by regional parties against the NDA at Jantar Mantar, Akhilesh made the point that regional is national.

He was invited by Andhra Pradesh's ousted CM, Jagan Mohan Reddy, who warned that his YSR Congress had 15 MPs in parliament and the NDA government, which includes his nemesis Chandrababu Naidu as a partner, should not take him lightly. He and Akhilesh have rarely met socially or for a political cause. Still, Yadav Jr accepted his invitation. It is clever optics: Akhilesh is extending his political turf beyond North India and wants to acquire national party status for SP by 2029. Socialism as ideology has passed its expiry date, but socialising in politics is the opposition playbook. Akhilesh is the New Deal—a young leader repositioning himself as a national leader while not playing the caste card and possessing a modern mind without Mu-

layam's Lohiaite baggage. For SP, Yadadism is dead, long live a new Yadav. Akhilesh now leads a minimised Yadavised outfit.

Ever since he led SP to a stunning victory with 37 Lok Sabha seats in UP to become the third largest party in the 18th Lok Sabha, he is on an overdrive inside and outside his party. He is no longer a low-key paladin; he delivers well-researched speeches laced with sarcasm, poetry and sober ideology. He has been meeting leaders across parties and is more than willing to give biting bytes to reporters waiting outside his home or parliament.

In Delhi, he held meetings of his parliamentary party to plan SP's future strategy for dominating and influencing an alternative narrative against Narendra Modi's government. According to party sources, he also held individual and collective meetings with opposition honchos. He makes it a point to attend the Lok Sabha along with wife Dimple Yadav and gives the Kennedy touch: an attractive political couple with good intentions for their country. He takes an active part in influencing the parliamentary agenda. He never misses a social get-together. When travelling outside UP, he meets persons who can provide inputs and information. This year, he visited Kolkata, Patna, Chennai and Mumbai.

It's a big change in political style. For the past decade, Akhilesh confined himself to Lucknow and met mostly close confidants, leaving home only for party meetings. The rest of the time, he spent with family, playing football or cricket in the backyard of his house. Now, after many years, India is seeing a new young regional raja itching to play a national role. Mamata Banerjee, M K Stalin and Tejashwi Yadav have by and large

stayed in their home states, while Akhilesh bonds with their MPs in Delhi. He has tried his hand at coalition-making and unmaking. He flirted with the Congress and BSP, but failed. But he is not giving up the fight, because age is on his side.

Akhilesh's endgame is to transform SP into an inclusive platform and reach the top. He tweaked his father's political style and is sculpting his own version by purging old disloyalists with tainted images. Mulayam's winning ticket was his anti-Congress agenda. In 2014, he ensured Rahul Gandhi's win in Amethi by transferring SP votes overnight to the Congress just before voting day. He was also responsible for blocking Sonia Gandhi from being PM after Atal Bihari

Vajpayee lost the vote of confidence in 1998; he refused to give a letter of support for his party's 39 MPs to the president. Yet, a couple of years later, he drove down to 10 Janpath to seek her back for Pranab Mukherjee's presidency. Akhilesh is finally stepping into his father's shoes. There is a big difference, though: his first fight was against family members. Mulayam appointed him the UP SP chief in 2012 just before the assembly elections. Akhilesh's state-wide rath and cycle yatras made him UP's first youth icon, giving SP over two-thirds of the seats. As Akhilesh began to assert himself as CM, he faced internal revolts from family. He sacked Mulayam's familial, political and bureaucratic nominees. A furious Mulayam expelled him from the party. The son retaliated, sacking the father from the presidentship and took charge. The feud went to the Election Commission, which gave the party and its symbol to Akhilesh. By 2017, Akhilesh was in full charge.

A private player who keeps everyone

guessing, he is perhaps the only Indian politician who doesn't have an advisor playing an extra-constitutional role. A degree holder in environmental engineering from both Indian and foreign institutions, he has mastered the art of environment management. Akhilesh is not surrounded by any Yadav, though Yadavs have won five elections. He has freed a Yadav-led party from Yadavs. Though half the party posts and legislator seats were grabbed by Yadavs, Akhilesh convinced his family they must share power with other communities if they wanted to rule India someday. Akhilesh diluted his father's political coalition of MY (Muslim and Yadav) and coined a new slogan, PDA (Pichhde or backward, Dalits, Alpasankhyak or minorities). PDA was a game-changer—it took SP from five MPs to 37 in 2024. Non-Yadavs were the majority on the candidate list. Akhilesh has learnt to speak the language of a modernist: liberal and humane with capitalist values, as his track record as CM shows.

Yet, Akhilesh is not a man in a hurry. A five-term Lok Sabha MP, a CM at 38, and party chief at 45, he is both treading and laying his political path with caution. He sticks to his political identity—though Congressmen have given up the Gandhi cap, Akhilesh stands out at every political event in his red cap. He is no comrade, but is a socialist at heart with a laissez-faire mind. Sober and soft spoken, he hasn't uttered a single toxic word against any BJP leader including Yogi and Modi. UP may be a polarised battleground, but Yogi as CM and Akhilesh as Leader of the Opposition display civilised political conduct, because the state comes first for both. Both are in the same age group and are potential PM candidates in the long run.

But one key question remains: which of the two 'UP ke ladke' (Rahul and Akhilesh) will get the cup? The outcome of 2027 assembly election will provide a partial answer. Mulayam's lesson has been, 'It's OK to lose the match if you win the tournament'. In this case, Akhilesh is playing against both friends and foes. There are some permanent enemies and friends in politics, but permanent interests are non-negotiable.



EXRESS

STEPPING AWAY FROM STAMPEDES



OPINION
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THE last thing I wanted to experience in the beautiful valley of Kashmir was getting stuck in a traffic jam. Yet, that is exactly what I had to brave every time I stepped out to be at the venue for a Jammu and Kashmir tourism conclave I was speaking at, or to visit the temples in and around Srinagar.

At the tourism conclave, the topics of concern included meeting the heightened needs of tourists—from accommodation and transportation to development of new destinations and dealing with the waste they leave behind. Problems aplenty where the demand is way higher than the supply. It is the same situation in every popular destination.

Then came the news of stampedes at Hathras and the Puri rath yatra. My mind immediately went back to so many of my temple visits, where such stampedes were quite possible. You could say that they do not happen on a daily basis is indeed some divine grace. Try attend-

ing the mangala arti in Puri, or be at Arunachaleshwara on a weekend, or visit Alandi temple any day. You get into a queue—once you are in, you simply cannot come out of it even if you are suffocating. You are surrounded by strong steel rods and a crowd that can only move in one direction. Sometimes, the width of the lane is just enough for one person to move in one direction.

Firstly, this chaos is man-made, not natural. For example, at the Arunachaleshwara Shiva temple you must spend hours in a queue. You come out and visit the Devi temple next to it, and through everyone visits it, there is no rush. You simply walk in, pray and come out. The crowd naturally keeps moving using the open space, making way for the elderly, children or disabled. The same crowd leads to total chaos at the first temple, even with high-value 'special' tickets. There is something amiss.

Crowd management needs to be urgently and mandatorily in place for all the places that attract big crowds. India is full of them. There must be a way out for those who may feel unwell or suffocated or may have a train or a flight to catch. CCTV cameras or similar technologies can be used to ensure that people visiting from far can peacefully enjoy the few moments they spend there. At the same time, they should not create chaos for others. The National Disaster Management Authority's 95-page guidelines are available online, but it is hard to see them in practice. One of the modules says a person needs one square

yard of space to move around freely—we do not even leave that kind of space at airports queues, leave apart the overly-crowded places.

We might soon need 'stay at home' campaigns. Sometimes I wonder if phrases like 'East or West, home is the best' were indeed invented for similar times in the past. Maybe it is time to follow Chaturmasa tradition of not travelling during the four monsoon months and allowing nature to rejuvenate.

The authorities, both government



The crush of crowds across India needs attention from authorities as well as tourists. Crowd control plans are rarely followed. But citizens can also choose to visit fewer places and follow the rules in place. Being in a chaotic crowd does not help anyone grow spiritually

and private, will act when they have a solid reason to. But we, as tourist and pilgrims, need to be careful in planning our travels. School vacations are understandably a peak travel time, but try to travel in non-peak times. At least choose less-crowded destinations. I remember visiting Ladakh in January meant having the whole landscape to myself, while the same place in summers looks like Kashmiri Gate in Delhi.

We need to question if traveling every weekend or every month is a must just because we can afford it with time and money. What are you enjoying if you are creating and suffering the same traffic jam in another location? Believe me, a traffic jam in scenic Srinagar feels the same as one in Bengaluru's IT corridor.

Devotees need to choose pilgrimage places that are important to their lineage and faith. You do not need to visit every temple, every religious place you see pictures of, or every temple that a professional travel influencer is visiting and posting about. Social media content tempts, but honestly, being part of a chaotic crowd does not really help you grow spiritually.

