

BCCI to revive red-ball tourneys for women

DEVENDRA PANDEY
JANUARY 13

AFTER THE Indian women's cricket team played One-Off Test matches against England and Australia at home, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has decided to start women's days cricket in the month of March-April. The richest cricket board in the world didn't have any domestic multi-day events for women since 2018.

The Indian board regularly conducts white-ball cricket which includes one-day cricket and T20 at the domestic level and it was a few years ago they started age groups too.

The Indian Express understands that BCCI is mulling to start days cricket post Women's Premier League (WPL) which is likely to be held from February 22 in Delhi and Bengaluru.

For starters, the BCCI is likely to have days cricket in zonal format this season and going ahead the Indian board might consider it to have a tournament like men's Ranji Trophy. The zonal selectors will pick the zonal squad and a three-day league tournament will be conducted. The finals though will be a four-day affair. "It will be a three-day tournament to start with. Due to the constraint of time we are thinking of starting with zonal format initially. The tournament will be concluded in the month of March-April. We don't have red ball cricket for the women's team (currently) and the BCCI felt it's time to start day's cricket as well as domestic cricket for womens," a BCCI official confirmed to The Indian Express.

Most of the major cricketing boards around the world don't have red-ball domestic cricket for women as Test matches are rare, with only India, Australia and England playing recently with some frequency.

According to statistician John Leather, India are among the most recent to have had at least a days-cricket domestic event. The likes of Bangladesh and Zimbabwe do currently but it is largely absent from the women's game.

"India briefly revived their multi-day women's domestic cricket in the 2010s, playing 10 inter-zonal matches a season for four years from 2014/15 until 2017/18 (2-dayers in 2014/15 and 3-dayers in the other three seasons). The last such match was played in 2018. England hasn't played any multi-day domestic matches since the Territorial tournament in 1991. While in Australia, the last multi-day women's domestic cricket was the finals series of the Australian Women's Cricket Championship (pre-cursor to the WNCL) in 1994/95," Leather said.

Women's cricket has grown in popularity at home since the past few years and more fans have turned up to watch the games. It was last year it started WPL and now the BCCI felt, it's high time the board has a domestic championship so that women's teams too have practice of red ball cricket. India had won both the Test matches against England and Australia by comfortable margins.



Most cricket boards don't have red-ball domestic events for women as Test matches are rare. Sportzpics

KS Bharat, not KL Rahul to keep wickets during India-England Tests

DEVENDRA PANDEY
JANUARY 13

KL Rahul won't be the first choice as the Indian team wicket-keeper going ahead during the India vs England Test series at home. Instead, specialist wicket-keeper KS Bharat will be doing the regular job and Rahul will be back on the field as a batsman and fielder.

The reason is that the Indian team will once again prepare a turner for the visiting England team for their five-match Test series at home. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) senior selection committee, headed by Ajit Agarkar, picked the Indian

team test squad for the first two Test matches and have chosen two full-time wicket-keepers, Bharat and Dhruv Jurel.

The Indian Express understands that the team management has made it clear to the selection committee that Rahul was asked to keep wickets in South Africa due to the bounce in the pitch. The fast bowlers came into play during the two Test match series against South Africa, and most of the time, the ball was collected over waist height. As a result, the Indian team has informed the BCCI and selection committee that Rahul won't keep wickets.

"The Indian team will once again be playing on a turner track, and the team management felt that specialist spinners should



Specialist wicket-keeper KS Bharat (left) will keep while KL Rahul will play as batsman and fielder.

India will prepare turners when England visit and so BCCI selection committee has picked two full-time wicketkeepers in Bharat and Dhruv Jurel

handle the job at home. The team has many quality spinners, and the team won't take any chances, especially when the pitch being offered will be a turner," a source in the BCCI informed.

The national selection committee has picked four spinners - R Ashwin, Ravindra

Jadeja, Axar Patel, and Kuldeep Yadav - and they will be seen in action.

Fast bowlers to be rotated
The Indian team management has decided to rotate its fast bowlers during the five-match Test series. The team management has already decided that no fast bowlers will be playing all five Test matches and instead, they will be given rest as per workload management. The first two Test matches will see Mohammed Siraj, Jasprit Bumrah, Mukesh Kumar, and Avesh Khan. There is no clarity at the moment on whether Mohd Shami will be playing Test matches ahead, as the pacer hasn't resumed bowling yet.

Seven-minute mania

Down six game points, Satwik-Chirag make a stunning comeback to beat World Champions and enter Malaysia Open finals

SHIVANI NAIK
JANUARY 13

THE INSCRUTABLE poker face, with even nostrils not permitted to flare, is the hallmark of the greatest badminton champions. One of the most expressive duos on the circuit, Satwik-Chirag gave away nothing to their Korean opponents - not even a decider - as they hollowed out the World champions in 7 scarcely believable minutes of a comeback from 14-20 down at the Axiata Arena at the end of a 21-18, 22-20 win.

Over the course of 8 icy-cool points, played casually and with not an iota of desperation, without a menacing stare or gnashing teeth or rolled fists or even a sledgehammer smash, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty mentally disintegrated the reigning champions, Korean Seo Seung-jae and Kang Min-hyuk.

In becoming the first Indians to reach the Malaysia Open finals sneaking up from 14-20 down in second set to winning it 22-20, Satwik-Chirag displayed just how dangerous they are, to all the top pairings eyeing this year's Olympic title. Their renowned big attack wasn't even the crux of this danger today.

The Indians are simply going A+ on any Plan A the opposition brings to the court.

When you have such an unbridled, world record smash worthy attacking prowess where you can thrash the living daylight out of opponents as Game A, who would go on to deploy Game B, of relentless flat exchanges at a great clip instead, to outpace Koreans known for their lightning fast reactions? Satwik-Chirag of course.

Placement over power. Speed over strength. Flat fast parallels over leaping steep down shots that had worked so amazingly just yesterday. Taut forearm shuttle control from midcourt punching gaps, over shoulder-full smashing dunks. The Indians flipped their winning style, to play quite a different game.

It wasn't that Seo-Kang played badly. They were simply flabbergasted that the Indians could play their Korean staple better than them. The realisation literally messed with Seo's brilliant head, who recovered from an error-prone first set to play really well in the second, until it came to the moment of finishing it off at 20-14. He couldn't. The Koreans froze over the 6 set point chances they had. At 20-20 they were goners, and what was looking like an even contest felt like a steamroll.

Here's how it panned out. The shuttles were even faster than Friday, which meant short, snappy exchanges with rallies barely reaching a dozen shots. None of the four players wanted to lift, if they could help it.



Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty fought back from 14-20 down in second game to win the match 21-18, 22-20. BAL file

FROM 14-20 TO 22-20

"I don't remember now how we got those points! (Smiles) We were not that confident throughout the game, as in there was no rhythmn here and there. But we stuck to the plan and when it really mattered we stepped up in the last phase. We know they were under pressure, we just played our game and got a few points. It will take a lot of time (to sink in), maybe a year more."

SATWIKSAIRAJ RANKIREDDY

"It wasn't like they gave away easy points or like we were pretty much dominating those. Barring the 19th point maybe it was a very 50/50 scenario where even they had a chance to win the point. But apart from that, those seven points I think we played quite well, kept the shuttle quite low, didn't really give them an opportunity."

