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YOUNG INDIA

HOPE, DREAMS AND DEMOCRACY

How involved is India's youth with the future of the country and its politics? What are their concerns and what changes would they like to see? Find out what a cross-section of young Indians has to say ahead of the 77th Independence Day

Riddhi Doshi

The April-May Lok Sabha elections in India and the political campaign leading up to it started a nationwide discourse on democracy and what it means for the youth, who make up more than half of India's population. What are their aspirations and expectations from a government in its third term? Do they have faith in the country's political, economic and social systems to make a successful life for themselves? What are their concerns, and what changes would they like to see in the long-term?

In our conversations with a cross-section of young Indians ahead of Independence Day, one thing became clear: they are politically aware and keen to do their bit for the development of the nation. From casting their vote in an informed manner to working at the grassroots level to effect change, the youth want to be active participants in the country's democratic framework. According to Madhuwanti Banerjee, former professor of sociology at S.K. Somaiya College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai, India's youth will never compromise on democracy. Whether it was protesting for justice in the Nirbhaya rape case in 2012 or the 2014 movement to save Aarey's forest or the 2019 protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act, "they were out there on the streets, risking their lives to express their dissent against what they thought was unjust and undemocratic", she says.

Also, unlike what many people might think, Gen Z is a very sensible generation, according to Banerjee. "As a teacher, I can tell you that they are aware, empathetic, more accepting of different castes, classes, genders and cultures. The political and sociological discourse and dissent at colleges and universities is very healthy. I have seen them fighting for democracy, standing up for it without any fear." Edited excerpts of a few young voices:

The Mumbai-based journalist is also a movement therapy practitioner and Kathak student.

ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA

ANAMIKA SUDHAKAR, 24

NGO employee | Gurugram

We have the right to vote, but are we doing it right? There is caste politics and religion politics, which make people sentimental about who they vote for — that shouldn't be the case. People in power are shaping people's opinions and leading uninformed decision-making. Election ethics are compromised, yet there are no consequences for the guilty. It's frustrating to see propaganda media creating factions amongst common folk based on religion identity, gender, caste, community and more. It distracts people from what the need of the hour is: to save the environment and mitigate climate crisis. Laws detrimental to both are being approved, but people are too busy fighting to notice. I have chosen to work in the NGO sector with a grassroots education institution along with the government to make a change.

ALEENA AAKASHAMITTAYI, 28

Poet, Dalit and queer activist | Kochi

The growing micro-aggression towards minorities and queer people is saddening. Even in what people perceive as a progressive state such as Kerala, I, a Dalit woman, am not able to find a rented accommodation. Even if I do find a place, I know I will constantly be under scrutiny. The attitude of people towards the minority has significantly changed in the last 10 years, ever since democracy in India has been interpreted as majoritarianism. My endeavour is to address these problems through my poetry and via public discourse and engagement with students. Silence is not the answer. Now is the time to speak up and fight for democracy.

ABDUL RAZZAQ, 28

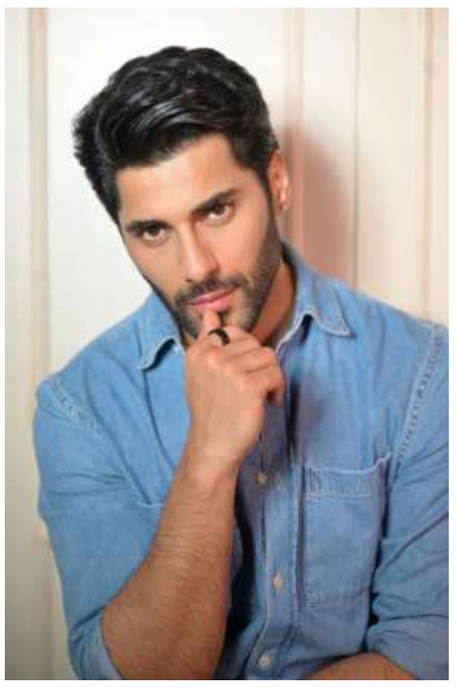
Data analyst | Dehradun

It is as if only a few people in the country know that we are a democratic nation and the others never got the memo. The entire narrative right now is authoritarian. Growing up, it was not a big deal to have a Muslim name. Yes, we were called Pakistanis during cricket matches, but it was just banter. Even our elders didn't think much about it. But in the last 10 years, the hatred has become blatant. I refrain from telling people my name in casual conversations and I am scared of approaching the police because I fear that I will be ill-treated. I, sometimes, think about leaving the country, but I don't want to. The last election results did give me some hope. I, however, realised that most people who didn't vote for the BJP did so not to save our Constitution but to vote for their communities.

ELIZER BAREH, 28

Actor | Shillong

The biggest frustration of living in India is the racism we people from the Northeast face every day. We are teased, bullied, insulted almost everywhere across India, yet nothing is done to stop people from demeaning us. When will India realise that we too are an integral part of the country?



TUSHARR KHANNA, 28

Actor | Mumbai

Growing up in a business family, I have realised that governance is all about power, politics and money. It's never by the people and for the people — whether it is the ruling party or the opposing party. So, I am inclined towards the development agenda of the right. I believe that if you want a country to grow, some harsh decisions, which may not be in everyone's interest, have to be made. That's the compromise you make to see your country grow economically and gain the respect of people from around the world. For me, democracy is not greater than my country's growth.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4-5

Vikram Seth's eminently readable translation of the *Hanuman Chalisa* is a virtuoso feat that only he could have pulled off

HYMN WITH A SWING AND A LILT

Harish Trivedi

The Hanuman Chalisa by Tulsidas is one of the best-known and best-loved poems in the world. Tens of millions of people can recite it by heart, and chant it daily. [It is] a magical and joyful work, impressed in the memories and affections of millions, which encapsulates a whole culture in fewer than ninety lines."

Anyone who makes such celebratory sweeping statements runs the risk in our embattled times of being instantly branded as a Hindu chauvinist. But this is Vikram Seth who boldly says so in his Introduction to this work. In self-referential meta-play, he dedicates his translation of the *Hanuman Chalisa* to Bhaskar, a minor character in his magnum opus, *A Suitable Boy* (1993), who had the hymn by heart before he was five years old. Seth surmises that Bhaskar now would be "fighting the chauvinism and the intolerance" which has weaponised texts like the *Chalisa*. Seth thus walks the tightrope between aligning himself with this iconic Hindu text and repudiating its misuse at the same time.

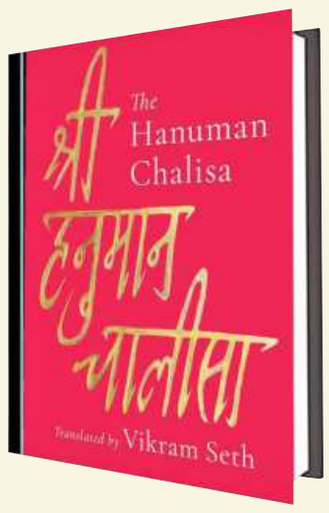
Seth makes his difficult task much harder by seeking to match his version with the original text not only semantically but also metre by metre, cadence by cadence, and rhyme by rhyme. He has been a virtuoso rhymester and prosodist ever since his first break-out work, the rhymed verse-novel *The Golden Gate* (1986). Later, he exploited the comic potential of rhymes in his *Beastly Tales from Here & There* (1992), a collection of fables meant primarily for children, where a weak or patently forced rhyme could only add to the fun.

Capturing the true spirit

But with the *Chalisa*, a work widely regarded as sacrosanct, there is not much elbow room for departure or manoeuvre. What Seth chooses to do, nevertheless, is to rush in like a jousting cavalier, hacking his path through the thickets of this allusive text deeply embedded in mythology. He goes weeding the text here and pruning it there, now explicating and now just omitting, until he can cut a clear and smooth swathe for the English-language reader to tread on. What matters most to him, and probably to the common reader as well, is the spirit of the text, and Seth certainly makes a spirited attempt to capture it.

But ultimately, the spirit and the letter are inseparable – like the *arddhanarishwar* Shiva and Parvati, as Kalidasa said. The book provides the Hindi original in both the *Devanagari* and the Roman scripts, and bilingual readers would relish an extra layer of literary pleasure in comparing the Hindi with Seth's renderings. The very first verse reads:

Hail Hanuman, great wisdom's ocean,
The three worlds glow with your light and devotion.



The Hanuman Chalisa
Trs Vikram Seth
Speaking Tiger
₹399

This sounds just fine on its own. But in the original Hindi, both the lines begin with the invocatory '*jaya*' (hail). The first line says "*gyaana guna saagar*" but Seth leaves out "*guna*" (virtue), as he also leaves out the appellation "*kapeesa*" (lord of monkeys) in the second line. In Hindi, the three worlds are not already aglow but it is Hanuman who lights them up (*ujaagar*). And that last word, "devotion", is added on by Seth, not because he is more devout than the original author (who is *not* Tulsidas, contrary to popular belief), but simply because he needs a word to rhyme with "ocean".

