

SCIENCE

Researchers find mechanisms behind plant response to warming

The Hindu Bureau

Microscopic pores on the surface of leaves called stomata help plants 'breathe' by controlling how much water they lose to evaporation. These stomatal pores also enable and control carbon dioxide intake for photosynthesis and growth.

Key mechanism

With global temperatures, widening stomatal pores

are considered a key mechanism that can minimize heat damage to plants. University of California San Diego researchers have constructed a detailed picture of increased stomatal 'breathing' and transpiration processes in response to elevated temperatures. Their findings (*New Phytologist*) identify two paths that plants use to handle rising temperatures.

For decades, scientists struggled to find a clear

method to decipher the mechanisms underlying rising temperature-mediated stomatal openings due to the intricate measurement processes required.

The difficulty is rooted in the complex mechanics involved in setting air humidity (also known as the vapor pressure difference, or VPD) to constant values while the temperature increases, and the trickiness of picking apart temperature and humidity

responses.

The researchers developed a novel approach for clamping the VPD of leaves to fixed values under increasing temperatures. They then teased out the genetic mechanisms of a range of stomatal temperature responses, including factors such as drought hormones, carbon dioxide sensors, and temperature-sensitive proteins.

The researchers found that carbon dioxide sen-

sors are a central player in the stomatal warming-cooling responses, and can detect when leaves undergo rapid warming.

This starts an increase in photosynthesis in the warming leaves, which results in a reduction in carbon dioxide. This then initiates the stomatal pores to open, allowing plants to benefit from the increase in carbon dioxide intake.

Interestingly, the study also found a second heat

response pathway.

Under extreme heat, photosynthesis in plants is stressed and declines, and the stomatal heat response was found to bypass the carbon dioxide sensor system and disconnect from normal photosynthesis-driven responses. Instead, the stomata employ a second heat response pathway, not unlike gaining entry through a backdoor to a house, to 'sweat' as a cooling mechanism.

SNAPSHOTS



Oyster reefs once thrived along Europe's coasts

Oysters once formed extensive reefs along much of Europe's coastline – but these ecosystems were destroyed over a century ago, new research shows. Based on documents from the 18th and 19th Centuries, the study reveals that European flat oysters formed large reefs of both living and dead shells, providing a habitat supporting rich biodiversity. The researchers found evidence of reefs almost everywhere, from Norway to the Mediterranean, covering at least 1.7 million hectares, an area larger than Northern Ireland.

Two months on, Meghalaya polio case shrouded in secrecy

On August 12, the ICMR-NIV Mumbai unit reported that the polio case detected in Meghalaya was a type 1 vaccine-derived poliovirus. CDC Atlanta has also confirmed that it is not an imported strain of type-2 VDPV or wild poliovirus type-1

R. Prasad

In 2017, the Health Ministry and the Gujarat government covered up three Zika virus cases detected between November 2016 and February 2017. India informed the WHO about the outbreak in Gujarat only in May 2017, six months after the first case was detected. The news of the outbreak became known only when the WHO posted the information on its website. Eight years later, India has been found shying away from divulging all the details of a polio case detected in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills district in early August this year.

On August 12, the ICMR-NIV Mumbai Unit, which is a WHO-accredited polio laboratory, confirmed that the polio case detected in Meghalaya was a type-1 vaccine-derived poliovirus (VDPV), and reported the results to the Union Health Ministry, the Meghalaya State government and the WHO. Dr. Roderico H. Ofrin, WHO Representative to India, told *The Hindu* in an email.

Yet, the first report of the polio case published by PTI two days later on August 14 called it a "suspected" case of polio. Based on unnamed officials, the PTI report from Shillong said: "A two-year-old boy in a remote village in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills district has been found with symptoms of poliomyelitis or polio, prompting health authorities to start an investiga-

Unwillingness to be fully transparent

By not sharing all the details on time, the Health Ministry is setting a bad example

Vaccine-derived poliovirus cases emerge when children are not fully immunised



■ On August 12, the ICMR-NIV Mumbai unit confirmed and reported the Meghalaya polio case as a type-1 vaccine-derived poliovirus (VDPV) case

■ The first report of the polio case published by PTI on August 14, two days after the results were shared with the Health Ministry, called it a "suspected" case of polio

■ A Directorate of Health Services official told PTI that a boy with symptoms of polio was detected on August 13

■ As per an August 15 report, a Health Ministry official said that the polio case

was vaccine-derived and that the child was "immunocompromised"

■ According to a WHO official, it takes three-four weeks to assess and get the results of the immunological profile of the child and to know if the virus is in circulation

■ Follow-up tests conducted by the ICMR-NIV Mumbai unit have confirmed that the child is not immunocompromised and there is no evidence that the virus is circulating in the community

■ The Health Ministry has not shared the complete details of the polio case till date

tion." The report, which quoted a senior doctor at the Directorate of Health Services, further added that "a boy with symptoms of poliomyelitis was detected yesterday [August 13] during routine surveillance" even when the results were available on August 12.

Immune-deficient

According to an August 15 report in *The Hindustan Times*, a Union Health Ministry official said that the polio case was vaccine-derived and the child was "immunocompromised". Vaccine-derived polio can be of two types – circulating vaccine-derived polio (cVDPV) or immunodeficiency-related vaccine-derived poliovirus (iVDPV). In the case of iVDPV, polio is caused in an immune-deficient individual. By saying that the child is "immunocompromised", the official was suggesting that it

was a case of iVDPV. In reality, on August 15, it was not known whether the child was immunocompromised. It finally turned out that the child was not immunocompromised, and therefore was not a case of iVDPV.

On August 20, a senior official from the Union Health Ministry told *The Hindu* that the Meghalaya case had been confirmed as being vaccine-derived polio, and ruled out wild-type virus causing polio in the little child. However, on the same day, health officials in Meghalaya were ambiguous on whether it was vaccine-derived or caused by wild poliovirus. The State health officials said samples collected from the child were sent to ICMR-NIV's Mumbai unit for testing, and the government was "awaiting the test results to ascertain if it is a case of wild poliovirus or a circulating vaccine-de-

rived poliovirus".

While the Union Health Ministry officials told *The Hindu* that the polio case was vaccine-derived, details about whether the virus belonged to type-1, type-2, or type-3 have not been revealed to date.

'Incorrect statements'

Dr. Ofrin's email makes it clear that the Union Ministry officials and Meghalaya health officials were making conflicting and incorrect statements – whether the polio was vaccine-derived or caused by wild poliovirus, the date when the case was detected, insinuation by the State government officials that it might be a case of iVDPV, and refusal to divulge the details about poliovirus typing (type-1, type-2 or type-3) – despite being aware of the results, which were shared by the ICMR-NIV Mumbai Unit on August 12.

"The type 1 VDPV was

confirmed and reported by ICMR-NIV Mumbai on August 12, 2024. It has been determined... that the polio case is not caused by the wild poliovirus type 1," Dr. Ofrin told *The Hindu* by email on September 16. "The virus has been confirmed as type 1 VDPV by ICMR-NIV Mumbai as well as by CDC Atlanta. Both labs have confirmed that this is not an imported strain of type-2 VDPV or wild poliovirus type-1."

No evidence

Explaining the delay in confirming whether the vaccine-derived polio is due to a circulating virus or due to immunodeficiency in the child, Dr. Ofrin said: "As per standard protocols laid down for responding to such isolations, immediate actions were initiated by the programme to assess the immunological profile of the child from whom the virus had been isolated and to also assess if there is any evidence of the circulation of the virus in the community. It generally takes three-four weeks to complete the process and receive the results."

According to Dr. Ofrin, the follow-up tests conducted by ICMR-NIV Mumbai have confirmed that the immunological profile of the child was normal and there was no evidence that the virus was circulating in the community. "The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the State government of Meghalaya, and WHO are fully aware of the details of the results," he said.



Diabetes and obesity increase risk of liver cancer relapse

Hepatocellular carcinoma, a type of liver cancer associated with hepatitis infections, is known to have a high recurrence rate after cancer removal. A study revealed that the risk of recurrence after two years postoperatively was approximately 1.5 times higher in the case of comorbid obesity and 1.3 times higher in the case of diabetes mellitus. In addition, the risk of recurrence after five years postoperatively was 3.8 times higher in the case of comorbid diabetes and two times higher in the case of comorbid diabetes alone.



Banning tobacco sales can prevent lung cancer deaths

Creating a generation of people who never smoke could prevent 1.2 million deaths from lung cancer globally, a study found. The simulation study suggests that banning the purchase of cigarettes and tobacco products among people born between 2006 and 2010 could prevent 1.2 million lung cancer deaths in 185 countries by 2095. Creating a so-called tobacco-free generation could reduce the impact of smoking on lung cancer deaths in future generations.

Hidden pandemic of AMR poses challenge

Maitri Porecha

A simmering silent pandemic of superbugs that is going on for decades, is causing more havoc than most people realise. "While this is a global story, India is at its epicentre," Anirban Mahapatra, Scientist, Editorial Director at American Society of Microbiology, whose book "When the drugs don't work – The hidden pandemic that could end modern medicine" was released earlier this year told *The Hindu*. "Quarter of antibiotics consumed in the world are in India, and there are annually 300,000 direct deaths attributable to AMR, and superbugs are a factor in 10 lakh additional deaths each year."

Mr. Mahapatra says that even a single scar can get dangerous as it can develop into a deadly wound if the body does not respond to antibiotics. "We haven't had any innovative anti-

biotics developed since the last few decades and we are finding more and more patients with seemingly minor infections going for complicated treatments and surgery; even newborn babies are facing infections at a very high rate for which there is no cure," he says.

So how did we reach this situation? A lot of early antibiotics were easier to isolate from soil and they have already been found. Also largely, populations have become resistant to these antibiotics. Also, pharmaceutical companies are now investing more in research and development related to anti-cancer medication as compared to antibiotics.

"There are only 27 drug candidates in clinical development for priority bacteria across the world meant for tackling AMR. Most of these will fail along the way and not get approved in comparison to 1,600 in cancer treatment. Also



There is more focus on R&D for cancer drugs compared to antibiotics. GETTY IMAGES

there are only 3,000 active researchers who focus on AMR resistance worldwide while there are 46,000 dedicated to cancer research," Mr. Mahapatra explains.

There is a complete market distortion with how antibiotics are developed and how we value

them. "That's why the pipeline is dry. The government can do more to provide incentives as there is going to be a public benefit to have more of these drugs," he suggests.

Less value as drugs

There is more focus on R&D for cancer drugs com-

pared to antibiotics because as a society we put less value on antibiotics as drugs, even if they are expensive and save your life compared to cancer which might just likely extend your life by a few months.

This is because he explains if a pharma company invests a lot of money in

antibiotics – say, it takes 10 years to develop that antibiotic – they normally have a set amount of time before it falls off the patent cliff. Then generics are available as an alternative so they have to recoup R&D expenses within a decade.

"So, the problem is that you have to price it very high and it is available for limited people, and the economics of it does not make sense at all," Mr. Mahapatra adds.

Need to restrict

Even when people suffer from a small sniffle, they prescribe antibiotics themselves or have a neighbourhood doctor write a prescription and there should be more stringent enforcement by the government to restrict this. During COVID, for instance, seven out of 10 people were given Azithromycin without basis even when they did not have a bacterial co-infection, he says.



Question Corner

Puppy dog eyes

Did 'puppy dog eyes' expression evolve exclusively in dogs due to domestication?

New research reveals that coyotes, like domestic dogs, can produce the famous "puppy dog eyes" expression. The study challenges the hypothesis that this facial feature evolved exclusively in dogs due to domestication. The researchers examined the levator anguli oculi medialis (LAOM), the muscle responsible for raising the inner eyebrow to create 'puppy dog eyes', in coyotes. They discovered that coyotes also possess a well-developed LAOM. The researchers compared

the facial muscles of coyotes, dogs, and gray wolves. While dogs and coyotes possess a well-developed LAOM, the muscle is either modified or absent in gray wolves. This challenges the hypothesis that human-driven selection was responsible for the development of the inner brow raiser in dogs. Instead, the LAOM might have likely been present in a common ancestor of dogs, coyotes, and gray wolves but was later lost or reduced in wolves.

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

PROFILES

Iran's forward defence network

The 'Axis of Resistance'

From Hamas to Hezbollah and Houthis to Hashad, the Islamic Republic has built strong links with a wide network of non-state militias in West Asia, which are now at the centre of the unfolding regional conflict with Israel

Stanly Johny

The 1979 Iranian revolution, which saw the fall of a thousands-of-years-old monarchy and spawned the birth of a theocratic republic, was one of the most consequential events of post-World War West Asia. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the last king of Iran, was a close ally of the U.S. and Israel. In 1953, the U.S. helped orchestrate a violent coup in Iran against Mohammad Mosaddegh, an elected Prime Minister, and reinstated the authority of the Shah. The monarch was seen as a pawn of the U.S. by the revolutionaries. Anti-imperialism was one of the ideological forces behind the revolution. The theocratic regime, established by Ayatollah Khomeini, broke with the U.S., "the great Satan", and the existing order of the day in West Asia.

Then the Islamic Republic was instantly seen as an enemy by Sunni Arab states and the U.S. Within a year, when the Ayatollah was still consolidating his authority in Iran, neighbouring Iraq, backed by Sunni Arab monarchies and the U.S., attacked Iran. Isolated, attacked and lacking conventional capabilities to face the growing geopolitical challenges around it, Iran turned to a new model of deterrence – forward defence or the formation of a network of militias across the region through which it can project its influence. This is how the so-called Axis of Resistance was born.

Hezbollah

Among the groups that are part of the Axis, there are organisations that Iran helped create and groups that it co-opted into its orbit. Hezbollah is part of the former. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) helped form a loose network of Shia militias called the 'Islamic Resistance', whose initial target was the Multi-National Force (MNF) deployed in Lebanon. After the 1983 U.S. embassy and military barracks bombing orchestrated by the new militia group, the MNF announced its

withdrawal from Lebanon. But Israeli troops continued its occupation of a sliver of territory in southern Lebanon. In 1985, the network announced itself as Hezbollah (Party of God), whose primary objective was to fight the occupying Israeli troops.

In 2000, when Israel announced its withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah claimed 'the first Arab victory against the Zionist entity'. From the 1990s, Hezbollah, under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed on September 27 by an Israeli strike on Beirut, transformed itself into a state within the state of Lebanon. According to the Office of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Hezbollah has over 40,000 well-trained fighters and many more reservists. The group has been the crown jewel of the Axis of Resistance – Iran's arm on Israel's borders.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad

If the Shah's Iran was a close ally of Israel, the Islamic Republic, driven by anti-imperialism, turned against Israel (the 'little Satan'). Ayatollah Khomeini said support for Palestine was a duty of the Islamic Republic. Two years after the revolution, the Islamic Jihad was formed in the Palestinian territories. A Sunni Islamist outfit, it was inspired by the clerical rule established by Khomeini in Iran.

In Gaza, there was another Islamist organisation, the Islamic Centre, which was established by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s. In late 1987, after the first intifada broke out in Palestinian territories, the Islamic Centre reinvented itself as Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah, or the Islamic Resistance Movement).

Theocratic Iran saw allies in these Islamist groups rather than the secular Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which was backed by Arab countries and was ready to engage with the Israelis. Unlike Hezbollah, which gets direct Iranian support through Syria, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad get limited material support from Tehran. But they are the Palestinian wings of the Axis and enjoy unlimited political support from Tehran. When Hamas



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

carried out the October 7, 2023 attack in Israel, Iran instantly supported the group.

Ansar Allah (Houthis)

Unlike Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, the Houthis of Yemen came into the picture much later. The roots of the Houthi movement can be traced to "Believing Youth", a Zaydi revivalist group founded by Hussein al-Houthi and his father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, two Zaydi clerics, in the early 1990s.

They called themselves Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), mobilised tribesmen in the north against the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh and chanted "Death to America". In 2004,

Salah's government issued an arrest warrant against Hussein al-Houthi. He resisted the arrest, starting an insurgency. In September, government troops attacked the rebels and killed Hussein. The government's high-handedness only strengthened the Houthis, who are named after their slain leader. When Yemen fell into chaos after the Arab Spring-inspired protests in 2011, the Houthis marched towards Sanaa and by January 2015, they captured the capital and much of northern Yemen. They still control those parts, despite a large-scale bombing campaign launched by a Saudi alliance. When Israel launched its retaliatory war on Gaza after the October 7 attack, the Houthis declared

war against Israel. Ever since, they have targeted hundreds of commercial vessels in the Red Sea and launched direct missile attacks on Israel.

Hashad al-Shabi

When the U.S. invaded Iraq and brought down the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, the country fell into chaos and spiralling violence. Subsequently, a new Shia political class emerged in Iraq. Iran, which had historically built close ties with Shia groups in Iraq, found the fall of Saddam an opportunity to expand its influence in the neighbouring country.

When Syria fell into a civil war following the 2011 protests, which also saw the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Iran offered direct support for Shia militias that fought in Iraq and Syria against the IS. These groups came to be called the Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces or Hashad al-Shabi. This includes Kata'ib Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat al-Nujaba, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Organisation.

Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, was the main architect of the Hashad and the key strategist of the Axis. Gen. Soleimani was killed in an American airstrike on Baghdad in January 2020, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kata'ib Hizballah. The killings were a setback for the network, but the militias remain powerful across Iraq and Syria.

All these groups have been part of the unfolding conflict in West Asia. Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. When Israel retaliated, Hezbollah and Houthis started attacking Israel. Hashad targeted U.S. bases in Iraq, Syria and Jordan. In response, the U.S. and allies have carried out air strikes against Hashad and Houthis. Israel has taken the war straight to Hezbollah, killing Nasrallah and launching an invasion of Lebanon. In retaliation, Iran launched its second direct missile attack on Israel and the latter has vowed to hit Iran back. When viewed collectively, these actions constitute a regional conflict, with Iran and the Axis on the one side and Israel and its allies on the other, both willing to climb up the escalation ladder.

THE GIST

Iran's Revolutionary Guard helped create Hezbollah in the early 1980 in the aftermath of Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah, a Shia militia, played a crucial role in forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000

Hamas, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, announced its existence in 1987, during the first intifada; it grew closer to Iran when the PLO, backed by Arab countries, recognised Israel and signed the Oslo agreements

Ansar Allah (Houthis), which was formed in Yemen by Badr al-Din al-Houthi taking inspiration from the Iranian revolution and Hezbollah emerged as a prominent actor after they captured Sana'a in 2015

The lone ranger

Mithun Chakraborty

The Dada Saheb Phalke Award is a celebration of the actor's versatility and commitment to meaningful cinema

Anuj Kumar

Beyond the gobbledegook of method and spontaneity, in the realm of cinema, there is a Mithun Chakraborty school of acting that simply classifies a performance between convincing and unconvincing. Almost five decades after the dark and handsome young man emerged on the scene with his intense portrayal of a young tribal cheated by the system in Mrinal Sen's *Mrigayaa*, the nation awarded his craft of conviction with the government bestowing on him the Dada Saheb Phalke Award, the highest honour in the field of cinema.