CHIRAG SHETTY

Told BWF

All four were skilled enough to play for large parts of the 47 minutes just angled patterns and parallels, without sending the bird into orbit. Very early though, the Indians would've realised that the left-handed Seo

wasn't getting his timing right on the net and dumping in errors galore. They played awkward lengths to the periphery of his face, and he was netting a fair few of those, unable to deal with the length at the pace

Indians were returning.

Earlier in the first set that the Indians pipped 21-18, Satwik-Chirag had stripped the Koreans off the notion that their world-class defense could weather the Indian storm. While Kang stayed intact and found angles, Seo was struggling. Both Indians kept picking points, sending the shuttle low near his body to his forehand side and he found no retort. As his perpendicular racquet defense crumbled, his confidence at the net started evaporating. Uncharacteristic errors bloated into the net as his flat pushes lacked sharpness to clear the tape.

Pristine play

Chirag was in a front court battle with Seo, but he was so confident with his interceptions that Seo paled in comparison. He even made service errors. Kang was holding fort, but both Chirag and Satwik were pristine and speedy in their flat back-and-forths. This was hours of high intensity training of the flat game trumping fast twitch fibres.

Yet, Seo regrouped, grew sharper on the third shot at the net, sent a few flick serves,

and found deep pushes to the back for winners to lead 11-6 and right up to 20-14 as the Koreans teased short lifts out of Indians in the second. "I think in the second game, they stepped up quite well. The shuttles like Satwik said were quite fast, although we were lifting it a little shorter, because we were playing the second (set) on the slower side," Chirag told BWF later. "The smashes were going quite well but eventually when we got to know that we need to lift it a little more deeper, then you're able to defend it."

The match was rambling onto a decider at 20-14, when Kang at the net erred once, and then a second time as his pushes went long. 20-16 now. The Indians would've merrily played a third, but they seldom give up on making life difficult for rivals. At China Open - their last tournament of 2023 - they were 20-14 down in the third. And casually, crept up to 20-19, before Liang-Wang saved their own hides in front of a bemused Chinese audience. "We came till 19-20 at China Masters, I was remembering that," Satwik would recall. The Malaysians were treated to something better at the expense of Koreans.

For 20-17, Chirag glided across the net and intercepted the bird, to begin to scare Seo-Kang. A point later, Indians were into a full-blown hustle as they grew monstrous at the net with each charging return sending forth attacking pushes, even as the Koreans shrunk like evening flowers. The wilting was complete at 20-20 when in another crowding flat exchange, Seo lost his nerve and only found the net. For their 7th straight point, Satwik wildly found a line.

And Chirag pounced on everything coming to this side next point with stupendous speed, first a body defense reflex, then a backhand drop from the left front corner before hungrily scurrying for a slashing smash on the right corner. Six set points saved. Eight taken for the win. 14-20 melted in front of disbelieving eyes.

On Sunday, Chinese Liang-Wang lie in wait and Satwik promised a treat. He's been too busy winning, to decide on what he's wearing to the Sunday do. "First we'll go for laundry, the main thing is we don't have clothes for tomorrow," he joked. "Then have a good dinner, then sleep. Then hopefully tomorrow we want to play some good badminton to entertain people, just not thinking about the result but yeah to play some good badminton tomorrow."

It's never an ominous threat from the Indians. Just a sweet smiling statement of intent to enjoy their game in the final. It tends to not be fun for opponents.

2023 ended with a rare loss in the finals for Indians to Chinese Liang-Wang. 2024 offers up another tournament final, same opponents who are now World No 1. And a deliciously different result.

Despite wrist niggle, Djokovic remains comfortably on top Down Under

NAMIT KUMAR
DECEMBER 13

LAST MONTH, at the end of yet another record-breaking season, Novak Djokovic appeared on the American television program '60 Minutes'. Even though most of these pre-planned athlete appearances tend to be neatly managed PR exercises, it ended up being a fascinating show, in most part due to the openness with which Djokovic reveals the most intricate details of his thought process.

It was not just the revelations - the emotional toil of playing against crowds that have mostly rooted against him, the way he uses eye contact during changeovers and notices minute details about his opponents to wear them down, the work that goes behind building his famed mental resilience, among others - but the comfort with which he offers up these details himself.

Even if briefly, the host, veteran tennis writer Jon Wertheim, attempts to peel the layers of a complicated yet glorious legacy, and Djokovic plays ball.

With the ease in which he gives a glimpse into his mindset, the Serb showed just how comfortable he feels at the top of this sport's peak at the moment.

Djokovic spent much of last year ending all debates. He has now won 24 Majors - at least three at each of the four Grand Slam tournaments. On Monday, he kicks off his 408th week as World No. 1. He may not have captured every fan's imagination, but he has certainly captured the title of the greatest

player men's tennis has ever seen.

And with no dips in hunger, he kickstarts his title defence at this year's Australian Open hoping to begin another year in which he will assert his sovereignty over the sport he has spent much of the last decade dominating.

On offer in 2024 are four more Grand Slam titles, as well as the Olympic gold medal that has eluded him in his formidable career. The chase starts on Sunday.

"It's no secret that I verbalise my goals and I say clearly that I want to win every slam that I participate and play on. It's no different this year," he said at his pre-tournament press conference.

"I'm just hoping I can start the season in a way that I have been starting my seasons, most of my seasons, throughout my career: with a win here in Australia, in Melbourne. My favorite place, no doubt. The court where I've done great things and achieved my greatest Grand Slam results."

Djokovic arrives in Melbourne as a 10-time former champion, unbeaten at the Sunshine Slam since 2018. Barring a spirited performance from Dominic Thiem in the 2020 final, none of those 28 matches have felt particularly close.

Djokovic enters almost every tournament as a favourite, but it is in Melbourne in particular where he exudes a greater aura. Opponents across generations have struggled to break through his hard court expertise, especially in the cooler temperatures during the night sessions of the showpiece Rod Laver Arena.

Djokovic's age-defying dominance over



On Monday, Novak Djokovic kicks off his 408th week as World No. 1.

Retuers

the sport is thanks to steady, understated evolution, transforming his relentless defensive playing style by heightening the aggression through precision from the baseline, more attacking court positioning, and a vastly improved, powerful first serve. These changes have, over time, made him an even greater threat on the Australian hard courts. Such is his dominance that physical is-

suess are no longer considered a hindrance. He won in 2021 with a severe tear in his abdomen. Last year, he stormed through the draw while cancelling practice and constantly receiving treatment for a thigh injury. This year too, a nagging wrist that cost him a loss at the United Open last week has been played off as no big deal.

Supporting cast

So who will be the challengers this year? Chief among those attempting to dethrone him will be 20-year-old Carlos Alcaraz. The World No. 2 became a phenomenon thanks to a charismatic playing style and overnight success, but his status in the game was elevated after he prevailed against Djokovic in five epic sets in last

ORDER OF PLAY

Day One

Rod Laver Arena

J Sinner [4] v B van de Zandschulp
Maria Sakkaris [8] v Nao Hibino
Night session (from 08:00)
Novak Djokovic [1] v Dino Prizmic
Ella Seidel v Aryna Sabalenka [2]

Margaret Court Arena

M Hontama v B Krejickova [9]
T Seyboth Wild v Andrey Rublev [5]
M Linette [20] v Caroline Wozniacki
Frances Tiafoe [17] v Borna Coric

John Cain Arena

L Fernandez [32] v Sara Bejlek
D Sweeney v F Cerundolo [22]
T Fritz [12] v Facundo Diaz Acosta

year's Wimbledon final. Physical issues have taken a toll and he has not hit those heights since, but he arrives at any Grand Slam as a genuine contender now, best-suited to end Djokovic's hegemony over the Australian Open like he did at Wimbledon.

