

Across THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

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The dazzling of Affluent India has blinded the BJP government to the state of the bottom 20 per cent because it has the unflinching support of a steel frame called RSS; its coffers are brimming with money thanks to the rich corporates and electoral bonds; and it knows how to make a potent mixture of religion and hyper-nationalism. It is a government verily for Affluent India

THE MEDIA has gone to town on Affluent India. Affluent India is our AI — persons having an annual income of USD 10,000 or about Rs 84,000. The media is gushing over the claims that AI is growing at a mind-boggling CAGR, AI is driving consumption, and AI will make India a USD 5 trillion economy by the year (yet undetermined because the goalpost is constantly shifting!).

I am happy for AI. Here comes the rider: according to the Goldman Sachs' report, the size of AI by the year 2026 will be 100 million (10 crore) or roughly **7 per cent** of India's population. Why is Goldman Sachs concerned about AI and not the rest (**93 percent**) of the Indian people? Because Goldman Sachs is a rich persons bank and, if AI were a separate country, AI would be a middle-income country and the 15th largest of the world. It is Affluent Indians (with honourable exceptions) who save, spend, invest, splurge, squander and shout about their income, wealth and everything else. When AI buys and consumes, it creates an *illusion* that all Indians buy and consume. AI has become the proxy for all India. The remaining 93 per cent earn modest incomes and some lead a satisfying life while the *majority* makes an effort to make both ends meet.

UPPER HALF, BOTTOM HALF

Let's stack the three customary numbers denoting income:

Affluent India: Rs 8,40,000 per year
Median income: Rs 3,87,000
Per capita NNI: Rs 1,70,000

It is a tiny slice that is Affluent India. The *per capita* net national income (NNI) is meaningless because AI pulls the average upwards. The more relevant statistic is the median income. **One-half** of the Indian people (71 crore) have an income of Rs 3,87,000 per year or *less*, or about 32,000 a month or *less*. The lower you go down on the economic ladder, the income will be lesser. What does the bottom 10 per cent or 20 per cent of the population earn *in a month*? My generous estimate is that the *per capita* monthly income of the bottom 10 per cent will be Rs 6,000 and of the bottom 11–20 per cent Rs 12,000. We should worry about the conditions in which they live, the kind of food they eat, the healthcare they get, and so on. According to the UNDP's multi-dimensional poverty index, 22.8 crore people or about 16 per cent of the population are below the poverty line. (According to NITI Aayog, it is 11.28 per cent or 16.8 crore.)

FORGOTTEN POOR

While celebrating the 7 crore people who will be Affluent India, we should also reflect on the pitiable status of three times more Indians (22.8 crore) who are

in poverty. It is not difficult to identify the poor:

- The 15.4 crore active registered workers under MGNREGS who were promised 100 days of work in a year but were allotted in the last five years, on average, only 49–51 days;

- Most of the beneficiaries who were given an LPG connection but could afford, on average, only 3.7 cylinders in a year;

- Those who own or cultivate less than 1–2 acres of land among the 10.47 crore farmers (the number dropped to 8.12 crore as on November 15, 2023) who received the *kisan samman* of Rs 6,000 per year;

- Most daily wage workers who are engaged as agricultural labourers;

- The 'street people' who live and sleep on pavements or under bridges;

- Most single women old-age pensioners; and

- Most persons who do so-called 'unclean' jobs like cleaning sewers, drains and public toilets; skin animals, make or repair footwear, etc.

The 21–50 per cent of the people who earn below the median income are only slightly better off than the bottom 20 per cent. They don't go hungry or without shelter but they live on the edge of uncertainty. Most private jobs have no job security or social security benefits. For example, the 2.8 crore domestic help registered on the government's e-SHRAM portal work at below-the-minimum

wage (the actual number is many times more). Except government and public sector employees, the others live in fear of losing their jobs. In 2023, the tech companies alone laid off or retrenched 2.60,000 highly qualified employees. 100 start-ups axed 24,000 jobs.

BLINDED BY DAZZLE

The five-star hotels, resorts, glitzy malls, luxury brand stores, multiplex cinemas, private jets, destination weddings, Lamborghinis (priced in the range Rs 3.22 to 8.89 crore, the company sold a record 103 cars in 2023), etc., have enough patrons among AI. AI is able to sustain this high standard of living because AI owns 60 per cent of the nation's wealth and earns 57 per cent of the national income.

The dazzling of AI has blinded the BJP government to the state of the bottom 20 per cent because it has the unflinching support of a steel frame called RSS; its coffers are brimming with money thanks to the rich corporates and electoral bonds; and it knows how to make a potent mixture of religion and hyper-nationalism. It is a government verily for Affluent India.

India is being pulled away from the idea of a *social and economic democracy*. The Opposition parties and the media may not be vigilant but the poor and middle classes — the 93 per cent — are watching and waiting.

Fifth COLUMN

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Renaissance, not revenge

THE CONSECRATION ceremony in Ayodhya tomorrow has the support of most Indians. Those denying this are deluded or trying to make a political point as Rahul Gandhi is doing on his new yatra. A clip he posted on social media has him saying that nobody has the right to tell you how to worship, what to eat or how to live. He is right but if his political instincts were stronger, he would know that he is out of touch with the national mood. Personally, I have learned never to go against the box office.

This is why I have said before that the temple is now a reality and that it should become a symbol of renewal and reconciliation. I have also warned against the dangers of religion becoming a political ideology and pointed to the ruin this has brought in countries like Pakistan and Iran. It is possible to say both these things. But trolls on social media see complex issues only in black and white and so I have been charged with, among other things, being confused and changing my mind out of sycophancy.

On the eve of the consecration of Ram's new temple, I would like to warn against Hindu triumphalism once again. This is becoming stridently evident and increasingly farcical. One political lowlife, known to be close to the Home Minister, went to the extent of posting a picture of Khan Market decked in saffron flags and sneeringly tweeted that people like me would now probably boycott Khan Market in future. I use this example because the barb was directed my way but there are thousands of examples of Hindu triumphalism on social media and some of it comes from people 'proud to be followed by Narendra Modi'. When he is done with the consecration ceremony, the Prime Minister would do well to openly condemn Hindutva triumphalism. It is destroying any chance of the temple becoming a symbol of hope and renewal.

There is something else I want to draw attention to today. I did an interview with V S Naipaul soon after the Babri Masjid was torn down in which he said that he was not that horrified by what had happened. Babar was no friend of India, he said, and would have built the mosque out of contempt so if nemesis caught up with him a few centuries later, nobody should complain. This interview has been posted on my timeline many times in recent days but without reminding people of what Naipaul said immediately after.

He said that the idea of taking political revenge made no sense and that after a cultural death, a true revival comes about only when you accept that the past is truly dead. "People feel continuity is what they are expressing, but the renaissance doesn't come about by people trying to pretend that the past is still going on. The renaissance comes when people accept that the past is over. I think this is where I would probably part company with the political position of the BJP." Wise words that need to be remembered in this moment when Ram could become the symbol of a much-needed Indian renaissance.

For far too long far too many Indians have lived in a sort of dark age in which for some the only thing that has mattered is religious revivalism entwined deeply with a hatred of Muslims. For those of more leftist bent the only thing that has mattered is a twisted form of casteism in which those belonging to castes oppressed for centuries now believe that it is time to take revenge on those they believe are privileged. Having recently been a victim of this second lot I want to reiterate that hating the upper castes is also a form of casteism.

It is our misfortune that political leaders on all sides of the divide have exploited the basest emotions in voters in the hope of winning elections. Hatred, fanaticism, bigotry usually define the mood of the nation in an election year and there is every chance that this could happen once more as the general election draws near. When the election is over there will be the usual attempts to try and bring peace and harmony but one reason why there has never been an Indian renaissance is because it is impossible to put the bad stuff back into the bottle once it is unleashed.

If the temple is to become a 'national temple' as some politicians have been saying, then there is a chance that there could finally come the possibilities of an Indian renaissance. It is something that will help India emerge from a long period of darkness in which people have been distracted from their real problems by reminding them constantly of divisions of caste, creed, and community. It is these basest of emotions and the constant idea of taking revenge politically for historical wounds that have held India back. All our political parties and all our political leaders are guilty of having done this again and again.

It is time for all of them to reflect on the harm they have done and repent. It is a shame that so many opposition leaders refused to attend tomorrow's consecration. It was an opportunity lost. I shall end with Vidya Naipaul's excellent advice: a renaissance will only happen when the past is seen to be 'truly dead.'