What makes Mithun special is his perseverance and versatility. He could be an easy breezy star as well as deliver an immersive performance without making a show of it. He could do justice to a larger-than-life *Jallad* (1995) or *Chandaal* (1998) and around the same time make you cry with the moving portrayal of saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa in *Swami Vivekanand* (1998) and an unsung freedom fighter Sibnath in *Tahader Katha* (1992) where he would squeeze out the last ounce of vanity.

Here is an actor who could catch the bullets on screen and then go on to express the plight of a cha-



racter who is so tortured by the colonial police that he could not control his bowel movement but when he gets freedom, the sacrifice does not seem worth it.

Opportunities did not come easy to the trained actor. After *Mrigayaa*, it took him two years of spirit-testing struggle to find acceptance in the commercial cinema. Seldom patronised by Bollywood behemoths, he rose above the camps and condescending labels to create a niche. With titles like *Daata Garibon Ka Daata* in 1989, he, indeed, was the poor man's hope when Amitabh Bachchan was no longer angry and young. The two came together in *Gangaa Jamunaa Saraswati* (1988) and *Agneepath* (1990).

The disco dancer

When the Friday fever became too hot to handle, he shifted base to Ooty to create an industry of B-grade films around himself. He considers being

consistently popular among millions a bigger challenge than earning the nod of critics.

One to credit destiny for his popularity, fame rests easy on Mithun's malleable figure. His smile disarms the harshest of cynics and his charm works across the class divide. As per your taste and age, Mithun could evoke different emotions in you. For some, he is our first desi James Bond whose craze as Gunmaster G9 in *Surakshaa* continues to reflect in memes. Some continue to worship his Elvis-inspired pelvic thrusts that made him a dance phenomenon with *Disco Dancer*.

For his female fans, he continues to be the boy next door singing romantic ballads in the hills while grappling with the challenges of love and family in *Pyar Jhukta Nahin*, *Pyar Ka Mandir*, and several other titles that begin with the word 'Pyar' (love) or the gentle lead of Basu Chatterjee's middle of the road ci-

nema with a message like *Pasand Apni Apni* and *Sheesha*. If Hindi cinema made him a star, Mithun got an opportunity to express intricate human relationships in Bangla films where he worked with stalwarts such as Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, and Rituparno Ghosh and garnered two National Awards for the best actor. His masterful turns in *Titli* (2002), *Kaalpurush* (2005), *Shukno Lanka* (2010), and the recent *Kabuliwala* exemplify his commitment to meaningful cinema.

Mithun's politics has been as malleable as his range in acting. Starting from the far-left ideology during his student days, he aligned with the Congress after the Emergency, followed by a short innings with the Trinamool Congress that sent him to the Rajya Sabha before switching to the Right. A survivor across mediums, observers indicate that sometimes the actor's personal life informs his professional and political choices.

Despite not being on social media, he continues to enjoy a loyal fan base that keeps his pull at the box office and election rallies intact. At 74, Mithun has half a dozen films on the sets. If you ask him if there is still some fire left in his tank, he will shoot back in his trademark style: "Koi Shaque?" (Any doubt).

From comrade to renegade

P.V. Anvar

The independent MLA backed by the ruling left coalition has turned against the Kerala Chief Minister and some officers in the State police with a host of allegations

ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Abdul Latheef Naha

Since mid-August, an independent MLA elected under the banner of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) from Nilambur constituency in Malappuram district has been rocking Kerala politics. Puthen Veetil Anvar aka P.V. Anvar has been in the limelight because he raised allegations against Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, his political secretary P. Sasi, and a group of police officers led by ADGP M.R. Ajit Kumar.

The State watched bemusedly as the ruling coalition MLA kept on strengthening his tirade against the government. His charges included nepotism, corruption, criminality, illegal wealth amassment, and communal bias.

But those watching Mr. Anvar's face-off with the government were surprised to see it worsening into a showdown in the last week of September when the Chief Minister and his party, the CPI(M), disowned him. Reports indicate that Mr. Anvar held discussions with the DMK leadership in Tamil Nadu on Sunday ahead of his planned announcement of a new party.

Mr. Anvar hogged Malayalam TV news channels for hours on end as he continued his broadside. "If this situation continues,



the CPI(M) will not even get 25 seats in the next Assembly election in Kerala," he said.

Mr. Anvar minces no words. The CPI(M) compares him to P.C. George, the former Kerala Congress MLA from Poonjar infamous for his acerbic tongue. Mr. George has been dumped by both the ruling and Opposition fronts in Kerala. "Anvar too will meet the fate of P.C. George," CPI(M) Malappuram district secretary E.N. Mohandas said.

Political family

Hailing from Edavanna in the traditional Papila region of Malappuram, Mr. Anvar, 57, claims himself to be a social worker with a great political family legacy. His father P.V. Shoukath Ali was a freedom fighter and had hosted first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at his house. "I grew up in a strong Congress base. So did the Communist ideologue E.M.S. Namboodiripad," Mr. Anvar would say

whenever his Communist pathways are under question. The CPI(M) never considered him a party man, but he emerged as a popular independent backed by the CPI(M) in Nilambur, Malappuram.

Most political parties, be it the Congress, the Muslim League, the CPI or the CPI(M), are wary of Mr. Anvar because of his unpredictable and brazen nature. A graduate in economics, he was an active Kerala Students Union member and college union chairman at MES Mampad College, Mampad, in the mid 1980s. He became Youth Congress district vice president and a trusted ally of current Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president K. Sudhakaran when he was the State Forest Minister in the early years of 2000. Shifting allegiance, Mr. Anvar joined the Democratic Indira Congress (DIC), formed by former Chief Minister K. Karunakaran.

He started his electoral

assays in 2011 when he contested to the Assembly from Eranad with the tacit support of the CPI(M). When the UDF's P.K. Bashier triumphed by polling 58,698 votes, Mr. Anvar became the runner up with 47,452 votes. After an unsuccessful Lok Sabha attempt from Wayanad in 2014, Mr. Anvar tasted his first electoral victory from Nilambur in 2016, which he repeated in 2021.

Controversies never deterred him; rather they chased him throughout his life. "I was born in fire, and sunshine cannot wither me," he says.

He has been involved in many ongoing criminal cases, including the murder of autorickshaw driver Manaf in 1995, illegal construction in the ecologically sensitive area of Kakka-dampoyil, land grabs, and cheating. His gutsy and confrontational style has won him many followers. But the alienated ruling party appears certain to take him on for the damage Mr. Anvar caused for the government, particularly its Chief Minister.

His dormant cases are most likely to be revived and given teeth. Fresh cases have begun to be slapped against him, the latest being a violation of Officials Secrets Act. The coming days are going to be more turbid and testing for Mr. Anvar.

REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

Rising tiger numbers, deteriorating habitats

The initial vision of Project Tiger — that the charismatic animal is just an indicator of a complex ecosystem — seems to have been forgotten

When it comes to sizing up the success of wildlife conservation in India, the focus of the government continues to be on tiger numbers. Project Tiger, launched in 1973, initiated the protection of tigers across the country. In the process, India safeguarded a vast range of natural habitats, including sub-Himalayan forests, tropical rainforests, savannahs and mangroves where tigers were found. However, in the 1990s, a wave of poaching for tiger parts, and declining habitat quality pushed tigers to the brink. From 2005 onwards, when the numbers were found to have dropped perilously low (estimated at 1,411), tiger conservation was increasingly centralised and better-funded. As of 2023, tiger numbers have been revived to roughly 3,700 and there are as many as 54 tiger reserves in the country covering more than 53,000 sq km. The popular opinion is that wildlife is doing well, as long as most tourists get to see the beast during a tiger safari. However, it is time to rethink our best-funded and most celebrated conservation strategy. Is the obsession with tiger numbers nec-

essarily good for biodiversity conservation? For one, the disproportionate attention to growing tiger numbers leads reserve managers to alter and manipulate habitats to favour tigers. But this type of management does not necessarily help other species that share the tiger's habitat.

A case in point is Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan from where the rare caracal silently disappeared in early 2000s. The open savannahs and rocky stretches used by this endangered species were planted with *vilayati kikar*, an invasive tree that was used widely for greening at the time. Construction of numerous artificial waterholes for improving tiger sightings increased the soil moisture in this naturally dry forest, leading to changes in vegetation. As a result of these habitat manipulations, an array of species associated with the scrub-savannahs vanished over time, including the caracal and the sandgrouse. Even the once common jungle cat has become rare, according to local naturalists. On the other hand, neglect of rich microhabitats such as the riverine forest abutting perennial streams, led to the decline of the fourhorned antelope. The eminent naturalist AJT Johnsingh declared this species locally extinct from Sariska in 2004.

Today, the long-term sustainability of Project Tiger has come into question as well. It's not just how many tigers we have, but how we got there, is what we need to focus on. The process really determines the long-term sustainability of any conserva-

tion effort. And sustainability needs both ecological guidance and buy-in from multiple social strata.

The social repercussions of tiger conservation have been enormous and have led to visible local hostility in several tiger reserves. The ostensible success of Project Tiger has been at the cost of people, who lose access to resources and livelihood once the strictures come into place. Many of the people living inside tiger reserves are descendants of workers who were settled inside for commercial timber extraction, grazing and plantations, but now have no legal status. In most cases, local residents became "illegal" overnight when the tiger reserve was established. In pursuit of inviolate wildlife spaces, coercive and inadequate resettlement of villages became the norm after 1972, barring a few cases where NGOs were involved. While the relocation package has seen some improvements in 2008, it could never keep up with the changing needs of livelihood security.

Legal ambiguities also continue to dog the sustainability of tiger conservation. Today, thousands of people continue to live in fear of eviction at any time, due to the grey zone created by the contradictions between the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. For instance, the need for scientific evidence to establish people-free spaces (critical wildlife habitats) inside core areas of tiger reserves has been on the back-burner for many years now. The direction by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to declare critical tiger habitats is considered to be in contravention of the



The social repercussions of tiger conservation have been enormous and have led to visible local hostility in several tiger reserves HT PHOTO

Forest Rights Act. Such anomalies continue to undermine conservation efforts inside protected areas.

In this situation, the recent directions of the NTCA to the states to start the process of relocation from core areas of tiger reserves, represent a short-sighted kneejerk reaction. Numerous studies show that such large-scale evictions, without attention to socio-cultural, ecological and economic particularities can only result in continuing the trend of inadequate resettlements. Tiger reserve authorities rarely think about other options on the table — for instance, meeting local communities midway on livelihood needs, absorbing local tribes into wildlife management, and sharing tourism proceeds with local villagers. In the meantime, external business interests swoop in to take advantage of burgeoning tourism.

Ironically, while much attention of NTCA is on moving out villages, tiger

reserves continue to be mercilessly fragmented by rampant infrastructure development. Highways, dams and industries threaten a number of tiger reserves across the country, including the famed Corbett and Rajaji tiger reserves. Fifty-eight sq km of savannah in Panna tiger reserve will soon be submerged by the Ken-Betwa Interlinking Project. Hydroelectric projects in the vicinity of Dibang tiger reserve will likely affect tigers and their movement. Unplanned development thus threatens to create habitat islands that will not support most wild species, let alone large carnivores such as tigers.

Rapid rural-to-urban transformation also has consequences for biodiversity, but is rarely taken note of. Erstwhile agricultural habitats that once formed buffer habitats between the forest and the city, and aided wildlife dispersal, are fast disappearing. Suburban built-up spaces are closing in on not just tiger reserves, but also other

protected areas. The frequent news items about tigers in suburban Gurugram, Leopards in Bengaluru, and crocodiles in Vaddara, make for interesting headlines, but hide a fragile state of affairs. Both wildlife and people are facing heightened conflicts due to such situations, with losses to lives and livelihoods.

The initial vision of Project Tiger in 1972 — that the charismatic tiger is just an indicator of a complex ecosystem — seems to have been forgotten. There is little point in declaring new tiger reserves without considering the larger picture of a country where wildlife and people have traditionally shared history and space.

Ghazala Shahabuddin is an ecologist and academician working on ecological change, ornithology and wildlife conservation policy in India. She is currently a visiting professor at Ashoka University, Haryana. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar

The case against bans, including on cigarettes

I must have been 16 but my memory is as clear as if it happened yesterday. I had come down for the weekend from Stowe and we were watching television. Kiran was smoking. We were in the middle of one of those *Carry On* films when one of the ads caught our attention. Two British policemen were walking past a roadside café when their eyes lit upon a svelte blonde. She was sipping coffee with a long cigarette in her left hand. "Look at her", whispered the first bobby. "But she's smoking?", said the other. "Like her legs." "They're as long as her wretched cigarette."

"I'd like to kiss those lips."
"Like kissing a bloody ashtray!"
By this stage, the two policemen had

walked past and the blonde turned to the screen and smiled. As her lips parted her teeth were revealed. They were brown with nicotine stains.

"Yuck!" I exclaimed involuntarily. A shudder ran down my spine. Kiran stubbed out her unfinished cigarette. I don't recall her smoking again that weekend.

I don't know who made the ad, whether it was government-sponsored or funded by a private trust, but it was effective. If our government is keen to curb smoking, then it has to launch a similarly imaginative and memorable campaign. Smokers can possibly be persuaded to give up. Attempts to bludgeon them will only fail. This is why decisions to ban smoking are so horribly wrong. The last British government toyed with the idea. I hope ours

never does.

Arguably, it's our ability to decide for ourselves, to tell right from wrong, good from bad, moral from immoral, that distinguishes us from other animals. Provided we do not endanger others this right is sacrosanct. It also defines our individuality. Any blanket ban which decides for us denies our essential humanity. It diminishes us. It treats us like children that cannot be trusted to decide properly.

Inseparable from the right to decide is the presumption others may disagree. But for that very reason the right has to be upheld. My individuality lies in my right to be different from you and I expect you to respect the difference even if you don't like it.

Thus it is with smoking. There are a thousand good reasons not to smoke; a million good arguments to persuade me against it. But if I still choose to do so, don't seek to ban me. Don't preclude my choice.

The argument that you do so in my interest is specious and unconvincing. I cannot deny that smoking is bad for my health — no smoker I know would — but so, after all, is overeating, excessive exercising, straining my eyes and drinking too many Cokes. Yet if I like any of these, I — and only I — should be the one to choose whether I can go ahead despite advice to

the contrary. If I suffer for my indulgence, so be it. After all, the right to decide includes the right to suffer for my choice.

So, how should the government behave? The answer is simple and straightforward. Let it seek to influence but not ban. Let it enforce the largest and most stark health warnings on cigarette packets, increase the incidence of taxation — although there's a point beyond which that will become both unremunerative and counter-productive — and finance the widest campaign against smoking. I would support all three. But never try to ban smoking. Groups or individuals will do that of their own volition when and if they want. The government must not do it for them.

Let me put it succinctly. Good governments seek to make adults of children by giving them the opportunity to decide for themselves and the capacity to accept responsibility for doing so. That's how a country learns to stand on its feet. Bad governments make children of adults by taking away their power to choose and, instead, enforcing their own decisions on them. That's how nations start to crumble.

Incidentally, I no longer smoke.

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

Choices for a nation with falling fertility

India is on a fertility decline. With 31 out of 36 states and Union territories achieving replacement-level fertility or even below this threshold, we are transitioning into a new demographic era. India is home to the world's largest youth population — 65% of our citizens are under the age of 35. This demographic advantage presents an opportunity for a more productive and an economically stronger future for the nation. It is, therefore, important that we accelerate our investments in our human capital. A critical factor for India to achieve development goals is to ensure widespread access to reproductive health services, including modern contraceptives.

We are at a moment in time when modern contraception, which improves and saves lives, must also be seen as an instrument of agency, autonomy, and socio-economic empowerment. The benefits have disproportionately greater impact on the lives of women. It is imperative then to recognise the potential we will unlock when we invest in women's (and their partners') access to modern contraceptives and family planning services.

The data could not be clearer: Greater access to modern contraceptives could increase women's participation in the workforce, which could add up to \$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025. Unplanned pregnancies can potentially disturb a woman's educational or professional ambitions, pushing her out of the workforce and into caregiving roles that restrict her potential to contribute to a family's financial security. When individuals and couples can plan their families, they can also pursue their dreams — be it higher education, or career advancement.

Modern contraceptives are more than just "family planning" tools — they are life-saving health interventions. Using modern contraceptives like oral pills, condoms, intrauterine devices (IUDs), and other methods reduces the incidence of unintended pregnancies and closely spaced births. Unplanned and closely spaced childbirth is linked to poorer health outcomes for women and their babies, including being correlated with maternal mortality,

and premature births, that bring a host of risks for the newborn.

The Indian government, through its family planning division, launched Mission Parivar Vikas in 2016, which has resulted in a significant improvement in the uptake of contraceptives. Through the years, newer, reversible methods like subdermal implants and injectables such as Antara-SC have been introduced, providing individuals with greater flexibility and safer, long-term choices, reflecting the government's commitment to enhancing reproductive health and autonomy.

Yet, despite these advancements, the responsibility of contraception has remained disproportionately on women. Although contraception utilisation rates have increased, and the basket of choices of reversible methods has expanded, nearly 38% of married Indian women still opt for permanent sterilisation, making it the predominant method. This reality reflects the limited awareness of newer methods and the persistence of patriarchal norms. Pregnancy and family planning are burdens carried by women alone. This imbalance must be corrected.

We need to embrace innovative solutions. Digital tools like mobile apps and chatbot counselling provide discreet, convenient ways for couples to access information on contraception. These tools can offer tailored advice, address common concerns, and help bridge the knowledge gap, particularly in underserved areas.

The rise of male contraceptive options will be a crucial step. The reversible, non-hormonal injectable RISUG (Reversible Inhibition of Sperm Under Guidance), developed by the Indian Council of Medical Research, represents a leap in male contraception. Safe, effective, and reversible RISUG opens the door to a future where men actively participate in family planning and share the responsibility.

Shamika Ravi is member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister; and Jaydeep Tank is president, Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India. The views expressed are personal

WhatsApp groups are starting to mirror life

On a lazy Sunday afternoon, I opened my extended family WhatsApp group, and sent some belated birthday wishes to the relatives with whom we had no property disputes. It's the digital equivalent of touching the feet of elders. Your parents would sternly remind you on personal chat, to wish Bhopal-waali bua (aunt) on her birthday, lest she takes offence and brings up a 25-year-old incident to spite your mother.