Fourth-seeded Jannik Sinner had a solid end to 2023, spearheading Italy to the Davis Cup title and beating Djokovic twice in three matches over one month. He is out to prove he is the real deal.

World No. 3 Daniil Medvedev is in the conversation at every hardcourt event, having reached three US Open finals (winning one) and two finals in Melbourne.

Outside of the top 4 seeds, a set of supporting cast members will look to flip the script. Eighth-seeded Holger Rune, like Alcaraz and Sinner, is one of the upcoming young guns of the sport and one to keep an eye on. Home favourite and 10th seed Alex de Minaur led Australia to triumph at the recent United Cup, and comes in form after a win over Djokovic this month.

As does Alexander Zverev, who has shown little sign of slowing his injury comeback down as he continues to compete despite a second domestic abuse allegation surfacing last year.

Any Major is far from a foregone conclusion, but Djokovic's status as overwhelming favourite is hard to counter. Fit and sharp, he will take some stopping this coming fortnight. It may take an inspired, outrageous campaign, like Alcaraz's in London last year, to put an end to his reign. **Live on Sony Sports Network, from 5.30am**



Disjointed India lose to United States

Women’s hockey team’s Paris Olympic hopes hang in balance after shock 0-1 loss in Pool B opener

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN
JANUARY 13

"PLAY TO our principles, that's our foundation. If I'd pinpoint one thing, it would be decision-making. Do we understand what the game needs?" That is what head coach Janneke Schopman said her team was focused on while closing the pre-tournament press conference before the FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifiers in Ranchi.

A lot of those words would be repeated on Saturday, but not in the sense Schopman and India would have hoped for. Savita Punia and Co's dream of going to the Paris Olympics were dealt a huge blow as they lost 1-0 to a gritty USA side in their Pool B opener. Abigail Tamer's 16th-minute strike was the solitary goal as India huffed and puffed but couldn't break the USA house down.

Consequently, India have no room for error when they face New Zealand on Sunday to keep their campaign alive. If the USA defeat Italy earlier in the day, a loss against New Zealand will end India's chances of qualifying for their third-straight Olympic Games while a draw will keep them in the hunt, mathematically at least.

Away from their strengths

It is a situation that has come about because, to Schopman's surprise, India did not play to their strengths against the USA.

"We created theoretically enough, but I haven't seen the composure and confidence on the ball that I am used to seeing in training or matches previously. We were rushed, we were forcing things, that maybe had to do with the fact that we were 0-1 down," Schopman told reporters in the mixed zone after the match.

To the visitors' credit, they came out of the blocks much better than India in the opening quarter. While it wasn't exactly an all-out attack, the USA didn't sit back from the word go but instead tried to put India under pressure initially.

"This is why you play the game, these are nights we work hard for. It will be a nervous start, but whichever team settles fast will be better," the USA coach David Passmore had said before the pushback. And his team played like they bought into that at the start.

India had 13 circle penetrations, to USA's 5, they had 9 shots on goal to USA's 5, they enjoyed 56% of the possession, but came up short in the stat that mattered most



USA players celebrate taking a deserved lead in the 16th minute for the only goal of the match.

FIH

India, on the other hand, had a few bright moments in the opening quarter but largely lacked a spark. The energy in running up and down the field wasn't lacking but the cohesion in attacking play definitely was. Neha, one of the midfield architects alongside Navneet Kaur who is at the heart of most of India's attacking threat when they play well, put it down to not finding combinations.

"At the start of the match, we were hurrying," the midfielder said in the mixed zone. "We had chances in the D, we could have scored easily if we play better when we pass and move."

That accurately summed up most of India's night. Usually in a scrappy game like this, the first goal can be all-important. And when the USA took the lead in the 16th minute, they were deservedly in front.

India lost the ball just outside their own circle and the USA had enough numbers high up to create a goal-mouth scramble. Savita made one save but the ball was bobbling around before Tamer slotted it in.

USA had thought they scored in the opening quarter before the goal was correctly ruled out for an attacking obstruction but there was no mistake this time. Duly, though, they started to sit back deeper and deeper, asking India to unlock their strong structure.

Lack of efficiency

India finished the half strongly, with Navneet forcing the USA keeper Kelsey Bing into a sharp save. She'd be called into action a few more times in the second half, and every time stood up – or got herself nice and low – to deny India, and was judged the player of the match in the end.

The second half largely played out in a similar pattern. India had a lot of the ball but often ended up running into USA traffic or making wrong decisions in the final third, looking to force their way through but not using the angles smartly enough. India had

13 circle penetrations, to USA's 5, they had 9 shots on goal to USA's 5, they enjoyed 56% of the possession and had 6 penalty corners. But in the stat that mattered, they came up short.

"We have to play our principles, if you lose every 50-50 duel more or less, then it is going to be a tough game," Schopman said on where the team came up short. "We have to be a little smarter in understanding what the game needs, and where is the space. Like our strength is not to hit long balls into the circle but we did that too often. I tried telling the girls to play it short, we have the skill to eliminate and get into the circle. To their credit, they kept fighting for it."

The Dutch coach stopped short of saying it, but on a night like this, India deeply missed the experience of Vandana Katariya, who is missing out due to a training injury.

When a squad collectively underperforms below the optimum level, often the quality of one or two main players can help make the difference. In the absence of the talismanic striker, India didn't have that against USA. Now, they find themselves in a tight corner.

Asian Cup: Australia two good for Chhetri & Co.

MIHIR VASAVDA
JANUARY 13

SUNIL CHHETRI resolutely guarded the near post. His strike partner Manvir Singh was flying in to intercept a dangerous cross and head it away from the India goal. Sandesh Jhingan had a bandage wrapped on his forehead and took more blows on the body than Pujara did in that Gabba Test.

For 45 minutes, India's players formed a blue-coloured wall in front of their goal and blocked everything that Australia threw at them. The Socceroos had 14 attempts on goal; the Blue Tigers only three; Australia enjoyed 72 per cent possession and earned 12 corners. But for all their slick passes, sneaky runs, delightful crosses and through balls, Australia couldn't get past India's last-ditch defending.

Yet, at half-time, when the two teams walked back with the scores – contrary to most expectations – level at 0-0, the questions really were – how long would it take for Australia to open the scoring; and would India be able to keep up the same focus for another 45 minutes?

It did not take long to get answers: India could not maintain their focus and Australia needed just five minutes in the second half to break the Indian wall. Jackson Irvine latched on to a mistake made by goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu – usually the safest pair of hands – to open the scoring. That settled the nerves as Australia beat India 2-0 in their opening match of the AFC Asian Cup in Doha.

The win puts Australia in the driver's seat in Group B, which also has Syria and Uzbekistan. India, on the other hand, will have to surpass all expectations to make it to the knockout stages.

India were not expected to win on Saturday. But at least they did not embarrass themselves. Australia, 24th in the world, were tipped to roll over their opponents ranked 101. But they at least got the job done.

India were without some of their key players – Sahal Abdul Samad, recovering from an injury, did not make it even to the bench, as expected, and the absence of Jeakson Singh meant Deepak Tangri made his international debut.

More than half of Australia's players started in the 2022 World Cup Round of 16 match at the same stadium against Argentina, including their captain and goal-keeper Mat Ryan, who recovered from a cheekbone injury in time but was virtually a spectator for 90 minutes.