Secular devotion

Altogether, the standout quality of Seth's version of the *Hanuman Chalisa* is that it is eminently readable on its own, and it goes with a swing. It can even be chanted, if any Anglophone reader is so uninhibited as to wish to do so. It is a *Chalisa*-like poem in its total effect, which is a virtuoso feat that only Seth of all our English-language writers could have pulled off. In the many interviews he has recently given, he can be heard reciting lines from the Hindi original, impromptu with fluent native inwardness. And Hanuman seems to have blessed him already for his act of secular devotion – for Seth is back in the limelight after a decade-long lull.

The reviewer taught English at Delhi University.

Author
Vikram Seth

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Soumyabrata Choudhury
(REYAZUL HAQUE)

Deafening silence

A philosopher dwells on the imprisoned population of Gaza and why protests against a wrong are muted in India

Soumyabrata Choudhury

In his latest book, *Thoughts of Gaza Far from Gaza*, Soumyabrata Choudhury, who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, speculates and reflects on an urgent but distant reality. An edited excerpt:

As I write this, the television screen in my room continued to transmit reports on the latest Gaza situation. I heard a health worker on the BBC say that she couldn't speak about Gaza from a bird's eye view even though she had just returned from there. Between the northern and the southern part of the Strip, wherever she went, it was a disaster. It was worse than anything she had seen before. And I thought to myself that if she, with first-hand experience of the reality, couldn't speak of Gaza as a total situation or scenario, then what chance would I have, so far removed from that reality?

When I try to look for voices speaking up in my own surroundings about any of this, I mostly hear a deafening silence. At the most, there are some faint murmurs. At a time when there are widespread protests across the globe, why is there so little happening in India? I can think of a few possible reasons.

First, even though the government has continued to uphold the position India has taken historically, that it supports Palestinian self-determination, this stand is more or less a formality today. The Indian state's relation with Israel is so visibly fraternal that this attachment has a far greater effective presence than any formal support for a so-called two-state solution.

This in itself is not surprising. Since India's entry into the neoliberal regime of global capitalism in 1992, its aim to belong to and to be normalised by the hegemonic system of states, that one only indicatively calls the West, was inevitable. What is striking is that under the present regime the people of India seem mostly led by the government's agenda. If the Indian government has little role to play in the present conflict, and shows little interest or initiative in any meaningful terms, then the people too seem to lose interest in what is happening in West Asia, despite its reality and intensity.

'Loss of reality'

The second level of reasoning to explain this kind of 'loss of reality' can come from the recognition that one of the older forms of popular resistance beyond governmental and state agendas to anti-capitalist or anti-colonial policies came from the left tradition. That tradition is substantially weakened in India now; even the popular resistance to global policies and anti-colonial support for Palestinian struggle becomes a little bit of a formal exercise than a mass movement. In fact, to speak of an anti-colonial internationalism, based on the role of different postcolonial states in the global order today, turns out to be quite hollow. It's shown on the ground by the fact that while South Africa's internationalism consists in speaking for Palestine at the International Court of Justice and comparing Israel's apartheid state with its own past of oppression, the anti-colonial limits of the Indian government consists of rewriting the Indian Penal Code in Hindi and claiming that this is a new expression of freedom from colonial law and language.

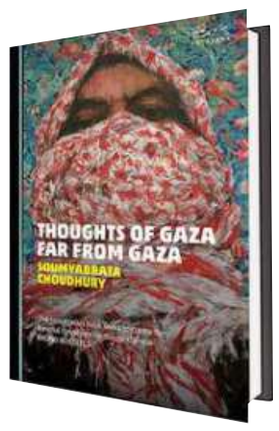
The third dimension of the lack of popular protests in India is the general atomisation and pushing to the wall of the Muslim population in this country, such that the expected visible solidarity on the part of what is called the 'Muslim world' with Palestine doesn't quite extend to Indian Muslims in any form of public association. There are of course some exceptions, like the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party, but the absence of any news about such protests in Kashmir is notable.

Politics of Hindutva

Even as we see the general dampening of popular political spirit in India, the phenomenon of Israeli Zionism provides a wholly relevant measure of the development of political Hinduism and the politics of Hindutva. One of the primary operations of this application is the racialisation of religion in both cases. Zionism and Hindutva relentlessly seek to convert religion into race and apply race to the political body in the form of a new idea of the people. We are led to think about the shattering historical irony that Hindutva proponents like V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, who admired Zionism for its so-called minoritarian muscularity, get compulsively attracted to the Aryan fantasies of Nazi ideology, a fantasy scenario built on the subhuman inferiority of a violently constructed Jewish racial identity.

But the negative reason to ally with Zionist Israeli ethnonationalism remains valid for Hindu ethnonationalism to the extent that both apparently have the same religio-racial enemy: the Muslim. The tragic irony that Islam and Judaism are both semitic religions, and antisemitism, in its widest meaning, must include both as potential victims of the supremacist Aryan fantasy, either escapes the Hindu cognitive reach or becomes an object of the political manipulation of the Hindutva project with an essential equivocation.

(Excerpted with permission from Navayana)



Thoughts of Gaza Far from Gaza
Soumyabrata Choudhury
Navayana
₹299

Open mic on Gaza

This weekend in Mumbai, creative minds across disciplines are coming together for an open mic at Method, Kala Ghoda. This is in support of Gaza amid the ongoing Israel-Palestine war. The curated line-up includes actors Swara Bhaskar, Danish Husain, comedian Abish Mathew, writer Raghu Karnad, among others. Featuring music, readings and performances, the event ties in with Method's ongoing exhibition on Gaza, *The Future Will Remember*, by Alexis Rose. August 10-11. Details: @methodindia on Instagram.

A field of rainbows

Thinking of places torn apart by violence, an artist imagines the suffering of a land and its people

Naveen Kishore

She was five then. When. She first stumbled. Tripped actually. Stubbed her toe. Would be even more precise. Accurate. The stumbling. A blessing. The tripping a revelation. Only the toe hurt. For weeks after that. To be precise. She was in pain from this accident. Of fate. This I think is an accurate description of what befell the child. Point being that if she hadn't. Fallen. After tripping. Stumbling actually would be more apt. Correct. Yes. She may not have discovered the rainbow. To be more accurate. Precise even. She may eventually have stumbled upon it. But not so early. In life. Had the initial stumbling not taken place. The revelation would not have happened. As it turned out she accidentally stepped on to a landmine. In a field full of rainbows. Shortly after the war. The one that had drifted into ceasing. Out of sheer exhaustion. Or to be precise. And accurate. The war had stumbled into a roadblock. Yes. The warring nations had run out of their young. The young had all tip-toed into the field. The one with the landmines. And been reincarnated. As rainbows. For it is said that children that die young. Are reborn. Almost immediately. As rainbows. I confess this may not be accurate. Or precise. But this is what I have heard.

The writer is a photographer, theatre lighting designer, poet, and the publisher of Seagull Books.

SONAKSHA

ANATOMY OF A LOSS

Mishal Husain pieces together multiple histories of her family scattered across the troubled past of the Indian subcontinent

Geeta Doctor

At times Mishal Husain's stories float across the page like a *Shatoush* shawl etched with light. At other times it becomes a patchwork quilt that traverses time lines, histories of cities with gardens perfumed with the scent of jasmine. It merges with the broken threads of the title that she pieces together of the multiple histories of her family scattered across the troubled past of the Indian subcontinent, searching for a Muslim identity in their newly enfranchised countries.

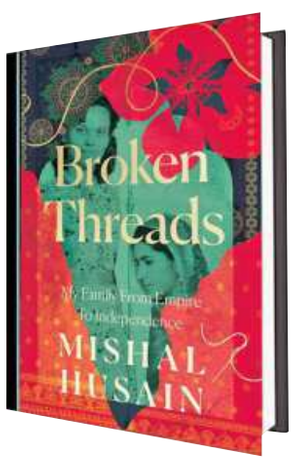
Husain is an eminently successful broadcaster, journalist, interviewer and documentary maker whose tenure at the BBC, U.K., has allowed her to be at home in different worlds. She traces her many branched family-tree from the north west frontier in Multan to the south east of the sub-continent in Anagapale, near what we now call Visakhapatnam, or Vizag, with a vital link in Lahore and Lucknow, pre-Partition. It's a tree that eventually disperses its seeds in the U.K. and to other more salubrious areas. As a child, Husain lived with her parents and younger brother in parts of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while also being sent to boarding school in England and summers to her maternal grandparents in Pakistan.

Partition horrors

No matter how many times and in how many different forms we have heard of the trajectory of Partition on the long road to Independence, it remains one that ravels our subconscious mind. One reason might be that it's still unfinished business. We remain divided in our innermost selves. The even tenor of the narrative is what distinguishes it from previous accounts of the horrors of people's lives being torn apart.

The first section is a series of miniature portraits of her grandparents and their back stories. This is where she talks of Empire and how it brought an Irish Catholic great-grandfather Francis Quinn to a remote village near Guntur in what was then known as the Madras Presidency. He married a Telugu woman named Mariamma, who in their wedding portrait is short, dark and half his size and probably half his age. Yet they had four lovely children, one of whom is the 'flirty eyed' Mary, as her future husband Mumtaz, described her. Mumtaz was a shy medical intern from Multan studying in Lahore and she was a young trainee nurse, who had been sent all the way from south India by the Irish nuns in Vizag. Their extraordinary courtship and subsequent lives together overcoming the deep divide of their different Muslim-Catholic faiths to which they both adhered, is just one strand of Husain's inheritance. Their son Imtiaz who becomes a surgeon at the NHS is Husain's father. Focusing on the family tree at the beginning pays dividends.

