Kanpur: Having bowled a magical spell of 4/14, Mohammed Kaif stepped up with the bat at No. 9 with an unbeaten 45 to help Bengal take the first-innings lead of 128 runs against hosts Uttar Pradesh on day two of their Ranji Trophy Group B match here on Saturday.

Brief scores: Uttar Pradesh 60 and 46 for no loss; 18 overs. Bengal 188; 58.2 overs (Mohammed Kaif 45 not out, Sayan Ghosh 41; Bhuvneshwar Kumar 8/41). UP

# 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-

women since 2018. The Indian board regularly conducts whiteball cricket which includes one-day cricket and T20 at the domestic level and it was a few years

April. The richest cricket board in the world

didn't have any domestic multi-day events for

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 vear 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.

# 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** 

ing offered will be a turner," a source in the BCCI informed. The national selection committee has picked four spinners - R Ashwin, Ravindra

handle the job at home. The team has many

quality spinners, and the team won't take

any chances, especially when the pitch be-

Fast bowlers to be rotated

they will be seen in action.

Jadeja, Axar Patel, and Kuldeep Yadav - and

The Indian team management has decided to rotate its fast bowlers during the five-match Test series. The team manage ment 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

and found deep pushes to the back for win-

ners 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.'

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 or

making life difficult for rivals. At China Open

- their last tournament of 2023 - they were

20-14 down in the third. And casually, crep

up to 20-19, before Liang-Wang saved their

The match was rambling onto a decider at

# 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 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 dan-

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 daylights 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 lightening 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.

#### 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 as no rny tmn nere and the 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

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

"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

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 worldclass 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,

own hides in front of a bemused Chinese au dience. "We came till 19-20 at China Masters I was remembering that," Satwik would recall. The Malaysians were treated to some thing 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 fullblown 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 in tent 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 preplanned 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

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 "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 tourna-

ment 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

Djokovic's age-defying dominance over



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

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-

sues 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 niggling wrist that cost him a loss at the United Open last week has been played off as no big deal.

## ORDER OF PLAY

#### Day One

Rod Laver Arena J Sinner [4] v B van de Zandschulp Maria Sakkari [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 Krejcikova [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 Sweeny v F Cerundolo [22]

T Fritz [12] v Facundo Diaz Acosta

## Supporting cast

Retuers

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

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

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.

Australian Open like he did at Wimbledon

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 alle gation 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 Asian Cup: Australia two good for Chhetri & Co.

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

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN

"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 train-

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

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 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 pres-

"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.



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

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

were a bit calmer on the ball. We were a bit wide at the start, and away from each other. We usually play good connect-hockey, 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

#### 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

"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

**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 goalkeeper 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 be tween 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 cap tain, 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 re cover 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 guota 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

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.

"Ît'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 uota 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 rank-

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

who had two ISSF World Cup final appear-

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 be tween 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 din-

ing 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

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 highpressure 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. Sportzpics

media after every meeting has for long been dumped, the rationale behind these deci-

sions would forever remain a state secret. Days later, head coach Rahul Dravid, before the first game of the Afghanistan series, 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,"

#### **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 cliche. "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 Dravid, is considered ar 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 decisionmakers 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

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

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# THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE



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



## 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 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 unno-

ticed 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-steriod 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.

# 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

# NEUGERRIEMSCHNEIDER

# 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 Bhansalidirected 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

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 Vasan Bala's Jigra with

Alia Bhatt, while The Crew,

brings together Tabu, Kareena

Kapoor and Kriti Sanon.

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. March 16 at Mahalaxmi



# 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.



# 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-fitsall 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, cook

ing 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."

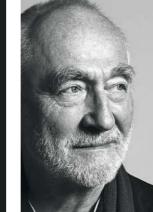
# Rethink Black

With performance-makers exploring new ways of telling stories there is a need for more flexible venues. Pune will get a state-of-theart 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 artistes 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.



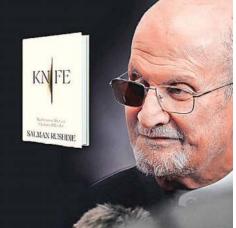
## Design Week

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 'Dashavatar', 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 "lifeaffirming meditation on life, loss, love, art — and finding the strength to stand up again."