Such groups are forever muted, hence I totally forgot about my message and opened the chat only after a week to check for replies. A lot of people had seen it, but there were four it was delivered to where it wasn't read — all elders who are no more in this world now. Such truths find their unique ways of hitting you hard.

Essentially, every such WhatsApp group with the elderly is like a digital graveyard. Though ours is a Hindu family, members keep getting added to the delivered-but-not-read cemetery.

There is immense utility of such groups. It keeps our elders sane. The same elders who worked hard to give their kids the best education (and entrance exam coaching) so that the latter could move 10,000 miles away for their high-frequency trading jobs, leaving behind the elders in their 3-BHK Noida flat with fast Wi-Fi and a smartphone with WhatsApp enabled.

The family chatgroups give them the feeling of being in a joint family. A digital equivalent of peeling potatoes on a terrace with three other family members, subtly bickering about the (n-1)th generation. Just like the old days. Blissful.

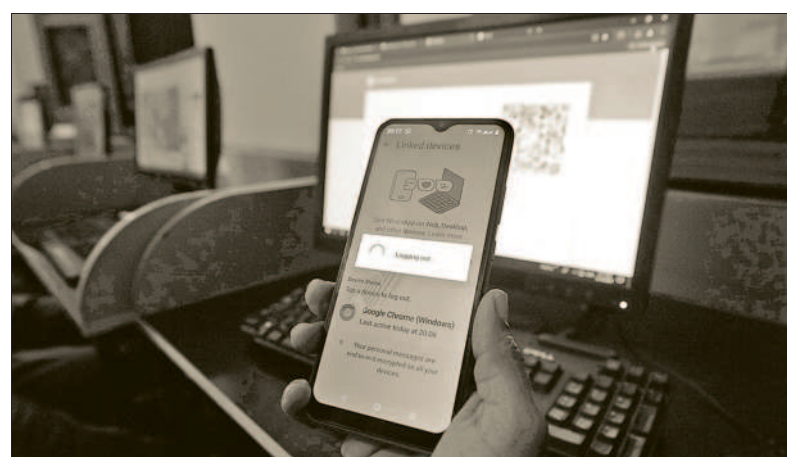
Another "designated family" that uses this medium to the fullest is your workplace. The boss and the human resources department keep reminding you that it's not a company but a family. That is, until there is a business restructuring exercise or Elon Musk takes over the company. Then, you have to return your laptop by 6pm sharp. There is no cemetery in such WhatsApp groups. You become ash.

This is the same group for which the delete-for-everyone feature was introduced. Imagine you take a screenshot of some stupid stuff your boss wrote, and instead of sending it to your colleague, you send it to the group itself, adding some flowery words from your mother tongue.

The reason the details here are so specific is that the author here has been a victim. Not very glamorous to reveal "this is why I became an entrepreneur" on three-hour long podcasts. But here we are.

And when you become an entrepreneur, 50% of your work involves creating WhatsApp groups, introducing venture capitalists to founders, creating smaller teams to delegate work, and finding other partners to play pickleball.

In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, propounded the concept of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* — two types of human associations. *Gemeinschaft* deals with family, friends, and people you have a personal connection with. *Gesellschaft* is about people you are contractually obligated to interact with, like your boss and colleagues. It doesn't encourage sending chat screenshots though.



The family chatgroups give elders the feeling of being in a joint family AP

Basically, Tönnies predicted the two types of WhatsApp groups you can be part of almost 140 years ago. But the one group that straddles both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is your building society WhatsApp group, a battleground between righteous 45+ Indian men and teenage stray-dog feeders.

The dogs themselves are blissfully unaware of such WhatsApp groups. Nevertheless, society WhatsApp groups are one of the greatest arguments against democracy. If you spend 30 minutes on it, you will vote for the next fascist leader who will get things done. And will also ban such groups which encourage such flagrant freedom of speech.

One other area of key interest for this cohort is how to squeeze the domestic help and delivery boys. "They should take the stairs. If you order a chips packet at 9am in the morning, it shouldn't keep my lift busy when I go to work" will have 20 thumbs-up emojis. Sad day for 10-minute delivery.

It diagnoses the inherent split-personality disorder we all have. On one work group, your subordinate posts two paragraphs of a multi-city trade activation he

executed with 47 adjoining photos, and you react with a thumbs-up emoji.

And in your college old boys group, you are critically appreciating the performance of a South Indian actress doing an item number in a Bollywood movie, while being proudly sexist and million other things you will get cancelled for. Often, when your spouse catches you smiling while chatting, it isn't an illicit affair, it is your old boys WhatsApp group.

The work group has absolutely no clue about this facet of your personality. For them, you are still the stiff upper lip, the thumbs-up emoji boss. Until one fine day, they read on LinkedIn why you left that WhatsApp group.

Ultimately, modern life is punctuated by WhatsApp groups you were part of, the ones you joined, the ones you quit, the ones you were kicked out of, the ones you stopped responding to, the ones in which everybody left except you. It's quite like life, with a built-in cemetery.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, and tweets as @gabbarsingh. The views expressed are personal



SUNDAY LETTERS

Encourage body donation

This is with reference to "The personal and political in making body donations" by Manoj Mitta (Sept 29). Voluntary body donation, is akin to the act of serving society with passion and compassion. It is heartening to know that some persons raise themselves above false religious beliefs, and donated their bodies.

BM Singh

Planned and delayed pregnancies vital for stronger economic foundation

This is with reference to "Redefining role of men in family planning scenario" by Lalita Panicker (Sept 29). The proper planning of pregnancies and delayed pregnancies give couples the ability to build a stronger economic foundation.

Subhash Taneja

Delving into the world of words

This is with reference to "Attracted to the world of words, like bees to honey" by Karan Thapar (Sept 29). Shashi Tharoor's prowess and knowledge of the English language is certainly impressive.

Sanjay Jadhav

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

ACROSS
THE AISLE

PCHIDAMBARAM

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN

When the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documents the rising graph of violent crimes, it is news of breaking the law. When vigilante groups beat up a young couple or lynch a person, it is news of breaking heads and bones. When officials use bulldozers to raze alleged encroachments, it is news of breaking homes. When the honourable prime minister calls the Opposition — especially the Congress — as the *tukde tukde* gang or urban naxals, the breaking news elicits a long yawn.

IT IS Breaking News, but of a different kind. It is not news about breaking the law or about breaking heads or about breaking homes. It is not the breaking news that had broken out several times in the past.

When the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documents the rising graph of violent crimes, it is news of breaking the law. When vigilante groups beat up a young couple or lynch a person, it is news of breaking heads and bones. When officials use bulldozers to raze alleged encroachments, it is news of breaking homes. When the honourable prime minister calls the Opposition — especially the Congress — as the *tukde tukde* gang or urban naxals, the breaking news elicits a long yawn.

BREAKING HOPES,
HEARTS

The all-important breaking news that I shall share with you today may break your hopes and hearts. Mr K V Kamath is a distinguished banker. He built the ICICI into India's leading private bank; he was the first chair of the New Development Bank (the BRICS bank); he is, currently, the Chairman of the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID). In a recent book review, he traced the path that India must take in order to attain the status of *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) in 2047.

Breaking news

In an essay in a leading newspaper, Mr Kamath warmly applauded the author, Mr Krishnamurthy Subramanian, for "persuasively laying out his underlying theme... that India needs to break free from the pessimistic shackles of the past and set bold targets, underpinned by sound thinking." Mr Kamath concurred with the author that at a nominal GDP growth of 12.5 per cent a year (in USD), the "doubling every six years would enable GDP to grow about 16 times from USD 3.28 trillion in 2023 to USD 55 trillion in 2047. This is eminently doable." I agree wholeheartedly, and have argued for aiming at such sustained growth.

STING IN THE TAIL

The sting in Mr Kamath's review is in the last six paragraphs. He begins by listing the 'four pillars' that will shape India at 100: macro-economic focus on growth, social and economic inclusion, ethical wealth creation by the private sector, and a virtuous cycle ignited by private investment. Let's examine the 'pillars' under the present government.

Macro-economic focus on growth: The indicators of unwavering focus on macro-economic growth are the data on fiscal deficit, inflation and interest rate, the current account deficit, and Debt/GDP ratio. The government has a long way to go to reach the FD target of 3 per cent of GDP (currently 5.6 per cent). Inflation is still above 4 per cent and the

RBI's repo rate has been at 6.5 per cent since May 2022. The CAD was still large (USD 23.2 billion) at the end of 2023-24 but foreign remittances saved the day. The Debt/GDP ratio at 18.7 per cent is at a manageable level. The record is mixed.

Social and economic inclusion: The biggest casualty under the Modi government is the failed attempt to reduce inequalities. Crony capitalism, public investment in capital intensive industries, reduction in corporate tax, taxes on goods of mass consumption, high fuel prices, inadequate minimum wages, neglect of tenant farmers, bias against services consumed by the poor (e.g., *Vande Bharat* trains vs second class and unreserved coaches in Railways) and other policies have increased the economic inequalities between the top 1 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent of the population. Social inclusion has also suffered a setback because of the hate campaigns and communal conflicts. The second pillar identified by Mr Kamath is wobbling and infirm.

Ethical wealth creation by the private sector: Bank frauds and corporate collapses have increased in the last 10 years. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code has become an instrument to legitimise bank write-offs and to acquire control of so-called failed companies. The recovery rate under IBC is just 32 per cent. Successful resolution applicants have reaped a windfall. Intrusive regulations, creeping controls and an oppressive tax

administration have demoralised ethical businesspersons; young entrepreneurs prefer to do business abroad or migrate. 4300 Indian millionaires have left India (*Mr Ruchir Sharma, ToI*). The Competition Commission has actually encouraged monopolies and oligopolies. There is very little competition in industries such as airlines, ports, airports, telecommunications, oil refinery and solar energy. Rapid consolidation is underway in cement, steel, power and retail, and it is a moot point whether competition will increase or decrease. The trends do not augur well for a competitive market economy which is the time-tested way to ensure ethical wealth creation by the private sector.

Virtuous cycle ignited by private investment: Private investment is lagging behind government investment despite the government's appeals, sops, cajolery and threats. Since business is not trusted by the government, business does not have confidence in the government. Shotgun weddings — takeover of businesses through questionable means — have soured the atmosphere. Over 8000 Indian companies have registered in Singapore since 2000 (*HCI, Singapore*). The overreach by investigative agencies has spread fear among businesspersons. In September 2022, the finance minister asked Indian businesses what is stopping them from investing in the Indian economy?

Mr Kamath is eminently qualified to instruct us on these issues.

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter: @tavleen_singh

Fiscal ruin in
near future

A CRIME is being committed by our political leaders that is likely to have immense and irreversible consequences and it worries me that it has gone almost unnoticed. This is the crime of turning voters once more into supplicants. They were forced to be supplicants in those socialist decades when Congress ruled most of India. We had just got rid of the British and political leaders enjoyed being benefactors, or as we say in Hindi as the 'mai-baap sarkar'. This literally means the government is our mother and father. In rural parts of our ancient land, you need only visit the Collector's office to see that these mighty officials continue to treat people as supplicants.

The Collector is a colonial post that should have been abolished long ago but inexplicably still exists. This official is so powerful that he behaves like a provincial potentate. He usually lives in the grandest bungalow, usually set in sprawling gardens and, if it is an old British official's house, can also have a tennis court and swimming pool on the premises. Outside the Collector's heavily secured palace are to be found, at a safe distance, queues of anxious people who sometimes come repeatedly for a small matter to be settled. In the old days I used to see people groveling, with their hands joined in supplication, when they were granted an audience with the 'Burra Sahib.'

When Narendra Modi became prime minister, one reason why I became a 'Modi Bhakt' was because he showed signs of bringing real change. With his Jan Dhan scheme he forced people to open bank accounts into which he transferred welfare funds to prevent the money from ending up in the pockets of corrupt officials instead of the hands of the needy. Slowly, Indian people, even the neediest, stopped thinking of themselves as supplicants and a new aspirational middle class emerged.

COVID was when millions of Indians who lost their jobs in cities and towns, because of that brutal first lockdown, became supplicants again, dependent on the free rations that the government provided. After COVID, Modi continued the free rations and he and his chief ministers started using the euphemism 'beneficiaries' to disguise what was happening.

Before the Lok Sabha election earlier this year, opposition leaders cleverly deduced that the way to shatter this new vote bank was to promise voters many, many more benefits and 'khataskhat'. Monthly pocket money for women, free transport in cities, subsidised cooking gas, scooters, cycles, free electricity and the promise of government jobs. This has led to a new era of competitive populism. So, in Haryana when the Congress Party promised women Rs 2,000 as monthly pocket money, the BJP promised Rs 2,100.

After the results of these elections come next week, dates will be announced for Maharashtra. Since the coalition government of the BJP, Shiv Sena (breakaway) and NCP (breakaway) is on shaky grounds, money spent on luring voters has doubled. According to a report in a rival newspaper last week, Rs 87,000 crore is being spent on welfare schemes of which monthly pocket money for women will alone cost Rs 46,000 crore. This new scheme, called Ladki Bahin Yojana, will give an estimated 2.5 crore women Rs 1500 every month. Alongside this report was another one that revealed that millions of women have yet to get the money they have become newly entitled to. In my own village, there is a very poor Adivasi settlement and many women from it complained that they have not yet received any money.

Once schemes like this are started, they are almost impossible to reverse. So, whoever wins in Maharashtra, taxpayers' money will continue to be poured into creating a new class of supplicants. Instead of creating jobs and encouraging women to participate in the work force, they are being encouraged to stay at home and wait for their monthly pocket money. Countries that turn their people into supplicants never become fully developed so we can forget about that 'Viksit Bharat' dream. There will not be enough money left to build ports, airports, roads, hospitals, schools and colleges since our money will be spent on populist welfare schemes instead.

My personal problem with turning voters into supplicants is that I remember well those 'socialist' decades when in the name of socialism most Indians lived on the verge of poverty and prosperity was considered a dirty word. There was almost no middle class then. Millions of Indians lived in horrendous poverty and the handful of rich people who survived socialism secretly sent their wealth to bank accounts in Switzerland while pretending to live in genteel poverty.

It was a time when if you bought a foreign car or went on a foreign holiday you could expect to be subjected to an income tax raid. The number of Indians who used Indian Airlines or Air India was so small that there were jokes about how our two airlines employed one person for every passenger. They were gloomy times, and as someone who lived through them, I pray that they never come back. But as a taxpayer when I see our political leaders spend recklessly on populist schemes in the name of welfare, I fear the worst. They appear bent on taking us backwards to a time when the world saw India as an economic basket case or, as foreign friends said to my face, a 'land of starving millions.'

inside
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



CAPITAL MINEFIELD

DELHI'S NEW CM, Atishi, with her crisp saris and college lecturer mannerisms, brings back memories of Sheila Dikshit, the gracious outsider who stunned local political heavyweights by getting elected thrice as Delhi CM. Atishi's tenure, however, promises to be much shorter. She has made clear she is merely standing-in for Arvind Kejriwal and has symbolically kept his chair vacant. While Kejriwal has taken the high moral ground by relinquishing his chief ministership, he is actually simply obeying the Supreme Court order which while granting him bail in the excise matter disallowed him from entering the CM's office or signing files. Kejriwal has announced that he wants an early election to coincide with Maharashtra polls. He believes that the election will be a referendum on his popularity and channelise public anger against the BJP's politics of vendetta. While Kejriwal is perceived as a political victim, nevertheless his squeaky clean image has also got besmirched by the alleged excise scam involving the Delhi government. The former CM's other handicap is that there is no second line of leadership in his party. Kejriwal guards his turf zealously and cuts out any potential rival.

Kejriwal's confidence of re-election should be tempered by the knowledge that Delhi is an electoral minefield, which has a history of throwing out seasoned political warhorses and voting in unknown challengers. Back in 1967, when the mighty Congress ruled India, the national Capital was the exception where the upstart Jana Sangh stormed to power. Vijay Kumar Malhotra was elected the Chief Executive Councilor of Delhi and former IFS officer Manohar Lal Sondhi defeated Congress stalwart Meher Chand Khanna for the New Delhi Lok Sabha seat. The Hindutva Jana Sangh rode to victory on the back of overwhelming support from Punjabi refugees from Pakistan.

CHANGING
CHARACTER

Back in the days, when I first covered the city as a reporter, Delhi comprised basically of three groups: Punjabi refugees in south and west Delhi, Muslims and trader families living in old Delhi and villagers on the Capital's outskirts. Delhi in the sixties and early seventies was dismissed contemptuously by Bombayites

as an overgrown village where the fanciest western pastry on sale was a pineapple cream cupcake. Khan Market, which has now become a metaphor for sophisticated consumption and high-end shoppers, was then a shabby middle class market with refugee families residing in tiny apartments on the first floor. Public transport was erratic and so was the electricity supply. Many cycled to work.

Over the decades, the city's population had increased exponentially as migrants from all over the country, particularly Bihar and UP, flocked to the Capital. The influence of Punjabis and old Delhiwallahs declined. The Congress's Dikshit's long reign as CM (1998 to 2013) broke the cycle of alternating political parties being voted to power in the Assembly. She was given credit for changing the face of the city with an ever expanding metro service, flyovers and a marked improvement in the erratic power supply by introducing privatisation, even if some of the innovations in her tenure were in the pipeline before she came to power. But, in 2013, Dikshit was voted out equally decisively, even losing her MLA seat from New Delhi to fledgling politician Kejriwal, epitomised by his long woollen muffler and humble demeanour. Kejriwal, who was an activist in Anna Hazare's anti corruption movement, has been chief minister ever since. Voters were attracted by his promises of freebies, minimal electricity bills for the poor and improved government schools. Kejriwal's reason for not delivering on all his promises is that since Delhi is a Union territory and not a state, a succession of LGs thwarted many of his schemes.

DEFT MOVES NEEDED

As with Kejriwal, the Delhi BJP also exudes confidence though it has been out of power in Delhi for 25 years. The BJP won all seven Delhi parliamentary seats in 2024. The BJP's pitch is that only a double-engine sarkar can work in the Capital. Its weakness is its lackluster local leadership. In the past, the party has tried to get around this lacuna by importing outsiders and each time, the experiment failed. A reluctant Sushma Swaraj was roped in at the last moment as CM candidate in 1988, Kiran Bedi in 2015, while in 2020, Prime Minister Modi and Amit Shah led from the front. For the coming election due in February — that is, if not held earlier — there is a buzz that the feisty Smriti Irani, after her Amethi defeat, could be fielded. But local BJP workers are not enthused. The Congress also has a dilemma. Does it join forces with AAP and cede first place to Kejriwal? Party workers warn that such a move would eventually make the Congress irrelevant in the city. The electoral outcome for Delhi will depend on how skillfully the three major parties play their cards.