Leaves from history (Clockwise from above) Francis Quinn and Mariamma at their wedding; hundreds of Muslim refugees on a train leaving from New Delhi to Pakistan, in 1947; Mishal's paternal grandparents Mary and Mumtaz; children at an exhibition on the partition, in Lahore; and Mishal Husain. (AP, GETTY IMAGES AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Broken Threads: My Family from Empire to Independence
Mishal Husain
4th Estate/HarperCollins
₹499

Mishal Husain's training as a broadcaster allows her to bring a certain visual clarity to the book. Each individual is placed on the geographical canvas with a map and wonderful photographs

Visual clarity

Husain's training as a broadcaster allows her to bring a certain visual clarity to the book. Each individual is placed on the geographical canvas with a map and wonderful photographs. She has either been incredibly diligent, or lucky to have relatives who are exceptionally handsome and also alert enough to write memoirs. Or in the case of Tahirah, her maternal grandmother, to use an old-fashioned tape-recorder to share her vivid opinion.

Husain's narrative is part-memoir, part-history which merges with real events. Part Three of the book 'After Midnight' fast forwards the frantic pace at which the long delayed demand for freedom was thrust upon the sub-continent. The truncated fault lines of Partition were sutured by the blood and bodies of those fated to be trapped in the crevices of personal histories. These have been repeatedly told, only to be forgotten.

"My generation can take the blame," Tahirah says in her old age as she records her years in Pakistan with her husband Shahid in Rawalpindi. "Partition was a sad, sad era. I do not hesitate to say it here – even though this is not meant to be a political book – but it need not have happened, had the majority in India accepted ordinary demands from a minority. But it happened and the way it happened was tragic. And to the eternal shame of the people of India and Pakistan, that big tragedy has been followed by others."

In weaving together these disparate voices from the past, Husain's broken threads hint at our collective loss, at what might have been an inheritance of hope for all mankind.

The reviewer is a Chennai-based writer and critic.

INTERVIEW

'Syeda's life mirrors India'

Journalist Neha Dixit is shocked at the invisibilisation of the urban poor, the backbone of the nation

Kunal Purohit

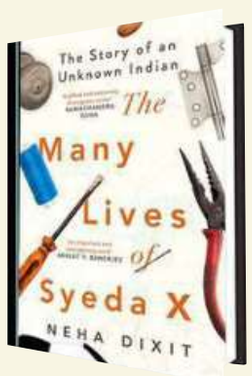
Even as chants of 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India) loudly resonate among the country's ruling party and policy-making, 80% of India's workforce remains in the informal economy, working on exploitative wages, without any job security or protection by labour and safety laws. When award-winning independent journalist Neha Dixit started tracking the lives of a few such female workers nearly a decade ago, operating not far from her Delhi home, she was "astonished to see" that her items of everyday use were being manufactured by workers who got a pittance. In her new book, *The Many Lives of Syeda X* (Juggernaut Books), Dixit chronicles the lives of home-based female workers while focussing on Syeda, a Muslim woman who makes everything from namkeen to photo frames to door hangings to cycle brake wires to plastic toy guns, wedding cards, rakhis and faux leather balls, even while a changing India upturns her life routinely. The book is a richly detailed account of the lives of those who have been forgotten in the New India story. Syeda's account tells us how communalism and casteism, and not economic gains, have trickled down, and powerfully demonstrates the systemic neglect of people who live on the margins. In an interview, Dixit says such stories "are everywhere around us, but not in the media because the media has structurally stopped talking about the urban poor in the country."

Question: *In capturing rich, quotidian details about the life of Syeda, were you responding to the deliberate marginalisation of the urban poor?*

A: I used to work for a television news channel and after a big corporate group bought a stake in it, we were told that henceforth, our target audience was going to be the urban rich, precisely, a 35-year-old male techie in Bengaluru. Instead of reporting on farmer suicides and clinical trials, we were told to investigate who were the kids racing fast cars in south Delhi. A few months later, I quit my job. Soon after, the media started reporting on sexual violence. But the reporting around it was never about the processes of communalism, sectarianism and casteism that could have shaped the violence. It was just about the act. I wanted to tell the full story and, hence, I started going to working class areas in Delhi, and saw how multinational companies had sub-contracted the manufacturing of products to home-based workers like Syeda.

Q: *What astonished you most about this world?*

A: Everything that I was using in my life, be it stationery, or utensils or helmets or tea strainers, was actually made by these home-based workers. What we don't realise are the abysmal conditions in which these products are made and how poorly the workers are paid. I saw how even bags distributed by the government under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (the Centre's flagship education scheme) were being made by these home-based workers in similar conditions. This kind of invisibilisation of people, who keep everything running, was astonishing to me.



All in a day Women begin work at sunrise at a brick kiln near Visakhapatnam; (below) Neha Dixit (K.R. DEEPAK AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Q: *In the light of the invisibilisation of Muslim identity from public life, was it a conscious decision to focus on a Muslim protagonist?*

A: When I started researching the book, there were two-three women I was looking at, from various communities. Slowly, I realised that a lot of things that Syeda was sharing were things we were dealing with in contemporary India. I realised that her life mirrored modern India. In passing, she mentioned that she had once made incense sticks out of cow urine. For her, it wasn't an important detail, but when I placed it in the contemporary times, I realised she was doing this job when there was a lot of politics around it. And because so many people had been killed around that (cow) politics, it became important.

Q: *You show how Supreme Court orders which ask 'polluting' agents to shut and relocate extract a high human cost. How are the urban poor affected?*

A: Syeda and many other migrants in Delhi have been displaced a number of times because of the Supreme Court's rulings on pollution. The conversation on pollution never revolves around workers who work in basements of factories without any ventilation and light. When you order industries to move out, what happens to the people who are employed in that informal economy? There is no thought for those people, especially when we have such a huge unorganised sector. In urban poor areas where Syeda still lives, the state has not provided infrastructure or made a systemic change to help them escape pollution. The urban poor bears the brunt.

Q: *There are strong references to rising communalism, and how the migrant influx is often communalised. Has that changed over time?*

A: In Syeda's life, communal discrimination started early, but what has changed is now it is sanctioned by the state. From the kinds of policies and statements being made, communalisation has increased in the last decade. The moment there is state-backing, it affects the most marginalised person in the socio-economic ladder. It has definitely made Syeda's life even more difficult.

The Mumbai-based independent journalist is author of H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars.

HOPE, DREAMS AND DEMOCRACY

SAKCHI JAIN, 24
Chartered accountant and content creator | Ranchi

The decisions of governance today seem to be influenced by power politics rather than democracy. While it is complex to retain the true essence of democracy, I do think there is room for improvement and youth can play a big role in it. During the last election, I scanned the Internet for reliable resources of information, had long conversations with my father, and then cast my vote. But the most exasperating part of living in India today is the deep-rooted corruption at the ground level. When one experiences this, it's difficult to trust the administration. Then there is also the rising cost of living, healthcare, food and sky-rocketing inflation. That makes things very difficult for people from lower income groups.

MALHAR KALAMBE, 23
Environmentalist and digital content creator | Mumbai

Democracy can only be upheld if we participate in everyday governance. Most of us believe that casting our vote once every five years is the extent of our democratic duty. That's definitely not enough. I clean up Mumbai beaches and organise cleanliness drives to do my bit. What inspired me to do this is the movie *Rang de Basanti* (2006). There's a line in the movie that goes "*Koi desh perfect nahi hota, usse perfect banana padhta hain*" (no country is perfect, one has to work towards making it perfect). This statement sums up the current situation of our country and how each citizen needs to actively work towards its welfare.

SHAILEE MEHTA, 27
Artist | Indore

Democracy should give people the right to dissent without any fear. This, obviously, is in a state of grave danger. I have the means to express my dissent through art, but I know that others don't. As a woman, I am also constantly aware of the body and people's gaze. Even if a crime happens, I am not sure the culprits will be brought to justice because they belong to a particular caste or community. When I was in college, I did think of going abroad. But today, I feel the country needs thinkers, especially people who come from privilege and can do things that minorities cannot. What's the use of my privilege if I can't create a community, and question or challenge the system? Artists should no longer be confined to their studios. We are thinkers, emotional empathisers, and must use that empathy to engage with communities, educate people and work on the ground. I volunteer with animal shelters to do my part.

SHANKAR SHRINIVASAN, 24
Scientist | Bengaluru

The huge development of digital infrastructure in India and around the world has given an impetus to democracy. It's given voice to people living in the remotest parts of the country, which also ensures accountability. As a scientist, my way of making change is to create technology that gives access to mental health infrastructure to people from all strata of the society. I have developed a wearable device called Sputnik Brain, designed to relieve stress in a non-surgical, chemical-free manner. It is being tested at NIMHANS, and I aim to make it available to people at an accessible price. This initiative aims to leverage technology to foster positive social change and empower youth.