It is fun to be adventurous. But why ignore warnings? I have seen beach guards in Goa pleading people to not go beyond red flags, but not many listen. Though we expect our security forces to come to our rescue, we must understand it is not their job to secure us from our stupidities like going to the edge of a steep rock for that selfie. We must also listen to the warnings put in place to keep us safe. The authorities also need to have strict guidelines for adventure sports operators. Something as simple as wearing life jackets while going into waters is rarely practiced.

If there was something called crowd pollution, let us pro-actively plan to stay safe from it. This would automatically minimise our contribution to it. It's time to sit back and enjoy our homes a bit, too.

QUOTE CORNER

In this campaign, I promise you, I will proudly put my record against his any day of the week... I took on perpetrators of all kinds. Predators who abused women. Fraudsters who ripped off consumers. Cheaters who broke the rules for their own gain. So hear me when I say, I know Donald Trump's type.

Kamala Harris, US vice-president and presumptive Democratic nominee against Donald Trump in the 2024 race, at her first campaign rally in Wisconsin

The quality we have in depth we have to catch up, but even more because this season will be the survival of the fittest

Erik ten Hag, Manchester United FC manager, on hiring more players for the coming season

When you're on the wave, you're very free. It's an open canvas.

Caroline Marks, 22-year-old member of the US surfing team at the 2024 Olympics; this part of the competition is being held in Tahiti in French Polynesia



MAILBAG WRITE TO

Faith dividend

Ref: *CPM's leap of faith could help ensure political survival* (Jul 27). The survival of any political party depends on its acceptability to the people. So, the CPI(M) cannot be blamed for being liberal in matters of faith when a substantial part of its sympathisers in the current society, which is patently conservative, is not averse to faith. Dogmatism and obstinacy will not reap political dividends.

Dharmarajan A K, Thalassery

People's opiate

Karl Marx stated that religion helps people in the same way that opium helps the wounded, suggesting that religion offers temporary relief, but is ultimately harmful. He predicted that communism would eventually eliminate religion, indicating that eliminating religion was not his primary agenda. However, the term 'opium' had a particularly negative connotation in the Indian context, leading Indian commu-

nists to project themselves as anti-religious. It is a welcome development that they have realised India has serious problems that need to be addressed beyond the issue of religion.

Sundareswara Pandiyan S, Chennai

Green communism

The editorial's point that the Kerala CPI(M) is losing support among Hindus, particularly in the Ezhava community, its earliest base, is true. This is not just because of denying the freedom to worship but appeasement of Muslims. It's a common joke in Kerala nowadays that communism is not red, but green in our state. Even when we elected a communist government in the 1950s, most people were believers.

V H Subramoney, Bengaluru

Odisha jobs

Ref: *Kannadiga quota bill needs to be reconsidered* (Jul 26). The article makes us think about our state Odisha. Let the government create employment here. Give facilities to companies to open offices in the state. IT companies need land and power. There is

nothing wrong in demanding jobs for one's own people. But it's practically not possible.

Sunil Pradhan, Khariar

Pay Commission

The central budget has failed to address the genuine, long-pending grievances of central government employees. The proposals are aimed at privatisation at a faster pace and do not speak of creating new posts, especially in the railways. Government employees and pensioners are frustrated and agitated, as dearness allowance from January 2020 to June 2021 has not been released yet. The parliament committee's recommendation for additional pensions after the ages of 65, 70 and 75 has not been addressed. It is imperative now to set up the much-needed 8th Central Pay Commission.

H Ghouse Baig, Tiruchirappalli

Congress disunity

The bane of the Congress is its disunity and ego trips, at least in the Kerala unit. No wonder other parties take advantage. They should realise that the party

is greater than an individual and represents the people. Partymen should not squabble like little children do for chocolates. Their positions mean serious business, which is not like giving a garland of flowers to a monkey who doesn't know how to handle it. Kerala Congress president K Sudhakaran should avoid high-handedness and assembly opposition leader V D Satheeshan should make use of his smile for diplomacy.

Elizabeth Koshy, Pathanamthitta

Stunted growth

The women and child development ministry said about 17 percent children aged below 5 are underweight, while 36 percent are stunted and 6 percent are 'wasted'. This is despite many schemes implemented by the Union government to address malnutrition in the country. Nutritional deficiencies inflict long-term damage to individuals. The silver lining is in states like Goa, Ladakh and Sikkim have lower malnutrition rates. Effective implementation of the policies is the need of the hour.

S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

REFLECTIONS

Games memory plays

GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

THE year 2021 was *annus horribilis*, the year of India's greatest holocaust in 74 years — it was the year of the greatest collective and personal grief since 1947. But in the struggle of memory against forgetting, it's our ability to wilfully forget that keeps us sane.

The memories of the devastation wrought by the second wave of the coronavirus — pyres lit by the dozen in school playgrounds, corpses floating in the Ganga, hospital fires and death in family and among friends — have been repressed. Unwanted memories are shoved into the subconscious, as Freud did say. India's worst tragedy since 1947 has been forgotten.

In the backdrop of the Covid tragedy of 2021, the feat of our great athletes at the Tokyo Olympics — organised in insufferable suffocation, yet greatly liberating — put a glowing, pleasant layer on the top of our bank of memories. India won seven medals in Tokyo, the country's greatest performance in the Olympics. Neeraj Chopra won gold in athletics, a feat that seems scarcely believable even now — just a decade ago, no one thought it possible that an Indian could win a medal in track and field, called the "mother" of all sports, at the toughest competition in the world. Mirabai

Chanu and Ravi Dahiya won silver medals; PV Sindhu won her second Olympics medal in a row, emulating the great Sushil Kumar; the hockey team made old men, who clung to memories of India's hegemony in the sport, cry in joy. Bajrang Punia won a bronze despite an injury, and Lovlina Borgohain got another, losing only to that great Turk, Busenaz Surmeneli.

Seven medals for India, our greatest Olympics show, despite the vaunted shooters coming a cropper for the second Olympics in a row.

The trouble with unprecedented success is that we tend to lose our sense of proportion — in the case of Neeraj Chopra, everyone wanted a piece of him. Everyone claimed Chopra as their own — Punjabis said he's Chopra, a Punjabi Khatri; Haryana celebrated, of course, because he comes from that state; stray Rajputs and Gujjars claimed online that Chopra belonged to their caste; the Rors said Chopra is a Hindu Ror; and the Marathas said Chopra descends from Maratha soldiers who fought the Afghans in Panipat in 1761.

Chopra was summoned and invited to so many government and private celebrations that he put on weight and his training suffered.

In the aftermath of the Tokyo triumph, the politicians took over, showering the winners with taxpayer money, using the opportunity to celebrate their own role in the athletes' success, get photographed with them.

India won three medals at Beijing 2008, six in London 2012; sports ministers, lesser experts than coaches and players, extrapolated from these trends to come up with wild conjectures — double the number in 2016, more in Tokyo 2020, and so on until the grand triumph at home when the

Olympics come to India in the 2030s.

But extrapolation and conjecture don't work in the world of elite sports, and the wild hopes came crashing down at Rio de Janeiro 2016. India won only two medals, courtesy PV Sindhu and Sakshi Malik, with the latter securing hers in the final seconds of her medal match.

The seven medals in Tokyo have also led to a game of extrapolation — hopes of 10 medals or more in Paris. Our current Olympics squad is around the same size as the 2021 contingent, but the count of seven is unlikely to be matched, unless the shooters perform extraordinarily well. It would be very difficult for Sindhu and Mirabai to repeat their Tokyo feat, as also for the hockey team. There's only one male wrestler in the squad, and all expectations rest with the women, especially Antim and Vinesh.

In elite sport, memory is a powerful tool through which past feats can be visualised, rehearsed to boost confidence — in the coming days, no doubt, Sindhu and Mirabai would relive the days of their Olympics glory, while Vinesh would try to shove the painful memories of her own two Olympics down into the recesses of the subconscious.

The opening ceremony, with 85 boats carrying athletes down the Seine towards the Eiffel Tower, afforded an opportunity to the Algerian contingent to revive a terrible memory. They tossed roses into the river; to pay tribute to the Algerian freedom fighters massacred by French security forces in Paris in 1961. It is believed that up to 200 protesters were killed, their bodies dumped into the Seine.

The Algerians continue to keep that memory alive, for the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting, as Milan Kundera wrote.

A tailor and a man on the moon



RAAJA BHASIN

FIFTY-FIVE years back, almost to the day in July 1969, two events took place. The major event was that Chooru Ram, the resident tailor at my school, was steeling himself to believe in science and space travel. The minor event was that Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon. Both, as I learnt, were interconnected.