New Delhi





LABOUR **OF LOVE** 

The male seahorse lovingly carries the eggs deposited by his bride after a loving tailentwining

# Top of the Pops

Males of several species make great dads, but very few make loving step-dads

N THE animal kingdom it's usually the moms that feed, clean, bring up and train the kids: the pops are usu-. ally out philandering or serving as security. There are, however, a number of intrepid dads who have taken up the gauntlet and the role as equal if not primary caregivers to their brats. Perhaps, this is best seen in the avian kingdom where often both parents work their tails off to feed and clean their bottomless-pit broods: where single-parent families would just not work. One rough rule of thumb to figure out whether this is or is not so is to check whether the cock bird and the hen of a particular species wear the same plumage like in crows. If they do (or if the difference in their attire is not too striking), it usually means that both parents are caregivers. If not, as in the peafowl, it usually means that brood-raising is almost entirely left to the mom, while the dad goes around looking glamorous and checking out the girls. The mom is usually cryptically coloured, so that she melds into the background and doesn't draw the attention of predators; the pop

Sometimes, parenting is divided 50-50 as in the Emperor penguins that live in Antarctica

has no such worries and puts on the most gaudy, glamorous glad rags that he can to catch the attention of the babes.

But yes, there are exceptions to the rule; some remarkable single-pop families that we'll meet here, or at least families where childcare is divided 50-50.

In the avian kingdom, the spider-footed jacanas and snipe provide splendid examples of total daddy-day-and-night care. Here, it is the lady that fights other ladies, beak and claw for her beau, lays her egg in a pad on the ground, bungs him into it and goes off looking for other viragoes she can fight and whose fiancés she can shanghai. In species like the pheasant-tailed jacana, both sexes dress alike, but in the painted snipe, for example, it is the lady who dresses up to the hilt while her partner remains humbly ethnic. I guess this goes some way in compensating for the behavior of that chauvinist — the baya — who after settling one wife in a splendid home ("centrally air-conditioned, modular kitchen, my dear") starts building another

for a new wife and then another. But number one in my book would be the seahorse, where after a loving tail-entwining romance, the bride coyly deposits up to 1,500 eggs in her groom's tummy pouch where they are fertilised and will remain, the pouch turning into a paunch. Papa is pregnant and, in due course, births tiny replica seahorses (sea-colts and sea fillies) while mom may hang around benignly to check that all is well.

Sometimes, parenting is divided 50-50 as in the magnificent Emperor penguins that live in the frozen wastes of Antarctica. The female carefully deposits a single precious egg on the brood pouch between her partner's feet and goes off on a shopping trip (on foot), to the ocean that may last two months (so husbands should stop complaining while waiting for their wives in supermarkets). Barely being able to hop around and ensuring that the precious egg doesn't for a second touch the frozen ground, the male waits anxiously, eating nothing all the while. Thankfully, he is not alone - there are many like him, and they will shuffle around in circles to ensure that each takes its turn at being at the outer freezing circumference of the ring, before moving inwards and taking advantage of their collective body heat. Eventually the mom returns with her tummy (which sub-

stitutes as a grocery bag) full, and very carefully the egg is transferred to her, before her husband is off to the ocean to fish. If the egg hatches before the mom returns, he will nourish the baby with 'crop milk'.

Among the larger animals, it's the canids that seem to believe most in shared parenting. In packs of wolves and wild dogs, it's usually only the alpha pair that breed, and both parents (as well as others in the pack) look after the squalling litters. Lion dads seem to find it beneath their dignity to have anything to do with their brats (except protect them to the death), the better-tempered among them tolerating having their flicking tailtufts treated as legitimate prey.

But yes, in times of stress the males do step up to the plate: there was that famous Ranthambore tiger, for example, who successfully brought up his partner's cubs after her death.

It's not only paternal love that's behind some of this kind of behaviour. I have watched big dada-rhesus males, play ludicrously with toddlers — all to win votes from their moms — who really hold the power in the group. Exactly like greasy politicians kissing babies

So, several males of several species make great dads, but very few (if any I wonder) make loving step-dads. In species after species, a new powerful male who overcomes the ruling patriarch will systematically butcher the former's babies so that the females will be willing to mate with him. Now that is not gentlemanly.

# 'I realised music was safe. I could allow more of me into it'

Sitar player Anoushka Shankar on finding the sublime through a trilogy of mini albums, an artiste's vulnerability, and the disappointment of never taking a Grammy home

Suanshu Khurana

N HER new mini album Forever, For Now, the first of a scheduled trilogy for the year, 42-year-old Anoushka Shankar — one of the brightest musicians of our times — has decided to capture the subliminity of the ephemeral. With songs devoid of the overarching concepts of rhythm, something her training in Indian classical music has ingrained in her being, Shankar consciously decided to eschew "the analysis of the moments from a future vantage point" and capture the here and now instead.