SIDDHESH SAKORE, 28
Farmer | Pune

One crucial element in the functioning of a democracy is to ensure that the benefits of government policies reach the grassroots and are implemented, which seldom happens. As an educated mechanical engineer-turned-farmer, I know that, on paper, there are many great policies to support the poorest of farmers and our country's agrarian economy. But because of bureaucracy and extensive paperwork, uneducated, poor farmers can't access them. Many of them don't even know they exist. I have taken it upon myself to educate them about these policies through my farmers' collective and bridge the gap between the government and them. I think all of us need to do our bit to help the most vulnerable in society. That's one way to keep democracy alive in the country.

KARTIK SABHERWAL, 23
Gaming entrepreneur | Jhansi

I think the media, including political analysts on YouTube, is doing great disservice to democracy by not being fair and balanced. While doing my research on whom to vote for in the last election, I only came across videos that were either completely for the BJP or against it. The same goes for other parties. But is either side getting it entirely wrong or right? Of course not. Then why is the media not presenting a fair report card of their performance. That makes the entire voting process confusing for a young voter. As a startup founder, I choose development over everything else.

AMMAR KHATRI, 23
Bandhini artisan | Bhuj

I understand democracy as one country, one rule, without any discrimination or favouritism. But that's clearly not the case in India. I think caste discrimination is at an all-time high. Those affected are protesting and rallying for change, but the government is not paying any heed to them. I am also worried about the growing drug menace here in Bhuj. And I'm concerned about the lack of proper infrastructure and support for artisans and their startups. The one thing I can do to ensure that democracy does not die in our country is to vote sensibly. So, last elections, I did a lot of research, heard opinions of respected journalists such as Ravish Kumar before casting my vote.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Shefalee Vasudev

KEEP MY STYLE OUT OF IT

A fashion editor's alter ego questions why there's no documentation of the personal style statements of politicians — from Nirmala Sitharaman's curated handlooms to Jyotiraditya Scindia's Nepali cap

Ever since she stopped dyeing her hair more than a year back, waiting for the messy grey to grow into subdued salt, Nirmala Sitharaman has been particularly attentive to her sari selection. For years, she wore handlooms from her home state of Andhra Pradesh besides Tamil Nadu's pattus, but there has been a stylistic shift recently. The colours she now chooses in Mangalagiris and Kanjeevarams, the gossamer of Venkatagiris, some allowance for zari, handloom blouses made from kalamkari and ikat fabrics match the confidence she now exudes as Finance Minister.

Nothing screams for attention but everything is curated, the blouses ever so subtly mismatched and tailored to good fits. A few weeks back, for Business Today's Budget Round Table 2024, Sitharaman wore an aubergine silk sari, with a blue and silver border, an ikat blouse slightly off-matched and, well, a blue glass bangle that you would seldom spot in the past.

Style diaries (Clockwise from left) Nirmala Sitharaman; Kangana Ranaut; A.N. Kalisetti; Rahul Gandhi; Priyanka Gandhi Vadra; and Jyotiraditya Scindia. (ANI, R.V. MOORTHY, SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP, AND PTI)

Political dressing in India – not trendy but sharply symbolic of the revealing-concealing grammar of identity and ambition – is the core of culture and fashion writer Kapda Kalam's conversation with a small group of friends one sweltering afternoon at Delhi's IWPC. The Indian Women's Press Club, where fashion writers never want to be seen, is her favourite hangout. The kind of club where eavesdroppers and news journalists know exactly what she means when she talks about BJP spokesperson Sanju Verma carefully dropping three inches of her sari *pallu* on one side to reveal a sleeveless arm for television appearances. That's her branding. Or, how green stoles sometimes twisted into *pagdis* by Rashtriya Lok Dal leader Chaudhary Jayant Singh are his way to show solidarity with farmers. Besides outdoorsy jackets, the political scion of Jat land, now the minister of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Singh favours *ikat kurtas* and jackets – often in black and white. It may be incidental, but he chooses well because his wife Charu Singh is a fashion designer. As Kapda Kalam tells her friends, many politicians make strong dressing statements; why are we not looking their way?

More importantly, why are they not looking our way to discuss the semiotics of dress and politics. How long will the Nehru vs Modi jacket battle, Gandhi's khadi and Indira Gandhi's handloom sorority be the reference points?

New draft of political dressing

Earlier this year, Rahul Gandhi's basic T-shirts and cargo pants found some mention, but not a paragraph surfaced on Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's *salwar kameez* sets (handloom saris strategically on stand-by) or how she is growing her short hair into a frizzy shoulder length style during the Congress campaign for the 2024 elections.

Conformed to the familiar narrative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's style, his jackets and turbans, his rumoured grooming rituals, those who occasionally comment on the political aesthetic in India borrow from that go-to script. Or, find soapy stories in what film stars turned politicians wear.

That's why the dressed down cabinet, plain at first sight, at the third swearing in of the BJP-led NDA government this June, went without much ado in reportage. Most stared at freshly minted MP Kangana Ranaut for obvious cues of glamour in her cream and gold sari, her hair and make-up done to suit an evening at Rashtrapati Bhavan. The stately, off-white and magenta *Kanjeevaram* of President Draupadi Murmu – whose elevated taste in saris since she took office is a matter of serious documentation for Kapda Kalam – did not catch the reporter's eye. Nor did the peach-coloured Nepali cap worn by Jyotiraditya Scindia, Union Minister of Communications and Development of the North Eastern region. It was a marked departure from the colourful *pagdis* he would wear to Parliament in the past. Insiders told Kapda Kalam that Scindia was mourning his mother, Madhavi Raje, and the cap honoured her Nepali roots.

Little has been written about "political daughters", millennials both – Bansuri Swaraj, lawyer-politician, and daughter of the hardcore traditionalist dresser and leader, the late Sushma Swaraj. Or, Iltija Mufti, media advisor to the People's Democratic Party, and daughter of Mehbooba Mufti.

In her audaciously argued book *The Journalist and The Murderer*, Janet Malcolm writes about the promise a journalist holds out to an interviewee, as a collaborator, sympathetic listener, "genuinely attuned to their vision" while in fact, being a practitioner of deceit. Readers of a work of journalism can only imagine, writes Malcolm, "how a writer gets the subject to make a spectacle of themselves."

It's a serious charge. But perhaps the fear of that kind of experience has landed hard on the relationship between politicians and those who write on apparel, identity, regional representation and semiotics of political appearances. No interviews are granted on clothes if the request is sent without the "handloom consciousness" tag. The clever politician senses the murderer in a journalist and thwarts the crime.

Fear of the flippant

Politicians try to control the narrative. Journalists are denied all on-record accounts of mythologies of dressing, private collections of shawls, heritage fabrics, or fascination for trends, experimental textiles and haute couture. Unless they write what is mandated and publish only after official "approval". Else it is too "flippant" to be risked. Politicians loathe being reduced to dandy dressers. The result is a fracture, a near-total absence of documentation of personal style statements in political life, peculiarly those not linked with patronage for handlooms.

The politician either ducks behind spotless white, a loaded satire of our times, or wears handlooms. Women politicians continue to avoid sleeveless sari blouses. It is hard to say if they dress to define who they are as persons, or the party ideology that catapults them to power. Looking Indian within the narrow confines of political life is easy.

Readers have little idea which politician is well-informed about experimental textiles, the country's escalating might in recycled fabrics. Wearing and promoting them could well be a part of the new politician's resume, but it is not. Rebels such as Trinamool Congress MP Mohua Moitra, who assert individuality, including by refusing to deglamourize, are mocked.

But this is a new season in global politics. The mixed racial identity of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, Democratic nominee for president, is being discussed threadbare. Not just her understated pantsuits, pearls and friendly laughter but why talking more, during her campaigns, about her Indian mother Shymala's roots and her Jamaican father's convictions could change the cadence around her "image".

Kapda Kalam must thus stop ruing the murder of dress journalism. She needs to write about West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's smart watch and Mother Teresa sari complexity. Interview Jual Oram, Minister of Tribal Affairs on cultural appropriation in dress. Look away from Ranaut's back slapping camaraderie with dapper dresser Chirag Paswan, to notice the democratic wardrobe (not focussed only on Maharashtrian handlooms, thankfully) of Maharashtra MP Raksha Khadse who won from Raver this year.

The murder of the story might just be thwarted, if Kapda Kalam uses her pen as a weapon. Shoot at sight is equally critical. It was a timely shot after all that showed TDP MP A.N. Kalisetti arrive on a yellow bicycle wearing a yellow *kurta* for his first day in Parliament this July.

The writer is editor-in-chief of 'The Voice of Fashion'.

ALLEGEDLY

How to guarantee gold medals

Here are ideas for three new Olympic sporting categories where India would surely shine

It is heartrending that for a nation so devoted to gold, Olympic golds are so hard to come by. Every patriotic Indian ought to do everything he can to bring home the gold – medals, not biscuits. So let me apologise for letting my country down this time. But I did try.

I started my preparations in early January, which is when I heard for the first time that the Paris Olympics are happening in July. I looked through the full list of events to figure out which ones I should enter. If it was up to me, I would have liked to participate in all the 329 events and bring home – assuming a conservative strike rate of 50% – 164 gold medals.

But unfortunately, being a man, I had to skip all the women-only events, like women's table tennis, which I would have won. Also, being just one man (though with multiple ID proofs), I could not enter team events, which have strict rules on how many can play as one team. So that ruled out hockey, football, basketball, etc.