Like many other boarding schools, Shimla's Bishop Cotton School was a tiny 'nation-state' in itself. Apart from its administration and hierarchy, it was also fairly self-sufficient. There was a very obvious requirement of a huge kitchen, and there was an infirmary, a bakery and 'dho-bi ghat'. It also had its own barber and tailor. The barber's mandate was to cut hair as close as possible, preferably without injury to the scalp. Then, the tailor, ah, well, he was the one and only Chooru Ram. By his own assertion, Chooru Ram had been prescribed a medicine which was only to be taken in the evenings when the lights were low and the comings and goings in the tailor room had decreased. He would pull the bottle out of a cupboard and place the medicine next to his miracle-working sewing machine. With each swig of medicine, the foot pedal of the sewing machine would go faster. The hand wheel would accelerate to an indeterminate speed. School uniforms would be stitched or repaired in the twinkling of an eye by this one-man assembly line.

The fact that he was the senior tailor in school did not deter him from having a mind of his own. He had his own version of the sciences and was an original 'flat-earther'. He did not believe that the planet was round and coaxed by the wheels and windmills of his mind, also dismissed the planet's rotation on its axis or around the sun. Those were days before television and various people, ranging from schoolmasters to pupils, showed him books and magazines with graphic depictions of the solar system. Chooru Ram was neither interested, nor impressed. He had a simple answer to all this badgering, "If what you say is true, and the earth goes round and round, then, why is this door in the same place in the evening? It should be in the opposite position." And further, "Has someone seen that the earth is round? You show me pictures which have been made by people who have not seen the earth except from earth." The simplicity of this logic, while fallible, could not be explained or discussed, especially after he had had his medicine.

On July 24, 1969, the space harvest sown by American President John F Kennedy some years earlier was reaped by President Richard Nixon. A manned mission

landed on the moon. On their return, the astronauts of Apollo 11 were feted and this historic moment reverberated around the world. This also led to a slew of brightly coloured print coverage. In August that year, a special edition of the iconic 'Life' magazine carried a grand visual spectacle of the moon landing. This publication, among others, was something that came home regularly.

My father, who taught physics at Bishop Cotton, in his wisdom, decided to loan this and some other publications with pictures of the earth taken from the moon, to a group of students who sallied forth to show them to Chooru Ram. These, once and for all, were expected to prove that the earth was round.

It took a while to mollify Chooru Ram that wanderings into space were not in search of god

Reports came back that when these publications were shown to the tailor, sparks prepared to fly from the sewing machine. Chooru Ram was in distress and as far as he was concerned, these scientific measures were blasphemous. "Why did they do that?" he is said to have cried. "Why do they want to look for god when he is in our hearts?" For him, the moon mission was taken as man's temerity to look for the divine. No more, no less.

It took a while to mollify him that these wanderings into space were not in search of god. As far as one knew, the so-called 'seekers' believed more in empirical science, as compared to something else. Then came the day when matters between science, the moon mission and Chooru Ram came to be sorted. President Nixon decided to gift a piece of the moon that had been brought back by the astronauts, to various countries around the world. India also received a small moon rock and this was then sent on tour across the country. In Shimla, this was placed for display in the old band stand on the Ridge, the structure that now houses a restaurant. Some of us went to take a look and as far as we were concerned, this priceless object looked no different from any other stone. The matter was dutifully reported to Chooru Ram. His reaction is not known.

Now, for a disclaimer: there may be some embellishments in this story, but those are only in terms of language. A little 'verbal decoration'. 'Dal pe tadka', coriander and chilli gamish, if you will. However, the dish remains intact. The facts in this story remain correct to the best of my knowledge. Neil Armstrong, despite what conspiracy theorists may say, did walk on the moon. More importantly, Chooru Ram started believing in a miracle called science and even began passing the message along.

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

Geeta Bali stardom, Amritsar to Bombay

SURINDERJIT SINGH SANDHU

LIKE a typical heroine of yesteryear, Geeta Bali's real life story, too, reads like a script of her black and white films. She dropped out of school after Class 6 to help her family — a blind father, a partially deaf mother, a partially deaf elder brother and a sister. Her family would travel to Burma, Malaya and Sri Lanka, along with her father Kartar Singh, who was a religious preacher. The family lived in the vicinity of Chowk Baba Sahib, near the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

During their trips to other countries, Geeta — born Harkirtan Kaur — and her elder sister Hardarshan Kaur gave stage performances. Both were excellent dancers. Geeta had learnt classical dance and music, horse riding and Sikh martial art 'gatra' at a young age.

However, these performances by the two young girls did not find favour with conservative Sikhs. In December 1939, they were not allowed to perform at Lahore. The nine-year-old Harkirtan vowed that she would come back and perform at the same venue. The resolute girl kept that promise — nine years later, she performed at the same stage as a star, Geeta Bali.

As a child, Geeta was selected to sing for a programme at the All India Radio, Lahore. The vivacious girl wanted to emulate Shirley Temple, an immensely popular American child star of her era. She was noticed by Pt Gyan Shankar, a leading choreographer, who selected her for a documentary film, 'The Cobbler' (1942). Her agility and sense of rhythm won her a solo performance in RK Shorey's Punjabi film, 'Badnami', in 1946. The same year, Mazhar Khan, a renowned producer-director from Bombay, signed her for a film. Geeta shifted to Bombay,



along with her family and Pt Gyan Shankar.

Mazhar's film got delayed and Pt Shankar came across well-known film-maker Kidar Sharma, whom he had known since his Amritsar days. Geeta was not beautiful in the traditional sense. She was quite thin, but Sharma was impressed by her sense of humour and eloquent eyes. He signed her for 'Suhaag Raat' (1948) at a princely sum of ₹26,000, against the wishes of his brother and the studio staff. The film turned out to be a blockbuster.

Sharma repeated her in more films, including 'Neki Aur Badi' (1949), 'Bawre Nain' (1950) with Raj Kapoor, and 'Rangeen Raaten' (1956) with Shammi Kapoor, whom she married in a temple on August 24, 1955, with only one other person in attendance.

Earlier, Dev Anand had cast her in Navketan production 'Baazi' (1951), in which Guru Dutt made his debut as a director. 'Baazi' was a super hit. People thronged theatres just to see her song 'Tadbir se bigdi hui taqdeer bana le', and her superb dancing. Anand and Geeta went on to give five more hits — 'Jaal' (1952), 'Kishiti' (1954), 'Farrar' (1955), 'Milap' (1955) and 'Pocket Maar' (1956).

Considered inimitable, Geeta worked with top names like Madhubala in 'Dulari' (1949), 'Neki Aur Badi' and 'Nishana' (1950); with

Suraiya in 'Bari Behen' (1949); and with Kamini Kaushal in 'Jailor' (1958). However, in all these films, only her superb performances are remembered. Meena Kumari once said, "Geeta is more accomplished than me as an actress. She has a much wider range."

She became so popular that whenever she came on screen, the crowds would chant, "Geeta Bali, chai ki pyali". Her 'Anand Math' (1952) is remembered for its patriotic fervour and the song 'Vande Matram', which has been ranked as one of the best composed songs in Hindi cinema.

Having seen hardship, Geeta would often help her colleagues in need. She helped Guru Dutt to first turn producer and then a hero in her production 'Baaz' (1953). Surinder Kapoor, actor Anil Kapoor's father, was Geeta's secretary. She also helped him become a producer. Rajesh Khanna, who was doing theatre, would visit the building where Geeta had her office. She wanted to cast him as a hero in her last incomplete film 'Rano' (1964), based on Rajinder Singh Bedi's novel 'Ek Chadar Maali Si', but it was Dharmendra who bagged the role.

Geeta would get 10 per cent of her earnings from her mother. She kept this money in a cupboard in Kidar Sharma's office. Whenever any needy person approached her, she would write a chit to Sharma to give him/her the money. When she died, there was still ₹3,000 left, Sharma recalled. In 1962, during the war with China, she donated all her jewellery to the National Defence Fund, set up for the welfare of the armed forces.

Geeta Bali was only 34 when she died of smallpox, which she contracted during 'Rano's' shoot, on January 21, 1965. It was ironical as she dreaded it the most because her father had lost his eyesight to smallpox. But death has not dimmed her brilliance. Her impish beauty and dimpled smile continue to dazzle.

90 minutes with a musk deer in Gurez

INTESAR SUHAL

COMPARED to habitats in the plains, wildlife across the Himalayas, particularly in the western sections of the mountain range, is known to be less in diversity and numbers. This conforms to the ecological reality that 'species' diversity decreases from the lower to higher altitude'. That said, the Himalayan landscape harbours some magnificent fauna, unique to the area and vehemently sought after by wildlife enthusiasts. The sheer hostility of the terrain and harshness of the climate makes wildlife viewing more exciting and adventurous.