Anand Teltumbde: Of a frank and fearless mind



Dalitality

SURAJ YENGDE

ANAND TELTUMBDE is a rare intellectual, someone gifted with a versatility that cuts across disciplines. He's among the top-ranking intellectuals of contemporary India. Much like the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm, he is someone who can easily play with multiple topics and engage intelligently.

Teltumbde's is an honourable name among the list of this column's predecessors. In his column Margin Speak, which he wrote for the *Economic & Political Weekly*, he demonstrated the quality and merit that flow in the lineage of India's talented people disdained by the arresting assault of caste.

Teltumbde's articles carried the weight of data, argument, and contemporaneity. Most importantly, they were unafraid to speak. It is only Teltumbde who could take on the state and politics stylistically, something that irritated many.

Teltumbde's text on the 2006 Khairlanji atrocity was heart-wrenching. He collated data by visiting the site of the atrocity and analysed its cause, reaching the conclusion that neoliberal policies clubbed with Hindutva were the cause of many of these atrocities. Teltumbde helped us to foreground the meaning of atrocity. Among his notable scholarly contributions to social sciences are his monographs covering the state and the political economy.

Teltumbde is an introvert. As much as he is a shy person, he doesn't shy away an inch when it comes to talking about the politics he believes in.

Anand is a sought-after intellect whose new writings are awaited in the marketplace of debates. Several campus dialogues and private scholarly conversations are based on his ideas. Anand is a casualty of his time. He grew up at a time when change was visible and not criminalised. It was a moment of revolutionary pronouncements.

Anand's greatest asset is his family and the background he hails from. It is a rarity for someone who took birth in a landless labourer's womb in the untouchables' quarters of Rajur village, in Yavatmal's Wani, to rise to become the sparkling titan of his field. Very few have managed to do what Anand has done in his life. Anand's

story is complete with his wife Rama by his side.

His early exposure to revolutionary literature kept him critically engaged. He sharpened the tools of his mind by probing into the terrains of blasphemous territories. The fragile, traditionalist camp of the Dalit movement took objection to Anand's vocal ideas. They accepted him as a Leftist thinker mimicking the Left's tone of unleashing his critique upon an entire community. As a writer, he took positions over several years and at times, these were unpopular, but that was his hard-earned right.

Teltumbde called out those who didn't make the lives of the poor and the regular people dignified. He found value in the Marxist maxim as well as in Ambedkar and Buddha. He was equally critical of either ideology, but the attack was against the system. By staying on what he saw as the right side of history, Teltumbde battled with many diverging interests.

We often forget that his core area of expertise lies in cybernetics, which is touted in the present era as the dawn of AI. Teltumbde charted new paths into this new-age technology in 1993 when he earned his PhD from the University of Mumbai. Besides, he was an ace management student at IIM-A and a C-class executive in India's state petroleum company. He then went on to teach at the IIT Kharagpur and founded the nation's first data science programme at the Goa Institute of Management. I have yet to come across a corporate success story like Teltumbde's, who has returned to the roots trying to ameliorate the condition that he was born into.

What a great travesty for the nation that a mind like Teltumbde is forced to stay muted. He follows the pursuit of truth-seeking and trades in plain speak. His energy and erudition must be boiling like volcanic lava, and we need to let that loose so the nation can assess its warranty. I have missed Anand's take on many matters in the past four years.

I recently met him at Rajgruha. His health is as fit as one can imagine of a person who has unjustly spent 31 months in gaol. The tragedy of such an act is that unfairness was paraded in the cabaret of moral schooling. Teltumbde is a winner for his maddened courage. He stands on the side of history that will judge once an epoch is passed for the next generations to sit back and assess. Fortunately, that generation is around and is praiseworthy of the man's work. I count myself in that league.

Suraj Yengde, author of Caste Matters, curates Dalitality and is currently at Oxford University

history HEADLINE

VIKAS PATHAK



AFTER A Ram Lalla idol was placed in the Babri Masjid on the night of December 22–23, 1949, a livid Jawaharlal Nehru ordered for its removal. But in a country born out of a scarring Partition and riots, Nehru didn't have his way. The pushback to the Prime Minister's orders came not just from then District Magistrate KK Nair and city magistrate Guru Dutt Singh, but also from within the Congress in Faizabad.

Local Congress MLA from Faizabad, Baba Raghav Das, was among those who vociferously opposed any move to remove the idol, even threatening to resign if that happened.

In his book, *The Demolition And The Verdict*, journalist Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay writes, "In 1950, when the Centre, at Nehru's directive, was pressuring the state government for action, Raghav Das threatened to resign from the assembly and the party if the idol was removed."

The MLA was no pushover. He had won the Faizabad seat in a 1948 byelection, defeating sitting MLA and socialist stalwart Acharya Narendra Dev by a margin of almost 1,300 votes. The by-election had been necessitated by Narendra Dev's decision to resign — he was among 13 MLAs who had walked out of the Congress to form a separate socialist party.

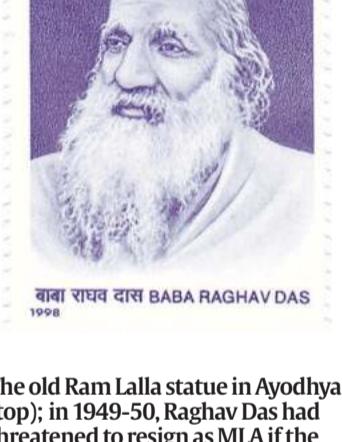
Raghav Das had been handpicked for the byelection by UP Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant himself. The spiritually inclined Raghav Das was the perfect foil for the rationalist Narendra Dev. Mukhopadhyay's book says that to ensure Narendra Dev's defeat, Pant himself campaigned for Raghav Das in Ayodhya, and told people of the temple town that Narendra Dev was an atheist who did not believe in Lord Ram. "Pant emphasised that Narendra Dev did not wear the *chet*, the tuft of hair worn by devout Hindus," Mukhopadhyay writes in his book.

The newly elected MLA got linked to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement right from the word go. When a nine-day *akhand paath* of the Ramcharitamanas was held in Ayodhya from October 20, 1949, Raghav Das attended the programme on the last day, sharing the stage with Mahant Digvijayanath of the Hindu Mahasabha — the guru of Mahant Avaidyanath, whose disciple Yogi Aditanath is now Chief Minister of UP — and Swami Karpati of the Ram Rajya Parishad.

Raghav Das's role and stature weren't limited to Ayodhya.

A new book, *Tryst With Ayodhya*, written by former BJP Rajya Sabha MP Balbir Punj, says people even called him the "Gandhi of Poorvanchal". Raghav Das had been made to join the freedom struggle

Cong MLA who defied Nehru on Ram Lalla idol



The old Ram Lalla statue in Ayodhya (top); in 1949–50, Raghav Das had threatened to resign as MLA if the statue was removed. File/Express

Raghav Das had been handpicked for the 1948 Ayodhya by-election by UP CM Govind Ballabh Pant. The spiritually inclined Raghav Das was the perfect foil for the rationalist Narendra Dev. Pant is said to have personally campaigned for Das

ten by former BJP Rajya Sabha MP Balbir Punj, says people even called him the "Gandhi of Poorvanchal". Raghav Das had been made to join the freedom struggle

by Mahatma Gandhi himself in 1921, and had gone to jail a number of times. He had also taken part in Gandhi's 1931 Dandi March. It is believed that it was Gandhi who first called him "Baba" Raghav Das, after which the prefix stuck.

Indeed, Raghav Das had spiritual credentials too. He was a disciple and the successor of Yogiraj Anant Mahaprabhu, a famous saint from Barhaj in Deoria, eastern Uttar Pradesh. He also built the Paramhansa ashram at Barhaj and got a statue of the revolutionary freedom fighter, Ram Prasad Bismil, with whom he was close, installed at the Ashram.

Raghav Das was also a social reformer. He was involved in educational activities, served lepers and was associated with Vinoba Bhave's Bhoojan movement to redistribute zamindari lands to peasants.

Born in a Brahmin family of Pune in Maharashtra as Raghvendra, Raghav Das left home at the age of 17, wandering across eastern Uttar Pradesh "in search of truth" and learning Hindi from an ascetic called Mauni Baba.