Unexpectedly, the match followed the predicted pattern. Australia parked themselves around India's box. And all 11 Indian players retreated towards their goal, guard-



Australia players celebrate their second goal. Reuters

ing it as if their lives depended on it.

It wasn't too different from the last time these two teams played each other, in the 2011 Asian Cup. Australia had won that match 4-0. In that sense, Saturday's scoreline will be viewed as 'respectable' for India. But it also showed that the gulf in class between India and one of Asia's best teams hasn't narrowed much in the last 13 years.

The only times India looked threatening going forward was when Lallianzuala Chhangte got the ball on the flanks. His speed made up for the physical disadvantage India had in the midfield – Australia's shortest player was as big as India's tallest.

India's attacking plan was to exploit Chhangte's pace to counterattack and hope it led to something. It nearly did once, when a cross flew over the Australian defenders and landed on Chhetri's head. The India captain, however, could not hit the target.

It was the only time India came close to scoring. For the rest of the period, they were busy protecting their goal.

One could sense frustration creeping in the Australian dugout, initially because of a lack of cohesion and later for not being able to put the ball into the net, even though nearly all their attackers had a go.

It was only after Sandhu's mistake, which Irvine capitalised on, that Australia started to breathe easy. Jordan Bos scored the second 40 seconds after coming off the bench – second fastest goal by a substitute in the Asian Cup, as per Opta – and put the match to bed.

It wasn't a thrashing as many predicted but there weren't many gains, too, for India from this match. They have five days to recover and prepare for the match against Uzbekistan, well aware that another defeat could mean a second-straight group-stage exit in the continental championship.

Lucky number 17: Sidhu wins Olympic quota before a shot is fired in final

NITIN SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, JANUARY 13

IN THE months leading up to the Asian Olympic Qualifying tournament, Vijayveer Sidhu prepared himself for all possible scenarios so that when the time came to stake his claim for a quota place, he'd have left nothing to chance.

As it turned out, it didn't have to worry too much – the young Indian shooter was awarded the quota for the Paris Olympics even before the first shot was fired in the final of the 25m Rapid Fire Pistol event. With the four other finalists not eligible for a quota, Sidhu – who shot his way to a silver medal – ensured an Olympic spot for the country.

With this, India's quota tally in shoot-

ing for the Paris Games, from July 26 to August 11, surged to 17 and the country has won 15 out of the 16 berths on offer in rifle and pistol events.

"It's the result of hard work and consistency over the years and I am glad that I could win the Paris Olympics quota place for India," Sidhu told *The Indian Express* from Jakarta. "As an experienced shooter now, one does not do many technical changes but the aim is to identify mistakes and work on them. And that was my focus. Quota or no quota, our aim is always to shoot our best and hopefully that's the case in the coming months too."

The Indian shooting team came into the Asian Qualifiers having bagged 13 Paris Olympics quotas including five in pistol events. This week saw them adding four more quotas – all of them in pistol events.



Vijayveer Sidhu. Express Photo

Varun Tomar and Esha Singh had bagged a quota each in men's and women's 10m Air Pistol respectively while Rhythm Sangwan earned one in women's 25m Pistol event.

With Sidhu getting India the second Paris quota after Haryana youngster Anish Bhanwala secured one last year in the Asian Championships last October, it will be the first time that Indian 25m Rapid Fire shooters will compete in the Olympics since Rio Olympics, where Gurpreet Singh finished seventh.

Sidhu, whose twin brother Udhayveer Sidhu is also a multiple junior world cup and world championships medallist, will now be eying the two Olympic trials in May this year to get a seat on the flight to Paris.

"I had just started shooting when Vijay (Kumar) sir won the Olympic medal (at the

London Olympics). I keep meeting him at the Delhi Range and we have little conversations," Sidhu said. "My focus will be to rest and recover and do selective quality training in the coming months. One cannot prepare only for trials – the Olympics are the target for me, like other shooters. The best thing for me is that the coaching staff including chief coach Ronak Pandit and foreign coach Munkhbayar Dorjsuren have faith in me," said Sidhu.

Indian pistol shooters can add one more quota with India having only one women's 10m Air Pistol quota through Esha Singh. The chance will come through the world qualifiers later this year or the world rankings.

Chief pistol coach Ronak Pandit believes the shooters need to fine-tune and aim to peak in Olympic trials as well Paris. Sidhu,

who had two ISSF World Cup final appearances under his belt including one silver medal, had shot 577 in the qualification on Saturday, a score which chief pistol coach Ronak Pandit believes both Sidhu and Bhanwala need to improve.

"We did not have a 25m Rapid Fire quota for Tokyo and Anish and Vijayveer have ensured that this time, we will have two shooters in the discipline in Paris. The most important thing for the shooters will be to ensure a minimum difference between their training and competition scores," Pandit said. "Both Anish and Vijayveer shoot close to 590 in training and the focus now has to reduce the gap between the scores of 577-583 and 590 in competitions. Rapid Fire is a complex event but we have to prepare and be ready for whatever improvement we can do."

OK BOOMER

Handling of Ishan situation shows up Indian cricket as crusty, outdated

SANDEEP DWIVEDI
JANUARY 13

AFTER WARMING the bench for most of last year, Ishan Kishan asked for a break in December, during the South Africa tour. He is said to have told the team management that he was mentally fatigued and missing home. In the days to follow, he would be seen on Kaun Banega Crorepati talking about his tattoo, cracking jokes and regaling the crowd with Team India stories.

Later, pictures of him in Dubai would emerge. These were usual frames that the young put out to tell the world that they were having a good time. One had him on the balcony of a skyscraper with a bay full of yachts below, another had him at a fine dining restaurant. So far so good.

But this didn't go down well with the righteous decision-makers of Indian cricket. The 25-year-old wicketkeeper from Jharkhand, scorer of two half-centuries in three T20Is against Australia at No.3, a certified white-ball dasher with an ODI double hundred to his name as an opener, was mysteriously dropped for the Afghanistan series.

He was not even picked for the Tests. Dhruv Jurel too was higher in the pecking order now. Also missing from the T20 squad was Shreyas Iyer, the find for India in the ODI World Cup.

Taking Ishan's place in the T20I squad

were a couple of lower-order wicketkeepers – Sanju Samson and Jitesh Sharma. They were the designated finishers, the high-pressure operators, chasers of impossible targets. Meanwhile, the position in the team where Ishan bats in white-ball cricket was now to be occupied by the old owners. Back in the team were two stalwarts in their mid-30s – Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli.

The selectors were making a statement – the veterans of many failed ICC events were once again the designated Top 3 batsmen for the T20 World Cup in June. Was it the right move? Not really.

Both Virat and Rohit are known to be the anchors – an ODI cricket concept that is on the verge of extinction in T20s. In this day and age, having even one ODI native in a T20 playing XI is considered a luxury. India, oblivious of the changing dynamics of T20 cricket, was indulging two of them.

Both might have enjoyed spectacular individual success at these world events but India under their watch haven't won an ICC trophy for more than a decade. Even in IPL, they don't have the numbers that give them the aura of match-winner batsmen. They are brands, they are seen as leaders, but not your every-day game-changers.

Were the selectors being conservative or were they reluctant to take the tough unpopular calls that could potentially trigger waves of social media attacks by troll armies of the dropped megastars? Since the good old tradition of national selectors facing the



A certified white-ball dasher, Ishan Kishan was mysteriously dropped for the Afghanistan series. He was not even picked for the Tests.