In the past, close scrutiny of her life has led her to strong and intimate themes such as Traces of You (2012), after the demise of her father and guru Pt Ravi Shankar, and Love Letters (2020), where she looked at infidelity and loss in the wake of her divorce.

The four songs in Forever, For Now, with Grammy-winning Pakistani musician Arooj Aftab as a producer, come with German composer Nils Frahm embellishing it with his piano, glass harmonica, harmonium, slit drums and a very elegant presence. The first chapter of the project was released last year on LEITER, the label run by Frahm, and recorded in his Berlin studio. This year, Anoushka will be on a five-city India tour with the album including shows in Delhi and Mumbai. Excerpts from a Zoom interview:

Even though the new album stems from a personal space, it's a more austere take on how you see the connection between music and life. How did the idea of a trilogy come about?

I wanted to see how it felt to release music in a slightly more immediate way. Partially, that came from working differently post-pandemic. With this, I could just go away for a week, have a wonderful experience working with new collaborators, work on a few songs and release them straight away. I was also taken with the idea of having something to release with each geographical area I am touring — North America, Europe and India places that mean something to me. The other desire was a creative one. I think in a very oldschool way. In my albums, my music follows a theme; there's a bigger story. But I wondered how it would change if the pieces were freed from being bound together and if there were chapters that could have different themes even if the journey connected. I found the whole process to be very freeing.

#### Take us back to the sun-kissed afternoon $and your grand mother's \, lull aby \, that \,$ started it all.

It's called Madhavam mammava and it's just one of those songs that has struck a nostalgia nerve for me the few times I've heard it performed live in Carnatic concerts. I never thought anything of it, though, But one after noon, I was with my kids in the garden and somehow ended up finding that melody on the sitar and really liked the way it sounded. My kid fell asleep on my lap while I played and I thought it would be nice to record a version of the song that was a bit less dynamic, less percussive, and dug into that lullaby feeling. I was so struck by the beauty of how simple moments can bring us so much peace and joy. The album brings back not just that song but that ephemeral feeling.

You've collaborated with Arooj Aftab on her album Vulture Prince and for a couple of stage shows. What was it like to

have her at the helm of Forever. For Now? Like me, she works in this space that's slightly undefinable. It's between genres, it's



STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL Sitar player Anoushka Shankar

was still a good show. The band carried me

through it but it's a frustrating feeling when

something stops you from being your best.

And yet we don't get to say we were having an

off day. There's a human on the other side of

it. There's got to be a little space to allow for it.

People say 'wasn't it incredible that she was

so sick and still performed'. I didn't cancel the

beyond genres. But, unlike me, she has a lot of space in music. There's a minimal approach that I want to move towards. I felt like she touid draw me into that space, vve feit like there hadn't been something in a while where I just allowed the sitar to be at the centre of my work and tell the story.

You've delved into a personal space with your music in the recent times. We've seen your fragile side, speaking about your sexual abuse, relationships, and more recently, about suffering from a debilitating migraine while playing at Edinburgh International Festival. The old-school system didn't allow for what was personal. Does talking about things make you feel overexposed?

I was raised old-school, but there was a real distinction after the Nirbhaya case. When I told my own story as a result of that, it felt like one big shift. I've been outspoken but I

hadn't talked about something real in my life. It felt it was important to show that. I thought it would be helpful, not that it's necessarily gratuitous. But still, my music stayed sepa rate. As I grew up as a woman and got more and more comfortable in myself, I realised music was safe and that I could allow the music more into me and more of myself in the music. And it was really interesting because I've had a different listenership since; people now connect more. Each time I share another layer, it feels safe and you can see that it serves a purpose, so that validates itself. In Edinburgh, it felt like I hadn't done my best. It

concert and we kind of elevate that. As if it's incredible, but that just sends the message that that's how we have to be and it perpet-

#### With nine Grammy nominations under your belt, does it get disappointing to still wait for the crowning moment?

For sure. It's become a bit of a running joke where I'm like, oh, here we go again. Now I'll be more surprised if I win Sometimes in a historical sense, it can feel a little frustrating when you say 'do I maybe deserve it', but then the word 'deserve' is so difficult to quantify. We're not measuring runners. You can't quantify. So, in a way, the blessing of it all is that I had my first loss at 21. I've had to do a lot of work around what that stuff means and whether that has any impact on my worth as a person. So that work has probably been more useful than

# With Eyes Wide Open

Accolades and beauty come and go, but what makes one happy is staying true to yourself

ROWING UP in India, travelling to rural and urban outposts of the country, it was the flora and fauna that most captivated me. In them I saw beings that didn't judge me but accepted me for who I was. Their well-being became my chief concern as a young boy. No surprise to family and friends then that I ran what to my juvenile brain seemed a home veterinary clinic, using a simple first-aid kit, scotch tape, dressings and ointments to clean, stitch, plaster and perform minor surgeries on birds and critters, many of whom survived my madness and were set free. As I cared for the birds and critters, I would dream about becoming a veterinarian or a doctor.