Raghav Das became a votary of the Hindi language and opened a Rashtra Bhasha Vidyalya at his ashram in Barhaj. He also started a leprosy home and a degree college in Barhaj. Till date, a few educational institutions in eastern Uttar Pradesh bear Raghav Das's name. Among them are Baba Raghav Das Medical College, Gorakhpur, Baba Raghav Das Inter College, Deoria, and Baba Raghav Das Degree College, Barhaj.

Raghav Das passed away in 1958. On December 12, 1998, during the Vajpayee government's term, a postage stamp in the memory of the 'Ram Bhakt' Congress MLA who took on Nehru was released by the Government of India to mark Das's birth anniversary.

She SAID SHALINI LANGAR



TOP OF THE
WORLD

President Felix Tshisekedi. Reuters

CONGO

Tshisekedi takes oath again, says will unite country

Kinshasa: Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in Saturday following a disputed December election, promising to unite the Central African country during his second five-year term and to protect lives in the conflict-hit eastern region. "I am taking back the baton of command that you entrusted to me. We want a more united, stronger and prosperous Congo," Tshisekedi, 60, said during the inauguration ceremony attended by several heads of state. His first inauguration in 2019 marked Congo's first democratic transfer of power since the country's independence from Belgium in 1960.

AP

BAHRAIN

2 UK warships collide in port, damaged

London: Two British warships collided in a harbour in Bahrain, causing damage to the vessels but no injuries, the Royal Navy said. The HMS Chiddingfold appeared to reverse into the HMS Bangor as it was at a dock, according to video posted on social media. "Why this happened is still to be established," said Rear Admiral Edward Ahlgren. "We train our people to the highest standards... but unfortunately incidents of this nature can still happen," he said. The two minehunters have been based in the Middle East to help protect merchant vessels.

AP

TURKEY

In Turkey's first, Four astronauts at space station

Ankara: A four-man crew including Turkey's first astronaut arrived at the International Space Station (ISS) early on Saturday for a two-week stay in the latest such mission arranged entirely at commercial expense by Texas-based startup company Axiom Space. The rendezvous came about 37 hours after the Axiom quartet's Thursday evening liftoff in a rocketship from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida. The multinational team was led by Michael López-Alegría, 65, a Spanish-born retired NASA astronaut and Axiom executive making his sixth flight to the space station. He also led Axiom's debut mission in 2022.

REUTERS

DAYS AFTER TEHRAN HIT 'ISRAELI SPY CENTRES' IN IRAQ

Israeli strike in Syria kills 4 Iran military advisers as tensions rise amid Gaza war

Iran successfully launches Sorayya satellite into its highest-ever orbit

REUTERS
DAMASCUS, BEIRUT, JAN 20

AN ISRAELI missile strike on Syria's capital Damascus on Saturday killed four members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, including the head of the force's information unit, a security source in the regional pro-Syria alliance told Reuters.

In Tehran, the Revolutionary Guards named four military advisers who were killed in the Israeli strike, but did not give their rank, and said further details would be announced later. Iranian state TV said the targeted building was the residence of Iranian advisers in the Syrian capital.

There was no immediate comment from Israel, which has long pursued a bombing campaign against Iran's military and security presence in Syria.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards late on Monday said they attacked the spy headquarters of Israel in Erbil, capital of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region.

Iran foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian had said Wednesday that attacks against Israel by the "Axis of Resistance" will stop only if Gaza war ends.

The security source said the multi-storey building was used by Iranian advisers aiding President Bashar al-Assad's government.

EXPLAINED **E** Complex theatre of war

Tehran has been accused of funding 'proxies' including Lebanon's Houthi group and Hamas as well as groups in Syria. Israel has for long been launching strikes in Syria, but these have only intensified since the war in Gaza started on October 7.

"Iran...reserves its right to respond to the organised terrorism of the fake Zionist regime at the appropriate time and place," said Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani.

In the meanwhile successfully launched its Sorayya satellite into orbit, Iranian state media reported on Saturday, in a move likely to increase Western concerns about Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

The satellite, developed by the research arm of the civilian Iranian Space Agency, was put into a 750 km orbit, the highest reached by Iran, the reports said.

The security source said the multi-storey building was used by Iranian advisers aiding President Bashar al-Assad's government.



Emergency services working at the building hit by Israeli missiles in Damascus on Saturday. AP

Netanyahu not opposed to all 2-state solutions, says Biden after phone call

REUTERS
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 20

U.S. PRESIDENT Joe Biden on Friday said he spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about possible solutions for creation of an independent Palestinian state, suggesting one path could involve a non-militarized government.

Biden's call with Netanyahu was the first in nearly a month,

the White House said, noting the discussions focused on Israel's ongoing strikes in Gaza.

White House spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that Biden had been trying to schedule the call "for quite a bit of time" and denied it came in response to Netanyahu's comment on Thursday saying he objected to Palestinian statehood that did not guarantee Israel's security.

Asked if a two-state solution was impossible while

Netanyahu was still in office, Biden said, "No, it's not."

Speaking to reporters after a meeting with U.S. mayors, Biden said there were number of types possible, noting that some United Nations members do not have military forces. "I think we'll be able to work something out".

Biden and Netanyahu also discussed efforts to secure the remaining hostages held by Hamas, and Israel's shift to more "targeted" operations in Gaza.



Republican candidate Donald Trump with Senator Tim Scott in New Hampshire, Saturday. Reuters

For anti-Trump GOP wing, it all comes down to New Hampshire

THE NEW YORK TIMES
NEW HAMPSHIRE, JANUARY 20

THE FIRST-IN-THE-NATION primary could be the last stand for the anti-Trump Republican.

Since 2016, a shrinking band of Republican strategists, retired lawmakers and donors has tried to oust Donald J. Trump from his commanding position in the party. And again and again, through one

Capitol riot, two impeachments, three presidential elections and four criminal indictments, they have failed to gain traction with its voters.

What could be the final battle of the anti-Trump Republicans won't be waged in Congress or the courts, but in the packed ski lodges and snowy town halls of a state of 1.4 million residents.

Ahead of New Hampshire's primary on Tuesday, the old guard of the GOP has rallied around Nikki Haley, viewing her bid as its last,

best chance to finally pry the former president from atop its party.

Anything but a very close finish for her in the state would send Trump on a march to the nomination.

The Trump opposition is outnumbered and underemployed. The former president's polarizing style and hard-nosed tactics have pushed many Republicans who oppose him into early retirement

and humiliating defeats, or out of the party completely.

Elected Republicans have rallied around Trump. On Friday, Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina endorsed him in Concord. Even New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu — Haley's most potent political backer — has acknowledged that he would support Trump if he wins the party's nomination for a third time. Even if Haley can overcome the odds in New Hampshire, she faces the question: what's next?

But a victory would give her momentum heading into the Super Tuesday contests on March 5. Twelve of the 16 primaries on Super Tuesday allow independents or other voters to participate, a dynamic that has helped keep Ms. Haley competitive in New Hampshire.



Nepal Foreign Minister NP Saud with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vershinin in Kampala, Saturday. PTI

Nepal asks Russia again not to list its citizens for war against Ukraine

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KATHMANDU, JANUARY 20

NEPAL HAS requested Russia to not admit Nepalese nationals into the Russian Army and help repatriate those who have already joined the country's forces to fight the war in Ukraine.

At least 200 Nepalese youths have joined the Russian Army through illegal channels and 12 of them have already lost their lives while fighting against Ukraine.

Nepalese Foreign Minister N.P. Saud, during his meeting with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Vershinin on Friday at the sideline of the ongoing Non-Aligned Summit in Kampala, Uganda, asked Russia "not to recruit Nepalese nationals into the country's Army and to help repatriate those who have already joined the forces", according to the private secretary of Saud.

Saud clarified that "Nepal has no policy to send its nationals to foreign army except those few countries with which it has traditional arrangements".

"Therefore, I have asked the Russian minister not to recruit our nationals into its army," said Saud as quoted as saying by his personal secretariat.

Saud also asked the Russian side to "send back the dead bod-

ies of those killed in the Russia-Ukraine war while fighting for the Russian Army and to provide due compensation to the family of the victims".

The Nepalese Foreign Minister has requested the Russian government to make necessary arrangements to return the dead bodies at the earliest so that the family members of the victims could perform the last rites of the deceased relatives as per their traditional rituals," the personal secretariat quoted Saud as saying.

The Russian side has informed Saud that necessary arrangements will be made to provide compensation to the family of the deceased as per the Russian law.