My profession has provided me opportunities to explore the Himalayan wildlife across the mountainous regions of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. I am among the lucky and privileged ones to have sighted and photographed all but a few of the wild mammal species of the region — from the snow leopard, the grey ghost of the trans-Himalayas, to the largest carnivore of the entire Himalayan range, the brown bear; to the most critically endangered of the moun-

tain deer, the Kashmir red deer or Hangul. One species that eluded me for long is the musk deer, an enigmatic creature, which by taxonomic nuances is not even a true deer! It is a smaller antler-less, large-eared 'deer', standing 40-50cm at the shoulder, having unequal hind and forelimbs, whose males sport a distinct pair of fang-like canines — all un-deer-like characters!

I did have my chances of sighting the animal on a couple of occasions, first during my student days while surveying in the hills of Ranikhet, Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand), in 1995, and then five years later during my early professional life, in the Over-Aru Wildlife Sanctuary, near Pahalgam, Kashmir. On both the occasions, it was just a snapshot glimpse, neither long enough to be registered in the brain, nor good enough to be captured in a frame. All these years, I have longed for a more satisfying view of this magical animal. Finally, the opportunity came when I was sent off on an official assignment to Gurez, north Kashmir, this summer.

Flanking the valley on its north-eastern side, Gurez is a picturesque vale surrounded by dense conifer forests of fir, spruce and blue pine, with cliffy peaks towering over-



A Kashmir musk deer. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

head, supporting patches of birch and juniper. There may not be any officially notified national park or wildlife sanctuary in Gurez, but its forests, home to a variety of bird and animal life, merit its inclusion in the Protected Area map of the country.

After a disappointing rainy morning and forenoon that upset all my plans of watching

birds, the sun finally shone in the afternoon, allowing me to venture out with two local guides from Barnai, a small hamlet 16 km south-east of Dawar, the administrative headquarter of Gurez. We crossed a log-bridge on the stream near the village and took a trail into the Chek nullah. The trail soon became steep and led us to a narrow gorge overlooking a road and the stream, running parallel to each other.

On the opposite side, about 90 metres from where I stood with my camera and binoculars, I noticed a rocky cliff that rose almost vertically from the road below. My attention was caught by some protruding rocks and a few crevices, ideal for vultures to perch on and nest. I scanned the cliff with my binoculars, hoping to see a Himalayan vulture or a lammergeier. Suddenly, I noticed movement in one of the crevices which supported a bit of grass. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw a musk deer standing still, holding on firmly to the little ground available under its hooves. The animal was panting with its tongue out as if it had escaped a predator, or was running away on being disturbed by a human. Whatever the reason, it had found the perfect spot to take refuge.

I watched more keenly and could see it was a female, as it lacked the canine tusks, prominent in males. The grey face and throat and greyish brown back with prominent spots confirmed her to be a Kashmir musk deer, a species endemic to the Kashmir Himalayas.

I handed over the binoculars to my companions for them to have a look while I set my camera on one of the rarest subjects it had ever clicked. I took as many pictures as I could, fearing that the animal may vanish as soon as she saw us. But, to my surprise, she remained right there, undeterred by our presence and unaffected by the noise of the traffic on the road beneath. After a few minutes, she stopped panting and made a slow but steady move up the rocky cliff.

She was now on a better perch with greener surroundings and gave a sideways pose for my camera, with the flowering foxglove lily in the background. For the next hour-and-a-half, I remained glued to my binoculars, cherishing every blink of her eye and every flick of her ear. I was finally able to see the animal in a manner that satiated the appetite of the 'wildlife' in me.

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



The RSS has seen an over 12-fold rise in the number of shakhas — from nearly 6,000 post the Emergency in 1977 to 73,200 in 2024. The number of swayamsevaks has grown nearly six-fold from 7 lakh to 40 lakh over the same period.

ADITI TANDON

THE BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government executed something extraordinary this month. On July 9, the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) erased the mention of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from a 58-year-old office order that barred Central government officials, serving and retired, from participating in the activities of proscribed organisations.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi accomplished what his predecessor Atal Behari Vajpayee could not — removing the RSS, BJP's ideological mentor, from the company of banned organisation Jamaat-e-Islami.

The consequential move, which the Opposition Congress-led INDIA bloc denounced as "dangerous" and the RSS and the BJP as "kosher", did not arise in a vacuum. It stemmed from a 2023 case in which Purushotam Gupta, a superannuated Central government employee, moved the Madhya Pradesh High Court for relief from the November 30, 1966, order, saying it frustrated his "dream of active RSS membership".

The High Court asked the Centre what its stand was on the November 30, 1966, July 25, 1970 and October 28, 1980, orders. Only after persistent prodding did Solicitor General Tushar Mehta appear in court on May 22, saying the orders under challenge were being reviewed.

What followed (DoPT's July 9 orders) prompted the court to lament that it took almost five decades for the Centre to "acknowledge that an internationally renowned organisation like the RSS was wrongly placed amongst the banned organisations and its removal is quintessential". The court said future moves of such nature must rest on evidence and stem from law rather than an executive order which is not law.

The High Court observations echo what the RSS has maintained since its inception in 1925 — "we are not a political outfit".

The RSS constitution (written as part of a condition the then Jawaharlal Nehru-led Congress government had put to revoke the very first — February 4, 1948 — ban on the Sangh following Mahatma Gandhi's assassination), reads, "The Sangh is aloof from politics and is devoted to social and cultural fields only. However, *swayamsevaks* are free as individuals to join any party except those which believe in extra-national loyalties, resort to violent or secret activities, or promote hatred towards any other community or religious denomination."

The latest orders, Sangh insiders say, will ease the needless burden of litigation. They say judges, Army officers, doctors, academics and lawyers have continued to engage with the RSS and its 36 affiliates despite the ban.

Vikram Singh, former Uttar Pradesh DGP, says he agrees with the MP High Court order: "RSS is not political and if government servants want to join it, they should be allowed. When I was in Class 10, many government servants used to join the RSS for fiscal culture and general discipline. There was nothing political about it," he says, welcoming the end to ambiguities.

THE TIMING

Coming closely after BJP's humbling in national elections and its evident unease with the RSS, the DoPT's orders are being viewed as the ruling party's attempts at a thaw with an angry parent. "Like erstwhile governments, this one could have sat on the matter but the intention was to fix things," a senior BJP leader said.

The order, which RSS' publicity chief Sunil Ambekar called "appropriate and pro-democracy", comes at three critical junctures in the Sangh Parivar's journey — when the RSS is preparing to mark its centenary in 2025; after the Lok Sabha polls which saw the BJP plummet to 240 out of 543 seats (down from 303 in 2019), and ahead of a three-day coordination meeting the RSS has scheduled with all affiliates, including the BJP, in Kerala's Palakkad from August 31.

The Samanvaya Baithak will reveal the future trajectory of BJP-RSS ties following serial Sangh admonitions of the ruling party's perceived arrogance.

BJP's below-par showing at the hustings invited caus-

RSS MEMBERSHIPS ACROSS AFFILIATES

The prominent among the 36 are BJP (politics), ABVP (students), Aarogya Bharti (health), Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad (law), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (labour), Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (farmers), Bharat Vikas Parishad (social service), Gau Samvardhan (cow protection), Gram Vikas (villages), Kutumb Prabodhan (family values), Kushtarog Nivaran Samiti (leprosy patients), Akhil Bharatiya Sainik Parishad (ex-servicemen), Pragya Pravah (intellectuals), Rashtra Sevika Samiti (women), Rashtriya Sikh Sangat (religious solidarity), Sahitya Parishad (literature), Swadeshi Jagran Manch (economy), Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (tribals), Vidya Bharti (education), VHP (religion), Vigyan Bharti (science).

Open pledge

Lifting of ban and allowing govt officials, serving or retired, to be a part of RSS activities reflects shifting dynamics within Sangh Parivar



The overturning of the ban by the BJP-led NDA government notwithstanding, one will have to wait for the Narendra Modi-Mohan Bhagwat equation to reveal itself, considering the Sangh's anxieties about growing personality cults.

HISTORY OF BANS

February 4, 1948 (Issued by Jawaharlal Nehru-led Congress government; lifted on July 11, 1949)

"It has been found that in several parts of the country, individual members of the RSS have indulged in acts of violence, involving arson, robbery & murder, and have collected illicit arms and ammunition. They have been found circulating leaflets, exhorting people to resort to terrorist methods, collect firearms, to create disaffection against the government and police and military."

November 30, 1966 (Issued by Gulzari Lal Nanda-led Congress government; lifted in July 2024)

"As certain doubts have been raised about the policy with respect to the membership of and participation in the activities of the RSS and Jamaat-e-Islami by govern-

ment servants, it is clarified that the government has always held the activities of these two organisations to be of such a nature that participation in them by government servants... is liable to disciplinary action."

July 25, 1970 (Indira Gandhi government)

"Refer to D.M. dated 30.11.1966... a) the provisions thereof may be brought to the notice of all government servants again; and b) action should invariably be initiated against any government servant who comes to notice for violation of instructions."