Music also played an important role in our home when I was young. The passing of my grandfather was made easier because of the music my grand-aunt Pramila Bhatnagar filled our home with. I sang at school, helped lead the morning prayer during our daily assembly, participated in competitions, and sang for All India Radio. I began to wonder if

music and performing was my true calling. When I wasn't singing, it was the visual arts that kept me busy. Sabiha Hashmi, the





Suvir Saran is a chef, author, educator and world traveller

senior art teacher at Modern School, Vasant Vihar, became my guide. I would bunk classes to draw, paint, sculpt and screen print. I dreamt of a life in visual arts and put my dreams of being a singer or doctor to rest.

So I headed to the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. I studied, worked, cooked and partied full time. Each night in my New York apartment, I entertained friends, strangers and relatives. My cooking, mostly the home cooking of India in the early years, made me a popular host, which led me to become a caterer and cooking teacher. I was featured in dailies and on the cover of NY Magazine. Retail and food became my new calling and kept me afloat and entertained.

It wasn't long after that I began my life as a caterer and chef. The top hostesses of the city yearned for my food, and helped me hone my culinary skills and brought me to the homes of people who were trailblazers of fashion and style, stalwarts of industry, and the puppeteers of life in Manhattan and the world at large. Catering took me across the US and even outside its shores. Super models, actors and actresses, bankers and librarians and everyday people made up the rosters of my students. My culinary skills - and my three cookbooks — were praised by magazines, newspapers, and podcasts. I made countless appearances on radio and TV.

But the more fame and success came my way, the more aware I became of how hollow my achievements were and how I hadn't gotten any closer to my innermost dreams of who I was, wanted to be. Deep inside I still



THE INNER VOICE

Life has shown me that what satisfies me most comes from within

felt like the schoolboy who questioned his place and what he should do with his life.

Then I got sick and came home to India a few years ago, I thought, to die, but life had another plan in mind for me. Even as I struggled with lack of vision and the inability to communicate with clarity, I found in my iPhone the ability to type and click photos. This became my fourth book, a compilation of 75 essays and photos that connected me to places and my mindset at that moment in time. This book also gave me confidence to take on writing my Slice of Life column, first for the India Today group, and now for The Indian Express. Through writing, I found myself connecting more with people on social media and taking on social causes. Today, I am happy cooking and mentoring chefs, modelling for brands I love, and teaching.

Life has shown me that what most satis-

New Delhi

fies me comes from within me, and without much fuss. Accolades, beauty and muscular bodies come and go. What is enduring is our innate character and what makes us happiest is being authentic to ourselves. I simply urge people to embrace every opportunity that comes their way.

The promise I made to myself of going to medical school hasn't been kept, but I don't find myself lamenting that failure. My cooking, that is healthy and nutritive, is medicine that heals minds and bodies.

My dreams of performing and making music my profession died when I moved to America and developed asthma, and died again when I had my concussions and my speech changed. But now I sing for my family and friends. I still take lessons, off and on from Marina Ahmad, the guru I gravitated to in Manhattan 30 years ago. And the devotional songs that my grand-aunt sang come alive when my mind searches for a song to bring me comfort in trying times.

At 51, I cannot say I have done what I set about to do as I graduated from school and college, but I do feel soulfully satisfied and comfortably happy. It is a happiness that brings tears to my eyes as I reflect upon what I had once wanted and didn't get, and what I got, which wasn't even on my radar when I was a young man. No matter how small it might seem, when we become one with the pulse of the planet and where it is taking us our strongest childhood dreams, or our adult dreams when we sleep as innocents,