Vesilievich, who is also the leader to the NAM Summit from Russia, has assured Saud that initiatives will be taken to address the concerns raised by Nepal.

"During the meeting the two leaders also discussed various aspects of bilateral relations between Nepal and Russia," according to Saud's secretariat.

Saud on the occasion mentioned the long historical relations existing between Nepal and Russia.

The Russian deputy foreign minister underscored the need for taking forward the bilateral relations, stressing that the relations between two countries were built on a strong foundation.

No disruption in trade with Iran on borders despite tensions: Pak

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KARACHI, JANUARY 20

TRADE ACTIVITIES between Pakistan and Iran remained uninterrupted at all the border points in the restive Balochistan province.

Umran said the positive thing was that governments on both sides now making efforts to move on with trade activities at the border crossing points of Taf-tan, Gwadar, Kech, Panj-gur and Washuk in Balochistan.

"Trade has been going on normally with vehicles and containers coming in and going there because despite the tensions..." he said. Mumtaz Khetran, the deputy commissioner of Panjgur, said that liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and other petroleum products were transported into Pakistan in the last 24 hours through the Chigay border with Iran.

Pakistan earlier recalled its 34-member trade delegation from Chabahar after the Iranian strikes in the Panjgur area.

13 students killed in fire in China school dormitory

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, JANUARY 20

A FIRE broke out in dorms at a boarding school for elementary students in central Henan province, and 13 students died in the blaze, Chinese state media reported on Saturday.

All of the dead were third grade students, a teacher told Zonglan news, a state-backed media outlet from Hebei province. One person rescued from the

scene was being treated, CCTV, China's state broadcaster said.

The fire started Friday night and was put out just before midnight at Yingcai School in rural Fangcheng district in central Henan, and the school's owner was detained, CCTV reported.

The boarding school caters primarily to students in the elementary grades, though it has an attached kindergarten, according to the school. Many of the boarding students come from rural areas, Beijing Youth reported.



RACE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

US SUPREME COURT'S RULING LAST YEAR WAS MEANT TO MAKE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS RACE-BLIND

After affirmative action ban, college selection essays flag key element: Race



Some parents said they were glad the children got to reflect on their identities in their essays, while some felt deprived. NYT

THE NEW YORK TIMES
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 20

ASTRID DELGADO first wrote her college application essay about a death in her family. Then she reshaped it around a Spanish book she read as a way to connect to her Dominican heritage.

Deshayne Curley wanted to leave his Indigenous background out of his essay. But he reworked it to focus on an heirloom necklace that reminded him of his home on the Navajo Reservation.

The first draft of Jyel Hollingsworth's essay explored their love for chess. The final fo-

cused on the prejudice between her Korean and Black American families and the financial hardships she overcame.

All three students said they decided to rethink their essays to emphasize one key element: their racial identities. And they did so after the Supreme Court last year struck down affirmative action in college admissions, leaving essays the only place for applicants to directly indicate their racial and ethnic backgrounds.

High school students gradu-

ating this year worked on their college applications, due this month, in one of the most

turbulent years in American education.

Not only have they had to prepare them in the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war — which sparked debates about free speech and antisemitism on college campuses, leading to the resignation of two Ivy League presidents — but they also had to wade through the new ban on race-conscious admissions.

"It has been a lot to take in," said Keteyian Cade, a 17-year-old from St. Louis. "There is so much going on in the world right now."

The court's ruling was meant to make college admissions race-blind — answers to the race and

ethnicity question on applications are now hidden from admissions committees.

A recent Gallup poll found that nearly two-thirds of Americans showed support for the ban on affirmative action. Some strongly believe race should not be considered during the admissions process.

"I think it's wrong," said Edward J. Blum, the president of Students for Fair Admissions, the group that brought the case to the Supreme Court.

But the ruling also allowed admissions officers to consider race in personal essays, as long as decisions were not based on

race, but on the personal qualities that grew out of an applicant's experience with their race, like grit or courage.

This led many students of color to reframe their essays around their identities, under the advice of college counselors and parents.

And several found that the experience of rewriting helped them explore who they are. While some parents said they were glad their children got to reflect on their identities in their essays, others feared that the court ruling would make it harder for their child to find community while in college.

'THE EVENT ON JAN 22 IS A RELIGIOUS FUNCTION, NOT A STATE FUNCTION'

Unscheduled holiday declaration irks banking unions and market players

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
MUMBAI/NEW DELHI,
JANUARY 20

THE DECLARATION of holiday on January 22, in order to enable people to participate in the Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha celebrations, has led to protests in the banking and financial markets with bank unions saying the move as a "blatant misuse of government and public sector institutions".

Citing the Government of Maharashtra notification that declared January 22 as a public holiday under Section 25 of the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said there will be no transactions and settlements in government securities (primary and secondary), foreign exchange, money markets and Rupee Interest Rate Derivatives on January 22. "Settlement of all outstanding transactions will accordingly get postponed to the next working day i.e., January 23," the RBI said.

Stock markets were open for trading on Saturday without the planned disaster recovery movements. However, the markets will remain shut on Monday as the Maharashtra government has declared public holiday under the Negotiable



Stock markets were open for trading on Saturday without the planned disaster recovery movements. File

instruments Act.

In a statement, the Kolkata-based Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI), one of the nine bank unions, expressed concern over the notification issued on January 18 by the Department of Financial Services (DFS), Ministry of Finance, declaring Half-day closing of public sector banks (PSB), PSU insurance companies, financial institutions and regional rural banks (RRB) on January 22.

"The occasion of Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha scheduled to be held on January 22 is only a religious function and not a state function. The Preamble to the Constitution declares India to be a Sovereign Socialist Secular

Democratic Republic," BEFI said, urging the government to maintain the direction of the Constitution in letter and spirit. "BEFI strongly opposes this highly objectionable Notification issued by the DFS and demands immediate withdrawal of the order," it said.

In an order dated January 18, the DFS said, "the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) order in respect of central institutions and central industrial establishments shall also apply to all PSU banks, insurance companies, PSU financial institutions and RRBs to enable employees to participate in the Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha celebrations."

"This is not the first occasion of this nature. The Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY) flagged off by the Prime Minister of the

"To enable employees to participate in the celebrations, it has been decided that all Central government offices, central institutions and central industrial establishments throughout India will be closed for half day till 2.30 pm on January 22," DoPT said in an office memorandum.

According to SC Garg, former finance secretary, the holidays are of two types - one is the holiday where the offices are closed, and the second is the holiday where all the establishments are supposed to be closed. "I understand this notification has been issued with the requirement of closing all establishments, factories and others. So, this covers the RBI, which is also an establishment.

If the Maharashtra government has declared a holiday (on January 22), which is applicable to all the establishments, then this has to be done," said Garg, also a former director on the RBI's Central Board of Directors.

Queries sent to the Ministry of Finance by *The Indian Express* on the issuance of the directive for half-day closing to banks and financial institutions by the DFS remained unanswered.

"This is not the first occasion of this nature. The Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY) flagged off by the Prime Minister of the

country on November 15, 2023 and scheduled to continue till 26th of this month has also been undertaken to campaign for the ruling dispensation throughout the country by engaging government and bank personnel including its resources," BEFI said.

According to the RBI, the three-day Variable Rate Repo (VRR) auction conducted today with date of reversal on January 22 will now be reversed on January 23. The three-day VRR auction announced earlier cancelled. Instead, a 2-day VRR auction will now be conducted on January 23.

The BSE Sensex closed 0.36 per cent, or 260 points, down at 71,423.65 and the NSE Nifty fell 51 points at 21,571.80 on Saturday.

In another rare instance, the RBI had announced a trading holiday on February 7, 2022, after the Maharashtra government had declared the day as a public holiday under Section 25 of the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881. The state government had declared a public holiday to mourn the death of legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar, who passed away on February 6, 2022. Even the stock exchanges had declared a trading holiday on February 7.

The RBI did not respond to queries sent on the issue.

CRUDE WATCH

OIL PRICES SETTLES LOWER

Oil prices settled slightly lower on Friday but recorded a weekly gain as Middle East tensions and disruptions to oil output offset concerns about the Chinese and global economies. **REUTERS**

Autonomous driving: India, an unlikely market, packs a surprise for ADAS gear makers

ANIL SASI
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

FOR MOBILEYE Global Inc., an Intel-owned Israeli company that makes chips and systems for advanced driver assistance technology in cars, India was not exactly a priority market for the better part of the last 25 years. But for the Jerusalem-based auto equipment major – Israel's most valuable publicly-traded company by market capitalisation – an unexpected surge in demand from India for its next-generation systems-on-chip, and sensing and mapping software for driver assistance technology over the last 12 months or so has resulted in order inflows from India surging to nearly four times what the company had originally forecasted.