October 28, 1980 (Indira Gandhi government)

Attention of the various ministries is drawn to O.M. dated the 30th November, 1966.

tic remarks from RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who reminded leaders that "true servants are never high-headed". Bhagwat called for precedence to consensus over rancour in politics, the need to view the Opposition as a critic and not an adversary, and the urgency to restore peace in Manipur. These veiled messages were directed at the BJP which is making some amends. Prime Minister Modi, for his part, has gone an extra mile to buy peace with the RSS by junking a nearly six-decade-old order.

His predecessor Vajpayee had squandered the chance to do so. In February 2000, Vajpayee defended the Gujarat government's decision to allow its employees to attend RSS *shakhas*, but when his deputy LK Advani declared that the Centre would also review the 1966 ban, the PM retreated. Then RSS chief Rajendra Singh wrote in *Organiser* that the Sangh didn't owe its position to government patronage. "Whether the ban should be lifted, how and when — is the prerogative of the government," Singh said, easing the pressure on Vajpayee, whose relations with Singh's successor KS Sudershan were quite fraught.

PUNJAB-HARYANA HC RULING

As many as 15 state high courts between 1955 and 1993 have ruled that the RSS is not a political outfit and government employees can't be barred from attending its wings and activities. The Punjab and Haryana High Court had on December 21, 1967, set aside the dismissal orders of a state government employee, Ramphal, sacked in 1965 for attending an RSS camp.

"The Punjab government took the view that the RSS is a political party and Ramphal's association with it was against the conduct rules. The dismissal order was challenged by way of a writ petition, which has now been

accepted on the ground that there was no material before the government to hold that RSS is a political party," the Punjab and Haryana High Court ruled.

But the Congress has a word of caution. AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh, who has done extensive research on Nehru, says the "bureaucracy can now come in knickers and the RSS history has been mainstreamed". Jairam recalls Nehru's January 1948 speech where the late PM had said, "Whoever insults the National Flag — be he a Pakistani, a Britisher or an RSS man — will be considered a traitor." Nehru accordingly insisted that the RSS, which professed the *bhagwa* flag (a symbol of Hindu *sanskriti* as per the Sangh constitution), declare allegiance to the Tricolour as a prerequisite for his government lifting the national ban on the outfit after Gandhi's assassination. The RSS had complied.

PATEL, POLITICS AND RSS

Even Sardar Patel, largely sympathetic to the RSS, had held it responsible for creating an atmosphere that led to Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948.

In a September 11, 1948, letter to then Sangh chief MS Golwalkar, Patel wrote, "As a final result of the poison, the country had to suffer the sacrifice of the invaluable life of Gandhiji." What is also true is Patel's soft corner for the RSS and differences with Nehru on the issue.

As author AG Noorani notes, "To Patel, RSS men were patriots. He addressed Golwalkar as brother even after the latter's arrest. In the very letter in which he condemned the RSS, Patel wrote to Golwalkar that RSS men can carry on their patriotic endeavour by joining the Congress." Noorani says Golwalkar was open to collaboration with the Congress in the political field and RSS in the cultural, but he refused to merge the two.

"In 1950-51, Syama Prasad Mookerjee (who was in the

Nehru Cabinet) accepted those very terms to form the Jana Sangh, which later became the BJP," Noorani says.

Sangh leaders, however, argue that the narratives around the first national ban on it were "Congress scripts".

"The first ban was lifted on July 11, 1949, after courts absolved the RSS of involvement in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination," RSS national media co-chief Narendra Thakur says, adding that the ban was primarily rooted in "the Sangh's growing popularity due to rehabilitation work with refugees of the tragic Partition".

RSS AND JANATA PARTY

The RSS, a pariah after Gandhi's assassination, slowly revived during second chief Golwalkar and vastly under his successor Balasaheb Deoras, who lent the Sangh its activist edge and opened it to non-Hindus.

Sangh's clout rose enough for Jayaprakash Narayan to seek its help during the Emergency after earlier questioning its credentials. "The RSS cannot be treated as a cultural organisation as long as it remains the mentor and effective manipulator of a political party," JP has been quoted as saying at the second National Conference against Communism in New Delhi in January 1968.

Just six years later, he took the support of Jana Sangh and the RSS against Indira Gandhi. The Janata Party coalition that came to power in 1977 had three Jana Sangh ministers, all *swayamsevaks*.

So, claims and counterclaims apart, the debate around RSS' political ambition still rages.

JP himself felt the Sangh had political ambitions and should merge with the Janata Party, or else open itself to Muslims and Christians. In a letter to PM Morarji Desai (draft published in *Dinman*) in April 1979, he said, "RSS people are trying to influence politics under the garb of a cultural organisation... I feel the RSS should merge itself with the pro-Janata organisations, but it is bent upon retaining its distinct identity."

Archives also show that immediately after Janata Party's insistence that Jana Sangh eschews links with the RSS and pledge to forego Sangh membership, the BJP was born. "Every member of the Janata Party shall unconditionally accept to preserve the composite culture and secular state and nation not based on religion, and no member shall work in any front which functions in competition to any organisation we sponsor," read the Janata Party resolution placed for Jana Sangh approval on April 4, 1980. On April 6, the BJP was formed.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

RSS researchers Walter Anderson and Shridhar Damle speak of the saffron brotherhood's belief that normalisation of the RSS has something to do with the political victories of the BJP, which could explain the Sangh support to the party despite differences.

The authors mention two occasions when the RSS fully engaged with national elections, lending its *pracharaks* for campaigns. In both, it had feared the rise of the Congress and the resultant threat to Hindu unification. The first instance was the Emergency when the RSS under Deoras backed the Opposition agitation, reducing the Congress to its poorest performance till then — 154 seats. The second instance was 2014 when the RSS backed Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as BJP's PM face to halt the Congress' bid for a third term. "The Sangh's political clout and mass influence can be judged from the fact that the two general elections in which they directly engaged were also the ones in which the Congress fared its worst," says a BJP source.

So, what next? Sources say one will have to wait for the Modi-Bhagwat equation to reveal itself, but point to the Sangh's anxieties about growing personality cults.

Insiders recall Bhagwat's March 9, 2013, address to the cadres in Bengaluru where he said their first loyalty was to the RSS rather than to any individual. The address came at the height of Modi's popularity, with some RSS workers comparing him to Lord Rama.

Recently, again, Bhagwat flagged unbridled human ambitions. "A man wants to be superman... *Devta, Bhagwaan*," he said, in cryptic references which the Opposition Congress linked to Modi even though the Sangh said the remarks were read out of context. Not ruling out differences, RSS insiders say, "Differences are natural in a family; that does not mean the family will disintegrate, we are one."

The RSS remains acutely aware of the need for a political vehicle to continue expanding its influence. The BJP, too, is conscious of RSS' vast network, which came in handy in 2014, when Modi formed the first full majority government in the Centre in three decades.

The import of Sangh's clout is not lost on anyone. It has 73,200 *shakhas* (up from nearly 6,000 in 1977, a 12-fold rise), 40 lakh *swayamsevaks* (up from seven lakh in 1977) and 3,300 *pracharaks* — a precious resource the BJP, which just finished below the Lok Sabha majority mark, can ill-afford to alienate. The parent and the child both know they need each other more than ever before.

"It is not part of a true culture to tame tigers, any more than it is to make sheep ferocious"
— Henry David Thoreau



INTERNATIONAL TIGER DAY

Forests, which are essential carbon sinks and wildlife habitats, play a crucial role in combating climate change.

Strengthening tiger conservation programs is vital to protect their ecosystems, benefiting both tigers and humans, writes **BK SINGH** on the eve of International Tiger Day

DON'T LET THE ROAR DIE DOWN

Scientific studies have consistently brought out that the planet Earth is warming at a faster pace than ever before. The report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned of the consequences of frequent and destructive climatic catastrophes if the global rise in temperature is not contained within 1.5 degrees Celsius concerning pre-industrial (1850–1900 levels). Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) dealing with the European Union's 'earth observation program' launched in January 2023, has recently taken stock of the project and found that June 2024 marks the 13th month of global temperature at 1.50 C above pre industrial levels. The monthly average surface air temperature from June 2023 to June 2024 was 16.660C and was .760C higher than the average for 1991-2020 and 1.640C above pre industrial 1850-1900 levels. So far 2023 has been the warmest year on record, but 2024 is on course to break this.