History
HEADLINE

SHYAMLAL YADAV



THE LAST time India saw "One Nation, One Election" was in 1967. The fourth general elections that year involved 520 Lok Sabha constituencies and 3,563 Assembly seats. Polling was largely held between February 15 and 21. It was a single-phase election in most states, but UP had it in four phases.

India's tryst with simultaneous LS and Assembly polls started right from the first general polls in 1952, which used to be followed by the elections to the posts of the President and the Vice-President.

After the 1962 polls, India saw many social and political changes: the 1962 Sino-India war defeat, the death of the country's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru in May 1964 and the death of his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri in Tashkent on January 11, 1966, just after he had signed a declaration to resolve the 1965 India-Pakistan war.

Several parts of India were then reeling under a two-year drought. The alarming price rise fuelled anti-incumbency. Around this time, Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi took charge as the PM on January 24, 1966, after defeating Morarji Desai in the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) leader elections. This created a rift between Indira and party veterans like Desai, which would reflect in the 1967 polls.

The Opposition was resurgent. Parties like the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) under Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay, Swatantra Party led by C Rajagopalachari and J B Kripalani and Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) under Ram Manohar Lohia mounted a challenge to the Congress's supremacy, which had been winning over 50% seats in the LS and Assemblies till 1962.

Lohia, who formed the SSP in 1964 to fight against the Congress, was elected to the LS in a bypoll from UP's Farrukhabad in 1963, with his "Congress *hatao*" slogan gaining traction. Opposition parties also tried to tap into the discontent among the farming communities in the wake of the Green Revolution. Using slogans like Lohia's "Pichhade Paavain *Sau Mein Saath* (OBCs must get 60%)", the parties galvanised these classes, which proved crucial in weakening the Congress in North India.

The total electorate — the legal voting age then was 21 years — in 1967 was 25.03 crore in a population of 43.87 crore, as per 1961 Census. The polls saw a turnout of 61.33%, the highest since 1952. The Congress got a majority in the LS by winning 283 of 520 seats, its lowest tally since 1952 though its vote share was still 40.78%. Although the Congress emerged as the single largest

1967: India's last 'One
Nation, One Election'

Over 61% voted in the Lok Sabha election of 1967, the biggest turnout until then. PMML

party in 13 Assemblies, it did not get an absolute majority in Bihar, Punjab, Rajasthan, UP and West Bengal.

The Swatantra Party emerged as the principal Opposition in the LS by bagging 44 seats. It also emerged as the principal Opposition party in some states. The results dealt a blow to the Congress, prompting the Opposition to forge an alliance, named the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD), to form a coalition government in many states. In some of the states, the Congress faced major defections, leading to the formation of the SVD governments.

Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee quit the Congress in Bengal to form the Bangla Congress before the polls. He was sworn in as the SVD's CM on March 1, 1967. In Bihar, Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, the lone MLA from Jan Kranti Dal, was sworn in as the SVD's CM on March 5, 1967. In Punjab, the Akali Dal's Gumam Singh was sworn in as the SVD's CM on March 8, 1967. Despite its victory in Haryana, Rao Birender Singh quit the Congress to form Vishal Haryana Party. He took oath as the SVD's CM on March 24, 1967. On April 1, 1967, Chaudhary Charan Singh quit the Congress and took oath as the UP CM as the SVD leader on April 3. In MP, the Congress government fell in a few months. Its rebel Govind Narain Singh was sworn in as the first non-Congress CM on July 30, 1967. Among Opposition faces who took over as CM included the CPM-led United Left Front's EMS Namboodiripad in Kerala on March 6, 1967; the DMK's C N Annadurai in Madras on March 6, 1967; and Swatantra Party's Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo in Odisha on March 8, 1967.

In 1967, the Election Commission (EC)

was mulling a fixed schedule for the synchronised polls so that governments would not face problems over the commencement of the Budget sessions. The EC's report for the 1967 polls states, "The best time for holding simultaneous general elections all over the country is the first week of March rather than the third week of February, but, unless the financial year is changed, e.g., to the year commencing on July 1, we shall have to follow more or less the programme adopted as at this year's general elections and, both at the Centre and in the States, the first budget session of the newly constituted Houses will have to be hustled through at the start." However, simultaneous elections were never held in the country after 1967.

As the SVD governments started collapsing months after their formation, mid-term polls were held in 1968-69 in Haryana, Punjab, UP, Bihar and Bengal. In 1969, President Dr Zakir Hussain passed away, with his successor's election escalating infighting within the ruling Congress. That election became a turning point in the Congress's history since it split the party — Congress (O) headed by K Kamaraj-Morarji Desai and Congress (R) led by Indira Gandhi. This, in turn, set off political instability across the country. President's rule was imposed in some of the states, while in others alternative governments were formed.

In 1971, PM Indira decided to hold the Lok Sabha polls 15 months ahead of the schedule, but many states had already held mid-term Assembly polls, thus breaking the simultaneous poll cycle, which would get increasingly disrupted in later decades.

She
SAID

NIKITHAPHYLIS



FOR A week every month, I am Anger, Sadness and Anxiety from the Pixar hit *Inside Out 2*, all rolled into one. Add a dash of Ennuui to the cocktail too.

Husband and I get into a minor argument? Cue the waterworks, one that leaves me with a nasty headache and an awful cold. Dishes not washed? There is probably a flaming ball of fire over my head at the sight of it.

My bed is my best friend to wallow in existential dread, watching endless mind-numbing reels on Instagram. Another recipe for a cake? Swipe. Movie recommendations? Hmm, maybe I'll save it for later. A

Living with PMS and reels

cute cat? Give me more such dopamine hits.

If this emotional roller coaster wasn't enough, pain makes a quiet appearance. Radiating from ankle to knee, it leaves me feeling like I am a 70-year-old and not 31. Sounds familiar? You, like me, are battling Premenstrual Syndrome aka PMS. A simple Google search throws up a list of symptoms: bloating, weight gain, mood swings, feeling upset, anxious or emotional. Most of these seem to describe the angsty teen I once was. Am I Benjamin-buttonging, I wonder?

Like most things in the online world, PMS too has been monetised by social media through reels and videos. The most common ones are a caricature of a woman turning into a literal ogre, ready to devour anyone who crosses her in the days lead-

ing up to her period and constantly craving chocolate. Men, keep sweets close at hand or count your days, it preaches.

Maybe that is a bit far-fetched, you think. Maybe women are exaggerating. You may laugh it off, sniggering at those "sensitive women".

But maybe there is some truth to it. For the past two years or so, my PMS symptoms have become progressively worse. I get angry faster. I cry even harder. My mood swings like an out-of-control see-saw. The bloating turns me into my worst enemy, an alter ego manifesting to fat-shame me.

Last month, a simple decision on what to wear during a lunch outing turned into a 20-minute crying fest because I felt "all my clothes made me look fat". My husband ventured forth a suggestion — to go shop-

ping. I wailed harder. "Why do I need more when nothing fits," I wept. The next day, my monthly visitor made her appearance. That explains the crying, I thought to myself.

I have even timed my cycle to a tee — exactly seven days before the 4th of every month. It is my very own biological reminder from hell. Instagram too starts sending reminders in the form of reels. The latest featured the woman as the evil Purple Minion from *Despicable Me 2* losing her shit when her partner suggests she should drink water instead of "babying her" during her period.

For a while, I wondered if I was making it up in my head. That was before I reached out to a few close friends to ask if they feel PMS gets worse with age. They all came back with an unequivocal reply — yes, it

does. A beloved friend says it is like "our bodies were designed to bombard pain". A good friend from work says she lashed out at her partner one day, going on to say that he made her cry more than her ex. The next day, she says, she got her period.

We empathise, exchange notes and find similarities. Will it ever get better, I ask? No, there's menopause to look forward to, a friend remarked wryly.

Great, a fresh hell to look forward to decades away.

Till then, I will give in to my chocolate craving, watch cat reels and wait for the worst to pass. Maybe laugh at an occasional PMS reel too. The algorithm too knows I'm PMSing.

National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

Opinion

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2024



Indian bowler Jasprit Bumrah is one of the greatest pacers, who doesn't need helpful conditions to make an impact

With a Test win in two days, India's ruthlessness a characteristic of great sides



HARDLY ANYONE WOULD have batted an eyelid if Team India had used the last two days of the Kanpur Test for some batting practice, even shuffling the order to provide time in the middle to those in need or short of runs.

That they instead chose to go all out for a win even after more than half of the playing time in the Test was lost to the weather — and an obsolete drainage system at Green Park — shows a streak of ruthlessness that is a characteristic of great Test match outfits.

True, it was just Bangladesh, who were coming off a thrashing in Chennai and were not expected to pose a major threat — especially when the time remaining in the game was just two days. It only points to the gulf in class between the two sides, even though Bangladesh had recently tasted a 2-0 series triumph in Pakistan.

The World Test Championship (WTC) has provided context to each game in the cycle, and every result counts in the final analysis, even if it doesn't affect the fate of a particular series. India would have still won the series 1-0 and could have lamented that they were not given a good enough opportunity for the sweep. That they refused to go down that path and took matters into their own hands shows an appreciation of the bigger picture that augurs well for the future of Test cricket.

As things turned out, the visitors were turned over with a session to spare, implying that it took only six of them for India to secure the result they were after. That should bring Bangladesh down to earth after experiencing a high across the border.

The victory in Pakistan was nevertheless a significant achievement for Bangladesh cricket but on the evidence of events in Kanpur, India have bigger goals in mind, with a five-Test tour of Australia and the prospect of a third consecutive WTC final next summer.

Before that, there are three Tests at home against New Zealand, who are coming off a twin drubbing at the hands of Sri Lanka in Galle, which has prompted a captaincy change in their ranks. India, who have not lost a home Test series since 2012, will be overwhelming favourites for that rubber too, especially as the last time the Kiwis won a Test on Indian soil was way back in 1988, when their team sheet included names like Richard Hadlee, John Bracewell, John Wright, Ian Smith, Mark Greatbatch, Andrew Jones, Danny Morrison, Ken Rutherford and Ewen Chatfield.

Lot of pluses

India will be full of confidence going into those games, with most bases covered. Jasprit Bumrah is well on the way to becoming one of the greatest pacers in the history of the game, who doesn't need helpful conditions to make an impact. Mohammed Siraj hasn't been as effective at home as he would like but Akash Deep has emerged as a reliable

operator used to the hard grind of the longer format.

There isn't much left to say about the old firm of Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja. They have eclipsed Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh as the most successful spin combination for India, and more often than not, come to the party with the bat as well when the team needs them most. Their numbers put them alongside the greatest all-rounders in the history of the game.

On the batting front, Rohit Sharma leads from the front, adapting his game to the match situation. It was the skipper who showed the way at the top of the order as India broke records galore to give them ample time to push for a win. Yashasvi Jaiswal has had a dream start to his Test career while Shubman Gill seems to have overcome the rough patch he had encountered. Virat Kohli may not have had a big score against Bangladesh, but can be counted upon to rise to an occasion, while KL Rahul has shown signs of returning to form.

However, the best news for Indian fans from the Bangladesh series was the almost-unbelievable comeback of Rishabh Pant to Test cricket, to such an extent that it seemed he had never been away. A serious car crash, which had at one time cast doubts over his ability to even walk properly, was forgotten as he slammed a hundred in his first Test back and was proficient behind the stumps as well.

A totally different squad will now feature in a three-game T20I series as the seniors get ready for the Kiwi challenge starting in 10 days' time. But the think tank can be forgiven if they have one eye on the big assignment in November-January Down Under, when a once-in-a-lifetime hat-trick opportunity presents itself, and the chance to be crowned World Test Champions for the first time in England in June. It's vital that all of India's big guns remain fit and fresh for those two challenges.

Debate over Test centres

India's all-out aggressive approach and their inherent superiority over Bangladesh painted over the embarrassment for the BCCI and the Uttar Pradesh Cricket Association, who couldn't get any play at Kanpur on Days 2 and 3 despite hardly any rain. In an era when the best grounds in the world showcase their superior drainage facilities and Test cricket is in competition with several other options for the viewers' and spectators' entertainment, Green Park fell way short.

Ashwin's suggestion about a limited number of Test centres, as against the rotation system in prevalence in India, makes a lot of sense. Australia doesn't have more than six Test centres, and the schedule is finalised months in advance. England doesn't have more than eight venues where Test cricket is hosted, despite there being 18 first-class counties.

If associations know that they will be hosting Tests every season, it gives them the incentive to keep their facilities and infrastructure in top shape. This assumes all the more significance in the WTC era when teams bank a lot on home advantage. Any match that doesn't provide a result due to faulty ground and drainage situation can hurt the team big time.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



When the National Crime Records Bureau documents the rising graph of violent crimes, it is news of breaking the law. When vigilante groups beat up a young couple or lynch a person, it is news of breaking heads and bones. When officials use bulldozers to raze alleged encroachments, it is news of breaking homes. When the honourable Prime Minister calls the Opposition — especially the Congress — as the *tukde tukde* gang or urban naxals, the breaking news elicits a long yawn

IT IS BREAKING News, but of a different kind. It is not news about breaking the law or about breaking heads or about breaking homes. It is not the breaking news that had broken out several times in the past.

When the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documents the rising graph of violent crimes, it is news of breaking the law. When vigilante groups beat up a young couple or lynch a person, it is news of breaking heads and bones. When officials use bulldozers to raze alleged encroachments, it is news of breaking homes.

When the honourable prime minister calls the Opposition — especially the Congress — as the *tukde tukde* gang or *urban naxals*, the breaking news elicits a long yawn.

Breaking hopes, hearts

The all-important breaking news that I shall share with you today may break your hopes and hearts. Mr K V Kamath is a distinguished banker.

He built the ICICI into India's leading private bank; he was the first chair of the New Development Bank (the BRICS bank); he is, currently, the Chairman of the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID). In a recent book review, he traced the path that India must take in order to attain the status of *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) in 2047.

In an essay in a leading newspaper, Mr Kamath warmly applauded the author, Mr Krishnamurthy Subramanian, for "persuasively laying out his underlying theme... that India needs to break free from the pessimistic shackles of the past and set bold targets, underpinned by sound thinking." Mr Kamath concurred with the author that at a nominal GDP growth of 12.5% a year (in USD), the "doubling every six



Inadequate minimum wages, neglect of tenant farmers, bias against services consumed by the poor and other policies have increased economic inequalities under the present government

Breaking news

years would enable GDP to grow about 16 times from \$3.28 trillion in 2023 to \$55 trillion in 2047. This is eminently doable." I agree wholeheartedly, and have argued for aiming at such sustained growth.

Sting in the tail

The sting in Mr Kamath's review is in the last six paragraphs. He begins by listing the 'four pillars' that will shape India at 100: macro-economic focus on growth, social and economic inclusion, ethical wealth creation by the private sector, and a virtuous cycle ignited by private investment. Let's examine the 'pillars' under the present government.

Macro-economic focus on growth: The indicators of unwavering focus on macro-economic growth are the data on fiscal deficit, inflation and interest rate, the current account deficit, and Debt/GDP ratio.

The government has a long way to go to reach the FD target of 3 per cent of GDP (currently 5.6%). Inflation is still above 4% and the RBI's repo rate has been at 6.5% since May 2022. The CAD was still large (\$23.2 billion) at the end of 2023-24 but foreign remittances saved the day. The Debt/GDP ratio at 18.7% is at a manageable level. The record is mixed.

Social and economic inclusion: The biggest casualty under the Modi government is the failed attempt to reduce inequalities. Crony capitalism,

public investment in capital intensive industries, reduction in corporate tax, taxes on goods of mass consumption, high fuel prices, inadequate minimum wages, neglect of tenant farmers, bias against services consumed by the poor (e.g., *Vande Bharat* trains vs second class and unreserved coaches in Railways) and other policies have increased the economic inequalities between the top 1% and the bottom 20% of the population. Social inclusion has also suffered a setback because of the hate campaigns and communal conflicts. The second pillar identified by Mr Kamath is wobbling and infirm.

Ethical wealth creation by the private sector: Bank frauds and corporate collapses have increased in the last 10 years. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code has become an instrument to legitimise bank write-offs and to acquire control of so-called failed companies. The recovery rate under IBC is just 32%. Successful resolution applicants have reaped a windfall.

Intrusive regulations, creeping controls and an oppressive tax administration have demoralised ethical businesspersons; young entrepreneurs prefer to do business abroad or migrate. 4300 Indian millionaires have left India (*Mr Ruchir Sharma, ToI*).

The Competition Commission has actually encouraged monopolies and oligopolies. There is very little competition in industries such as airlines,

ports, airports, telecommunications, oil refinery and solar energy. Rapid consolidation is underway in cement, steel, power and retail, and it is a moot point whether competition will increase or decrease. The trends do not augur well for a competitive market economy which is the time-tested way to ensure ethical wealth creation by the private sector.

Virtuous cycle ignited by private investment: Private investment is lagging behind government investment despite the government's appeals, sops, cajolery and threats. Since business is not trusted by the government, business does not have confidence in the government.

Shotgun weddings — takeover of businesses through questionable means — have soured the atmosphere. Over 8000 Indian companies have registered in Singapore since 2000 (*HCI, Singapore*). The overreach by investigative agencies has spread fear among businesspersons. In September 2022, the finance minister asked Indian businesses what is stopping them from investing in the Indian economy?

Mr Kamath is eminently qualified to instruct us on these issues.

Website: p.chidambaram.in
Twitter: [@PChidambaram_IN](https://twitter.com/PChidambaram_IN)

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Capital minefield

Delhi's new CM, Atishi, with her crisp saris and college lecturer mannerisms, brings back memories of Sheila Dikshit, the gracious outsider who stunned local political heavyweights by getting elected thrice as Delhi CM. Atishi's tenure, however, promises to be much shorter. She has made clear she is merely standing-in for Arvind Kejriwal and has symbolically kept his chair vacant. While Kejriwal has taken the high moral ground by relinquishing his chief ministership, he is actually simply obeying the Supreme Court order which while granting him bail in the excise matter disallowed him from entering the CM's office or signing files. Kejriwal has announced that he wants an early election to coincide with Maharashtra polls. He believes that the election will be a referendum on his popularity and channelise public anger against the BJP's politics of vendetta. While Kejriwal is perceived as a political

victim, nevertheless his squeaky clean image has also got besmirched by the alleged excise scam involving the Delhi government. The former CM's other handicap is that there is no second line of leadership in his party. Kejriwal guards his turf zealously and cuts out any potential rival.