As a born Gandhian, I am allergic to any kind of violence or fighting implements. That means I couldn't do boxing, wrestling, judo, taekwondo, shooting or fencing (not to be confused with the art of putting a fence around your bungalow). Given my long limbs, I could have easily won a medal in swimming. But for that I have to first learn swimming, which I intend to do at the ITO floods next July.

The only viable event was a new one introduced this year – breakdancing, or breaking, as it's officially called. I've been breakdancing since childhood – not many know that I briefly trained Prabhu Deva before he went big – and would have surely medalled for India. Unfortunately, the relentless increases in tax burden that our FM has been foisting upon us finally broke my back this July and forced me to withdraw – you can't breakdance with a broken back.

Nonetheless, I am grateful to the government for encouraging ordinary Indians to dream of Olympic glory. I have a suggestion though. If India wants to guarantee itself some gold medals, it should think beyond old-school approaches such as wasting thousands of crores on sports infrastructure and talent development. Instead, it should spend the money on lobbying with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to add new events where Team India would be a compelling favourite. Here are three such events I could think of:

Airplane exiting

Each team would comprise 10 'passengers'. Ten teams will enter a plane. Each of the 100 passengers will be assigned a seat and cabin baggage of 7 kg. All will sit down and wear their seat belts. When the pilot fires the starting pistol, everyone will race towards the exit, using their cabin baggage as weapon/shield to push, shove and bludgeon their way past competing teams. Athletes successfully exiting the plane will be awarded points in reverse order – with the first to exit getting 100 points, and the last one to emerge scoring 1 point. Individual points will be added up and the team with maximum points will be the winner. This is India's national sport, so gold is assured.

Breaking queue

I leave it to the IOC to decide how they want to design the event – whether as a series of ticket counter queues, or as a series of toll booth queues (in which participants will have to bring their own vehicles) that would have to be broken. There can also be a separate event where competitors will be judged on their ingenuity in breaking a queue despite each member of the queue holding a token.

Garbage dispersal

Not to be confused with garbage disposal, a skill alien to Indians. In garbage dispersal, each team of six athletes will be assigned a city block and handed one sack of garbage, along with a cow and a dog. Teams will get 45 minutes to make the entire city block look like a garbage dump, with not one lane, corner or sidewalk untouched by litter. Judges will evaluate each team on how judiciously they have dirtied the streets, with bonus points for artistic distribution of cow dung and dog poop across the block. I don't need to say it – gold, silver and bronze for India only.

If the Sports Ministry convinces the IOC to include these three sports, I can give it in writing that a minimum of three gold medals are guaranteed for India at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

***G. Sampath**, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor,* The Hindu.

PERSON OF INTEREST

GEETA DHARMARAJAN: A CHILD'S POV

The educationist and founder of non-profit Katha has successfully rewritten the basic rules of education

Wisdomous smile Geeta Dharmarajan, the founder of non-profit organisation Katha. (DINESH KRISHNAN).

Educationist Geeta Dharmarajan, 75, thinks literacy is overrated. For 30-plus years, she's answered a key question in a million different ways: what if we can teach the way children want to learn and not the way in which we want them to learn? Katha, the organisation she founded in 1988, began with a children's magazine and a learning centre with five pupils in the midst of a Delhi slum. It ignores tedious textbooks and outdated teaching methods to inspire children to read by telling them stories.

It has grown into a sprawling non-profit with impressive impact and looks at every aspect of educating marginalised children, from storybooks (535 published at last count) to an ambitious 'I Love Reading' programme across more than 1,000 schools and 4 lakh children. It has "brought the joy of reading" to 1.2 crore children. The original learning centre in Govindpuri has been a full fledged school since 1995 with no textbooks till Class IX – only storytelling as a tool to transform lives.

Katha's practical yet imaginative storytelling makes children see connections everywhere. "In school we are taught to unlearn the connections between things and we are never taught how to join the dots," Dharmarajan says. "Then we have to go to Ashoka University to learn how to do critical thinking."

Katha's trademarked 'story pedagogy' approach is based on Hindu sage Bharata's *Natya Shashtra*. Dharmarajan encountered the Sanskrit text when she was thinking of doing her Ph.D in dance. "I don't see it as a treatise on dance but a treatise on communication," she says. The first lesson teachers learn? Please your children.

Beyond English-medium humour

The world of education would have missed out if Dharmarajan had become a doctor like her father. She was his model every time he travelled to villages to demonstrate first aid, where she helpfully posed as someone who had fractured her arm and needed a quick fix. But after she got admission at Vellore Medical College, her parents visited to recce the campus and found women students in sleeveless outfits and mingling with their male colleagues. This was not the place for their child, they declared. An arts degree, an arranged marriage to Raju, an IAS officer and the only candidate whose horoscope matched hers, and a stint in the U.S. later, Dharmarajan found herself in Delhi and dabbling in stories for children.

Katha has too many programmes to outline in this piece but suffice to say that children are shown they can succeed when they start believing in themselves. Teachers see the world through the children's eyes. One of her students recently asked Dharmarajan to solve a riddle. "What is rows and rows of black and Maruti cars?" Answer: Hair and lice. "Traditionally, teachers are taught only via western texts and 'English-medium humour' is so different from the humour of our children," Dharmarajan says.

Katha ignores the systematic approach to learning advocated by literacy programmes. "Literacy is like this big gate in front of a beautiful land on the other side which has rivers, mountains, work opportunities, people driving around in cars...," she says. "There are two big locks – reading and writing. Just open these locks and all that is yours, the system tells children. But have we equipped our teachers to help them open these locks? No."

The organisation has trained thousands of teachers (5,000 of them just in the last four years) to understand what it takes to inspire children to read. "Once children have the joy of reading, it's difficult to keep them away," she says.

It's rocket science

That first teaching experiment in Govindpuri in 1990 was meant to be something for Dharmarajan to do between writing books. Back then she thought of herself as a writer first. "Now, I'm 75 going on 57," she says, laughingly. "I love being with the children. When I'm with them sometimes I find my feet leaving the ground, I tell myself I'm jumping at 75."

In the 1960s, she was part of the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu; now the slightly ungrammatical Hindi she speaks works to her benefit. "My friendships with my children flourish because they can laugh at me and correct me," she says.

How did Katha inspire a village of Muslim Dalit children from a fishing community who didn't want to go to school because they didn't want to be told that they were failures? It took a rocket. The village is near Sriharikota, on the other side of Pulicat lake, and as Chandrayaan-3 rose over the Bay of Bengal in 2023, it was the perfect opportunity to tell the children a story about the moon and introduce them to space travel. They had a few weeks to prepare to 'visit' the moon and learned along the way that once you get there, you can't go out and buy things and that the air is different.

They visited the planetarium to understand the solar system and learnt about gravity through astronaut Sunita Williams' YouTube videos. Eventually they wrote their own story where they went to the moon on Abdul *anna*'s magic balloons because, you see, spaceships are too expensive. And along this journey, many new dreams were born.

***Priya Ramani** is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Intricate deal

East-West vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from the recent Norwegian Pairs Championship. South was Norwegian star Christian Bakke, on route to victory in the event.

The opening spade lead was an obvious singleton, and there was no point to ducking it. Bakke rose with dummy's ace, led a heart to his ace, and cashed the queen of hearts, drawing trumps. Bakke might have led a spade at this point. East would have had to find a diamond shift immediately to defeat the contract. Bakke found a brilliant solution that gave the defenders no chance.

Bakke knew that West had only minor-suit cards remaining, and West had to have all the high cards in those suits for his opening bid. Bakke cashed the ace of diamonds and exited with the jack of diamonds to the West's queen. West chose to lead a diamond, making it easy for Bakke. A better defence from West at this point would have been to cash in on the ace of clubs and lead another club. Bakke was ready for this, also. Bakke would have won in hand with the king and crossed to dummy with the king of hearts. He would have cashed the dummy's queen of clubs and led another club, shedding two spades from his hand. West would now be forced to yield a ruff-sluff and give Bakke his contract. Very nicely played!

NORTH
♠ A J 9
♡ K 8 5 4
◇ 8 4
♣ Q 8 4 3

WEST
♠ 3
♡ J 2
◇ K Q 10 7 3 2
♣ A 10 5 2

EAST
♠ K Q 6 5 4
♡ 7 6
◇ 9 6 5
♣ J 9 6

SOUTH
♠ 10 8 7 2
♡ A Q 10 9 3
◇ A J
♣ K 7

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1◇	Pass	1♠	2♡
Pass	2♠*	Pass	4♡
All pass			

*Heart fit, at least invitational values

Opening lead: Three of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has August 11 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 'The Mesoamerican Long Count calendar' begins on August 11, 3114 BCE and is considered the date of creation of the universe in those cultures. The Mayan civilisation that followed it believed that the successful fourth world, where men were placed, would end on the 13th *b'ak'tun* (a *b'ak'tun* is 1,44,000 days). This translated to a particular date in the Julian calendar, which sparked an increased interest in popular culture. According to this calendar, on what date was the world supposed to end?

Come together George Harrison, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and John Lennon of The Beatles in London, in 1969. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

2 Leading Hollywood actor Hedy Lamarr and composer George Antheil received a patent for a frequency-hopping spread spectrum communication system on August 11, 1942. They had developed it while standing around an 88-key piano. This patent later became the basis for a modern technology that is now present in many of our devices. What technology is this that one usually asks for a password?