According to the latest order from Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. for the supply of advanced driver assistance technology and a plan to jointly work on a fully autonomous driving system for India, announced by Mobileye at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Orders from other India-based auto majors too are piling up, as automakers in the world's third-largest car market push advanced driver assistance tech as standard now on higher-trim variants of even mid-segment sedans and SUVs, prompting Mobileye to now upgrade India to the status of a priority market in Asia, alongside China.

Mobileye's Chief Executive Officer Amnon Shashua, who announced the company's new operating system called 'DXP' at the recent Las Vegas tech show, also indicated that alongside the growing interest for its latest suite of ADAS features from India, an even more unexpected trend is the demand for Mobileye's SuperVision package – its latest generation driver-assist that leverages surround vision using a suite of 11 cameras to offer 'hands-free' autonomous capabilities for human-driven vehicles.

To a query on whether the response to its premium gear was limited to the Mahindra & Mahindra order, the company said the response was more

broad-based from companies in India, seen as one of the most challenging driving environments in the world. "The response we've seen to demand for ADAS systems in India was in general, not just one customer. We are in the early stages of exploring SuperVision systems for India, so we don't yet know what exact demand is – but we see great potential for both safety and convenience improvements," Justin Hyde, Director, Communications at Mobileye told *The Indian Express*.

ADAS demand

India has traditionally not been seen as a priority market for ADAS systems given its infamously dangerous roads and haphazard traffic patterns. The country has the world's deadliest roads, with crashes killing and maiming over 800,000 people annually, according to the World Bank.

This demand for such systems comes at a time when there is a progressive democratisation of autonomous driving tools here, with car manufacturers starting to now offer advanced driver assistance systems as standard bells and whistles on their mid-segment vehicles.

According to Mahindra & Mahindra, a relatively high percentage of its XUV700 owners have opted for the system, which includes lane keep assist, front collision warning, smart pilot assist, automatic emergency braking, adaptive cruise control and traffic sign recognition.

The new Verna, Hyundai's upgrade of its flagship sedan, comes equipped with front and rear radars, sensors and a front camera to allow for what is called 'Level 2 ADAS' functionality, meaning that it will not just detect obstacles on the road or issue a warning in the event of an unusual departure of the car from a designated lane, but also initiate corrective actions. The new Kia Sonnet, an entry level premium SUV, also now offers ADAS as part of its feature list in higher variants.

The ADAS suite offered by most carmakers now include features such as automatic emergency

braking, forward collision warning, blind spot collision warning, blind spot collision-avoidance assist, lane-keeping assist, driver attention warning and adaptive cruise control, which can enhance the safety and convenience of driving.

Honda Cars India too now offers these ADAS features on the higher-spec variants of its mid-segment sedan, the City, while Tata Motors offers these in the top variants of the Harrier and the Safari. These tools have traditionally been offered with cars having a substantially higher price sticker, including Hyundai's premium SUV Tucson and sedans and utility vehicles sold by German luxury car makers such as Mercedes-Benz and the Volkswagen Group's Audi.

While this progressive trend of moving down the price bracket is being driven by several factors, including the increasing demand for safer vehicles among Indian consumers and the government's push for increased road safety, the availability of more affordable ADAS technology is also accelerating this trend.

With the adoption of ADAS technology, car manufacturers say they are helping to improve the overall safety of Indian roads and reduce the number of accidents and fatalities. But ADAS level 2 is where the self-driving goal of most carmakers seems to have maxed out, at least for now, despite lofty promises over the years.

Levels of autonomous driving
There are essentially five levels in the evolution of autonomous driving: each level describing the extent to which a car takes over the responsibilities from the driver, and how the two interface.

So, the levels range from 0 to 5, progressively defining their relative extent of automation. Level 0, "No Automation", is where the driver controls the car without any support from a driver assistance system – the case for most cars on the road currently.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

bers in November. The data indicates that around 73.6 lakh new members were enrolled during the month. The 18-25 age-group

RETIREE FUND body EPFO added 13.95 lakh net members in November 2023, as per the latest payroll data released on Saturday.

Cumulative net addition of members during the current financial year continues to remain higher than that of the corresponding period of the previous year, a labour ministry statement said.

According to the statement, the EPFO's (Employees' Provident Fund Organisation) provisional payroll data highlighted that the body added 13.95 lakh net mem-

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NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

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Cumulative net addition of members during the current financial year continues

Qualifying for Olympics gets tougher for India's marathoners

ANIL DIAS
MUMBAI, JANUARY 20

WHEN INDIA'S top runner Gopi Thonakal qualified for the marathon at the 2016 Olympics in Rio, the qualification timing was 2 hours and 19 minutes. He ran a fabulous race at the 2016 Mumbai Marathon, clocking 2:16:15 to make the cut.

While he wants to use the Tata Mumbai Marathon on Sunday to qualify for the Paris Olympics later this year, it will be a much tougher task. In just eight years, the qualification standard for direct qualification for the Olympic marathon has gone down by 11 minutes to 2:08, making it practically impossible for Indians to qualify directly with their current timings.

To put it in perspective, the Indian men's marathon record is 2:12, set by Shivnath Singh in 1978 in Jalandhar. Gopi's best timing is 2:13:39 which he set in Seoul in 2022.

With direct qualification seemingly not an option, there's still hope for Gopi and other top Indian runners who will look to qualify for the Summer Games via the average route.

"Runners who don't qualify automatically have the option to average the best five race timings. I feel 2:12 will be needed at Mumbai or in two races ahead for making the grade, one in India and one abroad," Gopi said.

What has changed?

Since 2019, nine of the top 10 men's and women's marathon timings have been set and it's clear that there's a catalyst — Super shoes.

Nike stunned the world of long-distance running in 2017 when they unveiled their Zoom Vaporfly 4% shoes to the public. The

In just eight years, the qualification standard for direct qualification for the Olympic marathon has gone down by 11 minutes to 2:08

'4%' in the name was derived from lab tests that showed the shoe improved running economy by an average of 4% compared to other popular marathon racing shoes. This remarkable improvement in efficiency immediately captured the attention of runners around the world. Elite runners wearing the shoe started breaking records and soon it became the footwear of choice for serious distance runners at all levels.

The effect was very evident in the surge of athletes meeting entry standards at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The extended qualifying window (it was held in 2021 due to Covid-19) resulted in 106 men and 88 women starting the marathon though the maximum entries were initially just 80 each.

For Indians, the problems run way deeper than just shoes. Gopi, who has been one of India's top marathoners in recent times, says training facilities definitely need to improve.

He currently trains at the SAI campus in Bengaluru, which isn't by any means ideal for marathon training. They do have high-altitude training in Ooty but Gopi says the roads are a problem.

"You need proper roads to have good timing during training. There's something that our country lacks. We need to train at high altitudes, but we also need flat roads as it reduces the risk of injury. We really need to look at all of this if we want to improve our marathon timings," he told *The Indian Express*. The African/European runners train with a core group of the top runners of their country. An expert trainer who works with Kenyan athletes said on the condition of anonymity that Indian athletes must train alongside runners who have timings of sub-2:08.

RANJI ROUND UP

Twin tons for Virat
IN DELHI, the Group A match between Jharkhand and Services saw twin centuries from Virat Singh (108) and Kumar Kushagra (132), as the former posted a modest total of 316. For Services, Varun Choudhary grabbed four wickets. In reply, Services batted decently. Services finished the day on 128 for two.

BRIEF SCORES: Jharkhand 316 (Virat Singh 108, Kumar Kushagra 132; Varun Choudhary 4/56) leads Services 128-2 (Ravi Chauhan 59 batting; Shahbaz Nadeem 2/33) by 188 runs

Vidarbha dismissed for 78
THE GROUP A game between Vidarbha and Saurashtra saw the former getting dismissed for a mere 78. Vidarbha began the day on 26 for four before conceding a lead of 128 to Saurashtra. While Jitesh Sharma (28) was their top scorer, Chirag Jani dominated with four wickets. In the second innings, Saurashtra were 205 for three.