We are left with no option but to transition away from fossil fuel consumption and develop renewable energy with speed and scale. Forests are the biggest carbon sink that can suck CO2 emitted into the atmosphere due to industrial activities and fossil fuel burning. It is the home of wild animals. Forests not only provide food and shelter to wild animals but also provide a series of ecological services necessary for the survival of mankind. Tiger is at the apex of wild animals. If a tiger is saved, other wild animals and the forests are secure. Project Tiger was launched in India in 1973 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi covering nine tiger-bearing areas extending over 16338 sq km of good quality forests across the country namely Corbett, Kaziranga, Melghat, Bandipur etc. Since then many more areas have been added to the list and by now there are 53 Tiger Reserves (TRs) in India. To commemorate 50 years of Project Tiger an international conference was held at Mysuru on 9th April 2023, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The most important takeaway of the conference was the launch of the international big cat alliance to protect seven species namely tiger, leopard, jaguar, lion, snow leopard, puma and cheetah worldwide. Among 94 member countries harbouring these species, the Ministers from India, Armenia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Suriname, Tanzania, Vientiane, and Vietnam presented the status of conservation of big cat species in their country. They also pledged to conserve the species. Forests and wildlife have a symbiotic relationship and both cannot survive without the other.



BK SINGH

PROJECT TIGER WAS LAUNCHED IN INDIA IN 1973 BY THE THEN PRIME MINISTER INDIRA GANDHI COVERING NINE TIGER-BEARING AREAS EXTENDING OVER 16338 SQ KM OF GOOD QUALITY FORESTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY NAMELY CORBETT, KAZIRANGA, MELGHAT, BANDIPUR ETC. SINCE THEN MANY MORE AREAS HAVE BEEN ADDED TO THE LIST AND BY NOW THERE ARE 53 TIGER RESERVES (TRS) IN INDIA. TO COMMEMORATE 50 YEARS OF PROJECT TIGER AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE WAS HELD AT MYSURU ON 9TH APRIL 2023, WHICH WAS INAUGURATED BY PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI

In this long journey of 50 years, the Project tiger coverage has been increased from 9 to 53 sites. The area under Project Tiger management has also been increased from 16338 sq km to 75000 sq km. Though tiger security was the focus in all 53 tiger reserves of the country, aggressive activities of interstate poaching gangs who killed tigers at will and decimated tigers from many reserves namely Sariska (Rajasthan), Panna (Madhya Pradesh), Buxa (West Bengal), Namdapha and Kamlang (Arunachal Pradesh) and Dampa (Mizoram). Project Tiger was revamped when the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) was brought in 2006 and enabling provisions were made in the Wildlife (Protection) Act through amendment. A robust methodology for All India Tiger estimation was developed by our Scientists at the Wildlife Institute of India and experts from NTCA and used for tiger estimation in the same year. First first-ever exercise was carried out in all forest areas of the country, which revealed that India had 1411 tigers in the wild. Thereafter the estimation was repeated every four years that was in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 which brought out the tiger numbers as 1710, 2226, 2967 and 3682 respectively.

An increasing trend in tiger numbers has been noticed, but the most worrying part that surfaced was the shrinkage in the areas of tiger occupancy. Though the recovery of tigers has grown from 1411 to 3682, the area of its occupancy has declined. From 92,000 sq km area in the first cycle of estimation in 2006, it has been reduced to 88,000 sq km in the fourth cycle in 2018. Despite all stringent measures the fragmentation of habitats and encroachments in forest lands have continued resulting in the loss of tiger-occupied areas. The western Ghats landscape itself has lost 527 sq km of tiger occupancy in four years between 2014 and 2018. North northeastern part of the country has lost more than 6000 sq km area under tiger occupancy in this period. Survey of India biannual report, which was last published in 2021 has assessed the change in forest cover of all tiger reserves over a decade (from 2011 to 2021). The report brings out that the forest cover has decreased by 22.62 sq km (0.04%) in this period. Twenty tiger reserves have gained in forest cover, while the remaining 33 have lost. While Buxa (West Bengal, Annamalai (Tamil Nadu) and Indravati (Chhattisgarh) have gained, Kawal (Telangana), Bhadra

(Karnataka) and Sunderbans (West Bengal) have lost.

The latest tiger estimation report about the Western Ghats landscape reads, "Majority of tiger populations remain stable and some have declined, a significant reduction of tiger occupancy has been observed throughout the landscape." Central Indian Highlands and Eastern Ghats landscape are reported to have added tigers but several threats are looming large; The report adds "High concentration of mining activity poses a significant challenge to conservation. The forests of this region are under threat from various activities, despite their high biodiversity and conservation significance. - Tiger occupancy declined in states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Telangana." The description from the north eastern landscape is no different. It indicates some major threats the region is facing "The landscape has experienced extensive change in land-use patterns in the past, leading to severe loss of natural habitat." Overall, the report is positive about the increase in tiger numbers from 2967 to at least 3167; the loss in the Western Ghats

landscape has been wiped out by the gains in the central Indian landscape. Human-carnivore conflict is prevalent in several landscapes, especially where buffer forests are disturbed due to human and livestock presence. When an area of occupancy decreases and the number increases, tigers are bound to stray outside the reserve and come in conflict with humans. Forest department faces challenges across the tiger landscapes; the conflicts can disturb the relationship with communities. The country should pledge to focus on conservation even outside tiger reserves. Diversion of natural forests, whether inside or outside the tiger reserve is detrimental to conservation. There is a mechanism for paying

compensation for the loss of human life as well as livestock, but the community has to be taken in confidence. Losing tigers would mean losing tree cover and vice versa. Loss of forest cover is the loss of sink for Carbon dioxide and further warming of the planet.

The writer is retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Karnataka; views are personalK

Image Source: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on X post



RICH LEGACY OF INDIA'S TIMELESS CUISINE

With global trends and multinational narratives challenging the nutritional value of traditional Indian dishes, it is crucial to preserve the unique flavours and benefits that define Indian cuisine, writes **ANIL RAJPUT**

Air, water, and food are essential for life, and in India, they have had a revered status from the beginning of civilisation. In this article, I will focus on the third—Indian Food and cuisine! The history and deep connection of Bharat with food are perhaps among the oldest in the world; it is actually timeless. The people of early Vedic civilisations in India were nomadic pastoralists who practiced elaborate rituals to placate their gods. Agni, the god of fire, was considered the mouth through which the gods ate their sacrifices, and one of his favourite foods was ghee (clarified butter), which remains popular to this day. The Indus Valley Civilisation that spanned from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE was known for barley, millet, ragi, amaranth, wheat, sorghum, rice, as well as oilseeds such as sesame, linseed, and mustard.



The traditional Indian palate has evolved over centuries and includes the traditional Ayurvedic way of living, which is a 6000-year-old healthcare system and lays special emphasis on Ahara (diet) and Anna (food) as means of good life, health, and wellness. One of the fundamental teachings of Ayurvedic tradition is that everything in the universe is composed of five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and ether (space)—and the tastes are no different; each taste contains all five elements, with each taste predominantly composed of two elements. There are six such tastes: Sweet (Madhura)—Earth and water, Sour (Amla)—Earth and Fire, Salty (Lavana)—Water and Fire, Pungent (Katu)—Fire and Air, Bitter (Tiktka)—Air and Ether, Astringent (Kashaya)—Air and Earth. In addition, Ayurveda describes foods as sattvic (pure or balanced), rajasic (active or increasing the energy of the body), and tamasic (heavy or reducing the energy of the body). The Sanskrit grammarian Panini, in his work Ashtadhyayi (6th–5th century BCE), describes three categories of food: meat, lentil-based soup, and vegetables. Chanakya's Arthashastra, a manual on how to run a kingdom that may date in part to the 4th century BCE, elaborately describes how certain foods are to be prepared, most of them with spices.

Foreign invasions have had a profound impact on Indian food. When Alexander came to India in 350 BCE, several parts of the country were introduced to fresh herbs like mint, coriander, oregano, and essential oils like olive oil. The Turk-Mongol conqueror Timur brought the precursor of Biryani when he arrived at the

frontiers of India. The biryani, a celebratory meal made using meat, rice, yogurt, onion, and spices, originated in Persia but evolved in India during this era. Biryani now has multiple variants across the country, with the most popular ones credited to the Mughals and the nizams of Hyderabad. The Islamic conquest of India also introduced fruits such as apricots, melons, and plums, as well as a rich gravy style of cooking. Kebabs cooked over coals and pilaf became popular during this period and are still classified as Mughlai cuisine in present-day India.

To the east, in West Bengal and Odisha, the amount of spice used in cooking decreases, and the use of mustard oil is more common. There is much importance given in this region to 'Shadrasa' or the six basic flavours in Ayurveda, with particular emphasis on tikta (the bitter taste). The cuisine of northeastern India is rice-based—rice is grown on terraced fields in the region's hilly terrain—and freshwater fish appears in many dishes, as does pork, mutton, and chicken. This reflects the cohesive nature of Indian regional cuisines, where the use of local ingredients and the customisation/ modification



A Pillar of Corporate Leadership

ANIL RAJPUT'S leadership journey, marked by strategic roles and impactful projects, showcases his deep understanding of finance, policy matters, and stakeholder management

Anil Rajput serves as a Member, Corporate Management Committee and Head of Corporate Affairs at ITC Limited, a leading Indian conglomerate with diversified presence in FMCG, hotels, information technology, packaging, paperboards and agribusiness.