3 Born on this date in 1858, Christiaan Eijkman was a Dutch physician who was awarded a Nobel Prize in Medicine for the discovery of a certain organic molecule. He discovered this when researching how poor diets led to a disease called beriberi. What did he discover that can now be taken as pills?

4 James Plimpton, on August 11, 1866, leased The Atlantic House hotel in Rhode Island and converted the dining room into a playing field he called a 'rink'. He did this to promote his invention, a four-wheeled device he got people to wear and race around on. What did he invent?

5 Henry S. Parmelee obtained a patent for his invention on this day in 1874. He ran a company called 'Mathushek Piano Manufacturing Co.', and was worried about the amount of valuable wood that was stored in the factory. Hence, he invented the very first automatic version of a system, which we now see everywhere, from parks to golf lawns. What did he invent?

6 Arguably the most famous children's author of all time, this person was born on August 11, 1897. She could write up to 10,000 publishable words per day which came up to 800 books. Though she excelled in tennis in school, she trained as a teacher at Ipswich High School. Who was this prolific author, who started her legacy with a collection of poems called *Child Whispers*?

7 The Austrian biochemist Erwin Chargaff, whose studies of a certain molecule at Columbia University led to the revolution known as biotechnology, was born this day in 1905. His lecture, where he stated that the amounts of adenine and thymine in the molecule were roughly the same, as the amounts of cytosine and guanine, was attended by James Watson and Francis Crick who took the idea further. What was the molecule these gentlemen studied?

8 On August 11, 1909, Theodore Haubner, a telegraph operator aboard the American ship SS Arapahoe sent off a string of signals when his ship became disabled off Cape Hatteras in North Carolina. Technically, it is not an abbreviation or acronym; it is just the most convenient way to send a message. This was the very first use of what signal?

9 Steve Wozniak, an American computer scientist born on August 11, 1950, pioneered the personal computer revolution. He was the designer of the first successful mass-produced microcomputer and later created the first programmable universal remote as well. Which company did he co-found with Steve Jobs in 1976 and operate out of a garage?

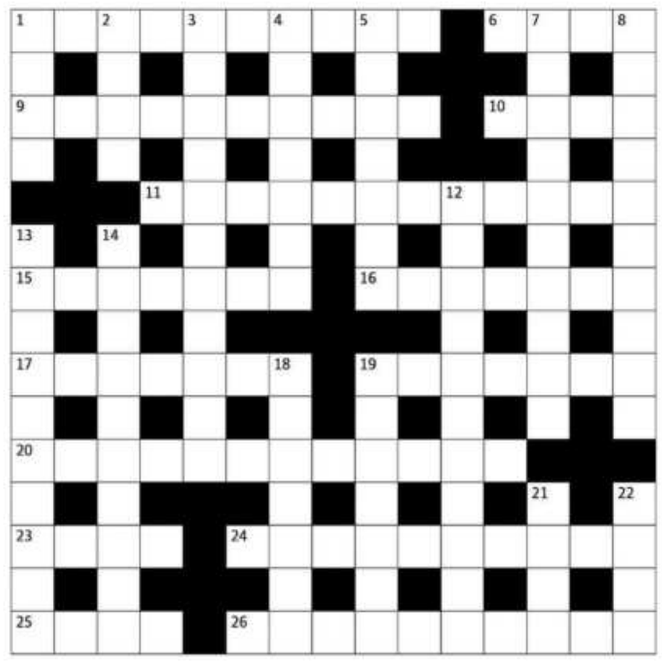
10 On this date in 1968, The Beatles released a song which became pretty much the song to end all concerts with (even non-Beatle ones). Written to pacify Jules Lennon after his parents decided to separate, the song starts off as a ballad and then ends on an iconic loop of singing that has entire stadiums on their legs and screaming their lungs out. What song is it that just keeps getting better, better, better, yeah?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. December 21, 2012
2. Wi-Fi
3. Vitamins
4. Roller skates
5. Automatic water sprinkler
6. Enid Blyton
7. DNA
8. S.O.S
9. Apple
10. 'Hey Jude'

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3319



Across

1 Sticky quality that's characteristic of seafood? (10)
6 Pointedly cut back? That's crazy (4)
9 It may take notes for one on the fiddle (5,5)
10 'European capital?' 'Cairo, Slovenia.' '...not entirely' (4)
11 Tired? I'll trot out something to read (6,6)
15 European, and united, it's become apparent (7)
16 Section of symposium in ICA building that may transport you (7)
17 Perks up demonstrations (7)
19 Hot and bothered, with fourth and fifth characters quitting playgroup (7)
20 Terrific Hitchcock thriller with a drop of red sauce (5,7)
23 In retirement, make some changes? It's regularly seen in the main (4)
24 Finished, being hot (7,3)
25 Expressed weariness, heard in TV station (4)
26 Harbours' charms (10)

Down

1 At first, celebration agreeable—before Everyman showed up (4)
2 Primarily, architectural polygonal / semicircular exhedra? (4)
3 Ones on the wing in derisory prison (11)
4 Wrote symbols, number 500, describing gallery (7)
5 Star with radiant smile, that's matey (7)
7 In stoic fashion, lab cats try to run free (10)
8 Wears checks where drinks are sold (6,4)
12 Men with pointers meddled—everywhere you look! (11)
13 Isolates unhealthy Easter eggs ... (10)
14 ... so quietly, went on to say ... 'chubby' (4-6)
18 River around north's quiet presently (7)
19 Feel uncomfortable following roast: dash! (7)
21 Double the size of your dating pool in inhospitable location? (4)
22 Does a mafioso's job on old fellow, vacantly fearless (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3318

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Writing a requiem to **handwriting**

The decline started with the advent of photocopiers, word processors and PowerPoint

Vijaya Bharat
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Recently, I read the biography of my uncle K.K. Neelakantan (1923-1992), aka Induchoodan. The author, Suresh Elamon, had studied more than 150 notebooks meticulously written and illustrated with sketches of birds by KKN, the Birdman of Kerala. KKN had chronicled his observations from 1942 to 1992. The notes enabled him to write a book in Malayalam, *Keralathile Pakshigal* (Birds of Kerala), in 1958, when he was just 35, and contribute more than a hundred articles through his life to the journal of the Bombay Natural History Society.

Highly inspired after reading the biography, I decided to start with a travel diary on a family holiday. After the first two days of jotting down the key points, my niece peeped into my diary and was aghast at my handwriting. She said, "*Periamma*, what is this?" I mumbled, "What to do? Doctor's handwriting," and joked about a senior colleague. His handwriting used to look as if a few ants had come out of an ink pot and crawled all over the paper. My handwriting has deteriorated after the use of computers and mobile phones. It won't be wrong to say that now I hold a pen only for signing an official document or a gift card. It is true I am losing the habit of writing on paper. While my younger daughter says that these days nobody writes diaries and it is far more convenient to keep notes on mobile phones, the elder one points out a flip side of the current practice.

On a site visit with her students, she had asked them to share a short paragraph on their observations at the end of each day. She was disappointed at her students' inability to write one paragraph clearly and correctly. Most of the students said that they had taken photos with their mobile phones and would submit reports later.

In the 1960s, my grandfather, an English professor, used to take me and my siblings to the British Council Library near our home in Thiruvananthapuram. We could borrow books of our interest, but before returning them it was compulsory for each of us to write a précis and show him. We did not feel it was a chore since reading and playing were the only ways we had to pass the time in the days before television. The habit of writing notes and making a summary stayed with me. The availability of photo copy machines was the first spoiler of the habit. It became convenient to quickly make copies of the relevant pages "to be read later" and return the book. "Later" would seldom happen. Then came the practice of making bullet points for PowerPoint presentations which could be elaborated with adequate knowledge of the subject.

While blaming modern gadgets for my deteriorating handwriting, I am happy about the writing habit that was inculcated in us. I realise that if I were to start maintaining a handwritten diary now, my current handwriting will be an insult to the pages. I can probably improve it by writing "Sri Rama Jayam" one thousand times a day, like my late mother-in-law used to do, or write one page of something every day like my grandchildren, as part of their holiday homework. A more manageable option is to follow Doogie Houser, MD, and type my daily observations in a computer. While my handwriting might get worse from disuse, this practice will certainly help me to recollect details of events. I may learn a new skill – that of making digital books with select photos from the clutter in my phone. With no electronic device and not even a good camera, regular writing in plain notebooks helped my uncle to comprehend the world around him in his own unique way and share his clear and in-depth understanding of the birds of Kerala.

I am starting a diary at an age half a century older than him, but I am still excited about what this new enterprise may yield. It may not be material for an unlikely future biographer, but nonetheless I am going to do this for my own sake.

'Samen delen' across the fence

S.V. Raman
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Recently I stayed at my daughter's house in the Netherlands for a month. On the first day, I noticed that her neighbour, a Dutchman, was working in his garden for several hours. On the subsequent days, he was active on other chores as well. I wanted to compliment him but two thoughts deterred me: first, I recalled what a few friends in India had cautioned me about the Dutch – they may say 'Hi' and smile, but nothing beyond that. Second, most of them are not conversant in English. Nevertheless, I managed to convey my appreciation about his hard work in halting English and sign language. He smiled but I was not sure if he understood.