Kejriwal's confidence of re-election should be tempered by the knowledge that Delhi is an electoral minefield, which has a history of throwing out seasoned political warhorses and voting in unknown challengers. Back in 1967, when the mighty Congress ruled India, the national Capital was the exception where the upstart Jana Sangh stormed to power. Vijay Kumar Malhotra was elected the Chief Executive Councilor of Delhi and former IFS officer Manohar Lal Sondhi defeated Congress stalwart Meher Chand Khanna for the New Delhi Lok Sabha seat. The Hindutva Jana Sangh rode to victory on the back of overwhelming support from Punjabi refugees from Pakistan.

Changing character

Back in the days, when I first covered the city as a reporter, Delhi comprised basically of three groups: Punjabi refugees in south and west Delhi, Muslims and trader families living in old Delhi and villagers on the Capital's outskirts. Delhi in the sixties and early seventies was dismissed

contemptuously by Bombayites as an overgrown village where the fanciest western pastry on sale was a pineapple cream cupcake. Khan Market, which has now become a metaphor for sophisticated consumption and high-end shoppers, was then a shabby middle class market with refugee families residing in tiny apartments on the first floor. Public transport was erratic and so was the electricity supply. Many cycled to work.

Over the decades, the city's population had increased exponentially as migrants from all over the country, particularly Bihar and UP, flocked to the Capital. The influence of Punjabis and old Delhiwallahs declined. The Congress's Dikshit's long reign as CM (1998 to 2013) broke the cycle of alternating political parties being voted to power in the Assembly. She was given credit for changing the face of the city with an ever expanding metro service, flyovers and a marked improvement in the erratic power supply by introducing privatisation, even if some of the innovations in her tenure were in the pipeline before she came to power. But, in 2013, Dikshit was voted out equally decisively, even losing her MLA seat from New Delhi to fledgling politician Kejriwal, epitomised by his long woollen muffler and humble demeanour. Kejriwal, who was an activist in Anna Hazare's anti corruption movement, has been chief minister ever since. Voters were

attracted by his promises of freebies, minimal electricity bills for the poor and improved government schools. Kejriwal's reason for not delivering on all his promises is that since Delhi is a Union territory and not a state, a succession of LGs thwarted many of his schemes.

Deft moves needed

As with Kejriwal, the Delhi BJP also exudes confidence though it has been out of power in Delhi for 25 years. The BJP won all seven Delhi parliamentary seats in 2024. The BJP's pitch is that only a double-engine sarkar can work in the Capital. Its weakness is its lackluster local leadership. In the past, the party has tried to get around this lacuna by importing outsiders and each time, the experiment failed. A reluctant Sushma Swaraj was roped in at the last moment as CM candidate in 1988, Kiran Bedi in 2015, while in 2020, Prime Minister Modi and Amit Shah led from the front. For the coming election due in February — that is, if not held earlier — there is a buzz that the feisty Smriti Irani, after her Amethi defeat, could be fielded. But local BJP workers are not enthused. The Congress also has a dilemma. Does it join forces with AAP and cede first place to Kejriwal? Party workers warn that such a move would eventually make the Congress irrelevant in the city. The electoral outcome for Delhi will depend on how skillfully the three major parties play their cards.



Apartheid is a word that's an accurate description of what has been going on in the West Bank, and it's based on the desire or avarice of a minority of Israelis for Palestinian land

Jimmy Carter

CREDIT GAP: POOR LENDING HAUNTS SMALLER BORROWERS

THIS week, the Reserve Bank's reconstituted Monetary Policy Committee will review the cost of money and the state of the economy. On the face of it, to borrow a phrase from ornithology, the conditions signal a dovish policy—

inflation is down, the US Federal Reserve has cut rates and GDP growth was slower at 6.7 percent as against the RBI's forecast of 7.1 percent. Ergo, the debate is centred on the cost of money and pace of growth.

The cost of money is critical, but what matters for sustaining growth momentum is wider access to credit. As Adam Smith observed in his seminal book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, "Money says the proverb makes money. When you have got a little, it is often easy to get more. The great difficulty is to get that little." India's economy is haunted by the cost imposed by the credit gap and poor lending to smaller and poorer borrowers.

The landscape is littered with a litany of lament. Take the case of micro, small and medium enterprises or MSMEs. India is home to an estimated 60 million MSMEs—over 29.7 million of them are registered on the Udyam portal. MSMEs account for 30 percent of the GDP, 45 percent of the manufacturing output, 48 percent of exports, and they employ around 110 million people. Despite a plethora of schemes—for one, the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee scheme was a big saviour post pandemic—their access to credit remains poor.

A CRISIL report from February 2024 revealed that formal credit penetration in the sector is at a mere 20 percent. The parliamentary standing committee on finance in 2022 found formal credit touched only 39 percent of the MSMEs. How does this translate in credit delivery? The committee cited the UK Sinha expert group report to point out: "Total addressable demand for credit is estimated at ₹37 lakh crore, whereas overall supply is ₹14.5 lakh crore." In effect, leaving a credit gap of ₹20-25 lakh crore. Lack of funding stunts MSMEs and impedes technology upgrade.

The status of credit to agriculture is stranded in complications of legislation, regulation and distribution. Thanks to the expansion of Kisan Credit Cards, there is some improvement. In absolute terms, bank lending for agriculture has gone up from ₹6.04 lakh crore in 2014-15 to ₹24.8 lakh crore in 2023-24. That said, a Nabard study in 2023 revealed that while 58 percent of farmers were aware of credit schemes—KCCs being the most popular—only 28 percent availed of credit. The hurdles in accessing credit ranged from complex procedure, distance to banks and documentation. So, credit continues to elude the small and marginal farmer. And it gets worse for the tenant farmer who is "hardly included in the institutional credit system", says the study.

Agriculture accounts for nearly 16 percent of the GDP and 46 percent of the workforce. According to the Agriculture Census of 2015-16, 68 percent of farm landholding in India measured up to one hectare. The National Sample Survey stated in a 2019 report that the average monthly income of farmers was ₹10,218 and the average household debt ₹74,121. While the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi has helped, the distress in the sector is visible in rural consumption data and is reflected in the quest for job quotas and recent election results. The twin objectives of improving the income of farmers and reducing the proportion of workforce on farms call for expansion of credit.

Unlike the past, it's not the lack of financial inclusion that's hindering credit delivery. Aadhaar has propelled financial inclusion through the Jan Dhan Yojana. In the decade since the programme was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2014, India has linked 531 million persons to bank accounts, of which two-thirds are in rural and semi-urban areas. The RBI's FI-Index, that captures the extent of financial inclusion across the country, rose to 64.2 in March 2024 from 60.1 a year ago.

India's digital public infrastructure affords the opportunity to use technology. The potential is manifest in digital payments—UPI registered 15 billion transactions in September. The Open Credit Enablement Network, a tech framework for lenders and account aggregators, was launched in 2020. Riding the wave is the launch of Unified Lending Interface—call it the UPI of lending—in August this year by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das. The ULI promises population-scale resolution, and allows leveraging of cash flow or data on transactions to deliver credit. Much would depend on how rapidly the ULI is deployed.

The credit gap is perpetuated by gaps in policy and is aggravated by the patriarchy of profitability. The unwillingness to lend to MSMEs and farmers stems from systemic apathy. Credit assessment is influenced by economics. The viability of farming, for instance, depends on access to inputs and markets, enabling collectives for scale and price realisation. The farmer—as onion growers in Lasalgaon and rice farmers in Madhya Pradesh and Haryana will testify—is vulnerable to price controls and export bans. The small entrepreneur needs systemic support to upgrade tech and scale, and protection from defaults by the big buyer.

Success calls for structural reforms. India's small businesses and farmers are the force multipliers of growth. Bridging the credit gap is critical for sustaining growth and prosperity. Delivering fuel to all the cylinders is essential for velocity and momentum.

Success calls for structural reforms. India's small businesses and farmers are the force multipliers of growth. Bridging the credit gap is critical for sustaining growth and prosperity. Delivering fuel to all the cylinders is essential for velocity and momentum.

BJP HUNTS FOR AN ASSERTIVE NEW CHIEF



POWER & POLITICS

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

NATURE abhors a vacuum and vacuum abhors a limbo. After the BJP didn't come anywhere near the 400 mark or get a majority in May 2024, the job of the party president is in limbo. Though his term expired in June, J P Nadda continues in the catbird seat since the leadership is unable to agree on his replacement. Nadda is not just the interim party boss but is also a Union minister. Now that the TINA factor seems to apply to him, the party will have to quickly resolve the issue to offset the fragility of indecision in public perception.

The world's biggest party, with myriad lawmakers and chief ministers, is beset with a talent famine. The halcyon days in power have indeed created a phalanx of successful administrators. When the BJP was in the opposition, there were four Vajpayees for one Atal or one Advani to fill their shoes as party chief. As the process for choosing its 12th president is underway, the ink hasn't dried on many names.

● **Shivraj Singh Chouhan:** A leader who began his social service as an RSS swayamsevak at the age of 13 in 1972, Chouhan, now 65, appears to be the frontrunner. He has age, caste, credibility, experience and acceptability on his side. A three-time chief minister, he is an RSS darling and the least hated by the opposition. Affectionately called Mama in MP, he is a people's man and easily accessible. His innovative welfare and developmental schemes made the BJP almost invincible in the state. Hindutva

has been the core principle of his governance. Both Vajpayee and Advani had identified him as a future leader and made him CM in 2005, and a member of the parliamentary board. Author of pro-farmer prosperity measures, he enjoys huge rural support. But his independent persona could be his liability.

● **Devendra Fadnavis:** Associated with the Sangh parivar for 35 years, the 54-year-old-Maharashtra neta from Nagpur began political life in the ABVP. After coming to power in 2014, the talent-spotting Modi and Shah made Fadnavis, a Brahmin who was then 44, the second youngest CM of India's richest state. Senior leaders like Nitin Gadkari and Gopinath Munde were ignored for his

hasn't handled any national responsibility that deals directly with the cadres. Moreover, she has kept a distance from the Modi-Shah combo, which has no love lost for her.

● **Dharmendra Pradhan:** Another former student leader with ABVP credentials, the 55-year-old Odiya strongman has been a force in the Sangh's and BJP's activities in Odisha and Delhi. He is seen by the top tier as a potential national leader and ideologically trustworthy. A national general secretary, Pradhan has handled state elections in Karnataka, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, UP and Haryana. After the end of the Atal-Advani era, Modi kept him on in organisational and government positions—among them, as the longest serving petroleum minister since independence. This man of sensitive statecraft has skills better suited for governance, though his opponents allege he lacks national stature and pan-Indian acceptability.

● **Bhupender Yadav:** This 55-year-old Rajasthan-born advocate began his political career as a secretary of the RSS-controlled lawyers' organisation. He had emerged as a potential national leader during the Atal-Advani era. He was chosen by Nitin Gadkari as BJP national secretary in 2010. Since then, the non-controversial Yadav has been trusted by the top and given important party positions. He became a vital member of Shah's team after the latter became party president in 2014. As general secretary, he managed crucial state elections in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh. He also played an active role in toppling the Uddhav Thackeray government. The importance of this low-profile backroom operator is evident as the Union minister of environment, forest and climate change, which is a super-sensitive min-

istry for Modi's agenda of Viksit Bharat. But a section of the RSS feels he is too junior to be party boss and handle the states where the BJP is in power.

● **Sunil Bansal:** A full-time RSS pracharak on deputation to the BJP as general secretary, the 55-year-old Bansal's ABVP lineage and RSS experience had made him a master team leader whose philosophy is the ideology of nationhood. He was drafted by the RSS to lead the Youth Against Corruption campaign from 2010 to 2014. When Shah took over the BJP's election campaign in 2014, he made Bansal the UP in-charge, which enabled its massive Lok Sabha triumph and later assembly win. Bansal's mandate this time was handling Odisha, where the BJP came to power for the first time. However, a section of the leadership thinks Bansal needs more exposure to national politics and a strong alignment with the BJP's state-level architecture.

The problem with crystal-gazing is what you see isn't always what you get. Modi and the RSS have veto power, which is unprecedented in any state-and-church scenario. The old BJP had a battalion of national and regional satraps suited for the president's post. But they were veterans of clamorous battlefields, where they fought the Congress and opposition parties for over six decades. There were veteran leaders like Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, Pramod Mahajan, Kalyan Singh, Gopinath Munde, Ananth Kumar and Sushma Swaraj; B S Yeddyurappa is still around.

Modi is known to get ministers to resign and take up party jobs. It is likely that Rajnath Singh, Gadkari or Chouhan, or a tested and trusted lesser-known swayamsevak may replace Nadda. Of the 44 years of BJP's existence, Vajpayee and Advani led for 15 years. Shah created cohesiveness and a national footprint. Nadda's thinko that the BJP can survive without the RSS cost it dearly. Perhaps, the appointment of the next president next January will reflect whether he was right, or the RSS is still the mothership with a veto that rides the Hindutva wave created by Modi and his BJP.



PH

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BREAK BOLLYWOOD'S WALL OF SILENCE



OPINION

NAMRATA JOSHI
Consulting Editor
Follow her on X @Namrata_Joshi

IN late 2018, when Bollywood was in the grips of the MeToo movement, the Hema Committee was working towards bringing to light sexual harassment and discrimination against women in the Malayalam film industry. Since the committee's pathbreaking report was made public on August 19, there has barely been an acknowledgment of its gravity in one of the largest filmmaking industries.

Something seems rotten in the state of Bollywood when it comes to gender sensitivity. Instead of addressing the elephant in the room, the attempt has been to disregard it. "It's as if it's happening in another country; as if no parallels can be drawn here... How will the kettle call the pot black? It's like everybody is complicit and it keeps the business going," says screenwriter Atika Chohan.

Especially galling has been the black-out of the issue by celebrities. "The big names who identify as feminists could have brought it into the public sphere, but didn't do it," says journalist and author Karishma Upadhyay, who had made her own harassment known.

The tone deafness on the report stems

basically from Bollywood having squandered the MeToo momentum. "Nothing changed... It's like MeToo never happened," adds Upadhyay.

What followed instead were attempts at diverting from and subverting the very essence of the movement. "Conversations around gender equality begin with defining feminism and not #NotAllMen. You start on the defensive. The issues and solutions are obvious. These feel like tactics to waste time and delay action," says Smriti Kiran, founder of Polka Dots Lightbox and curator of Maitri, a female-first collective.

There is the perception that, unlike Kerala, the movement in Mumbai remained driven by individuals and couldn't transform into a concerted exercise. "Solidarity was there among women who came out, but it got scattered," says filmmaker and editor of *The Daily Eye*, Vinta Nanda.

Some sets in Mumbai might feel safer now than others and clauses safeguarding women's rights might have been introduced in contracts by a few studios, but these are a few individual initiatives rather than systemic overhaul. There is celebration of these glacially-slow changes and any disappointment at these not being enough is scoffed at. "It is another form of gaslighting. All change towards bridging this divide is appreciated, but a lot more needs to be done and at a pace commensurate with the colossal gap. Pointing this out is being realistic and not negative," says Kiran.

Organisations like the Screenwriters' Association and CINTAA did come out in support initially, but the engagement wasn't sustained. Many allege that the implementation of Vishakhya guide-

lines and POSH Act 2013 has remained on paper; internal complaints committees have often turned out compromised.

Most of the men who were named and shamed in Bollywood eventually didn't just get exonerated but also comfortably rehabilitated. On the other hand, all the women who spoke up were left vulnerable to further abuse and pressure, their cases forced to a close. The most debilitating has been the denial of work and marginalisation within the industry.



Bollywood has been silent about discriminations against women in the industry since the publication of the momentous Hema Committee report. The progress made in the 2018 MeToo movement seems lost now

"The women are, in fact, much more in jeopardy for coming out and putting their heads and careers on the line... The Bollywood system has gone even more vigilant in making sure that it protects men more fiercely," says Chohan.

There is cynicism and bitterness among women, even among those at the top, and the allegations that many big wolves would still be roaming around in the industry, their predatory ways unchecked. "I do understand why the younger girls [of the 2018 MeToo movement] have disappeared and gone silent—because they have their whole lives and careers in front of them," says Nanda.

On the flip side, there have been righteous assertions by some filmmakers about having more women in their crew as a way to create equality of opportunity, but that has also left many unimpressed. "With the world watching, they have to include them. It's more like window dressing. They're not doing it willingly," says Nanda.

Kiran points out that the gatekeeping in the industry and how harsh it is for women to get decision making opportunities: "New male directors, if they do well, instantly become hot property. A woman, despite success, finds it hard to stay on the grid. If she fails then that turns into a funeral and not something that is par for the course. The parameters are skewed to say the least."

There are other issues enumerated in the Hema Committee report that hold true for Bollywood as well. Like the poor working conditions, denial of basic facilities on sets and, most importantly, a galling disparity in pay. "There must be pay parity. Then everything will fall into place. Pay me equally, and you will treat me equally," says Nanda.

According to Upadhyay, "*Abhi Dilli door hai*" (It's a long way to go) and powerful women in Bollywood—with the integrity of the likes of Parvathy Thiruvothu, Rima Kallingal, Revathi and Bina Paul—will need to step in and step up.

The Hema Committee was no doubt a game-changer, but it's appalling for it to have been lying buried for more than five years when it could have put the MeToo movement in a different space. Says Nanda: "We would have reached the goalpost back in 2019. I feel saddened that we lost a consequential moment."

(Exclusive interview on TNIE website)

QUOTE CORNER

I think the India-Pakistan rivalry is more about the emotions of the fans than anything else. It's not like the players don't talk to each other; it's the emotions from both nations that make it so intense. For me, every World Cup match is special, and we put the same amount of effort into each game.

Smriti Mandhana, Indian cricketer, before the start of the ICC T20 Women's World Cup

I misspoke on this... I'm a knucklehead at times.

Tim Walz, Minnesota governor and Kamala Harris's running mate, conceding that he was not in Tiananmen Square during the 1989 protest as he had previously claimed

'The Sound of Silence' was the first song I wrote which seemed to come from some place that I didn't inhabit. At age 23, it was unusual, well beyond my age and abilities.

Paul Simon, singer and songwriter, on how some of his early compositions came about

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Laddugate solutions

Ref: *Why laddugate needs measures beyond ordinary* (Oct 5). In his interesting revelations of the history of Hindu insensitivity in the Nehruvian era, it appears the author deviated from laddu quandary. He ought to have come up with concrete and constructive suggestions over the issue instead.

Ramalingeswara Rao, email

Scoring points

Chandrababu Naidu's move to ignite a controversy to score quick political points has accentuated the issue. The chief minister swiftly formed a probe team to ensure the investigation remained under his government's control. Now that his remarks have boomeranged after the Supreme Court's intervention, Naidu appears anxious that if his allegations are proven false in court the impact could be significant for him and his government.