Sportspics

media after every meeting has for long been dumped, the rationale behind these decisions would forever remain a state secret.

Days later, head coach Rahul Dravid, before the first game of the Afghanistan se-

ries, would further complicate the Ishan matter. "Ishan Kishan was not available for selection. He requested for a break in South Africa which we agreed to. He has not made himself available for selection and when he

does, I am sure he'll play domestic cricket and make himself available for selection," he said.

Unequal treatment

Those tuned in to Indian cricket long enough know what "he'll play domestic cricket and make himself available" means. It's a euphemism for a rap on the knuckle. It's the classic class teacher's go stand in the corner snub. Worryingly, it can also be the proverbial push over the cliff into the abyss that has thousands of hopefuls trying to crawl up.

There was a counter-question that Dravid needed to be asked. With the five-Test series against England round the corner, a vital outing keeping in mind the World Test Championship calculations, aren't Sharma and Kohli better off playing a Ranji game than a T20 series against Afghanistan?

One of the decision-makers, when asked about the Ishan situation, fished out that good old cliché. "Ishan remains in the scheme of things," he would say.

It's that stale carrot that gets historically dangled in front of all horses – those genuinely in race and also the ones practically out of it.

But what exactly is this "scheme"? It's the same that the selectors have stuck with for years now. By including Rohit and Virat for the Afghanistan series, the selectors were making it clear that transition will have to wait. As has been India's good old tradition of giving an unendingly long rope to seniors, the bold decision seems to have been pushed back. In Indian

cricket, the barn door gets slammed only after the horses have bolted.

Only once, before the 2007 World T20, India took the courageous call of trusting a bunch of promising youngsters and a fresh leadership approach. But MS Dhoni's historic win, with a team without Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly and David, is considered an exception, a miracle that just happened. The success of that leap of faith didn't inspire subsequent selection committees. They continued to take those mini hop-scotch jumps without going anywhere.

To be a true world leader, India's decision-makers need to keep pace with the ever-evolving cricket, and more importantly the cricketers. Those in the know say that the Indian team management was insensitive to the frustration that Ishan faced while being benched for a long time. Mental fatigue is a Western concept, and we, the relentless toilers, never face such frivolous trauma – was the thought process.

Ishan was also blamed for not taking his non-selection in the right spirit. The leadership wants the Ishans of the world to be grinning widely, running enthusiastically with drinks while waiting on the fringes. Even when the seniors get undeserving extensions, the juniors shouldn't sulk but do joyous cartwheels for the sake of the team. They shouldn't even take a break from the game and post happy pictures from Dubai. That's not what good juniors do, feel India's decision-makers. Ok boomer.



eye



INTERVIEW, PAGE 3
'When you push, new and interesting ideas emerge'
Konkona Sensharma



24 THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

From theatre festivals to retrospective of India's finest modern artists, from sleep tourism being the new way to travel and Sriracha sauce entering our kitchens, this year holds a promise of new discoveries and experiences

EXPRESS FEATURES SERVICE

Mahindra Blues Festival

The 12th edition of one of Asia's largest blues festivals will celebrate women this time. At the iconic Mehboob Studio in Bandra, Mumbai, on February 11 and 12, listen to a diverse array of voices, including Beth Hart (pictured), recognised as one of the most talented voices of her generation, and American singer-songwriter Dana Fuchs, known for her blend of Southern rock, soul, roots, and blues. Then there's 2015 Chicago Blues Hall Of Fame inductee Sheryl Youngblood and three-time Blues Music Award-winning Vanessa Collier. Listen also to Tipriti Kharbangar, an exceptional voice from Shillong.

Lollapalooza

The second edition of Lollapalooza India (January 27 & 28, at Mahalakshmi Race Course, Mumbai) will open with performances by English legend Sting, American pop rock band Jonas Brothers (pictured), American singer-songwriter Halsey and sitar player Anoushka Shankar. It will also feature homegrown musicians including The Raghu Dixit Project and Dualist Inquiry.



Past Forward

As an ode to India's modern art legacy, galleries have retrospectives lined up. While it is the birth centenary of Ram Kumar, Dhoomimal Gallery, Delhi, will present a commemorative collection of artworks by Francis Newton Souza (pictured), while Akar Prakar will highlight how cards/postcards bring out tangents of Nandalal Bose that have remained unnoticed otherwise. While Art Alive Gallery has planned a solo of Thota Vaikuntam, Vadehra Art Gallery will have solo exhibitions of Baroda stalwarts Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Jyoti Bhatt.



Kala Ghoda Arts Festival

The festival returns, this time, in January. The nine-day event will be held between January 20 and 28, themed on the idea of 'Udaan', symbolic of aspiration, progress and a yearning for the skies. The festival will feature various art forms including visual arts, music, dance, theatre and literature. Visitors will get to witness exhibitions, installations, workshops and performances, enhancing the vibrant street festival atmosphere in Mumbai's historic cultural hub.

Aim for Action

Keeping up with the trend of serving a spectacle with men-on-stereoid action, this year is expected to see the release of *Pushpa 2: The Rule*, *Bagheera*, *Devara Part 1*. After *Pushpa: The Rise* got Allu Arjun (pictured) the National Award for Best Actor, all eyes are on the sequel, which is supposedly made on a budget of around Rs 500 crore.



Star Debut

Here's a roll call of star kids making their debut — Ajay Devgn's nephew Aaman; Raveena Tandon's daughter Rasha; Aamir Khan's son Junaid; Saif Ali Khan's son Ibrahim; Sanjay Kapoor's daughter Shanaya; Chunky Pandey's nephew Ahaan and Hrithik Roshan's cousin Pashmina.



Food Trend

The Sriracha sauce, that spicy combination of chillies, sugar, salt and garlic, may end up defining global flavour as each country, us included, are finding various ways to incorporate it in our cuisine. And even as algae emerges as a top health food, oriental flavours will determine their kick.



Art for All, All for Art

In its 15th edition, the India Art Fair will see the launch of a new Design Section featuring handmade collectibles by leading designers and studios, blending the traditional and contemporary. To be held from February 1 to 4, it will see the participation of 100 exhibitors, including 71 galleries and major regional art institutions. While the 'Focus' section will see works of artists such as Probir Gupta, Paresh Maity, V Ramesh, Chippa Sudhakar and Dibin Thilakan, the art booths will have works of modernist and contemporary artists. The 'Platform' section will feature traditional forms such as woodworking techniques of marquetry, Bhutanese thangka paintings and contemporary crafts from Kutch.

Old-world Magic

One of Netflix's much-awaited series, Sanjay Leela Bhansali-directed *Heeramandi*, promises to celebrate the life and art of courtesans. Through the stories of their patrons set against the backdrop of the Indian freedom struggle of the 1940s, with a mix of love, betrayal, succession, and politics in the *kothas* (house of courtesans), *Heeramandi* will showcase Bhansali's signature style of larger-than-life stories and soulful characters.

All together at BRM

From folk theatre to foreign performances, from professionals experimenting with the form to students exploring it, the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM), the world's largest theatre festival, organised by the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi, is aligning with India's Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam philosophy. It has resulted in several firsts, among them, the festival being taken to 13 cities this year. BRM will also include four other drama schools of India and five other regional centres of the NSD.