The following week, I noticed him standing precariously on an unusually tall ladder to reach and clean windows on the first floor. Again, with the communication technique utilised earlier, I advised him that he could use a cleaning brush with a long handle so he can avoid using that unsafe ladder. He just nodded and I was again unsure if he grasped what I conveyed. Later, when I shared the above incident with my daughter, she cautioned me that the Dutch value their privacy and also don't like unsolicited advice.

But the next day, when I came face to face with him while he was walking his dogs, he smiled and said loudly, "Hi." The dogs, taking the cue, wagged their tails.

The next day, when he was busy doing carpentry, I managed to share my appreciation about his hard work. He grinned and remarked, "I work outside. My wife inside." "It is *samen delen*." My daughter said it means sharing, and from childhood, the Dutch are taught this value.

The day before I was to return to India, I thought of offering him a gift. But I recalled another piece of advice: no one can visit a Dutchman's home without appointment. He opened the door and stood towering over me. I said 'Hi'. He signalled me to come in. I entered, told him that I am leaving for India and wished to give him a gift. To my surprise, he joked, "Gift for me or my wife." I was relieved once again. Quickly collecting my wits, I said, "*samen delen*." By then, his wife joined us and had a good laugh. His wife quipped: "We are Dutch. And we are touched."

Where have the sparrows gone?

It's not a forest bird; hence urban denizens will have to help them thrive

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"Crows and sparrows belong to our clan," declared the great Tamil poet and freedom fighter Subramanya Bharati long ago. But do we see any sparrows nowadays in urban areas, not to speak of big cities such as Chennai and Bengaluru?

More than 30 years ago, sparrows were common in rural areas and not rare in the cities.

The little birds used to build nests even on the roof ceilings and often I could see them flitting in and out of the house. It used to be a wonderful sight to watch them picking grains and intently looking for insects. But that is all history.

In the recent past, I have seen only two or three house sparrows on shrubs in waterbodies and creepers in houses in Chennai. Urbanisation has denied the birds food and shelter. It is believed that cellphone towers have affected them and considerably reduced their number. But there is no scientific proof for the same.

Seeing this sorry state of affairs, I cannot help thinking of the happy time I spent watching a variety of sparrows and other birds in the Redmond Ridge area in Washington State on the western U.S.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

during a visit two years ago. With more than 20 species just in Washington State, the sparrows are very common birds throughout the year. I sighted around 10 species in a small area as Redmond Ridge.

Of all the different varieties, song sparrows are more common, occupying tree stumps, bushes, and pathways, all the time chirping.

The old-world sparrows, also known as house sparrows, are not native to the U.S., introduced from Europe in the 19th century. They are identified by their round head, thick beak and shorter tail.

Another common sparrow species in Redmond Ridge is dark-eyed junco. They are year-round resident of Washington State and have a high-pitched sonorous voice, like the one generated by a lathe.

Another common sparrow species is the white-crowned sparrow, with its distinctive zebra-striped head pattern. Most of these sparrows feed on wild berries and rarely haunt apple, peaches and plum trees. If I can sight at least some house sparrows in Chennai, I will be very happy.

As the name suggests, it is a "house" sparrow. It feels comfortable living in and around human habitations. It is not a forest bird. Hence it is our duty to take some steps such as installing nest boxes in buildings where they can thrive.

Off-field cricket 'rituals'

'Commentator curse' and some other reigning superstitions that diehard fans have immense belief in

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It is a relief that India won the T20 World Cup. Had India lost, the die-hard cricket fan would have lost all meaning in life.

Such is the cricket crazy fan – for him, India should win at all costs even if it means following superstitions, that too, to the extreme.

A noteworthy superstitious fan is like Bheeshma – he takes a solemn vow not to watch the match!

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

He sincerely believes that every time he watches the game, India loses. And to let India win, he will inflict self-pain and self-mortification, and deny himself the pleasure of watching the game he loves most.

Others reinforce the superstition. After India lost the ODI World Cup final last year, I got a sudden call from my friend. He had a pointed question, "Did you, by any chance, watch the finals?" Unwittingly, I said, "Yes." Immediately, he flared up. "Who asked you to watch the match? Now, I know...why India lost!"

One type of superstition is called a "commentator's curse".

The commentator has just praised the batsman to the skies. "A wonderful 50 from Virat! He is now batting 'in the zone'; not just a 100, this time, even a double hundred, is well within his sight!" Before he can complete the sentence, the next ball, Virat hits the ball in the air, and is out unceremoniously! The commentator is lucky not to be anywhere close to the cricket fan.

In the days of yore, we watched cricket matches on the old cathode-ray tube TV. As the match progressed, the TV visuals had a bad habit of "shaking" from time to time. Someone at home was roped in, to slap the TV-top.

Each time, you slapped the top of the TV, the shaking stopped. To our delight, two things happened in unison with the slap: the visuals were restored and to top it, the rival team lost a wicket. It was a perfect case of "*kaaka-taaliyan nyaaya*" (a crow sitting on a palm-tree and a fruit falling off at that exact instant).

From then on, till the rival innings progressed, the slapper had only one job at hand. He must induce a wicket by pounding the TV from time to time, even if it meant breaking the TV, all with noble intent, of course!

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

To encourage more people to become better sexual beings, the Ministry of Tourism can start 'sexual wellness tourism' in India to promote better sexual health among people belonging to different generations. ('On the 2024 travel itinerary: sexual wellness'; Aug. 4) Sexual wellness is also a part of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3) and helps in ensuring universal access to sexual health care services.
Aniket Mohapatra

Better intelligence

What we need is artificial intelligence that does not burden the world with overuse of energy sources. ('Energy-hungry models of AI will accelerate climate crisis'; Aug. 4) For that, this new innovative mechanism in the domain of development should be tempered with realistic goals rather than an overdose of it, which can result in dubious players making use of it with ulterior motives.
Cijo Joseph Chennelil

Perilous development

If the proposed gargantuan "development project" is grounded and population swells to a few lakhs, not only would the unique biodiversity be destroyed over time, but the tiny tribal population that has been inhabiting those islands for millennia will either lose their distinctive identity or will soon disappear from the face of the earth. ('Alarm bells'; Aug. 4)
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Powerful voices

Duvvuri Subbarao is frank and free in discussions and debates preceding decision-making, which is missing in the majority of Indian bureaucrats of the present day. ('Fire fighter'; Aug. 4) He made a mark in all positions he held because of his courage and conviction. He needs to be emulated by all policy makers to derive benefit of collective wisdom for achieving national objectives quickly.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Workplace humour

The corporate world is basically full of people bent on demonstrating to their bosses that the organisation would collapse if they're not heard properly. ('Workplace friction'; Aug. 4) Merit matters up to a certain level. After that, your interpersonal skills come into play. The jokes on bosses are basically indicative of the right people in the wrong places.
Deepak TAAK

Rising stars

From movie stars promoting sportswear to sportspersons promoting movies, individuals who are completely unrelated to a certain field are increasingly being seen as "influencers" who can endorse just about anything. ('Gue$t of Honour'; Aug. 4) The growing power of these influencers and their legitimacy must be scrutinised.
Pranati R. Narain

Fabric for the future

It is welcome news that garment makers and designers are doing their bit to upcycle leftovers from garment production with a view to reduce the gargantuan garbage problem and resultant environmental pollution. ('Made from scraps and offcuts'; Aug. 4) It is a win-win solution. .
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Troubled waters
The good and bad aspects of the rains
Ashok Balakrishna

A way with birds
As the world became deafeningly silent during the lockdown, birdsong was the only solace
Pallak Goyal

Jackfruit tales
Lovers of the fruit go to any extent to get their fix
Shiny Babu

Pencilled in
The writing stick has all but disappeared, flaunted only by a few sections
Mohan Das

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Second chance at life (Clockwise from below) A rescued elephant uses the hydrotherapy pool at Wildlife SOS Elephant Hospital; Satyanarayan with rescued elephants Asha, Coconut, Peanut, and Lakhi; Satyanarayan; and an elephant being treated at the hospital. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

WORLD ELEPHANT DAY

TUSKERS IN REHAB

Six years in, India's first elephant hospital continues to give abused and exploited elephants a second chance at freedom and safety

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Three years ago Ginger, a 50-year-old elephant, was rescued from Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh. She was found shackled to a tree. With cracked toenails, wounds on her legs, saddle-induced injuries on her back and diminishing eyesight, she was forced to beg and used for joy rides.

Fast forward to 2024 and Ginger is enjoying a bath in a pond, eating watermelons, and going for evening strolls. A sense of calm has replaced her past trauma as she walks up for a routine medical check-up at Wildlife SOS Elephant Hospital located inside the Elephant Conservation Care Centre (ECCC), off the NH2 between Agra and Mathura.

The 3,300 kg gentle giant cooperates with the team of vets and staff, who review and treat her condition – deviated limbs, ankylosis, a wound at the base of her ear, and discharge from her eyes – using portable X-ray machines and lasers. Photo-biomodulation therapy helps to rejuvenate the cells around her joint tissues, improve circulation and minimise pain.