# '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?

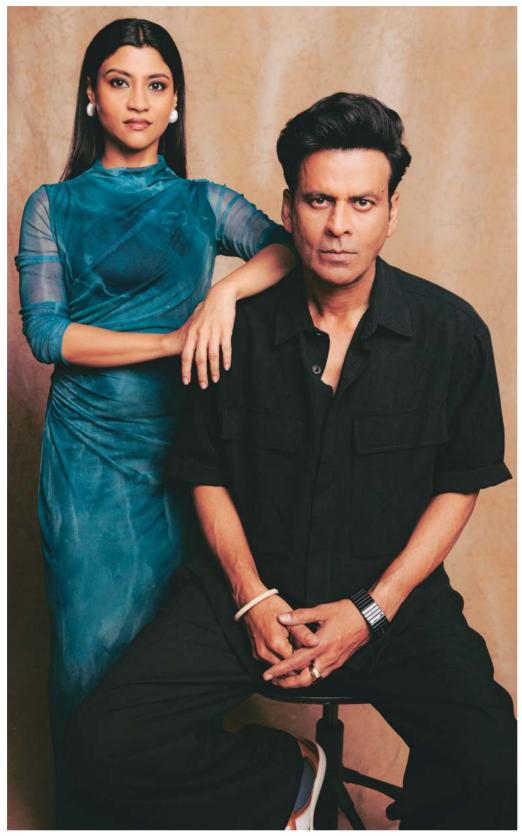
**MB:** In cinema, it is far easier since so many other technical departments are involved. In theatre, when you have to do a double role, it becomes demanding. What's challenging here was that if I got too into Prabhakar's character in the first half, I had to play Umesh in the afternoon. I found a 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 ecome better today ?

in some areas there has been remarkable ideas emerge. For instance, *Aamis* (2019).



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 **KS:** Not uniformly and consistently, but pushing the boundary, new and interesting

(Above) Manoj Bajpayee and

Sensharma; a still

from Killer Soup

**STAGE** 

(Above) Sajal

Mondal; in his

theatre workshop

with the children

at Sunderbans

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 owcased 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

**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

10tner project togetner 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

WO EXPERIENCES shaped Alain Ducasse, the superchef 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 Frenchborn 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 Germanspeaking 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

#### 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

WHEN THEIR course was over, the graduating batch of 2011 at India's prestigious theatre institute, the National School of Drama (NSD). in Delhi, was asked by a panel of faculty members what they wanted to do next. Sajal Mondal, one of the first from the Sunderbans, West Bengal, to gain admission to NSD, did not have to think. He would be going home to set up an initiative, called the Mangrove Theatre, named after the trees that grow profusely on the islands, to connect people with their stories of living in one of the most ecologically vulnerable regions in the world.

It was an unusual decision to return to the place from which most young people seek to migrate in search of a better future. The Sunderbans is the largest delta in the world, with a long history of exploration and rebellion. Here, nature and civilisation are constantly at loggerheads. Located to the southeast of Kolkata, the deltaic region is an ever-changing landscape of land, water and forest, where hunger drives humans into tiger territory. Already one of the poorest regions in the world, the Sunderbans is now facing the cascading effects of climate change in the form of intensifying cyclones

The islands have been inhabited for centuries and developed unique rituals and traditions. "Unlike most places, people have a close understanding with the ways of the water, the animals and the forest, which is essential for our survival," says Mondal. His

theatre is made of such stories Mondal was born and raised on Basanti 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,"

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

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 the-

to Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata where he chose the drama department. atre clowning.

atre, with ritual performances centred around deities such as Bon Bibi and Manasa. "After I returned from NSD, I went around meeting the local folk artistes. 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.

Without any funding source, Mondal is using his earnings from films - he had two releases during Durga Puja, Raktabeej and Bagha Jatin — to develop a theatre space behind his house. It is a large space with no walls and a fabric-covered canopy supported by pillars. An attached room is for practitioners who want to stay and work. The highlight of the Mangrove Theatre is the annual Shishu Mela or Children's Fair in October, an event for which the local children wait an entire year. In 2023, it included a workshop on the-

The last performance at the space was in December 2023 — an event to felicitate the achievements of a local boy, Somen Debnath, who had returned home after covering the world on a bicycle to spread awareness for HIV/AIDS. Debnath had started his journey in 2004. At present, another work is in progress, involving children who imagine stories about themselves and their surroundings based on word prompts. "I make theatre to show them that it is possible to live in a different way, in different worlds," he says.

New Delhi

Why aren't there better options for menstrual cramps than just popping painkillers?

The pain women are taught to grin and bear

Rinku Ghosh

LL THROUGH her school and college years, actor Sumona Chakravarti, 35, would curl up in spasmodic pain during her periods, miss her classes and basketball games, clutching on to her hot water bottle and a strip of pain-relieving Meftal 500. "Consulting several gynaecologists, it was only after college that I got diagnosed with endometriosis (where the uterus wall tissue grows outside of it too, crusting it). Still, it took me some time to find a specialist, as gynaecologists suggested that I opt for early pregnancy to ease my cervix for easier blood flow and reduce my cramps — an extreme alternative really. I laboured through my shoot days, was bloated and in pain so severe that I felt I was being sliced alive. Sometimes I could neither