Shape of Him

Ed Sheeran, British singer-songwriter and one of the biggest popstars in the world, is all set to visit India again and will conclude his Asia tour with a performance in March in Mumbai. While his last performance in the country was in 2017, this time the 32-year-old, who has played at almost all the massive arenas in the world and is known best for his songs *Shape of You* and *I See Fire*, among others, returns at the back of his recent and seventh studio album, *Autumn Variations*. On March 16 at Mahalaxmi Race Course.



Power Puff Girls

After her bona fide action in *Pathaan*, Deepika Padukone joins Rohit Shetty's cop universe with *Singham Again*. Before that, she will be seen flying planes in *Fighter* (pictured), that has all the *Top Gun* vibes. Then there's Vasana Bala's *Jigra* with Alia Bhatt, while *The Crew*, brings together Tabu, Kareena Kapoor and Kriti Sanon.



Love is in the Air

Bridgerton will be back with its third season with eight episodes and finds Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan) giving up on her long-held crush on Colin Bridgerton (Luke Newton). She has, however, decided it's time to take a husband, preferably one who will let her continue her double life as Lady Whistledown. With a new showrunner, Jess Brownell, helming the series, lots of mush and magic are expected.

Classic Manto

Stories by Manto: *A Graphic Narrative* (Simon and Schuster) edited by Pinaki De and Debkumar Mitra will bring the Urdu writer's short fiction to visual life, drawing from old and new illustrations of his prose. Award-winning illustrators and designers, De and Mitra have edited this volume.

Quiet Fashion

With talk of repurposing, reusing and sustainability, quiet luxury makes a comeback. This means the return of classic pieces that are perfectly tailored, rich in materiality and can be adapted to different combinations and accessories. Cleaner silhouettes make a comeback as do paler solids. In a word, discreet chic.

High on Sleep

Given our burden of chronic illnesses, this year is all about looking within, prioritising personal health. With AI tools and devices, this is the year for customised wellness routines instead of one-size-fits-all plans. Sleep tourism will take off with resorts offering sleep-inducing ambience, experientials, spa therapies, sound-proof rooms, even mattresses and pillows for a restorative eight-hour sleep.

Taste with your Five Senses



Dining out will become less aspirational and more approachable and interactive. Walk-ins are back with restaurants reducing their reservation tables for engaging with impromptu diners. Restaurants are working on a multi-sensorial food experience with tasting evenings, supper theatre, cooking with chefs and other immersive experiences. Evolved tastes of diners also mean that each restaurant is working on more standout dishes. Expect more cinnamon in dishes.

Blending Heritage and Nature

Hampi Art Labs, one of the newest arts centres near the World Heritage Site, will open its doors to visitors this year. With exhibition spaces, studios, residency apartments, it is set to provide an international platform for contemporary Indian art and culture.

Notre Dame Restoration



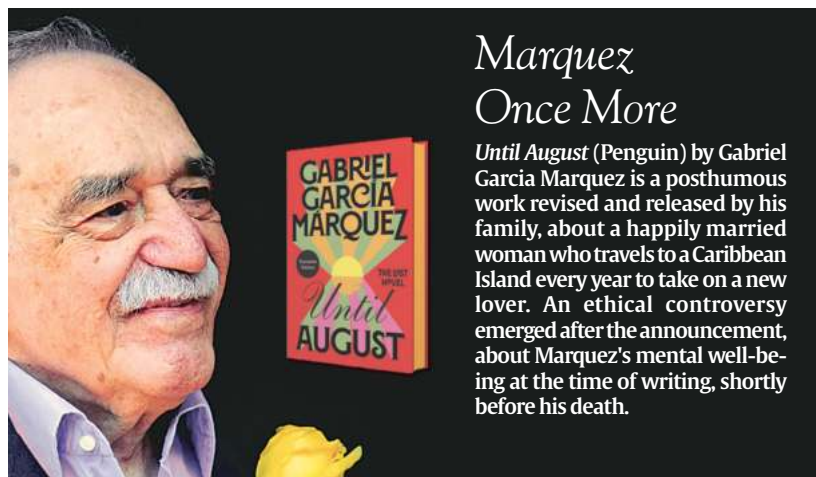
The 860-year-old building that saw the catastrophic fire in 2019, will be open to the public later this year. With nearly 500 craftspeople working on the restoration, come July, when Paris hosts the Olympic Games, visitors might just be able to see the upper part of the spire and the roofing, which will be almost complete by then.

How Empires are Built

The Architecture of Modern Empire: Conversations with David Barsamian (Penguin) by Arundhati Roy is a collection of interviews over the past two decades on nationalism, imperialism and the rise of fascism. The work is teared through with Roy's popular strain of hope, resistance, and imagination — "to see what is in front of us, to envision another way, and to fight for it."

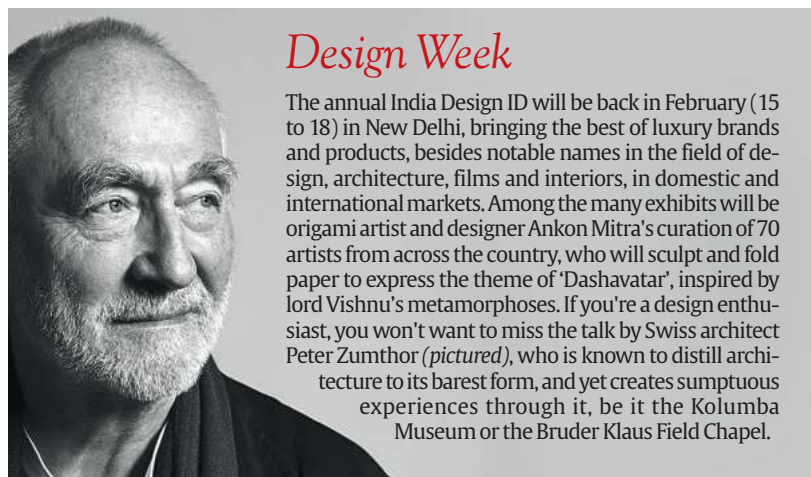
Rethink Black

With performance-makers exploring new ways of telling stories, there is a need for more flexible venues. Pune will get a state-of-the-art black box called the Shreeram Lagoo Ranga-Avakash. An initiative of Maharashtra Cultural Centre and the family of the late veteran Shreeram Lagoo, it will be located on the first floor of the Jyotsna Bhole Sabhagruha Building on Tilak Road. Naseeruddin Shah will inaugurate the space on January 18. It will also set the stage for performing artists from across the country.



Marquez Once More

Until August (Penguin) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a posthumous work revised and released by his family, about a happily married woman who travels to a Caribbean Island every year to take on a new lover. An ethical controversy emerged after the announcement, about Marquez's mental well-being at the time of writing, shortly before his death.

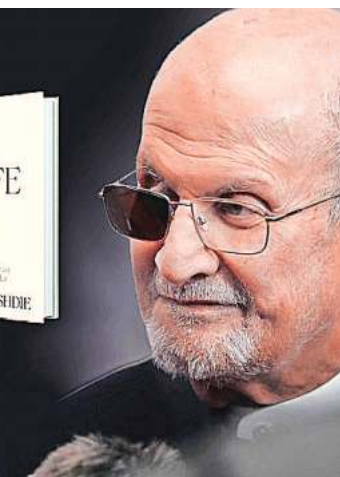
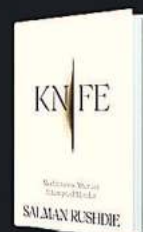


Design Week

The annual India Design ID will be back in February (15 to 18) in New Delhi, bringing the best of luxury brands and products, besides notable names in the field of design, architecture, films and interiors, in domestic and international markets. Among the many exhibits will be origami artist and designer Ankon Mitra's curation of 70 artists from across the country, who will sculpt and fold paper to express the theme of 'Dashavatara', inspired by lord Vishnu's metamorphoses. If you're a design enthusiast, you won't want to miss the talk by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor (pictured), who is known to distill architecture to its barest form, and yet creates sumptuous experiences through it, be it the Kolumba Museum or the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel.