Through the eyes of giants

Much before the Ambanis launched Vantara elephant hospital in Jamnagar, Gujarat, earlier this year, roughly 1,200 km away in the obscure Garhi village in Churmura district, ECCC has been redefining the landscape of advanced medical care for pachyderms, sans brouhaha and media glare. Since 2010, the centre has rescued 60 elephants, treated 120 and attended to 200-plus on-site injuries. It achieved a milestone in 2018, setting up an exclusive elephant hospital by the river Yamuna.

"The aim is not to check any boxes, but to develop the ability to provide assistance to elephants in distress," says Kartick Satyanarayan, co-founder and CEO of Wildlife SOS. During his road travels in the aughts, Satyanarayan was haunted by the sight of abused elephants on the highways. "They would be walking dehydrated and uncomfortably hot on tarred roads, limping due to foot abscess, traumatised by their injuries, and beaten to obey," he recalls. "Most often, the adults and calves were trapped and taken from the wild and put through rigorous training – to be domesticated, to follow temple rules, to entertain in circuses, or to bear the load of safari tourists."

As per Project Elephant's 2017 census, India has the largest number of wild Asian elephants: estimated at 29,964. "Around 2,980 are in captivity; their trauma begins when poachers separate them from their herd, and their physical health deteriorates when they are compelled to undergo training in captivity," says Satyanarayan, adding that they conduct awareness programmes with all stakeholders, from forest officials to the police, *mahouts* and local communities.

It takes a village

Rehabilitating physically and psychologically scarred elephants is expensive. Their mechanised treatment unit is equipped with wireless digital radiological X-rays, laser therapy machines, a hydrotherapy pool, and quarantine enclosures to conduct lab tests. According to Satyanarayan, the monthly maintenance per animal is approximately ₹1 lakh.

"We run on donations [private and public, from around the world] and charity, and organise events like Toast for Tusks to create awareness about our work. Some of our patrons include actors Jim Sarbh, Disha Patani, Adah Sharma, Adil Hussain and Julia Roberts." Another hospital, housed in 100 acres across the Yamuna, is expected to be ready by the end of 2024.

Every rescue is a challenge

Inside the hospital, veterinary surgeon Ilayaraja Selvaraj examines his patients and explains why elephants in confinement suffer multiple ailments. "In the wild, they are known to roam for miles in search of food and water; their regular walks help maintain strong and healthy feet. Elephants' feet bear their massive body weight and are like their second heart."

The 40 elephants under rehab care at ECCC have had gruesome pasts. When an elephant is injured, ill or traumatised, it is imperative to help it regain its confidence. "They are sensitive animals and heal with compassion; over a period of time, their behaviour changes," says Dr. Selvaraj, who has been with Wildlife SOS for two decades, and got into elephant care in the last five years. "[For instance] we prioritise stimulating their natural behaviour by encouraging them to walk on soft soil in a near-natural environment."

While the majority of elephants rescued by the ECCC are from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, the team has also carried out operations in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Kerala. On tip-offs from informants and trackers, Wildlife SOS collaborates with the police, forest and enforcement departments, and local communities to save elephants from illegal confinement. The rescue is prioritised based on the animal's neglect, pain, exhaustion and starvation.

ECCC's most valuable asset: a fully-equipped customised ambulance. A team of at least five rescuers travels to fetch the animal; and the journey to-and-fro often lasts days to weeks. "It is an expensive and elaborate process. We have to verify ground information and send decoys to confirm the exact location," says Satyanarayan. "It entails a lot of map work – figuring out the distance and the condition of roads and bridges – because we cannot afford to make the rescue journey of an already stressed-out animal any worse."

Smoothies and giant *laddus*

All the elephants have a feeding schedule. Depending on their age and the condition of their dental pads, Babulal says they are fed cut or pulverised fruits and foliage. They are also given "giant *laddus* made with groundnut paste, cooked *ragi* rice or red rice, mixed with *moong dal* and horsegram".

There have been occasions when the team has encountered stone-pelting mobs. "There are legal issues with elephant protection. The person who loses his elephant [due to cruelty or adopting illegal methods] often challenges us in court," he says.

The elephant keepers

Inside the 36-acre campus, the rescued animals – once controlled by tools of pain and fear – now have the freedom to be themselves. "We spend time understanding their pain, feed and pet them, talk to them," says Babulal, 48, ECCC's oldest mahout. He supervises a team of 32 in-house mahouts who are trained to be sensitive.

It is a humongous task to keep the animals alive and thriving after they suffer trauma. "We help them to unlearn their past. All elephants are silent when they first come in. Within a few months of rehab, they regain the mental stimulation to form small units; we hear them trumpet and talk to each other," Babulal says.

Every elephant here gets a chance to live normally again, until the end of their days. Take the case of Suzy, their oldest resident, who is blind. At 70, she is referred to as the grandmother. When she was rescued from a circus in Tirupati, her molars were severely damaged. Today, she enjoys her special vegetable shakes in peace.

SCAN THE QR CODE and take a tour of the Wildlife SOS Elephant Hospital

Stopped in their tracks

Railway authorities are turning to AI cameras to help avert elephant-train collisions. But not everyone's convinced

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No one wants to intentionally hit an elephant," says Seema Lokhandwala, an elephant biologist at the Elephant Acoustics Project, which focuses on developing technology to better understand the animal and mitigate human-animal conflict. And yet, train-elephant collisions are among India's leading causes of unnatural elephant deaths, with the most recent incident taking place less than a month ago when a tusker lost his life in Assam's Morigaon district.

In recent years, technology, particularly AI (Artificial Intelligence), has emerged as a potential game-changer in averting such accidents. Several projects are already underway. Last December, the Indian Railways announced the deployment of the AI-based Gajraj system along 700 km across multiple states. Earlier this year, the Tamil Nadu Government launched an AI and ML- (Machine Learning) enabled surveillance system along two lines that pass through Madukkarai in Coimbatore.

Early warning

Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary of Health & Family Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu – who, in her earlier role in the Department of Environment, Climate Change, and Forests, was instrumental in setting up this system – says that since the tracks are located in the ghats where loco drivers cannot brake abruptly when they spot an elephant, a robust early warning system is essential. The new system consists of 12 high towers fitted with thermal and normal cameras, giving 150-metre coverage on either side of the track.

IAS Supriya Sahu inspects a railway track at Madukkarai; and (left) camera-based alert system. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

When an elephant approaches the tracks, an alert automatically goes to key stakeholders, including a patrol team, the forest department and designated officers in the railway department. "The railways inform the guard of the oncoming train, and measures are initiated: either reducing the train's speed, stopping, or sounding the horn," says Srinivas R. Reddy, Tamil Nadu's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden. Also, since teams physically patrol these sensitive areas 24/7, they will try to get the elephant off the tracks and back into the forest.

"Reaction time is really critical along a railway track. The faster you are to generate this information, the easier it is for them to react," says Piyush Yadav, founder of Nightjar Technologies, a social impact enterprise that has developed and manufactures TrailGuard AI, an end-to-end, camera-based alert system. Forest officials say since the system was installed in February 2024, over 500 animals, including elephants, have crossed the track safely.

Understand the local context

Other experts, however, are more cautious in their optimism, believing AI to be a useful tool but not a universal solution, given the complexity of the problem. "Technology could play a significant part in facilitating solutions, but we really need to look at the root cause of why this is happening," says Sandeep Kumar Tiwari, chief of conservation at Wildlife Trust of India, who has been working with various state governments to manage the issue.

M. Ananda Kumar, a wildlife biologist with Nature Conservation Foundation, says we must also delve deeper into a factor that is often ignored: the local context – how an elephant negotiates the landscape and the communities that share its space and resources. Since no two places are alike in terms of pressure on the elephants, their behaviour, land use pattern and so on, solutions need to be crafted accordingly. "People think that if you use technology in one place, it has to be applicable to all landscapes," he says. "But unless there is a strong scientific basis that supports replicability of technological interventions at the local level, they may not be effective in achieving the desired results."

As far as official figures are concerned, nearly 200 elephants were killed in train collisions between 2010 and 2020, averaging about 20 elephants each year

NEELLOHIT BANERJEE
Wildlife SOS

Rewilding in Kenya

Kapai nuzzles elephant keeper Lekupinai Tiyapi. He nurtured the orphaned calf who was suffering from diarrhoea and other difficulties. (AMI VITALE)

Ami Vitale

In northern Kenya, local communities are embracing elephants as neighbours, thanks to the transformative efforts of Reteti Elephant Sanctuary. Owned and operated by the Samburu community, the sanctuary rescues orphaned and abandoned elephant calves, rehabilitates them, and reintroduces them to the wild. This approach to 'rewilding' involves guiding the calves back to their natural habitat in a way that minimises stress and fosters a deeper bond between the animals and their environment. Over the last month alone, 12 elephants have been successfully reintegrated.

A key factor in this success is the role of "elephant guardians" – locals trained to bridge the gap between the animals and the communities. Using GPS geofencing technology, they monitor the elephants' movements and alert the communities across the vast Namunyak Conservancy when the animals approach. This early warning system is crucial for preventing conflicts and ensuring safety on both sides.

The elephants are now seen as valuable assets to the community. They contribute to the local economy through eco-tourism and the milk-to-market initiatives, which support Samburu women in selling excess goat milk to the sanctuary. This not only provides jobs and income, but also strengthens the integration of conservation efforts into everyday life.

The writer is an American photojournalist and documentary filmmaker.