stand nor sit," Sumona says. For Rashmi Kabra, 49, an NGO worker in Spiti Valley, her teenage years were about her 'The uterus is mother asking her to grin and hardly looked at as bear it like she did. "Imagine being caged in by a grid of an organ beyond swords, piercing you from all sides but keeping you alive its reproductive breath by breath or being in continuous labour pain. I function' would shiver and change five sanitary napkins in an hour as the blood gushed out from

nowhere," she says. She gave up her previous job at Balaji Telefilms in Mumbai after she collapsed on the studio floor and had to be hospitalised. "I was diagnosed with grade-4 endometriosis, had a surgery. The battle was won but the war continues with cyclical hormone therapy. This has affected my relationships and sunk me into depression," adds Rashmi, whose frequent visits to the

emergency room resulted in a divorce Women like them experience paralysing menstrual cramps month after month for varying reasons. They could be cysts, fibroids, endometriosis, adenomyosis (where the wall tissue overgrows inside and covers muscles) or simply the restrictive shape of the cervix or the mouth of the uterus that differs from woman to woman, sometimes firm and narrow. Yet, all of them are prescribed the same routine of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for pain, hormonal birth control pills and tranexamic acid tablets to control blood flow and severity of cramps. At the extreme end are surgical interventions. And this has pretty much been static over decades. But as the prolonged use of painkillers and birth control pills has side effects on kidneys and can become a trigger for certain cancers, the question is why research hasn't been able to crack the code of a convenient medication or therapy for menstrual pain?

#### WHY A MAGIC PILL ELUDES US?

"That's because the uterus is hardly looked at as an important organ that needs looking after just like other major organs of the body. We look at it as just a reproductive vehicle. Yet it balances women's hormones, which govern all aspects of their overall health. Women themselves have normalised and patronised old wives' tales," says Dr

Anshumala Shukla Kulkarni, the Head of Minimally Invasive Gynaecology, Laparoscopic and Robotic Surgery at Kokilaben Ambani Hospital in Mumbai.

Casually dismissed as a "routine problem," menstrual cramping has been put on the backburner. "We have not yet understood the complexity of the female reproductive system or its exact science. That's because the

manifestation of menstrual complications is different for each woman. So are their responses to therapy. Pain cannot be quantified and is multifactorial. Every therapy has to be customised," says Dr Shishta Nadda Basu, senior director and Head of Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Max Super Speciality Hospital in New Delhi's Shalimar Bagh. "Also, most women are eager to pop a pill than do a clinical investigation and find out if they have an enlarged uterus, thickened walls, fibroids, polyps or cysts. Nobody thinks about rooting out the problem at source and prefers persistent pain. Yet, pills and dilatory

medicines are just temporary relief," she says. At the beginning of menstruation, levels of the hormones progesterone and estradiol drop, leading to an increased production of compounds called prostaglandins. In the absence of a fertilised egg, its job is to contract the uterus and help it expel tissue. This may cause painful cramps. "Sometimes abdominal muscle soreness, inflamed tissue, pelvic floor muscle fatigue and bowel irritability could also cause the pain. Women should know that any pain that's uncharacteristic and debilitating, and lasts longer than half a day, is problematic and consult a doctor," says Dr Basu.

Dr Kulkarni, who runs the endometriosis clinic at Kokilaben, says that anecdotally, one out of 10 Indian women or roughly 10 per cent of the productive workforce unknowingly suffer from this condition, where tissue overgrowth forms degenerative clusters all around the uterus and spreads elsewhere due to delayed diagnosis. "It takes up to eight years to show up properly. Even ultrasound fails and you need a specialised MRI. Sometimes, you need to insert a laparoscope to locate the growth. And women, given their conditioning, myths and inadequacy of medical professionals to guide and alert them in tier-II or III cities, end up ignoring it. By then, surgery is the only way to give relief," she adds.

The diagnosis of endometriosis for most of her patients was incidental. "They came to me when they had trouble conceiving. I had a young husband abandon a wife during surgery, saying she had misinformed him about her condition before marriage and was not ready to pick up either the financial or emotional tab of something he had not caused," says Dr Kulkarni. Besides, it can even cause problems during and after menopause. "A 74year old reported severe burning in her vagina and we found an old tissue mass had compressed her nerves badly. Yes, 20 per cent women can have symptoms even after menopause. And there is a genetic link. A mother, in her late 40s, came for hysterectomy after suffering for decades. Her 20-year-old daughter had similar symptoms and was found to have endometriosis after the mother insisted she be tested.'