Rushdie's Latest

Knife (Penguin) by Salman Rushdie is a memoir of the Booker-winning writer's recovery from the 2022 attack that blinded him in one eye at a lecture in New York. Thirty-five years after Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* that called for Rushdie's death because of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), it's a "life-affirming meditation on life, loss, love, art — and finding the strength to stand up again."



‘When you push the boundary, new ideas emerge’

Manoj Bajpayee and Konkona Sensharma on *Killer Soup*, its unusual characters, and being curious about each other

Alaka Sahani

The Netflix series, *Killer Soup*, brings you both together on screen for the first time. What made you both gravitate towards this bizarre, dark series?

Konkona Sensharma: There was no reason not to do this project — it’s a great role. It was an opportunity to work with director Abhishek Chaubey, and with Manoj Bajpayee. It is a crazy, amazing, fun story.

Manoj Bajpayee: Prior to this, no one ever approached us to act together. We love to team up with good actors who know their mind and craft. The performances of their co-actors compel them to better themselves. Irrfan (Khan) too used to complain about it. He used to say: ‘Why is no one casting us together?’ So would Kay Kay Menon.

Manoj, how was it playing a double role for the first time on screen?

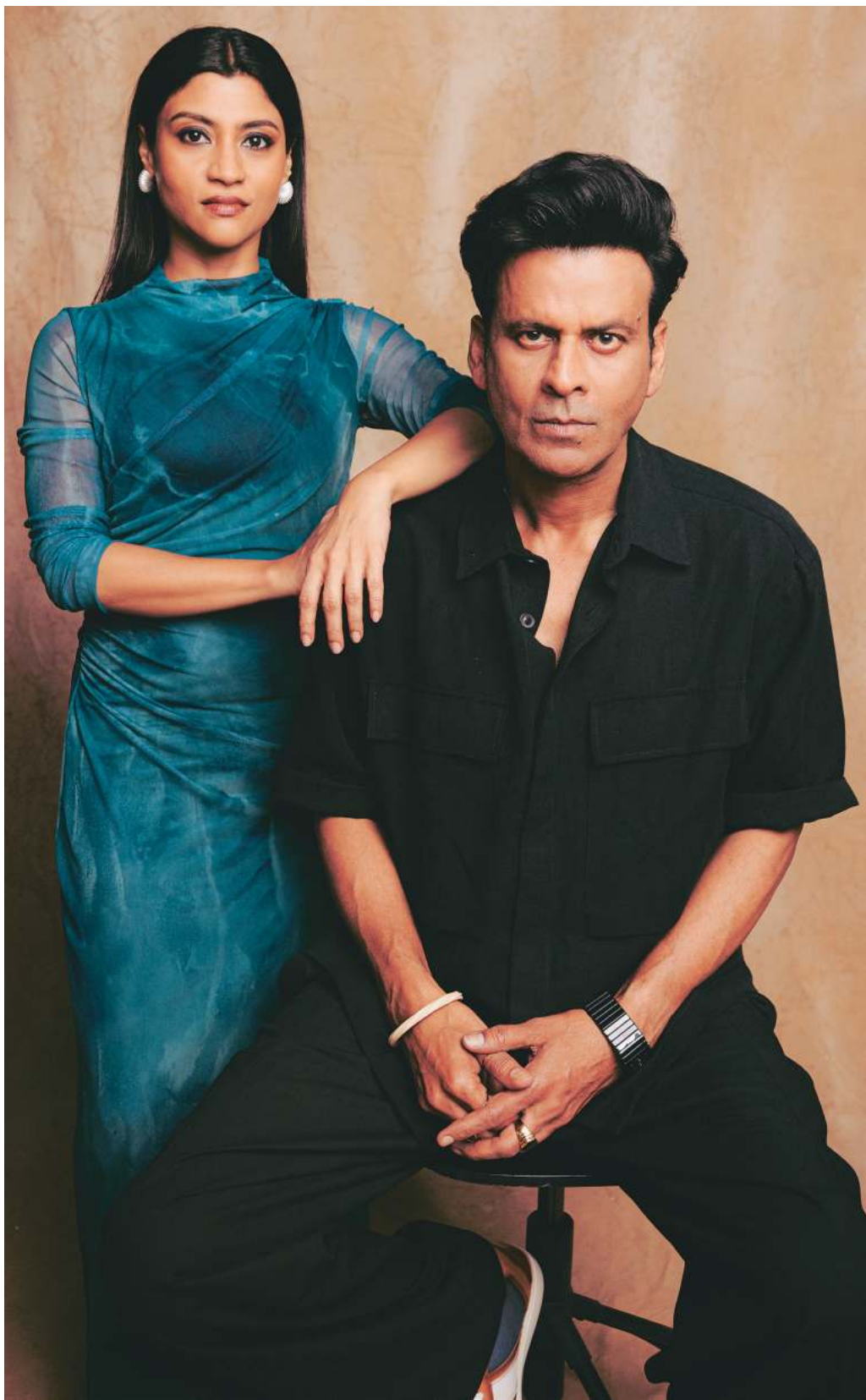
MB: In cinema, it is far easier since so many other technical departments are involved. In theatre, when you have to do a double role, it becomes demanding. What’s challenging here was that if I got too into Prabhakar’s character in the first half, I had to play Umesh in the afternoon. I found a way around it — I made notes about my characters, read them as much as possible, created their arcs and kept their backstory in mind. This also meant collaborating with the director and finding the right pitch for the scene we were going to shoot.

Konkona, you play the role of a highly complex and ambitious woman.

KS: We used to call her ‘Swathi Shady’. I was happy to play ‘a shady lady’. Swathi is done with the domestic chapter of her life. After being a nurse, she married a Shetty and climbed up the social ladder. Her son is now a grown-up. In her 40s, she wants to do something for herself. This is something many women will relate to. She wants to open her restaurant and make the best *paya* soup in the world. She steadfastly sticks to this dream from the first episode to the last even when many things go wrong. But she tries to come up with solutions all the time.

Both of you play unusual characters. Do you believe that writing for shows has become better today?

KS: Not uniformly and consistently, but in some areas there has been remarkable



writing. It is important to do projects that are not mainstream or conventional. In the mainstream, you are often repeating something that has worked. I have no complaints regarding that. Sometimes, when you are pushing the boundary, new and interesting ideas emerge. For instance, *Aamis* (2019),

SERVE IT HOT

(Above) Manoj Bajpayee and Konkona Sensharma; a still from *Killer Soup*

What an unconventional love story. It is done engagingly and subtly.

MB: If you look at last year, there were interesting series like *Jubilee* and *Kohrra*, which showcased great writing and performances. I have been part of some great projects whose directors are in their 30s. That’s great



for the future.

On the sets, were you both very serious?

MB: Konkona was. This is something everyone should learn from her. She goes on rehearsing till the lines are part of her system. I get it that Hindi is not her first language and that’s why she is extra careful.

KS: If there are long lines, I like to keep saying them. Manoj teases me about it. Now, Manoj, you do a Bengali film and I won’t help you with the lines.