BRIEF SCORES: Saurashtra 206 & 205-3 (Kevin Jivrajani 57, Vishvaraj Jadeja 79; Yash Thakur 1/23) leads Vidarbha 78 (Jitesh Sharma 28; Chirag Jani 4/14) by 33 runs

Maiden century for Porel
YOUNG UN Abhishek Porel notched up his maiden first-class century to steer hosts Bengal to a formidable 381/8 against Chhattisgarh at Eden Gardens in Kolkata. The 21-year-old wicketkeeper-batter's



Bengal's Abhishek Porel scored 114 against Chhattisgarh. PTI

knock of 114 runs came off 219 deliveries, featuring an impressive array of strokes, including 14 boundaries and a six.

BRIEF SCORES: Bengal 381/8; 128 overs (Abhishek Porel 114, Sudip Gharami 49, Suraj Singh 33; Shashank Singh 2/42, Sourabh Majumdar 2/72, Vashish Bareth 2/85) vs Chhattisgarh

TN lead Railways by 363 runs
NARAYAN JAGADEESAN smashed his way to unbeaten 245 as it propelled Tamil Nadu team to a commendable first innings score of 489 against Railways. Resuming the day on 286 for five, Jagadeesan added 45 more to bring up his maiden first-class double ton.

BRIEF SCORES: Tamil Nadu 489 (Narayanan Jagadeesan 245, Boopathi Kumar 67; Sai Kishore 59; Akash Pandey 3/102) leads Railways 126-2 (Pratham Singh 76 batting;

Sandeep Warrier 2/35) by 363 runs

Delhi-MP tie evenly poised

DELHI WERE bowled out for 205 as Madhya Pradesh nullified the slender first innings lead of 34 with better batting effort in the second innings. Starting the day at 86 for 2, Delhi batters could only survive a total of 67.5 overs but in the process managed to cross MP's first innings total of 171.

BRIEF SCORES: MP 171 and 157/5 (Shubham Sharma 79, Aryan Pandey 3/54). Delhi 205 (Yash Dhull 47, Ayush Badoni 41, Aryan Pandey 3/54)

Karnataka trail Goa by 70

HUNDREDS FROM Mayank Agarwal (114) and Devdutt Padikkal (101) propelled Karnataka to 251 for 4 against Goa.

Karnataka has managed to finish Day 2 on 251 for four, trailing by 70 runs, with Goa's Darshan Misal and Mohit Redkar clutching two wickets each. Earlier, Karnataka bundled out Goa for 321. The visitors began the day on 228 for eight, with Arjun Tendulkar (53) being their last man to be dismissed, whereas Snehal Kauthankar (83) was their top scorer.

BRIEF SCORES: Goa 321 (Snehal Kauthankar 83, Arjun Tendulkar 52, Heramb Parab 53; Vijaykumar Vyshak 3/76, M Venkatesh 3/41, Rohit Kumar 3/90) leads Karnataka 251-4 (Mayank Agarwal 114, Devdutt Padikkal 101; Mohit Redkar 2/65) by 70 runs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

GUKESH OUTWITS FOREST

Wijk Aan Zee: Grandmaster D Gukesh scored his second victory on the trot at the expense of Jorden Van Foreest of Holland and jumped to joint third spot after the end of the sixth round of Tata Steel Masters chess tournament. PTI

Crown awaits, coronation confirmed

Doubles pair Chirag-Satwik beat Malaysia's Chia-Soh to enter India Open final, set to reclaim world number 1 ranking

VINAYAK MOHANARANGAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

YOU WAIT for something for so long, and then it happens not once but repeatedly in quick succession. Like London buses, as the saying goes, India's Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty defeated former world champions Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik for the third straight time after 8 consecutive losses. The second-seeded Indians defeated the Malaysians 21-18, 21-14 in 45 minutes to reach their second straight final on the BWF World Tour this year at the IG Stadium for the India Open.

As a result of the win, Satwik and Chirag are set to return to the top of the world rankings in next week's update as defending champions Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang, currently occupying that spot, lost earlier in the event.

The match was set up beautifully in terms of context. After having lost 8 straight matches against the Malaysians, the Indian duo had won the last two, with the help of tactical tweaks from coach Mathias Boe. Both those wins came under significant situations as well. First at the Indonesia Open final, as Satwik-Chirag clinched their first Super 1000. The second one was at the Asian Games semifinal, that helped Satwik-Chirag create history in Hangzhou by becoming India's first badminton gold medalists at the event.

Chia and Soh, for their part, had a point to prove that the tide hadn't turned decisively in favour of the Indians. But on the evidence of what transpired in Delhi on Friday, the Indians have truly found their groove against the current world No 4.

"People used to say, we never won against them after seven or eight meetings," Satwik told reporters after the match. "I used to feel then, 'it's ok we might lose 10 times or 100 times also but at least one time we will win.' Once we crossed that border for the first time, then I knew there wouldn't be any fear for us, we can beat them anytime. It took us a while to cross that line. When it matters really, it has happened. Indonesia, Asian Games, and today."

It was a neck-and-neck start to the match as the two pairs kept at each other from the word go. Every Indian point was cheered on loudly by the fans who had stayed back late in good numbers for the match that started



Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy will take on third seeds Kang Min Hyuk and Seo Seung Jae in final. Praveen Khanna

beyond 10 pm. The roof had a proverbial lift-off for the first time when Satwik-Chirag won a fabulous rally to make it 8-8.

The lead kept changing hands throughout the opening game. So many doubles matches at the highest level get decided in the last few points of a game. And so the Indians pulled ahead from 17-17 to take the lead.

"Going into the match we knew it was going to be tough, because we have had some really close games in the past," Chirag said, identifying that as the turning point. "Likewise, it was close until 17-all in the first, it was anybody's game. We could have been a little calmer probably earlier, but at that point, we got it back and eventually won it. The second game started a bit slow but eventually got our rhythm back."

Indeed, Chia-Soh are one of the best pairs in the world in transitioning between offence

and defence, and they showed up early in Game 2, leading 13-10 at one point. A kill-shot from Chirag at the net to make it 13-13 hit Chia flush on the face near his eye, and it caused a significant pause in the proceedings as the Malaysian received treatment while looking a bit shaken.

Turning point

Once again, that would be a turning point as Satwik-Chirag went on to win 8 out of the next 9 points to celebrate another famous win.

"To beat these guys, we need to be good in defence, it can't be always all-attack. We have been working on it with Boe for a while now. We are used to it now," Satwik said. Chirag added that it was pleasing to see the number of fans who had stayed back to cheer them on: "Crowd was tremendous,

staying late in the night, it requires a strong motivation. For us, it feels really special. Hope to see many more on Sunday."

Now their focus will firmly be on Sunday when they take on World Champions Kang Min Hyuk and Seo Seung Jae. The Koreans prevented a reunion for Satwik-Chirag with their former mentor Tan Kim Her, defeating Japan's Takuro Hoki and Yugo Kobayashi. Satwik and Chirag have won the last three meetings against the current world No 3 duo, including an epic performance last week in Kuala Lumpur.

On Tuesday, they will be world No 1 for the second time. But they have maintained repeatedly that rankings are secondary. As Chirag said, "We have never really given too much importance to rankings, it keeps changing often. We aim for titles. That's our goal always."

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"There are going to be matches like this very often out there where your body might not be 100% and you might have these kinds of days, you just have to forget it as quickly as possible and get back to work the next day," reflected Prannoy.

Prannoy loses to China's Shi Yu Qi in semifinals

VINAYAK MOHANARANGAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

ONE OF HS Prannoy's targets for 2024 was to not just go deeper in tournaments but try and win titles. Frustratingly for him, that would not be at the India Open Super 750 as the country's top singles shuttler bowed out in the semifinals 15-21, 21-5-21 on Saturday against world No 2 Shi Yu Qi at the IG Indoor Stadium in New Delhi.

Prannoy came into the match with a 2-5 Head-to-Head record against Shi but had won their last meeting at the Swiss Open. He started the opening game at a superb tempo, to get the crowd fired up early with a 3-0 lead. But neither player was giving the other an inch in the early stages, with plenty of winners being hit and unforced errors weren't winning points.

Prannoy won a breathtaking rally to make it 14-14, which was easily the point of the match. A 37-shot exchange saw the 31-year-old play a signature backhand smash and let out a big roar. At that instant, the match felt like tilting ever so slightly towards Prannoy. What followed that, however, was a service error that left Prannoy frustrated and suddenly the momentum shifted completely towards Shi. In the second game, Prannoy struggled to get going physically as the mind had some right ideas but the body wasn't cooperating fully.