#### HOW GOOD ARE EXISTING THERAPIES?

Most therapy revolves around suppressive medication, medicated copper Ts or surgical intervention. Lab-made versions of hormones and hormonal contraceptives regulate blood flow. "These days new drugs, like gonadotropin-releasing hormone (Gn-

RH) agonists and antagonists, block the menstrual cycle and lower estrogen levels, shrinking tissue growth," says Dr Asha Dalal, Director of Obstetrics & Gynaecology of the Well Women Centre at Sir H N Reliance

Foundation Hospital in Mumbai And as with diabetes and cardiovascular health, lifestyle correction is a must. "Take time out for pelvic floor exercises, lose body fat, avoid inflammatory foods, sleep on time and, as latest research has shown, have a diet rich in vitamins and minerals," says Dr Basu. "Hormone therapy means you keep taking breaks every few months. I never miss my tests and screening. I do weight training six days a week because it is important for endometriosis. I have low-carb home food as fat tends to accumulate around the abdomen. I have given up gluten and dairy as they increase inflammation, a trigger for pain. I drink a lot of water and stay away from black tea. I have dinner by 6 pm, sleep by 10 pm and wake up by 5.30 am. Pranayama helps. And I carry my prescriptions and medicine while travelling," says Sumona.

#### DOES RESEARCH LACK FUNDING?

While many argue that menstrual pain is ignored in research since it is not life-threatening, Dr Kulkarni says the real issue is that most studies are at the molecular level and there has been no breakthrough that indicates a consistency in results. "Test samples have been very small and you need a larger cohort. You invest only when there is a demonstrable potential," she says.

Latest research in the West is veering around Sildenafil citrate, which is the generic version of Viagra and increases blood flow by dilating blood vessels, thereby flushing away pain triggers. It is also believed to oxygenate the uterus more as low oxygen levels can stimulate nerve endings, resulting in pain. But till large scale clinical trials prove its worth, options are limited at this point. Viagra for male virility assures returns, its experiments with female hormones don't.

"In India, research on menstrual pain is difficult given its subjective nature. But the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and  $the \, Endometrios is \, Society \, of \, India \, have \, found \,$ an mRNA which can help in detecting endometriosis. Another study has found a link between autoimmune disorders and endometriosis," says Dr Kulkarni.

ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

THE ROLE OF A SUPPORT SYSTEM But can greater societal understanding help in alleviating the pain of insensitivity? Ask Shibashish Roy, a corporate executive, 44, who has been with his wife Aasha, 41, through her bad years, about how that experience has helped him consider flexible work options for women colleagues. The starting point in managing menstrual health, he believes, is an open discussion between partners. "What was ac ceptable for us back then is not what we need to accept now. So, men too should be guestioning beliefs and cliches, should be a part of women's health check-ups and reassure them that going slow on some days is okay. Whenever I visit a doctor, my wife accompanies me. If I reciprocate, that's a good place to normalise conversations about menstrual pain as a chronic health issue. Half our population suffers from it," says Roy. However, for women, the time for patience is over and absenteeism just cannot replace drugs.

#### T want to start by asking you to reflect on your last flying experience: How did you feel when you were boarding the plane? What do you remember from your in-flight experience the most? Was it a pleasant one or did something happen which ruined your mood completely?

For many of us, flying today is just the fastest way of getting from point A to point B. For some, it's about finding the cheapest fare no matter the duration of the journey. If you are like my wife, Heta, your main goal is to minimise the idle time at the airport. She will be forever optimising her time of arrival to the airport such that she reaches her gate precisely when her boarding zone is called. She will never check-in a bag to avoid check-in queues and baggage belts. If you are a flight nerd like me, then flying for you is about the experience appreciating the nuances of each airport, each airline, each aircraft, and each flight route.

Regardless of which category you fall into, one thing is inevitable: The rate at which Indian aviation is progressing, more people are going to take more flights every year. This also means, more crowded airports, fuller planes, and a greater load overall on airport systems. When I fly these days, I see a lot of travellers frustrated across the 4 phases of their flying experience: pre-airport, pre-flight, in-flight and post-flight. Let me illustrate:

Pre-airport frustrations - the factors that cause anxiety before you even arrive at the airport: The Uber or Ola driver taking a wrong turn, Google Maps underestimating the traffic, finding a traffic jam at a key junction or just mundane things like being unable to find your wallet when you are supposed to leave. Now you are worried whether you will make it before the check-in or gate closes. Worse yet, you find after making it through all this anxiety that your flight has been delayed by 3 hours.