Anil Rajput joined ITC in 1976, and in the course of last 48 years, he has held various positions in the organisation. Starting his career in the finance function, he was seconded to International Travel House Limited in 1983 as part of the start-up team. During his tenure with International Travel House

Limited, he assumed the charge of General Manager-Travel at the age of 27 and laid a strong foundation for its domestic network across India.

Upon completion of his secondment in International Travel House Limited in 1989, he was assigned the responsibility in ITC's Hotels Division as Divisional Project Controller. In this assignment with the Hotels Division, he was tasked with the critical functions of finance, projects and development. He has been closely associated with iconic hotel projects like ITC Grand Maratha, Mumbai, ITC Sonar Bangla, Kolkata and ITC Grand Central, Mumbai. In the year 2003, he held the position of Vice-President - Project



Finance & Development, before he moved to ITC's Corporate Affairs function as Vice President, Corporate Affairs. Anil Rajput has been heading the Corporate Affairs Division since 2007. He is the first corporate affairs chief of

ITC to be designated as its President. With a keen global perspective, clear and deep understanding of policy matters, he is highly attuned to the developments, nuances and impact of regulatory and policy issues. Over the years, he has forged effective and strategic relationships with key stakeholders in the government, public affairs, media and the industry chambers.

In his capacity as President, Corporate Affairs he also represents the organisation in all major industry Chambers of the country like CII, FICCI, ASSOCHAM, PHD, and International Chamber of Commerce. He is on the

Executive Committee of FICCI, ASSOCHAM, and PHD and he chairs/co-chairs various sectoral committees in these chambers. He holds the Membership of Academic / Professional organisations such as FMS and Skal International. He is a Non-Official Member of the Managing Body of the Indian Red Cross Society (Delhi Branch) and Secretary, Cuisine India Society.

He is also a Non-Executive Director on the Board of International Travel House, a subsidiary of ITC Ltd, engaged in the Travel & Tourism Business, since May 2000. Anil Rajput is an alumnus of Faculty of Management Studies, Delhi University.



of dishes from different regions is done with perfection. In southern India, rice is the staple food, and it is eaten with sambhar, a watery stew comprising lentils, tamarind, and vegetables. Many fruits and vegetables are pickled and

consumed with meals, and coconut oil and gingelly (sesame) oils are used as the mediums for cooking. Seafood is common along the coast, along with high sugar and salt content, which is scientifically supported due to the high humidity and the resulting loss of body fluids from excessive perspiration in these regions. Within southern India, there are also diverse cuisines—

Andhra, Tamil, Chettinad, Kerala, and Mangalore, among others. Each region cooks sambhar differently and uses different varieties of rice. Tamil cuisine classifies food into six tastes—sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent—and aspires to include each taste in every main meal.

The west coast of India has its own distinct cuisines. In Goa,

rice and fish are staples. Goan Hindu cuisine is less spicy and includes many vegetables, though little onion and garlic. Portuguese cuisine in Goa includes meat and uses a vinegar-based gravy (vindaloo) for many dishes. The arrival of New World vegetables by way of the Portuguese in the 16th century resulted in further changes to Indian cuisines. They introduced chilies, tomatoes,

potatoes, and peanuts, and brought beans, corn, cashews, peppers, and more from the Americas. Vinegar, which is used to season achar and chutneys, was also introduced by them in India.

In coastal Maharashtra, fish and rice are quite common. Mutton Kohlapuri is famed, and then there is the legendary Pav Bhaji. Things

change within the state as well, and we find the increased consumption of millets and groundnuts in inland areas instead of rice and coconut. Further north, Gujarat is predominantly vegetarian, and most dishes have some sweetness due to the use of sugar. This is quite unique to the state and indicative of the sheer variety and changes.

A CULINARY SYMPHONY

CHEF PRATEEK SADHU and **CHEF MANISH MEHROTRA** Shine at Indian Accent Pop-Up

FOODFREAK



Pawan Soni
Food critic and founder of the Big F Awards

I had long yearned to savor Chef Prateek Sadhu's cuisine, which I had heard so much about. However, during my brief visit to Mumbai, I only had time for lunch, and his ingredient-driven restaurant, 'Masque,' was only open for dinner. Later, I learned about his new restaurant, 'Naar'-meaning fire in Kashmiri-near Kasauli, where all dishes are cooked over a wood fire, symbolising the passion of the entire team to deliver something extraordinary. Chef Manish Mehrotra, a household name, has given

India a strong contender in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants with Indian Accent. So, when Rohit Khattar, the media-shy promoter of Indian Accent and other popular restaurants, invited me to a unique pop-up at Indian Accent featuring both Chef Prateek and Chef Manish, I immediately said yes with great excitement. The event was graced by many luminaries from the culinary world, including Vir Sanghvi, Rocky Mohan, Rocky Singh, and Sourish da, with whom I had the pleasure of sharing a table



and discussing each dish as it arrived. **While I could detail the 12 exquisite courses we enjoyed, I'll focus on a few standout dishes:** **DIRTY TOAST BY CHEF SADHU:** This fluffy fermented wheat bread topped with trout, flavoured with Kashundi and perhaps a



hint of ketchup, was both comforting and gourmet. **GHEE LAMB BY CHEF MEHROTRA:** This dish exemplified the principle that less is more. The best meat from the shank was cooked with just four ingredients—ghee, salt, red chili, and garlic. The result was a flavour explosion, and I

guarantee you won't find better meat. **LEMON CRAB BY CHEF MEHROTRA:** Cooked with Karnataka's byadgi chili, it boasted vibrant color and flavour without being overly spicy, and was served with dried shrimp poppadom for an added crunch. **PAHADI PORK BY CHEF**

SADHU: This dish, served with bakharkhani, white butter, and fermented bamboo shoot pickle, featured a perfect fat-meat ratio and was my overall favourite. The handmade noodles called sundar-kala were also delightful. Each course was expertly paired with wine, and the desserts, such as the classic Kashmiri shufta served like a pinwheel paneer, were equally delicious. Unfortunately, the pop-up is already over. It was priced at Rs. 9800 per person for both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings. The food was so exceptional that I am already planning a visit to Naar to enjoy a meal in its serene environment.



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

A DAZZLING DEBUT IN THE WORLD OF KUCHIPUDI

Aadya Gupta's breathtaking Kuchipudi debut, Rangapravesham, showcased her years of dedication and passion. Guided by the esteemed Drs. Raja Radha Reddy and Guru Kaushalya Reddy, Aadya's performance beautifully highlighted her mastery of the classical art form, illustrating her journey from student to accomplished dancer, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**

As one steps into Kamani Auditorium, they are immediately transported into the heart of a spellbinding Kuchipudi recital - Rangapravesham. This cherished milestone, marking a dancer's formal debut, was brilliantly embodied by Aadya Gupta. Under the esteemed guidance of Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri awardees Drs. Raja Radha Reddy and Guru Kaushalya

Reddy, Aadya's performance was a radiant showcase of her dedication and passion. Her recital not only highlighted years of rigorous training but also celebrated her remarkable journey from an earnest student to a consummate performer. The evening was more than just a performance; it was a celebration of art and tradition that captivated everyone present. The audience's presence in the hall was a tribute to the enduring

appreciation for Kuchipudi, as people from all age groups came together to admire the rich heritage of this classical dance form. The non-stop applause and standing ovation from the audience, spanning from children to elders, underscored the universal appeal and excellence of Aadya's performance. This enthusiastic response highlighted not only her individual talent but also the remarkable mentorship of her Gurus.