After his win on Thursday night, Prannoy had commented that the scheduling wasn't ideal as a match that gets over at 9.30 pm or so, meant the recovery time would stretch beyond midnight. He'd repeat that on Friday, requesting that at least the final stages of the tournament be played at more reasonable timings. The India No 1, who had attributed his turnaround against Wang Tzu Wei partly to the push he received from the fans, also apologised for the result in the semifinal.

"There are going to be matches like this very often out there where your body might not be 100% and you might have these kinds of days, you just have to forget it as quickly as possible and get back to work the next day," reflected Prannoy.

Australian Open: Teenager Noskova stuns top seed Swiatek in 3rd round

REUTERS
MELBOURNE, JANUARY 20

WORLD NUMBER one Iga Swiatek crashed out of the Australian Open at the hands of Czech teenager Linda Noskova in the third round on Saturday to further deplete an already weakened women's draw heading into the second week at Melbourne Park.

While only three of the top 10 women's seeds remain, the main contenders for the men's title have all breezed into the fourth round with Carlos Alcaraz, Daniil Medvedev and Alexander Zverev joining the charge on day seven. Swiatek's bid for a maiden title at Melbourne Park was brought to an abrupt halt when 19-year-old Noskova became the first teenager to down the top seed since Amelie Mauresmo beat Lindsay Davenport in 1999.

Noskova held her nerve after Swiatek had won the opening set, and on the big points in the third set, and only let emotions get the better of her after serving out for a 3-6 3-6 4-6 victory. "I think it was an unbelievable match for me," the world number 50 said. "Playing on such a court for a first time, playing with Iga for a second time, I really wanted



Linda Noskova celebrates after beating world number 1 Iga Swiatek. Reuters

"I want to try to go again to the final, try to have my chance of winning another Grand Slam. Just want to show good tennis, beat good guys, and hopefully get one more title."

Sixth seeded German Zverev also went through in straight sets after a 6-2 7-6(4) 6-2 win over American Alex Michelsen in the final match of the day.

While Shang fell short in his bid to become the first Chinese man to reach the fourth round of a Grand Slam since 1938, the

ORDER OF PLAY

Rod Laver Arena

Magdalena Frech (Poland) vs 4-Coco Gauff (U.S.); 1-Novak Djokovic (Serbia) vs 20-Adrian Mannarino (France); 10-Alex de Minaur (Australia) vs 5-Andrey Rublev (Russia)

Margaret Court Arena

Amanda Anisimova (U.S.) vs 2-Aryna Sabalenka (Belarus); 4-Jannik Sinner (Italy) vs 15-Karen Khachanov (Russia)

John Cain Arena

12-Taylor Fritz (U.S.) vs 7-Stefanos Tsitsipas (Greece); Mirra Andreeva (Russia) vs 9-Barbara Krejcikova (Czech Republic)

country will have a presence in the second week after Zheng Qinwen beat compatriot Wang Yafan 6-4 2-6 7-6(8).

The 21-year-old received a surprise visit after the match from compatriot Li Na, who was the first Chinese player to win a Grand Slam and triumphed at Melbourne Park in

2014. "I watched that final 10 times," said the 12th seed. "

U-19 WORLD CUP

How hardship steeled gritty Adarsh

After losing job, father sold land to fund his cricket; Opener scores 76 as India beat Bangladesh by 84 runs

PRATYUSH RAJ
JANUARY 20

THE PEOPLE from Kanpur are generally sharp-tongued and don't back down under provocation. India U-19 opener Adarsh Singh kept his inner Kanpur in check and never responded to the continuous sledging from Bangladesh seamers. After overcoming the initial oohs and aahs, the southpaw showed his determination in a classy 76 to take India to 251 for 7 and earn a 84-run win over Bangladesh.

His elder brother Ankit wasn't surprised by the attitude and revisited the tough financial times in the family that has shaped Adarsh's personality. During the lockdown their father and Ankit lost their jobs, their mother, who worked in an anganwadi, was the sole breadwinner, but father would sell a plot of land to put the money in Adarsh's name so that he can continue his cricket pursuit. Adarsh knows the family struggle and gambit on his cricket, and isn't going to throw his wicket, says his brother.

"Bura waqt tha (It was a difficult time)," Ankit, the brother, tells *The Indian Express*. "Our father used to work in a company that used to make Chinese jewellery. He used to earn Rs 25,000. I also lost my job. Adarsh was playing U-16. It was difficult to pay rent with our mother being the sole bread earner," he recalls.

Tough calls

"I started giving private tuition to high school kids in Kanpur, but it was only enough to make a living. My father made a decision to sell a plot in the village, put the money in the bank under Adarsh's name so that he doesn't have to suffer. Later when cricket resumed and he also started getting match fees, things started to ease off a bit," says Ankit. They had to earn the ire of relatives and neighbours for the decision.

Adarsh has been India's best batsman leading into this World Cup. Tuesday presented the sternest test yet in his U-19 career – the team lost wickets intermittently (India were 31/2) after being put into bat and the seamers extracted bounce from the surface with the left-arm Maruf Mridha moving the ball both ways.



Adarsh Singh overcame an early period of struggle to stitch a match-winning 116-run stand for the third wicket with captain Uday Saharan. ICC/media zone

The 18-year-old Adarsh was unfazed, overcoming an early period of struggle to stitch a match-winning 116-run stand for the third wicket with captain Uday Saharan (64). A couple of cameos from Aravelly Avanish (23 off 17 balls) and Sachin Dhas (26 off 20 balls) followed as India reached 251 for 7. Mridha was the pick of the bowlers for Bangladesh with a five-wicket haul. The only false shot Adarsh played cost him his wicket, but he displayed his courage and composure, virtues that are as essential as technique and skills.

"It was Adarsh's stubbornness that forced my father to let him play cricket for one year with the condition that he would bid farewell to cricket and continue his studies if cricket did not work out. Ek saal mey UP U-14 mey aa gaya, agle saal captain ban gaya, fir peeche mud ke nahi dekha (Within a year, he was in

the state U-14 side, became captain in the next, and hasn't looked back since)," says the brother.

The Singh family hails from Newada Ishwari Singh, a village in Uttar Pradesh's Jaunpur district and Narendra Kumar Singh shifted their base to Kanpur to give his children a good education.

"My father used to work in Kanpur, and we moved here. Then he got a job in Mumbai and my mother (Manju Lata Singh) got a job in Anganwadi, a rural childcare centre. My father shifted to Mumbai while my mother moved back to our village. In the meanwhile, I completed my engineering, got a job and Adarsh's game had improved significantly," narrates Ankit.

Then the lockdown came with a bag of troubles. Selling a plot to let his son play was

It was a difficult time. Our father used to work in a company that used to make Chinese jewellery. He used to earn Rs 25,000. I also lost my job. Adarsh was playing U-16. It was difficult to pay rent with our mother being the sole bread earner."

ANKIT SINGH
ADARSH'S BROTHER

not welcomed by the relatives and neighbours in Jaunpur.

"Rajputon ka swabhimaan suna hai aapne (have you heard about the self-respect of Rajputs). People said in our caste we generally don't sell land, even if we do, it is for studies and the daughter's marriage. They were against my father because he was selling it for his son's cricketing dream," laughs Ankit.

Change in fortunes

"Samay bada balavaa hota (time is very powerful). Slowly Adarsh started doing well, got picked for India and now the same folks are praising him. I am getting several texts and calls. Everyone is talking positively. People are enjoying and we are not able to watch it. Yahi zindagi ka sach hai (This is the truth of life)," he says.

If it was Adarsh and Saharan's steely knocks that helped India put on a good total, it was the vice-captain and left-arm spinner Saumy Pandey (4/24) who choked Bangladesh in the chase. Mohammad Shihab (54) and Ariful Islam (41) were the only notable contributors. Adarsh was adjudged player of the match for his feisty knock.

"There was help for the bowlers, so my plan was to play every ball as per its merit. We lost a couple of early wickets and when Uday came into bat, we just decided to milk ones and two as the size of the boundaries are big," Adarsh told the broadcasters about how he bided his time in the middle. Just like he and his family have done in life during a crisis.