Pre-flight frustrations can especially ruin your mood because these are not always about you; they are often due to another passenger making life difficult for other fliers. Take security check: regardless of the airport you are at, you will always find three stars: 1. That person who is foreign to the concept of 'queues' and just tries to cut to the front of the line 2. One who has indeed arrived late and is skipping all queues telling everyone diligently

# Frustrations at the airport! How to overcome them?

Your last flying experience. What were some of your frustrations? If there were many, why not change this with your next flight!

waiting in line that their boarding has started and that they have no choice but to skip queues. 3. The one pushing the x-ray machine trays of other passengers away and only trying to get their tray to the front of the queue. Another major cause of pre-flight frustration are crazy long lines at check-in or even at the boarding gate. This can make many of us, including myself, feel edgy or snappy.

If that wasn't enough, you reach boarding and see a long line form at the gate before boarding even starts or people trying to board in the wrong zone. You finally get to your seat but the cabin space above is so full that you now have to go 10 rows behind to store your bag. Heta's biggest frustration: meticulously packing all her travel needs into a cabin bag only to be told at the boarding gate that she needs to check-in her bag (which is directly a post-flight frustration that I will discuss next). Then you realise you have a middle seat on a 14 hour flight, or that your family members are split up. You look around and see a tall or large person struggling to fit in an economy seat, or a vegetarian who finds out only non-veg meals are left on the flight. You take off and realise your entertainment system has no good content (or is broken!), and you forgot to download your movies or

Finally, the post-flight frustrations: hours long immigration queues, bags taking forever to reach the belt, bag arriving damaged or drenched from the rain, or worst of all, your bag not making it to your destination at all, leaving you with absolutely nothing for your trip. And after that whole ordeal, having to coordinate with your Uber driver with the complicated airport signage to just feel relieved to be done with it all.

It is safe to say that there is an



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abundance of scenarios that can sour our flying experience, which inevitably leads to a bad start to a trip, be it for work or for leisure. And I really dislike that! With the advancement of science and technology that enables transportation at 37,000ft in the air, our flying experience should have us feeling like we are on cloud nine! While I can appreciate that many

factors in the flying experience are out of our control, I certainly believe that there are many things that we can do to improve our experience and that of our co-travellers.

Based on the airline you choose, there are many steps you can take to minimise frustrations and increase delight. If you are an impatient traveller like Heta, get priority check-in and boarding, and ensure you have DigiYatra through security. Have a flight with a short layover? Get travel insurance that covers delayed luggage. Picky about your food like me? Pre-book your meal and you have something to look forward to. Finally, the one step that costs nothing: just plan to arrive at the airport with an extra 30 minutes to spare for any eventuality. After a horrific sequence of events that led her to miss a flight, Heta has finally started putting this into practice, and has found Zen in her flight experience.

So here are some of the things on my personal checklist to ensure that each and every flight is a fun one.

Pre-book your meal. I can't stress this one enough. If you are flying to countries like Japan or South Korea and are a vegetarian or have any other dietary limitations/preferences make sure you select a meal of your choice. These flights generally have limited vegetarian meals which run out quickly. Nothing ruins a flight more than being left `hangry'.

Check for airline add-ons. Akasa's priority check-in, and Indigo's Fast-track service can ensure super fast check-in and sometimes priority boarding too - skip the queues, be the first one on the plane and keep your cabin bag where it suits you best.

Check the validity of your travel insurance. This often can come in handy for lost or damaged baggage.

New Delhi

#### **ADVERTORIAL**

Check-in online, and early! I usually put a reminder on my phone when I book a flight for when the check-in opens. Select a seat of your choice and keep your boarding pass handy. Are you a couple that wants some privacy on a 3-3 seat configuration flight? Some aircrafts such as Indigo's A321 neo have a row (row 28) with only 2 seats on each side.

Check Google Maps and multiply by 1.5. I always assume it's going to take 1.5x the time Google Maps estimates to reach the airport and leave accordingly. This leaves enough time for a wrong turn or sudden change in traffic

Set up DigiYatra. Load the boarding pass for your flight on the app so entry into the airport is hands-free and quick. This also ensures a dedicated security check line.

Plan for security screening. I keep my electronics easily accessible to remove at security checks. I even dress for it, avoiding belts, and wearing easy-to-remove shoes. Heta and I are now extra mindful at security, noting each of the requirements and taking an extra minute to ensure we remove all the items asked for, because too often we have found our bags pulled up for additional screening. Nothing is more frustrating than waiting in yet another line of additional screening when it can be avoided.

This is the checklist that I have created based my own frustrations and observations. So let me come back to what I started the article with: Your last flying experience. What were some of your frustrations? If there were many, why not change this with vour next flight? So go on, get your checklist ready. Bon Voyage!



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