The evening's celebration was enhanced by a meticulous attention to detail in every aspect of the performance. The light design added a captivating depth to the visual experience, enhancing the emotional impact of the dance. The costumes and makeup, elegant and alluring, played a crucial role in bringing the traditional essence of Kuchipudi to life, ensuring that each movement was complemented by its visual presentation. A particularly magical aspect of the performance was the live orchestra, whose contribution was essential to the recital's success. The musicians created a soothing and heavenly auditory experience, particularly in the Raga Ragamaalika, which accompanied the piece "Chhaap Tilak Sab Cheeni." The harmonious balance and deeply devotional quality of the music elevated Aadya's performance, creating a rich, immersive experience that resonated deeply with the audience. The symbiotic relationship between the dancer and the musicians underscored the true essence of classical performance, highlighting the integral role of live music in enhancing the beauty and emotional depth of the dance. The program featured a range of pieces that demonstrated Aadya's mastery over Kuchipudi's expressive depth and technical brilliance. She began with "Shree Venkateshwara Stothram," a devotional piece that set a serene tone for

the evening. This was followed by "Jathikattu" in Raag Maand and Taal Khanda Chapu, a dynamic dance that showcased her precision and rhythmic mastery. One of the evening's highlights was "Bhamakalapam," a narrative dance that vividly portrayed Satyabhama's intense love for Krishna. Aadya's nuanced performance captured the emotional complexity of the character, showcasing her ability to convey deep emotions through her dance. Her rendition of "Chhaap Tilak Sab Cheeni," a poem by the 14th-century Sufi mystic Amir Khusro, was another standout, blending romantic and devotional themes in a mesmerizing performance. The recital concluded with "Tarangam," a traditional Kuchipudi piece celebrating Lord Krishna's childhood stories. Aadya's skillful execution of intricate footwork on a brass plate was a breathtaking display of her virtuosity and command over the dance form. Drs. Raja and Radha Reddy, along with Kaushalya Reddy, have played a pivotal role in promoting Kuchipudi globally. Their unique choreographic style and ability to blend tradition with modern sensibilities have garnered them numerous accolades. Natya Tarangini,

founded in 1976, stands as a testament to their dedication and vision, nurturing countless dancers over the years. Aadya's journey, shaped by the disciplined and compassionate guidance of her Gurus, reflects the transformative power of Kuchipudi. The institute's focus on technical precision and emotional depth has enabled her to perform on prestigious platforms across India. This debut marks not just an achievement but a new beginning for Aadya, promising greater heights in her dance journey. Aadya Gupta's Rangapravesham was a radiant celebration of her talent and dedication. The performance, accentuated by beautiful lighting, elegant costumes and a supportive audience, was a seamless blend of technical brilliance and emotional depth. The live orchestra's contribution added a magical dimension, making the evening an immersive experience that beautifully highlighted the essence of Kuchipudi. The overwhelming appreciation from attendees, coupled with the meticulous execution of every element of the recital, left a lasting impression. With the unwavering support of her family, friends and mentors, Aadya is poised to achieve even greater success in her future endeavors.



A Celebration of Connection

M-tastic's inaugural Mother & Kids Exhibition offers a perfect blend of quality shopping and interactive fun. This vibrant event celebrates the special bond between mothers and children, featuring curated products and engaging activities that create unforgettable family moments, says **TEAM AGENDA**



In a world where family moments meet unforgettable experiences, M-tastic's inaugural Mother & Kids Exhibition has set a new benchmark for joy and connection. This enchanting event celebrates the special bond between mothers and their children, blending quality shopping, imaginative play and creative activities into a magical experience for families. Founded by Suryashi Juneja and Surbhi Sachdeva, the exhibition reflects their combined expertise and passion. Suryashi, a seasoned chartered accountant with a background in logistics, and Surbhi, who holds dual MBAs and extensive corporate experience, have crafted an event dedicated to enhancing family life. Their goal is to bridge the gap between emerging homegrown brands and discerning parents, providing a premier platform for quality brands and enthusiastic parents to connect and discover. The exhibition features a curated selection of products catering to every child's needs. Visitors are greeted with chic clothing, imaginative toys, innovative educational tools and stylish accessories. Highlights include the Norah Kids Collection and PNK by

Isha Arora, which offer adorable pink dresses capturing the essence of childhood wonder. Tiny COCO adds to the excitement with its chic finds for little minds, appealing to both children and their parents. Beyond shopping, the event is a celebration of creativity and fun. Children can participate in art workshops, science experiments, dynamic STEM projects and cupcake decorating. Face painting, gel nail art and a dedicated play area provide endless entertainment, while older kids enjoy exciting games. The creative free art corner stands out, allowing children to express their artistic talents and share special moments with their families. Seeing their faces light up with joy and concentration highlights the simple yet profound pleasures of childhood. A standout feature is the face painting, adding a special touch of joy to the event. Children and mothers are thrilled to see their favourite stars and characters come to life with vibrant designs. A particularly heartwarming sight was a little girl with a doll painted on her face in sparkling glitter, capturing the fun and creativity that define the exhibition. The event also includes free nail art by the talented Vaishali

Nagpal. Her decision to offer this service at no charge underscores the significance of such exhibitions in providing small businesses with a valuable platform. Vaishali's work adds glamour to the day and highlights how events like M-tastics play a crucial role in supporting the visibility and growth of emerging brands. This commitment enriches the experience for all attendees. Another highlight is the variety of stalls. Rakhi stands by a mother-daughter duo buzzing with activity as children eagerly choose their favourite designs, reflecting the creativity and personal touch of the event. The Ritwik Collection, featuring handmade tote bags and file folders crafted by a mother-son duo, exemplifies collaborative creativity and practical products from small businesses. M-tastic's dedication to a holistic experience is evident in its food offerings. Health-conscious parents will appreciate the homemade bakery items and granola bites from Pinks & Grumps, crafted without preservatives. Sanchita's Gourmet Medleys provides a selection of additive-free snacks, including Nutri Hexas cheese basil crackers and Millet Murukku. This focus on wholesome, artisanal products underscores the organizer's commitment to creating a nurturing environment for families. In essence, M-tastic's Mother & Kids Exhibition resonates with laughter, joy and discovery. It has set a new standard for family-centric celebrations and illuminated the beauty of shared experiences. Families leave with hands full of delightful finds and hearts brimming with cherished memories, experiencing a renewed sense of wonder and connection. M-tastic's dedication to thoughtful curation and the joy of family moments ensures that this exhibition will be remembered as a radiant chapter in the story of family celebrations.

Discover the Depths of Abstraction

Tejinder Kanda's latest exhibition is a vivid exploration of the human psyche, inviting viewers to delve into the realm of self-discovery through a mesmerising display of abstract artistry

BY TEAM AGENDA

Tejinder Kanda's latest exhibition, "In-Within," at the Shridharani Art Gallery, is a profound exploration of the human psyche through abstract art. Kanda, a celebrated contemporary artist known for his evocative and thought-provoking pieces, continues to push the boundaries of abstraction with this new series. The exhibition features 32 artworks, each painted with acrylic on canvas, offering viewers an opportunity to engage with art that is both visually stunning and deeply introspective. Kanda's work in this exhibition showcases a mastery of abstract techniques, utilising impasto methods and a vibrant palette to create canvases that evoke a powerful emotional response. The use of impasto techniques adds a tactile dimension to his work, inviting viewers to experience the paintings not just visually, but almost physically. This adds depth and complexity, drawing the audience into the layered and textured world Kanda creates. The swirling strokes and tonal gradations are reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionist movement, echoing the work of artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. However, Kanda's approach is distinct in its exploration of the "unidentified and unknown," pushing beyond the traditional confines of abstraction. Kanda's versatility as an artist is evident in his wide range of influences and mediums. While this exhibition focuses on acrylic paintings, Kanda's artistic practice extends to vibrant silk-screen prints and ceramics, showcasing his ability to adapt and explore various forms of artistic expression. This diversity is a monument to Kanda's commitment to exploring the creative process in its many facets, providing a richer context for understanding his work. It also speaks to his broader artistic philosophy that art is not confined to a single medium or style, but is a continually evolving dialogue between artist, material,



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

and audience. The palette in "In-Within" is notably varied, ranging from earthy tones of reds and browns to cool blues, purples and greens. This wide spectrum of color not only reflects Kanda's skillful use of color theory but also the emotional depth of his work. He also incorporates pinks, pastels and yellows, which are traditionally seen as more feminine colors. However, Kanda employs them with a vigorous application and powerful strokes that inject a masculine energy into his paintings, subverting traditional color associations.

This interplay of color and technique creates a dynamic tension in the artwork, allowing viewers to experience a range of emotions from calmness and contentment to intensity and excitement. One of the most compelling aspects of Kanda's work is his ability to capture the passage of time and emotion. The fluid application of watered-down acrylics allows him to layer colors in a way that reflects his emotions and thoughts at the moment of creation. This technique gives his work a sense of immediacy and authenticity, inviting viewers to

connect with the artist's emotional journey. It's as if each painting captures a fleeting moment in Kanda's personal exploration of his own psyche, offering a glimpse into his inner world. The exhibition is curated by Georgina Maddox, who highlights the transformative power of abstraction in Kanda's work. Maddox emphasises how abstraction goes beyond the physical realm, allowing viewers to connect with the intangible essence of the world. In this regard, Kanda's work invites the audience to engage in a shared journey of self-discovery. His art dissolves the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, revealing the true essence of the human experience. In "In-Within," Tejinder Kanda offers more than just an art exhibition; he provides a profound and introspective experience that invites viewers to look beyond the surface and engage with the deeper layers of meaning and emotion embedded in his work. This series represents a significant milestone in Kanda's artistic journey, as he delves into the depths of his psyche, translating his internal exploration into a visually stunning and emotive body of work. The exhibition is a tribute to Kanda's skill and creativity, offering a compelling exploration of the human condition that is both intimate and universal. "In-Within" offers a unique opportunity to experience the transformative power of abstract art in a profoundly personal and meaningful way.