R Sivakumar, Chennai

Honour decision

Ref: *Supreme Court sets up separate SIT* (Oct 5). The Supreme Court's decision is fitting. At least now, both the ruling TDP and the opposition YSR Congress should keep quiet and honour the decision to dig out the truth without unnecessary remarks on the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams' functioning.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Just jails

The Supreme Court's decision against caste-based prejudice in jails is a major step towards ensuring everyone is treated with dignity and equality. But how can we make sure that states implement these changes? Practices from the colonial past remain in state jail manuals. What steps will be implemented to monitor compliance and end this prejudice? The court's order is only an important first step.

Anshu Bharti, Begusarai

Marital rape

Ref: *Don't criminalise marital rape: Govt* (Oct 4). One fails to understand why the BJP government is

vehemently against criminalising marital rape. It was dismaying that former Union minister Smriti Irani, herself a woman, was in the forefront advocating against such legislation. There could be unmetten grounds on which a woman feels what is happening to her is nothing but rape by her husband. Not recognising it means not recognising gender equality. Rape, which is invariably unilateral, is not part of 'reasonable access to sex'.

Geetha B K, Kanpur

Discriminatory stance

The recent comment made by the Union government counsel in the Supreme Court on the criminalisation of marital rape comes off as discriminatory, since both the Indian Penal Code and the new BNS have provisions against marital rape. There is no clear way out to figure if there was consent in both the statutes. So how is the safety provision only applicable for men? If this be the case, it raises question on the discriminatory nature of the approach towards married women's assault and rape.

Ananya, Patna

Ladakh's concerns

The people there are deeply concerned about pressing environmental issues, regional affairs and the lack of essential services. Their key issues include the demand for tribal status under the Sixth Schedule, separate parliamentary constituencies for Leh and Kargil, and the establishment of a public service commission. Sadly, despite the region's activists' peaceful protest and padayatra, they were detained by the Delhi police. The government's apathy and the media's silence on this are strange.

Jakir Hussain, Kanpur

Truck tragedy

Ref: *Case against truck owner Abdul Manaf* (Oct 5). The complaint filed by Arjun's sister against truck owner Abdul Manaf is preposterous. Manaf did everything possible to provide moral and material support to Arjun's family when his truck was washed away and remained buried under water for 71 days. The fact that Manaf spent these 71 days at the site of the tragedy should explain his anguish.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

REFLECTIONS

CHANDIGARH | 6 OCTOBER 2024

Phogats, politics, patriarchy

GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

VINESH PHOGAT — 30 years old, Asian champion, near-Olympics champion, World Championships medallist — is a mere child, a girl who must listen to and obey the patriarch of the family, Mahavir Phogat, the man who turned his daughters and nieces into world-class wrestlers. For Mahavir, she's a chit of a girl — yes, she can easily wring your neck but, for him, she's a mere overgrown kid whom he started coaching after his brother Rajpal died, killed by a madman in 2003. She must listen to him, as she did when he started training her in Julana village over 25 years ago.

Is it patriarchy that makes Mahavir Phogat tell niece Vinesh — through the press — that she should not have joined politics, and certainly not the Congress party?

Patriarchy, unfortunately, seems to be the more charitable explanation for his public comments against his niece and protegee, for the other explanation is politics — Mahavir had joined the BJP along with his daughter Babita in 2019.

A politician, said Nietzsche, divides mankind into two classes — tools and enemies — and those aspiring for great success in politics become adept in using people, and being used. In the case of the Phogats, politicians seem to have divided the family into enemies of each other.

Vinesh, Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia — married to Mahavir's youngest daughter, Sangeeta — were the face of the wrestlers' protest against the Wrestling Federation of India president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over allegations that he had sexually abused several women wrestlers. To Mahavir's credit,

he did put himself on the right side in this significant battle for women's right to pursue a career in sports without being molested by officials or coaches — this, every insider knows, is a very big problem in sports. Mahavir, in fact, went so far as to say, in early August, that Vinesh's reaching the final of the 50kg class at the Paris Olympics represented a slap on Brij Bhushan's face.

Babita, however, has been rather reticent in expressing support for her cousin Vinesh and the wrestling sisterhood, and quite mum on her party colleague Brij Bhushan; she went so far as

Mahavir seems unaware that even a child should have agency — and that a woman of 30, his niece Vinesh, a decorated wrestler, absolutely must

to suggest that the protesting wrestlers were misled by the "Opposition parties".

With Vinesh now contesting the Haryana Assembly elections to become an MLA, Babita has stated Vinesh is ungrateful — because, she says, Vinesh did not name Mahavir in a thank-you note she shared on social media after she was disqualified at the Paris Olympics.

"When my uncle died, Vinesh and both of her siblings suddenly quit wrestling," Babita said. "My father went to their house and fought with their mother to get them back to wrestling. Imagine how much he has worked to make Vinesh. But she thanked everyone except for that *guru*."

Indeed, Vinesh did not thank Mahavir in an exhaustive note, penned in English; the focus

was her mother, whom she eulogised in lofty terms, before turning to 'my team' that helped her over the past two years, after she suffered a traumatic defeat, followed by a more traumatic aftermath, at the Tokyo Olympics.

Mahavir, indeed, does not figure in the note, the bulk of which is focused on Tokyo and thereafter.

Mahavir, rightly lionised as a pioneer of women's wrestling, likes to hail himself as a font of "beti's emancipation". "PM Narendra Modi launched Beti Bachao Beti Padhao in Panipat last year *Yeh kaam toh mere se sikho. Mein hun beti bachao beti padhao* (I embody Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao)," he said. "*Humne beti padhai bhii aur khilai bhii*. People were initially against me but I would tell them wrestling is their *padhai*."

To a child, Mahavir may not have been perfectly endearing as a coach and mentor. He comes across as rather dictatorial — the curse of power — and some of his methods may now be termed excessive, even abusive.

Six years back, Vinesh told an interviewer that the Aamir Khan version of Mahavir in the movie 'Dangal' was a pale copy of his real autocratic self. "How they showed *Tauji* wasn't even 5 per cent of the real deal," Vinesh recalled. "Wrestling to me at that age was *Tauji ka danda*. You couldn't die, couldn't live, couldn't run away. I would tell my mother, 'I won't go from tomorrow. I'm good at studies and will make my name that way.' But she knew how to coax me."

Possibly, like many sportspersons forced to excel by their parents or coaches — the most memorable example is Andre Agassi, and his wife Steffi Graf to a lesser extent — Vinesh harbours resentment against Mahavir. Mahavir, on his part, seems unaware of the fact that even a child should have agency — and that a woman of 30, a decorated wrestler, absolutely must. He must let go — he must let Vinesh be.

Mahavir may have raised champion daughters — which can be interpreted as an act of self-aggrandisement, for his own defeated ambitions — but the toxin of patriarchy may still be informing his actions and utterances.

Caught in a trap that's difficult to walk out of



RAAJA BHASIN

I CAN write this now as the person around whom this episode hinges is no more and can't be harassed, harried, or worse. Yet, for safety's sake, let's not take his name and simply call him Mr X.

My father, probably egged on by an old memory, once wrote to the Headmaster of Lahore's Central Model School. Before Partition knocked the bottom out of so many lives, this was where he had studied before moving on to Lahore's famous Government College. The upshot was that he received a letter from Mr X, also an alumnus of the school, though much after my father. The Headmaster must have shown the letter to X, who then wrote to my father to say that he had grown up in Shimla, in Barnes' Court, today's Raj Bhavan of Himachal Pradesh.

His father had been on the staff of the last British Governor of undivided Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins. With Partition, the family had moved to Pakistan. In time, Mr X left for another country and did well in business. When he aged, he sold his business and returned to Lahore. As he said, he 'wanted to live out the rest of his life with family and friends'.

Someone vouchsafed Mr X's credentials for a visa to India and one summer evening, both he and his wife arrived in Shimla. I helped arrange a visit to the Raj Bhavan. No matter what politicians from both sides of the border may plot and plan, the person-to-person affection between the ordinary Pakistanis and Indians is considerable — you just have to see both nationalities living it up with friendship and bonhomie when they are in another country and on neutral ground. Mr X was able to revisit the romping grounds of his childhood and the security staff were kind, yet careful, courteous and yet, cautious.

Then, one day, Mrs X and Mr X came home for dinner. Mrs X and my mother got into a conversation. The lady, trying to open a stream of talk, I assume, asked my mother, "How many servants do you have? We manage with four." Our mother, who when she had to had been a sweeper, cook, dish-washer, wife, mother and academic rolled into one, did not know what to say. More bluntly put, I don't think she had either the interest or the patience for conversations like this. Our guest carried on, "We pay two servants and we give the other two food." Suddenly, our rather placid and calm mother acted as if she'd been stung. "What do you mean, 'You give just food?'"

"Yes, we give food" was the answer. Good manners came to the fore. My mother returned to her calm and

gentle state. "How nice," she said. "Should we have dinner now?"

After leaving India as a child, this was Mr X's first visit to the country and it was the first time his wife had come. Expectedly, over the course of the few days they were in Shimla, the conversation turned time and again to the similarities and common ground that we had as a people. At the same time, we also spoke of how different our countries had become. The fundamental difference seemed to emerge from the fact that the Constitution of Pakistan was adopted in 1956, while India's had come into force in 1950. Those crucial six years seem to have altered the trajectory of that country. The feudal order continued, with a limited number of individuals and families controlling both money and power.

Recalling the time spent with the guests from Pakistan, and the intriguing questions that never go away

Then, one evening, Mr X and I went out for a drink and a meal. The place where we were at had several serving and retired Army and civil officers, who were also there for a drink and a meal. One introduced Mr X. Within moments, he was surrounded. A barrage of questions was fired. That inquisition of sorts could be summarised in a single sentence, "Why does Pakistan behave the way it does with India?" He did not say so, or even indicate this, but I won't be surprised if Mr X thought that this chance meeting was an ambush arranged by me. One tried one's best to extricate him from this situation, but he was quite capable of holding his own. His answer to the barrage was, "I've lived most of my life out of Pakistan as a businessman and only returned to retire."

As we left, Mr X was visibly upset. He said, "Don't you realise that both our countries have become very different? You have democracy here. In Pakistan, we alternate between some sort of a democracy and military coups. There is no clear power centre. We have four: the Army, the ISI, the religious hardliners and then the weakest, the elected government."

There is a popular song by Elvis Presley, 'Suspicious Minds'. Apart from the mind conjuring what it may, this has another phrase, 'We are caught in a trap.' That is where we are — in a snare that has snatched shut on our feet and won't let us move. This line came to mind when one of the gentlemen who had cornered Mr X met me later and said, "Don't be naive. How do you know the truth of anything that Mr X claimed? Or, of who he was?"

— The writer is an author based in Shimla

War, valour and values in Vietnam

RAJBIR DESWAL

IN typhoon-torn Vietnam, though being room-bound for two days, we had interesting experiences last month. Some fellow golfers, who had visited the country a couple of months earlier, told us that the Vietnamese were a friendly people with values to cherish. And that, with fortitude and valour in their blood, they had rebuilt their war-ravaged country. The typhoon was to hit our city Hanoi at 7 in the evening, when we ventured out, walking up to a lake nearby. Soon, we realised that we had made a foolish decision, for we were caught in heavy downpour and wild, gusty winds.

While hobbling back to the hotel, and mindful of the uprooted trees, my wife, Koumudi, harboured a fishing bait, flung unknowingly by a boy, on her trouser. While trying to remove it, she suffered an injury on her finger and it started bleeding profusely. Panicked, we shouted for help when a 10-year-old girl came running from her shop-cum-home.

She made Koumudi sit on a chair and ran inside to bring a first-aid box. She put the band-aid on the finger, saying something which we could not understand. But her smile said it all. The boy kept standing on one side, being an epitome of an apology. For the next hour or so, we were sheltered in their tiny house.

In Ho Chi Minh City, our guide, Danh Hong Puch, told us interesting facets about the Vietnamese. We were surprised to know that the kids in the country generally do not want to go to school; instead, they stay on their land and pursue their parents' profession.

Puch, who spoke monk-like, talked about the Buddha and his teachings, especially compassion. He too wanted to go back and live with his parents in a few months.

We saw the fields with built-up ornamental graves; according to Puch, the Vietnamese liked to be buried only on their property. I was reminded of the man in New Orleans, who wanted to be buried 'above land' since he had lived in swamps all his life! Pretentious human desires do not leave them even after death.

Puch introduced us to families on Unicorn Island, located in Mekong river, who have been living there for generations, rearing cattle, growing fruits and crops, and even raising beehives for honey.

It's been a tough ride, but the Vietnamese have gone from strength to strength

Some distance away from Ho Chi Minh City, we saw bunkers, which stretched up to a distance of 250 km, used by Vietnamese guerillas and their families during the war with the US. The design of these bunkers is so scientific that despite having kitchens and wells inside to subsist, these are difficult for the enemy to detect. Guerillas even wore sandals in the reverse manner, so that the enemy was fooled into believing that they were going in a particular direction, whereas it was just the opposite.

While in Da Nang and heading up to Ba Na Hills, we met Minh, a Vietnamese who had stayed for 22 years in California, USA, and who had returned to his moorings. He was in our group as just another member, but took care of everyone around. With us, he was extra helpful. He would caution, "Mind your head please!" and "Mind your step please!" He would offer to take pictures and suggest angles and the perfect light options.

Minh limped a bit since he had undergone a knee replacement surgery, but it did not deter him from offering a hand to Koumudi if it was a steep climb. At our luncheon, he guided us to the vegetarian counter. I couldn't help telling him, "Minh, you are a good man!" He smiled and said, "You are in my country. How can I not be good to you!" Whoever said war makes people rugged and insensitive!

— The writer is a retired IPS officer

Lessons from encounters in the wild

BKS SINGH

WHILE we have been celebrating 'wildlife week' across India, beginning from October 2, disturbing news has come from African countries such as Namibia and Zimbabwe. Apparently, orders have been issued to cull elephants for providing food to hungry citizens. Many of these countries have been reeling under severe drought conditions, and coupled with supply chain disruptions due to the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, governments have been facing the daunting task of addressing the hunger of the countrymen.

Drought is linked to global warming and the developed countries responsible for this have not paid adaptation funds of \$100 million annually, or the loss and damage funds agreed to in annual climate conferences. No one can do any conservation with a hungry stomach.

The biggest impediment to conservation is the conflict between humans and wild animals. With the fragmentation and degradation of wildlife habitats and forests, wild animals stray into human areas and damage crops, properties and also inflict human and

livestock casualties. Though human casualties are inflicted by tigers, leopards, wolves, wild buffaloes, etc, the largest number of deaths take place in elephant attacks. Whenever a child is lifted by a wolf and an adult is killed by large carnivores or an elephant, the affected community members turn against the Forest Department. They protest and create a law and order situation. If it is not handled effectively, often members of the community turn against the conservation programmes and all efforts go in vain. Recent incidents of wolves' attacks in UP's Bahraich is one such example.

In the case of Bahraich, the habitat for wolves, which historically lies between Katarnia Ghat forests and Ghaghara river, has been shrinking owing to frequent changes in the course of the river. According to experts, the wolves there have cross-bred with stray dogs and the offsprings are no longer fearful of moving into human areas in search of food. The UP Forest Department has already taken five out of the six wolves into captivity. Under pressure from the community, it had no option but to capture and shift wild wolves to a zoo/safari.

The reasons for tigers and leopards attacking and killing humans in the Terai belt of UP and Uttarakhand are similar. The habi-



The biggest impediment to conservation is the conflict between humans and wild animals

tats have been fragmented due to human encroachments, rivers changing course and diversion of forests for infrastructure and developmental projects. There have been several incidents of communities targeting wild animals. Apart from being poached and hunted, the animals straying into human areas are killed by the villagers.

Tigers living on the periphery of forests at times attack livestock for food. They drag the kill several hundred metres to hide it under tree groves and bushes and feed on it. Tigers are known to eat twice a week; the half-eaten carcass of the kill is often revisited. Villagers exploit this weakness of tigers and spray poison on this. The tiger gets killed whenever it revisits.

Unless there is an accidental encounter, wild animals maintain a safe distance from humans and would never attack. Only when the distance is breached do the animals attack in self-defence. While perambulating forests infested by elephants, forest officers take a lot of precautions. There have been several instances when officers on duty got killed in elephant attacks. A clear distance of 200 metres is to be maintained between the elephant and the human while moving in the forests. When the direction of the wind is from the elephant towards the human, one

can afford to go a bit closer. But when the direction of the wind is towards the elephant, a safe distance of 200 metres must be kept. When we move in forests, we make sure that the colour of the vehicle is not white, nor do we wear any white-coloured clothes.

In December 1977, NR Nair, the then Director, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, lost his life when he went too close to photograph an elephant in Karnataka's Bandipur forests. He was attacked and killed on the spot. In 1989, while working as the Deputy Conservator of Forests at Kollegal in Karnataka, I was going with my wife and kids in a Mahindra jeep on a hilly narrow road in an elephant area and was charged by an elephant from the front. We were lucky that the elephant did not touch us and turned away. If it had pushed the jeep, five of us, including the driver, would have disappeared from earth.

Elephants feed on small-sized trees, which have lower carbon absorption capacity. This removes the competition. Big trees with a higher carbon absorption grow luxuriantly. The presence of elephants increases the carbon sequestration potential of the forests and makes the ecosystem more climate resilient.

— The writer is former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Karnataka



A woman holds her daughter as teddy bears symbolising Gazan children who have lost their lives since October 7, 2023, are displayed for charity sale in Doha, with proceeds donated to the people of Gaza. PHOTOS: REUTERS

ONE YEAR AFTER OCT 7 ATTACK

DEAD END

A 76-year history of strife and killing

VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN

MIDWAY in his acclaimed biography of Itzhak Rabin, the former Israeli prime minister (*Rabin of Israel*), American journalist Robert Slater gives us details of the assassinated leader's views on dealing with Palestinians. This has relevance even today when we are discussing Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

Rabin, one of the greatest Israeli military heroes of the 1967 Six-Day War who defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria to wrest areas for 'Eretz Yisrael' (Land of Israel), has an equal role in Israel's nation-building as the legendary Moshe Dayan. As Chief of Staff, he captured the Gaza Strip and the Sinai desert from Egypt; the Golan Heights from Syria; and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan.

Yet, he was prepared to negotiate with Palestinians even during the First Intifada. As Defence Minister, he told his Labour Party on February 21, 1988, that "you can't rule by force over one and a half million Palestinians". However, extremists in his country did not take that kindly. They wanted the entire land to themselves. As *The Guardian* (UK) recalled on October 31, 2020: "The road to Rabin's assassination began in Oslo, sealed in September 1993 by a handshake on the White House lawn between Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat."