How about working in a Bengali movie directed by Konkona?

MB: I would love to. When I watched *A Death in the Gunj* (2016) directed by her, I was like, wow. I can’t get the first shot of the vintage car out of my mind. That’s the beauty of a good film. Even *The Mirror* (which is part of *Lust Stories 2*) is so well-crafted.

What would you like to know about each other’s approach and process?

KS: I would like to know if Manoj takes the same approach for each character he plays or if it varies.

MB: The only thing common is that I keep reading the script. At times, I don’t even take notes. I write down a few essential things that I should not leave out while doing the scenes. Rest of the method varies. For instance, in *Aligarh* (2015), I thought of taking help from literature and let that help me get into the character. I love the process more than the real work. I also believe an actor’s performance is determined by their interpretation of the character.

Manoj, what do you like about Konkona’s craft?

MB: When is the time for you to switch from being an actor to writer-director? I can’t even read a book when I am immersed in playing a character. It is remarkable how Konkona, during our shoot, was talking about the next (*The Mirror*) that she was planning to direct.

KS: I love to read books on the sets. Reading, I find, is an effective way to keep my mind neutral. As an actor, it is important for me to keep Konkona at bay. When I have an intense scene or long lines, then I can’t do anything else. However, on days when I am not stressed out, I can concentrate on reading a book or chatting with my co-actors.

What would it take for both of you to do another project together?

KS: I’m ready.
MB: If it’s Konkona’s direction, I’m there.



THE RIGHT MIX

Alain Ducasse (centre) with his team; (below) École Ducasse Abu Dhabi Studio

‘We should share if we want to grow’

The living chef with the most Michelin stars, Alain Ducasse, on growing up on a farm, sharing his memoirs and passing on the baton

Vandana Kalra

TWO EXPERIENCES shaped Alain Ducasse, the superstar chef with 21 Michelin stars. One was understanding the taste of fresh produce on his parents’ farm. The other was surviving a plane crash at 27 and spending a year in a hospital bed. That was the time when his mind got creative, thinking up unusual flavours. Now, at 67 Ducasse heads an empire of over 30 restaurants spread across the world. The French-born Monégasque chef (specialising in cuisine of Monaco) also runs a network of schools to impart training in French culinary expertise and pastry arts. He doesn’t believe in looking back. He believes, “You must allow people to evolve, help them grow, make them feel gratified.” Having recently released his memoir *Good Taste: A Life of Food and Passion* (Gallic Books), he is looking to open a new restaurant in Rome. We met him at the launch of the culinary school, École Ducasse Abu Dhabi Studio, where he spoke about the need for sharing knowledge, traditional cooking methodologies and his hopes for Indian cuisine.

You recently launched the École Ducasse Abu Dhabi Studio in partnership with Erth Abu Dhabi. India’s first École Ducasse campus was inaugurated at the Indian School of Hospitality, Gurugram, in 2022. How important is it for you to train future generations?

Sharing of knowledge is essential. We shouldn’t keep what we know to ourselves if we want to grow and become creators. I apply the same philosophy to my books. *Good Taste*, for instance, is about what I have done and will be doing. This is only the beginning as I have a lot planned. I am always discovering new approaches, countries, cuisines. The more I see, the less I know.



You now have multiple restaurants with Michelin stars. Do you remember the moment from 1990 when your Monaco restaurant Louis XV was awarded three Michelin stars? That was the first of your restaurants to win the accolade.

At the time, there were no cellphones. I was at a restaurant in Tokyo and my assistant was German-speaking and not very fluent in French. She called me to say that someone from Michelin wanted to speak to me but she was very flustered and didn’t know why. She put him through and he told me that my restaurant had received three Michelin stars. Coincidentally, I took the call on the same phone that had been used by Joël Robuchon three years earlier to learn that he had been awarded Michelin stars.

How do you see traditional methods such as slow cooking and ‘farm-to-table’ becoming a trend?

This is not a trend but the only truth. At any Ducasse restaurant, we have always sourced local produce and let it define our cooking based on what we know about French cuisine and applying what is best for that location. My first plant-based menu (*Jardins de Provence*) dates back to May 1987. A Michelin star for this kind of food was completely new at the time.

You grew up on a farm in provincial France. How did that influence you? Also, what is comfort food for you?

My grandmother prepared our meals and once it was decided what each would eat, we’d go together to the kitchen garden to pluck ripe vegetables she needed for the day’s menu. I loved to see her cook. My comfort food is Gratin Dauphinois (French gratin of sliced raw potatoes baked in cream, from the Dauphiné region in south-eastern France).

How would you describe the future of Indian cuisine? Do you have a favourite Indian restaurant?

I have a lot of hope from Indian cuisine. I found it very enticing when I was in India for the opening of the École Ducasse campus. There was a lot of energy, great inspiration and a lot of talent. At the institute, trainee chefs made lunch, where they applied their training in French cuisine with a lot of interesting touches. My favourite Indian restaurant is Indian Accent.

Tales from Tidal Country

Actor-director Sajal Mondal is getting the people of the Sunderbans, one of the world’s most vulnerable ecosystems, to tell their stories through theatre

Dipanita Nath



COURTESY: SAJAL MONDAL



SETTING THE STAGE

(Above) Sajal Mondal; in his theatre workshop with the children at Sunderbans

islands, where his parents migrated from East Bengal during the Partition. Pointing at a bustling Matla bridge that connects Basanti with the main railway station, Canning, he says, “When there was a wedding, the groom’s party would come by boat. There would be a *nachni*, a man performing as a woman, who would hold us in a thrall. This tradition is coming to an end. I have seen people catch fish with their bare hands. If anybody sponsors us, we could tell raw stories that India has not heard,” he says.

In 2016, he made *Jeebon Pur’er Golpo*, based on the lived experiences of regular women, whom he cast as actors. The play articulated the problems they faced after being married off at a young age, between 16 and 23. “I travel through the islands, meet people, hear their histories and script them. After I left NSD, I have barely done plays by other playwrights,” he says.

He goes off for 10-day stretches with fishing boats and comes back having seen “magic elements” in nature. “In late summer, if you go deeper into the coastal Sunderbans, you will see a long, black chain, like a snake in the water. These are crores of mangrove seeds floating together, each seed bobbing in the water,” he says.

Mondal’s first encounter with performance was as a child, when he used to take food for his father who sold onions and garlic. The market was alive with all kinds of performances. A vendor would sell ointment by singing about it. A street performer would attract a crowd by demonstrating a trick. Their ways of speaking, throwing their voice in song and using their bodies made deep impressions

in Mondal’s mind. It was at the marketplace that he was approached by a member of the local sports club to act in a play with other children to celebrate their annual day. This led him to Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata where he chose the drama department.

It was here that Mondal felt a new self unfolding. He changed his looks, started wearing bell bottoms and dyed his hair red. He also did a lot of theatre, students’ films and ad campaigns before he graduated in 2000. In 2008, he joined NSD where theatre veterans Amal Allana was the chairperson and Anuradha Kapur the director. This was where Mondal “learnt to connect of theatre to what was happening around the world”.

The Sunderbans has a long tradition of theatre, with ritual performances centred around deities such as Bon Bibi and Manasa. “After I returned from NSD, I went around meeting the local folk artists. They have a free and flexible style of acting. I felt a development taking place in myself — I learnt how to integrate the pedagogy imbibed in my theatre education with the way local artistes work,” he says.