The Oslo Accords were transitional agreements signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) to establish partnership for negotiating border disputes, creating Palestinian self-governance through the creation of the Palestinian Authority, with hopes of resolving the conflict with a two-state solution.

The Guardian also said that the Opposition, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, spoke at two demonstrations where one of the slogans was "Death to Rabin". "Israel's head of internal security asked Netanyahu to dial down the rhetoric,

warning that the prime minister's life was in danger. Netanyahu declined". Rabin was assassinated on November 4, 1995.

RISE OF HAMAS

On January 1, 2009, Daniel Barenboim, the famous Israeli pianist and conductor, wrote in *The Guardian* that Israel had encouraged Hamas as a tactic to weaken Yasser Arafat. On October 26, 2023, Ami Ayalon, former Shin Bet chief, told *Globes*: "We built Hamas... It didn't work, because we didn't understand what Hamas is... That's why it blew up in our faces."

The links between Hamas and Iran's Hezbollah originally came through Arafat, the high priest of secular Palestinian nationalism who provided bodyguards to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini while he lived in exile in Paris. He also facilitated training of future Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in the PLO camps in Lebanon. Arafat became the first foreign leader to visit Iran in 1979 following the Islamic revolution.

Israel's action of pushing Palestinians out of West Bank and Jerusalem into neighbouring countries in 1948 indirectly facilitated these contacts. Another factor which cemented these links was Israel's mass expulsion of Islamic Jihad militants from Gaza in 1992 to Marj al-Zuhur (Lebanon) for abducting an Israeli soldier.

Meanwhile, Arafat's incremental journey towards peace talks with Israel, culminating in the 1993 Oslo Accord, disillusioned Iran.

Militants in Gaza did not agree with this and gravitated towards Iran for financial support. Gradually, Palestinian militants started receiving training in Beqaa valley in Lebanon, in camps run by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

PALESTINIAN GRIEVANCES

In brief, Palestinians' grievances are to peacefully reside in their own land, unhindered and unmolested by massive illegal overseas Jewish migration, water rights, abolition of the 'Permit Regime' for their movements, and

allowing the return of nearly 7,00,000 of their compatriots who were expelled by the Jewish militia during the 1948 'Nakba'.

They also want Israel to remove the West Bank wall, which Israel calls the "security wall". Human rights organisations like B'Tselem (Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) call it the "Apartheid wall" — to put as much Palestinian land and as many Israeli settlements as possible on the western, or Israeli side, while placing as many Palestinians as possible on the eastern side, effectively annexing large areas of Palestinian land.

Palestinian demands are legal under the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution No. 181(ii) of November 29, 1947, defining the future government of Palestine, partitioning Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab, with Jerusalem under UN rule. True, it was the Arab coalition which used force to prevent partition by invading Palestine. However Jewish militias launched attacks on Palestinian villages, forcing thousands to flee. Although Israel won the 1948 war, the UN has been urging Israel to allow the 50 lakh Palestine refugees to return.

FLOUTING UN RESOLUTIONS

Israel has been attempting to push the remaining Palestinians also into the neighbouring Arab countries. I had observed this approach early in the 1980s while I was attending, as a visitor, a Council of Europe seminar on Palestine in Strasbourg. When the then Syrian foreign minister Abdul Halim Khaddam raised the West Bank situation, the Israeli delegate stoutly opposed it, saying that Palestinians already had a state, which was Jordan.

As a result, 56 lakh refugees, registered by the UN refugee organisation (UNRWA), are cramped in about 68 refugee camps. Some of these were bombed by Israel during the ongoing Hamas-Lebanon wars.

On May 15, Palestinians all over the world observed 'Nakba Day' as the anniversary of their displacement from their homeland. On May 17, 2024, the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) conducted a seminar on the "Ongoing Palestinian Nakba".

'Nakba' means catastrophe in Arabic. That was the process of ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs from their homeland whereby majority of the present 1.48 crore Palestinians live outside of what was once their Palestine.

On September 26, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas urged the UNGA to stop the Gaza war as "Israel had almost entirely destroyed Gaza, and it was no longer fit for life". On October 3, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani

termed the crisis a "collective genocide".

ISRAEL HAS ENSURED SECURITY?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the bloodiest discords in the history of mankind. According to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, the official organ of the State of Palestine, recognised by 145 of the 193 UN member states, nearly 1,34,000 Palestinians and Arabs have been killed since 1948 when the partition of Palestine came into force. As against this, Israeli casualties from different sources were nearly 10,000.

Before the 2023-24 Gaza war, Israel had fought the Hamas in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021, which killed nearly 6,400 Palestinians against 300 Israeli deaths.

The latest series of clashes started when Hamas unleashed the most violent attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, killing 1,200 Jews and taking 240 as hostages. As this is written, it has spiralled out of control extending to Lebanon, where Israel is battling with Hezbollah, killing their supreme leader Hassan Nasrallah on September 27, while Iran has entered the battle by sending hundreds of ballistic missiles on October 1.

RISE AND KILL FIRST

In 2018, I reviewed Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman's book *Rise and Kill First*, which claimed that Israel had "assassinated more people than any other country in the western world" — some 2,300 'targeted killing operations', most of them against Palestinians, but also aimed at Egyptians, Syrians, Iranians and others.

He quotes a scene on March 14, 1988, when the then Israeli finance minister Moshe Nisim, son of the chief Rabbi of Israel, persuaded the cabinet to kill PLO leader Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), who was Arafat's closest ally, quoting a Talmudic precept: "If a man comes to kill you, rise early and kill him first."

Bergman said that Abu Jihad's killing had the opposite effect: it intensified the First Intifada, which lasted till 1993, killing 277 Israelis and 1,962 Palestinians. It also proved foreign minister Shimon Peres' earlier warning that Abu Jihad was a moderate who could have checked Arafat.

The author quoted Aman's (Military Intelligence) chief Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, after the killing: "He (Abu Jihad) could have made a significant contribution to the peace process." The author concluded: "If the adored and charismatic Abu Jihad had been alive, Hamas might not have been able to consolidate large parts of the Palestinian public."

The second wrong decision was the assassination of moderate Lebanese Shia leader Abbas al-Mussavi in southern Lebanon. On February 16, 1992, Israel proudly described it

as the first drone-guided 'Hellfire' missile assassination in the world. It was to check the growing Iranian influence on Hezbollah. This also backfired as Mussavi's successor, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, "was blacker than black", more radical than Mussavi.

Nasrallah chose Imad Mughniyeh to intensify guerilla tactics to get rid of Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon. He rained Iranian rockets on northern Israel, attacked a synagogue in Istanbul, killed the Israeli embassy's security officer in Turkey and attacked their embassy in Argentina, all within days of Mussavi's killing. Nasrallah made things so difficult that Israel was forced to vacate southern Lebanon in 2000.

NASRALLAH'S ASSASSINATION

Now that Nasrallah has been assassinated, does Benjamin Netanyahu feel that Israel would be safer? *The Times of Israel* (September 29), quoting *Channel 12*, said the US was hoping for a pause in Israeli action through the efforts of Israel's Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer: "Once the hit on Nasrallah took place, the US was left with a feeling of having been misled." The same was revealed by Lebanese foreign minister Abdallah Bou Habib to *CNN's* Christiane Amanpour that Hezbollah had agreed to a ceasefire hours before Nasrallah was killed by Israel's bunker-buster bombs in Beirut. He claimed that Nasrallah's consent was communicated to the French and the Americans. The two western powers had confirmed to Lebanon that Prime Minister Netanyahu was in the picture.

IRAN'S MISSILE ATTACKS

Opinions differ whether Iran was able to inflict retributive punishment on Israel. Some retired US military intelligence officials said that only 60 per cent of the missiles were intercepted with American help, while 30 per cent hit the targets. However, President Joe Biden said that it was a failure. *France 24* said that Iran might fire ballistic Fattah-1, which could bypass Israeli air defences, if Israel chooses to hit back.

That America holds the key to the present strife is borne out by President Biden's statement on October 3 that "the idea of Israel striking Iran's oil in retaliation for ballistic missile attack was in discussion". The American media compared this to the stern message President Ronald Reagan had given to then Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1982 to stop using cluster bombs on the civilian population in Beirut, which he described as "holocaust".

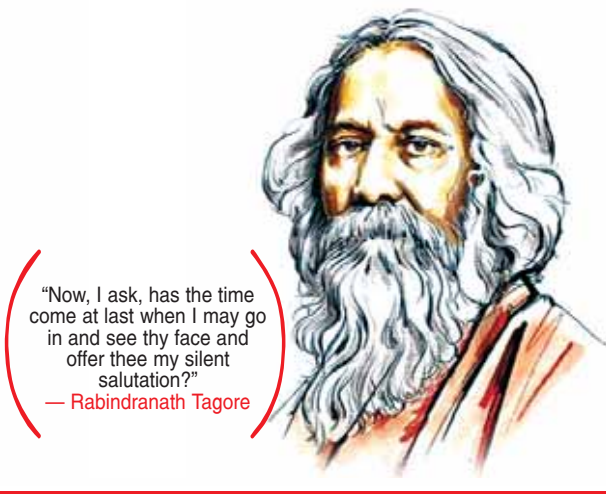
— The writer is a former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat. Views are personal



An explosion occurs following an Israeli air strike on a residential building in central Gaza Strip.

A Palestinian rests near the rubble of houses destroyed in Israeli strikes in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip.





STEP INTO THE FESTIVE SPIRIT

Kullu Dussehra is a vibrant festival in Himachal Pradesh that brings the Kullu valley to life with colourful processions, traditional music, and cultural performances. Celebrated in honour of Lord Raghunath Ji, this annual event attracts visitors from all over, creating a sense of community and joy, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**



Kullu Dussehra, celebrated in the picturesque valley of Kullu in Himachal Pradesh, is a vibrant week-long festival that goes beyond just religious observance. It brings together centuries-old traditions, the unity of hundreds of local deities and the incredible artistic expression of the region. *Kullu Dussehra* has a distinctive flavour, embracing the valley's culture, history and devotion. This year, the International *Kullu Dussehra* Festival is set to take place from 13th to 19th October 2024, offering visitors a chance to immerse themselves in the vibrant festivities while also appreciating the breathtaking scenic beauty and natural wonders of this enchanting region. The origins of *Kullu Dussehra* date back to the 17th century when *Raja Jagat Singh*, a ruler of Kullu, brought the idol of Lord Raghunath Ji to the valley. From then on, Lord Raghunath Ji became the central deity of the festival and *Kullu Dussehra* has been celebrated in His honour ever since. What sets this festival apart is its spirit of inclusion, with over 300 local deities from surrounding villages joining the celebrations. These deities, carried on beautifully decorated palanquins, are accompanied by their devotees, musicians and dancers, creating a lively and spiritual atmosphere as they converge at Dhalpur Maidan in Kullu. The festival begins on 13th October with the grand Rath Yatra, a procession where Lord Raghunath Ji is placed in a chariot and pulled through the streets by devotees. This procession marks the beginning of a week filled with devotion, music and dance. The streets come alive with the sounds of traditional instruments, the colourful sight of waving flags and the energy of people who have come from far and wide to participate in this sacred event. The Rath Yatra is not just a religious act; it's a celebration of the unity and shared faith that binds the people of Kullu together. *Kullu Dussehra* is not only a spiritual gathering but also a cultural festival that showcases the rich artistic heritage of the region. Every evening, the open-air auditorium at Lal Chand Prarthi Kalakendra becomes a stage for performances by local, national and international artists. From traditional Himachali folk dances like the Nati to contemporary performances, the festival offers a diverse range of cultural experiences. This year, approximately 15 international cultural troupes will participate, bringing their unique traditions and performances to Kullu. These performances reflect the universal language of art, reminding everyone of the shared human connection through culture. On 14th October, the Cultural Parade takes place, showcasing a vibrant display of traditional attire, music and dance from across India and the world. This parade highlights the rich diversity of cultures, where each troupe brings its own distinct flavour to the celebrations.

"Kullu Dussehra beautifully showcases our cultural richness and serves as a reminder of the bonds that unite us as a community." - Sushil Kumar Singla, Principal Resident Commissioner of Himachal Pradesh Sadan, New Delhi



Sunder Singh Thakur CPS and Sushil Kumar Singla, Principal Resident Commissioner Government of Himachal Pradesh, New Delhi

The sight of dancers in traditional costumes, performing to the rhythmic beats of their native instruments, creates a colourful experience that celebrates unity in diversity. The Cultural Parade embodies *Kullu Dussehra's* inclusive spirit, welcoming different cultures to come together in celebration. A highlight of *Kullu Dussehra* is the performance of Lalhri, a traditional dance native to the Kullu Valley. Passed down through generations, Lalhri is not just a dance but a form of storytelling, where each graceful movement and musical note carries the history of the region. Watching the dancers perform in their traditional attire is like stepping back in time, where the cultural legacy of Kullu comes alive through the art of movement and music. This performance encapsulates the very essence of the festival, where tradition and heritage are celebrated and preserved. The spiritual climax of *Kullu Dussehra* takes place on 19th October with the symbolic Lanka Dahan, marking the return of nearly 300 deities, or devidevatas, to their homes. This significant day begins as the Raja approaches Lord Raghunath Ji, causing all music and dance to pause. After the Raja circumambulates the chariot, the procession moves towards Lanka by the river Beas. Here, bushes and grass are set ablaze, symbolising the burning of Lanka. The flames create a captivating spectacle, while the Lanka Dahan ceremony reinforces values of justice, morality, and goodness, highlighting the festival's importance in uniting the community.

The penultimate day features the



Muhalla ceremony, an event filled with joy, music and festivity. Villagers from across Kullu gather at Dhalpur Maidan, setting aside their daily lives to participate in this lively celebration. The deities, surrounded by flags and accompanied by traditional music, pay their respects to Lord Raghunath Ji. The Muhalla is a vibrant reflection of the community spirit that defines *Kullu Dussehra*, where unity and togetherness are celebrated in a colourful display of devotion. Historically, *Kullu Dussehra* has also been a major commercial event. It once served as a trading hub where villagers would sell their crops, handicrafts and other goods. Traders from regions like Lahaul and Ladakh would bring products such as pashmina shawls, carpets and local herbs, creating a bustling marketplace. Today, this tradition continues with the Artisan Showcase, where award-winning artisans display their crafts, from textiles to woodwork. Visitors can purchase these handmade items, taking home a piece of Kullu's rich artistic heritage and supporting the local economy. For those who enjoy food, *Kullu Dussehra* is a culinary journey that showcases the flavours of Himachal Pradesh. The food courts at the festival serve traditional dishes such as siddu (a type of steamed bread) and madra (a rich chickpea curry), offering a taste of the region's culinary traditions. Alongside these local delicacies,

international cuisine is also available, ensuring that visitors can enjoy a wide variety of food during the festival. The culinary experience is an integral part of *Kullu Dussehra*, reflecting the valley's agricultural richness and its connection to the land. This year's *Kullu Dussehra* will also feature the Ambassador's Meet on 18th October, presided over by *Shri Sukhvinder Singh*, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh. The event will bring together resident ambassadors from various countries, promoting cultural exchange and enriching trade ties. The Ambassador's Meet reflects *Kullu Dussehra's* growing global recognition, where tradition meets modernity on an international stage. This blend of cultural celebration and diplomatic engagement adds a new dimension to the festival, highlighting its significance beyond the local community. Beyond its vibrant cultural performances and religious rituals, *Kullu Dussehra* offers a diverse range of entertainment options for visitors of all ages. Families can enjoy amusement rides like toy trains and swings, while sports enthusiasts can engage in competitions such as

volleyball, kabaddi and tug-of-war. The open-air performances continue late into the night, ensuring that the festivities are alive with music, dance and laughter. As the festival progresses, visitors will also have the opportunity to explore the natural beauty of the Kullu Valley, which offers breathtaking views of snow-capped peaks, lush green valleys, and flowing rivers. Many visitors choose to explore nearby attractions such as the Great Himalayan National Park, Bijli Mahadev Temple, and the historic Hadimba Devi Temple in Manali, combining the spiritual experience of *Kullu Dussehra* with the serene beauty of Himachal Pradesh's natural landscape. As *Kullu* prepares to host this grand celebration, it's essential to reflect on the significance of festivals like *Kullu Dussehra* in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. The festival not only showcases the artistic traditions of Himachal Pradesh but also serves as a reminder of the unity and community spirit that festivals inspire. It brings together people from different walks of life, whether they are locals, tourists or international dignitaries, all coming together to celebrate the rich cultural legacy of the region. *Kullu Dussehra* is a festival that everyone should experience at least once in their lifetime. It's not just a celebration; it's a living tradition that continues to evolve while staying deeply rooted in the values of the community. The festival's grandeur, coupled with the warm hospitality of the people of Kullu, makes it a truly unique experience. As the date approaches, excitement is building, and the town of Kullu is gearing up to welcome visitors from all over the world. It's a time of joy, devotion and celebration, an event that leaves a lasting impression on all who attend. *The International Kullu Dussehra Festival 2024* is set to be a spectacular event that will showcase the best of Himachal's culture, art and traditions. *Kullu Dussehra 2024* promises to be a celebration unlike any other. From the grand Rath Yatra to the vibrant cultural performances, from the symbolic Lanka Dahan to the bustling artisan markets, the festival offers a diverse range of experiences for all who attend. Whether visitors are drawn by the spiritual devotion, the artistic performances or the natural beauty of the valley, *Kullu Dussehra* is a festival that speaks to the heart, offering a unique glimpse into the soul of Himachal Pradesh. As the festival approaches, everyone is encouraged to mark their calendars and experience this remarkable celebration from 13th to 19th October 2024. It's a perfect opportunity to enjoy the magic of Kullu Valley, where tradition, culture and community come together in a festival of life, love and joy!

THE ORIGINS OF KULLU DUSSEHRA DATE BACK TO THE 17TH CENTURY WHEN RAJA JAGAT SINGH, A RULER OF KULLU, BROUGHT THE IDOL OF LORD RAGHUNATH JI TO THE VALLEY. FROM THEN ON, LORD RAGHUNATH JI BECAME THE CENTRAL DEITY OF THE FESTIVAL AND KULLU DUSSEHRA HAS BEEN CELEBRATED IN HIS HONOUR EVER SINCE

A TASTE OF THE NEW

EXCITING RESTAURANTS SHAPING NCR'S FOOD SCENE

Explore NCR's newest hotspots, serving up bold flavours and vibrant atmospheres for those looking to experience the best in dining and nightlife



PAWAN SONI
Food critic and founder of the Big F Awards

The food scene in the NCR is heating up, with a host of new eateries making their mark, each worth a visit. This month, I sampled a few, and here are my impressions.

LITCHI BISTRO

Nestled in the culinary hub of Malviya Nagar, *Litchi Bistro* offers a creative world cuisine menu alongside freshly brewed coffee from their in-house roastery. The spacious open patio outshines the indoor seating, creating a vibrant atmosphere. Two dishes I highly recommend are the *Spicy Tuna Taco*, served on a crisp Nori sheet with a kick from sriracha mayo and *the Korean Bacon*, a miso-marinated pork belly. The latter is so exceptional that I would return just for this dish.

AVARTANA AT ITC MAURYA

This is easily the most intriguing restaurant I've explored this year. *Avartana* offers set-course menus ranging from 7 to 13 courses, priced from Rs. 2,950 upwards per person. The cuisine is a contemporary interpretation of South Indian ingredients, far from the traditional dishes we usually associate with the region. I'll be doing a detailed review soon, as it's hard to choose favourites when each dish is stellar. It's no surprise that *Avartana* ranks 44th among Asia's 50 best.

689, GURGAON

Six Eighty Nine at Two Horizon brings Quorum Club's finesse into the public domain. This Asian restaurant draws inspiration from Japanese cuisine, with a clever twist of Japanese ingredients across its offerings. A standout dish is the *Flame-Kissed Avocado* from the Robotayaki section. The buttery avocado, glazed with soy-mirin, perfectly balances saltiness and sharpness, with a



zing from shichimi lime. Ideal for those who enjoy Asian flavours and refined cocktails without the distraction of loud music.

TEPPANYAKI AT EEST, WESTIN GURGAON

Gurgaon finally has a live *Teppanyaki* counter. What was once

Eest's Omakase section has been revamped to accommodate a *Teppanyaki* grill. The sauces are fresh, the ingredients top-notch and Chef Jatin engages with diners to craft dishes tailored to their preferences. The food here is as delicious as it is healthy, ensuring my return visit soon.

ROOM XO, AIPL JOY CENTRAL, GURGAON

The new party hub, *Room XO*, features one of the largest bars in the city, offering high-energy music, creative cocktails, massive screens and a performance bar. The food, curated by celebrity chef *Sabyasachi Gorai*, complements the lively atmosphere. With the same founders as *Studio XO*, this spot is set to be the next big thing in Gurgaon's nightlife.

THANKS AND BEYOND, NEHRU PLACE, DELHI

Veteran nightlife impresario *Priyank Sukhija's* latest venture at *Epicuria Mall* offers three distinct zones. 'Thanks' is a casual dining space, 'And' is the outdoor area, and

'Beyond' is a high-energy bar. For a great time, I recommend the Tequila-based *Picante*, *the Sheesha*, and *the Tuna on Toast*.

PIRATES OF GRILL GRANDE, CYBERHUB, GURGAON

Buffets just went gourmet, thanks to the famous *Banga Brothers*, who have redefined the concept with their Grande edition of *Pirates of Grill*. The quality, variety, and pricing are a revelation - priced at around Rs. 1,000 per head; the spread rivals the best à la carte restaurants. Standout items include *the Benne Dosa* with *Podi Masala*, possibly the best in the NCR and *Dim Sum* that would hold its own in any reputable dim sum restaurant. Don't miss the *Grilled Pineapple*, an old favourite or *the Indianised Meatballs* with shredded gey cauliflower and cheese, a delightful fusion.

Now that you're in the loop on the hottest dining and nightlife spots in the NCR, where are you heading tonight or later this week? Let me know at pawan.soni@indianfoodfreak.com.

FROM KOLKATA TO DELHI: THE TASTE OF TWO CITIES

While Durga Puja is celebrated across the country, it is at a different level in Kolkata. The rhythm of the dhak, the vibrant atmosphere and the exquisite food transport you to another world, writes DIVYA BHATIA



A visit to Kolkata revealed the grandeur of the festivities, showcasing stunning pandals and creating cherished moments. As a foodie, I was captivated by the culinary extravaganza, especially the traditional *Bhuribhoj* and *Bengali Thali*. The unforgettable flavours of *Basanti Polao*, *Aloo Bhaja*, *Begun Bhaja*, *Potol Bhaja*, *Luchi* and *Chholar Dal*, paired with *Mishtoi Doi* and *Rasgulla*, left a lasting impression. The magic of these dishes lies in the love behind their preparation. Bengalis savour their meals in small courses, enhancing the authentic flavours of their cuisine. While I've felt a festive spirit in Delhi, it cannot match Kolkata's enchanting transformation during Durga Puja. However, Delhi offers its own take on Bengali cuisine, and this year, I explored delightful recipes from young chefs, ensuring that whether you're in Kolkata or elsewhere, you can enjoy traditional Puja dishes.

CHEF GAUTAM KUMAR'S RECIPE FOR GOBINDOBHOG GURER PAYESH

Chef *Gautam Kumar*, Executive Chef at Foodlink F&B Holdings (India), brings over 20 years of experience in regional Indian cuisine. He emphasises fresh, locally sourced ingredients and has held prestigious positions at top hotels like *Shangri-La* and *Grand Hyatt Delhi*. His innovative approach has garnered numerous accolades, and one of his favourite dishes is *Gobindobhog Gurer Payesh*.

GOBINDOBHOG GURER PAYESH

Kheer, or 'payesh' in Bengali, is a sweet rice and milk dish beloved in Bengali culture. Offered to the goddess *Durga* as 'bhog,' it is shared among devotees after the puja. Made with date palm jaggery, 'nolen gud kheer' is a healthier alternative to sugar, especially popular during *Durga Puja*. Sharing *Payesh* symbolises unity and harmony among family members. *Durga Puja*. Sharing *Payesh* symbolises unity and fosters harmony among family members.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 litre full-fat milk
- 50 grams *Gobindo bhog rice*
- 150 grams *nolen gur* (date palm jaggery)
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon green cardamom powder
- 20 grams cashew nuts
- 10 grams raisins (soaked and drained)
- 10 grams ghee

METHOD

- **Soak the Rice:** Soak the rice in water for 30 minutes, ensuring not to over-wash it to retain as much starch as possible. After soaking, drain the rice and spread it out to dry.
- **Coat the Rice:** Coat the soaked rice with ¼ teaspoon of ghee and set aside.
- **Prepare the Raisins:** Soak the raisins in water until swollen.
- **Fry Cashews:** Heat ghee in a pan and fry the cashews until golden. Set aside.
- **Boil the Milk:** Boil the milk in a heavy-bottomed pan, simmer for 15 minutes, and add cardamom powder.
- **Cook the Rice:** Add the ghee-coated rice to the milk and cook on low heat until fully cooked. The rice should be soft and mushy when mashed between your fingers, as it will firm up while cooling. Stir gently to prevent burning and release starch, which thickens the payesh.
- **Thicken the Payesh:** Ensure the rice is fully cooked; the payesh should be slightly thicker than desired, as the gur will thin it out.
- **Add Gur:** Turn off the heat and mix in the gur, salt, soaked raisins, and fried cashews, keeping the heat off to prevent curdling. Gently fold everything together, cover the pan, and let the residual heat melt the gur completely. Serve the payesh hot or cold in a bowl, garnished with fried cashews and soaked raisins.

RECIPE FOR NARKEL NI CHINGRI

Chef *Gagandeep Singh Bedi*, Director of Culinary at *Roseate Hotels & Resorts*, specialises in reviving regional Indian cuisines and creating signature dishes at *Kheer*. He focuses on organic produce and minimising food waste.

NARKEL NI CHINGRI RECIPE

One of his standout creations is *Narkel ni Chingri*, a delightful prawn dish cooked in coconut milk. This recipe exemplifies Chef *Gagandeep's* commitment to authentic flavours and sustainable practices. Here's how to make it:

INGREDIENTS

- 500g prawns, cleaned and deveined
- 200ml fresh coconut milk
- 75g fresh grated coconut
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 1 tsp ginger paste
- 1 tsp garlic paste
- 2-3 green chillies, slit
- ½ tsp turmeric powder
- ½ tsp red chilli powder
- 40ml mustard oil
- Salt to taste
- Fresh coriander for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

- Marinate the prawns with turmeric and salt for 15 minutes.
- Roast the grated coconut on medium flame until golden brown.
- Heat mustard oil in a pan until smoking, then reduce heat.
- Sauté onions until golden brown, then add ginger and garlic paste.
- Add green chillies, turmeric and red chilli powder, stirring well.
- Add marinated prawns and cook until pink (5-7 minutes).
- Pour in coconut milk and simmer for 5-10 minutes.
- Add roasted grated coconut and cook for an additional 2-3 minutes.
- Adjust seasoning and garnish with fresh coriander and serve hot with steamed rice for a delicious meal!



Navratri: The essence of Satvik food

BY TEAM VIVA

The festival of Navratri is filled with a spirit of devotion and celebration. During these nine auspicious days, millions across India follow a special dietary regimen, abstaining from regular food and opting for *Satvik* meals. While these dishes are rooted in tradition, chefs at hotels like *Le Meridien, New Delhi* have taken the opportunity to elevate this sacred cuisine with contemporary flavours, ensuring that even the most discerning food lovers can enjoy fasting meals with a gourmet touch. *Navratri* food is characterised by simplicity, with ingredients that align with spiritual purity. Common dishes consumed during this period have been improvised by Chef *Setuu Gupta*. Here are the dishes:

- **'Kuttu ki Puri' (Buckwheat Flour Puri)** - A deep-fried, gluten-free flatbread made from buckwheat flour, which is one of the staples during Navratri.
- **'Sabudana tikki'** - A light and flavorful dish made with soaked tapioca pearls, peanuts, and mild spices like cumin, offering a fulfilling yet easy-to-digest meal.
- **'Paneer Tikka'** - Cottage cheese cubes marinated in yoghurt and mild spices, then grilled to perfection. *Paneer* dishes are popular as they provide a protein-rich option for those fasting.
- **'Samak Rice Pulao'** - This is made from barnyard millet, often called 'vrat rice,' and is cooked with mild spices and



vegetables to offer a flavorful alternative to regular rice.

- **'Anjeer ka Halwa'** - A dessert made from figs, slow-cooked in milk and flavoured with cardamom, is a popular sweet indulgence for the fasting period.
- **'Makhana Curry'** - A creamy salty pudding made from foxnuts (*makhana*) and curd flavoured with spices and nuts for a rich taste.
- **'Kacche Kale Sabudana Tikki'** is a crispy snack made from raw banana, *sabudana* (tapioca pearls), green chillies, and spices. Shallow-fried and enjoyed during fasting periods like *Navratri*, it offers a flavourful and energising treat.
- **'Arbi Singara Kadhi'** - is a flavourful curry made with *colocasia* (*arbi*) and water chestnuts (*singhara*), simmered in a spiced yoghurt-based gravy. It's thickened with *singhara* flour and seasoned with mustard seeds, curry leaves and chillies for a tangy, savoury dish.

Navratri food has always been about maintaining purity and simplicity, but at *Le Meridien, New Delhi*, Chef *Setuu Gupta* and his team have shown that fasting meals can be both humble and sophisticated. By elevating traditional dishes with innovative techniques, they ensure that guests not only honour their spiritual commitment but also indulge in a culinary journey that excites the senses. This fusion of faith and flavour is a testament to the evolving nature of India's food culture, where tradition and modernity walk hand in hand.

Photo: Pankaj Kumar



CELEBRATING NAVRATRI

A SPECTACULAR DANCE-DRAMA EXPERIENCE

With the festive spirit of Navratri, *Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra* presents a captivating dance-drama that brings the timeless tale of the Ramayana to life, highlighting the struggle between good and evil and the victory of righteousness, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

October marks the arrival of a magical time in India, where the festive spirit fills the air and people from all walks of life come together to celebrate the rich cultural heritage passed down for generations. Among the many stories and traditions that take centre stage during this season, none are as cherished or as timeless as the story of the Ramayana. Retold through art, music, dance and drama, the Ramayana during Navratri is more than just a mythological tale; it's a reminder of the eternal struggle between good and evil, love and loss, and the ultimate victory of righteousness. One of the most iconic ways to experience this story is through the grand production of "Shri Ram" by the *Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra*. For 68 years, this dance-drama has been a hallmark of Delhi's festive calendar, drawing audiences into the epic saga of the Ramayana. The production spans 24 days during the Navratri festival; it's not just a performance but an experience, a journey through time and a deep dive into India's cultural and spiritual heritage.

A GRAND STAGE AND CAPTIVATING ATMOSPHERE

From the moment visitors arrive at the venue, they are welcomed by an impressive stage representing ancient Ayodhya. The meticulous attention to detail in the stage design is evident, featuring intricate patterns and vibrant colours that transport the audience to the heart of the Ramayana. The lighting shifts throughout the performance, enhancing the emotional depth of each scene. As the performance commences, the atmosphere buzzes with excitement and anticipation. Artists in elaborate costumes fill the stage, celebrating the arrival of their lord Ram. The traditional music accompanying their movements resonates with the audience, enveloping everyone in the festive spirit. The dance-drama format allows for a seamless blend of storytelling and art; classical Indian dance forms like Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Odissi take centre stage, where each gesture and expression conveys deep emotion. The opening scene beautifully showcases themes of community, love, and unity, drawing everyone into the celebration.

A DIVINE BEGINNING

The story begins with the birth of Lord Ram and his brothers, as the people of Ayodhya rejoice in the arrival of their beloved prince. The joy on stage is visible, reflecting the warmth and happiness of the occasion. The scenes that follow take the audience on a journey through Ram's life, from his education in scriptures and warfare to his marriage with Sita, highlighting the trials he faces along the way.

What makes this story captivating is not just Ram's destiny as a divine figure but his humanity. From a young age, Ram exemplifies virtues of humility, patience and wisdom, shaping his actions throughout his life. This sense of divine purpose, combined with Ram's ability to empathise with ordinary people, makes his character relatable and inspiring to devotees during Navratri. As "Shri Ram" beautifully portrays, Ram's early years symbolise the joys of life and the weight of



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Photo: Pankaj Kumar



responsibility he must bear as the future ruler. The early relationships that shape him, including his bond with his brothers Lakshman, Bharata and Shatrughna, each play an essential role in the unfolding drama.

THE JOURNEY OF LORD RAM AND HIS BROTHERS

As the story progresses, spectators witness the formative years of Ram alongside his brothers, training under Vishwamitra. This segment showcases the dedication and brotherly camaraderie that define their relationships, expressed through intricate choreography that highlights their commitment to duty. The physical movements and emotional expressions of the dancers capture the essence of loyalty, honour, and sacrifice, core values that resonate throughout the Ramayana. The portrayal of Ram's marriage to Sita is another highlight of the performance. The ceremony is beautifully staged and thoughtfully executed, illustrating the depth of love and devotion between the two characters. Sita is depicted with grace and strength, captivating the audience as she expresses her hopes and dreams. The artistry of this scene reflects the timeless nature of love, with each gesture drawing the audience deeper into their narrative. This portrayal captures the essence of their divine union while reminding the audience that true love involves enduring hardship and remaining steadfast in faith.

THE RISE OF CONFLICT

The story takes a dramatic turn with the introduction of Ravana. The portrayal of Ravana brings an air of tension and complexity, masterfully performed by a talented artist whose commanding presence leaves a lasting impression. The audience feels the weight of impending conflict as the stage transforms into a realm where good clashes with evil. One of the most gripping moments comes when Ravana sends a golden deer to tempt Sita, leading to the separation of Ram and Sita. The tension during this scene is visible, as Sita's innocence and longing are powerfully conveyed. This pivotal moment marks the beginning of trials that will test Ram's love and resolve.

The fierce confrontation between Lakshman and Surpanakha highlights themes of loyalty and honour. The

choreography in this segment is intense, illustrating the raw emotions involved in defending family honour. Lakshman's decisive action in cutting off Surpanakha's nose showcases the protective instincts that run deep within the characters of the Ramayana.

THE BATTLE OF GOOD AND EVIL

As the narrative escalates, the stage transforms into a dramatic battlefield. The choreography during these scenes is breathtaking, with performers moving in perfect synchrony to depict the chaos of war. Ram's battle against Ravana becomes the climactic moment of the performance, showcasing the bravery and determination of the forces of good. The audience is enthralled as Ram ultimately conquers Ravana, a victory resonating with the core message of the Ramayana: righteousness prevails in the face of evil. The final scenes, where Ram returns to Ayodhya to be crowned king, are a celebration of joy and mastery. The atmosphere fills with colour and light, reflecting the happiness of the citizens of Ayodhya as they welcome their lord home. This ending serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of justice, duty, and the values that bind communities together.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "SHRI RAM"

Under the artistic direction of Padmashri *Shobha Deepak Singh*, the show has evolved over the years while retaining its essence. *Singh*, Chairperson of SBKK, beautifully articulated this sentiment when she stated, "Shri Ram" is more than just a retelling of the Ramayana; it is an educational tool, a common connection between generations, and a tribute to Indian talent in dance, poetry, and design." Her words resonate throughout the venue, emphasising the importance of preserving and celebrating Indian culture. The entire production is a tribute to the dedication of the artists and the meticulous planning that went into its execution. Every detail, from the stunning costumes to the intricate choreography, was carefully curated to create a seamless experience for the audience. This performance not only entertains but also educates, providing insights into the values



of loyalty, courage, and righteousness at the heart of the Ramayana.

A CELEBRATION OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

The performance of "Shri Ram" is not just an artistic display; it is a celebration of culture and community. The universal messages of love, sacrifice, and the struggle against adversity resonate deeply, reminding everyone of the cherished values in our lives. The lighting is masterfully used to reflect shifts in tone, from the warmth and joy of Ram and Sita's union to the ominous darkness of Ravana's plans. As the scenes transition, the stage transforms fluidly, drawing the audience deeper into the narrative. The costumes are a visual feast - rich, vibrant and steeped in historical authenticity. Each character, from Ram and Sita in their royal attire to Hanuman and his monkey warriors, is dressed to reflect their roles and the cultural and mythological significance of their actions. The grandness of the set and costumes adds a layer of magic to the story, allowing the audience to fully immerse themselves in the spectacle.

Embracing the Spirit of Navratri The festival of Navratri is a time for reflection, devotion and celebration, beautifully captured in the performance of "Shri Ram." This production highlights the strength of unity and the importance of standing up for what is right while encouraging a shared understanding of our cultural values. As the Navratri celebrations continue, performances like "Shri Ram" inspire us to reflect on the deeper meanings of the Ramayana and the victory of good over evil.

With performances scheduled until 26 October 2024, families have the chance to experience this iconic production together, witnessing the brilliance of Indian art and culture come to life on stage. So, as we gather with friends and family to celebrate Navratri, let us carry forward the lessons of the Ramayana in our hearts. May this festive season fill our lives with joy, love, and an unwavering commitment to righteousness. Wishing all readers a blessed Navratri filled with love and light!