BRIEF SCORES: India Under 19 251/7 (Adarsh Singh 76, Uday Saharan 64; Maruf Mridha 5/43) bt Bangladesh Under 19 167 in 45.5 ovs (Mohammad Shihab James 54, Ariful Islam 41; Saumy Pandey 4/24)

Shooting in her blood, Raiza earns skeet quota

NITIN SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, JANUARY 20

AS THE family's only child, the 19-year-old Raiza Dhillon grew up listening to tales of guns owned by her great-grandfather. On Saturday afternoon, as Dhillon earned India's first women's skeet quota in history and a 18th Paris Olympics shooting quota in the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Kuwait, the Haryana youngster was reminded of the guns back at her paternal home near Karnal. The shooter Anant Jeet Singh Naruka grabbed the 19th quota place, winning silver in the men's skeet shooting event.

Raiza's father Ravijit Singh Dhillon turns all emotional while speaking with *The Indian Express* from Kuwait.

"While Raiza has not seen my grandfather Jagirdar Gurinder Singh Dhillon, she grew up seeing pictures of the 20 guns owned by my father and the six shot guns of my father. All she wanted was to hold a real gun when she grew up, to win India's first women's skeet quota means a lot to her as well the whole family," the father says.

When her family shifted base to Panchkula, her mother Gul Dhillon, a sarpanch of the village in Karnal, coaxed her into playing tennis, swimming and learning dances like Bharatanatyam and Kathak.

When she turned 12, Raiza chose shooting but she had a special demand. Her mother Gul Dhillon explains. "Initially, we got Raiza to compete in the 10m Air Rifle; she also attended camps at Gagan Narang Shooting Academy in Pune. But then she wanted to shoot with the big guns. As a mother, I was concerned about her getting hurt from the gun recoil but she did not seem worried at all. Her right cheek still has many black marks due to the placement of the shotgun. Sometimes my father would wonder why to put a girl in such a sport! But then that's what Raiza loves and we have never stopped her," says the mother.

In 2018, the Haryana youngster picked up skeet shooting with the coach Amrinder Singh Cheema, a close friend of her father. A bronze in the senior skeet event in 2021 nationals followed. Last year, she became the junior national champion and also won a silver medal in ISSF Junior World Champions in Changwon Korea. More medals came her way; a silver from the Asian Junior Championship in Changwon and another silver at the nationals in Goa. "Unlike kids of her age, Raiza was clear



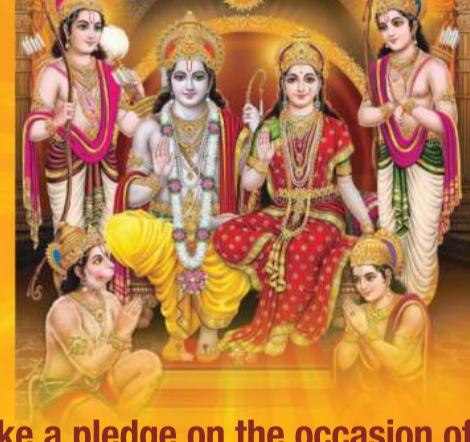
Raza Dhillon has earned India its first women's skeet quota in history.

about competing in skeet from day one. Initially, I made her shoot 50 targets per day and increased to 250-300. We trained at Patiala and in my village near Ludhiana; she would travel daily from Panchkula with her father or mother to train. There were days when temperatures would be close to 45-47 degrees in summers and she would ask me to hold an umbrella and shoot," says coach Amrinder Singh Cheema, who himself has competed in multiple ISSF World Cups.

On Saturday, Raiza qualified for the six-shooter final at the sixth place; fellow shooters Ganemat Sekhon and Maheshwari Chauhan also made it to the final. Raiza did not miss single target from her 29 targets. When Thailand's Sutija Jiewchaleemmit and Reem Al Aharshani exited, India were assured of a quota. Jinmei Gao bagged the second quota place on offer for China. Raiza won the silver medal and Gao took the gold while Chauhan and Sekhon finished third and fourth respectively.

"For the last two months, Raiza had shifted to my village and we worked on her getting an early advantage. Such scenarios also help when a shooter qualifies with a lower bib for the final and it worked for her in the final. We need to work upon her stock apart from a couple of minor things for the Olympic trials to seal her place for Paris," says Cheema.

25-year-old Naruka, who belongs to the erstwhile royal house of Unjara in Tonk District of Rajasthan, ensured India has a Paris quota place in each shooting event and a possibility of the Indian mixed skeet team as he won the silver medal. Naruka, who had become the first Indian shooter to win a skeet medal in last year's Asian Games with a silver medal, shot 56 targets as compared to 57 from the gold medal winner Yuan Meng Lee of Chinese Taipei.



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**POINT OF VIEW, PAGE 2****Beyond the Songsheet**

Jazz vocalist and five-time Grammy winner Dianne Reeves on her first visit to India, the audacious women in jazz and the day she stood in for Ella Fitzgerald

Sriram Raghavan on his two-decade journey as director, why he paired Katrina Kaif with Vijay Sethupathi for *Merry Christmas* and what makes his next project different

Alaka Sahani

EVER SINCE his directorial debut 20 years ago, Sriram Raghavan has carved out a distinct cinematic world that boasts thrillers with noirish-vibe, well-crafted narratives suffused with nostalgia and fascinating characters. In his sixth feature film *Merry Christmas*, he opts for a slow-burn thriller with an unconventional pairing of actors Katrina Kaif and Vijay Sethupathi for the first time.

Raghavan, 60, who has gained the reputation of telling engaging stories with flawed characters, made his debut with *Ek Hasina Thi* (2004) and followed it up with *Johnny Gaddaar* (2007), *Agent Vinod* (2012), *Badlapur* (2015) and *Andhadhun* (2018). The FTII-graduate, who dabbled in film journalism and wrote for television shows such as *CID* and *Aahat*, has always spoken about his deep love for cinema and admiration for many masters including Alfred Hitchcock and Vijay Anand.

Seated in his Andheri office, where one wall is covered with old Hindi film posters while his desk has a bobblehead miniature of Hitchcock, sharing space with Christmas decorations and a copy of Raymond Chandler's *Playback* (1958), the writer-director unpacks his process, talks about his many loves — old Hindi songs to his favourite film personalities — and why he doesn't give in to commercial concerns. Excerpts:

This year, you complete 20 years as a filmmaker. Does it feel like a landmark?

I had not given it a thought. I have been here longer but, yes, I directed *Ek Hasina Thi*, my first film, 20 years ago.

In your interviews, you said that after the success of *Andhadhun* you wanted to make an intimate film.

When I read the story (*Merry Christmas*) is based on French writer Frédéric Dard's book *Bird in a Cage*, which is set in Paris, in the '60s, I realised it's a beautiful read but plot is not vital to it. It is like a love story in the garb of a thriller. But what I loved about it are the characters and the possibilities of what one can do with them. Films like *Andhadhun* didn't have a romance that's strong like this. I knew I couldn't pace it up. Initially, I thought this would be a 90-minute movie without an interval. When I started fleshing out the script with my co-writers (Pooja Ladha Surti, Arijit Biswas and Anukriti Pandey), I realised there was scope to do more. It's longer than two hours (144 minutes) now.

Why was it so crucial for you to have a fresh pairing, featuring Katrina Kaif and Vijay Sethupathi, for *Merry Christmas*?

If you have seen the movie, you know the pairing works beautifully. I did try different kinds of casting options. I don't flesh out the story in detail till I have my cast in place. While writing, of course, you keep a certain dream cast in mind. For *Andhadhun*, I thought Tabu would be great but she had not heard the story for a long time. Luckily, she liked it. For *Merry Christmas*, I wanted actors who are strangers to each other. If I had taken A and B, who had worked with each other before, it wouldn't have been as effective.

You stuck to the choice of casting Katrina even though you took a while to zero in on the male lead. Did you wish to break her established image?

More than me, it was Katrina who was keen on breaking that image. It would be too pompous of me to tell an actor that I wish to break your image. She wanted to do something different than what she is mostly known for. When I met her, I liked her hunger to do this kind of character. That's something one looks for in an actor. She is meticulous and suited the character. We had a lot of fun working together. Vijay came on board almost a year later and that too by chance. I had watched his Tamil films earlier and knew that he is a superb actor. I knew having Katrina and Vijay was going to be a risky combination but that's also the USP.

When Katrina and Vijay are dancing, you have gone for a long take.

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THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE

eye

'Every time I have written a script keeping an actor in mind, it hasn't worked'



MYSTERY MOMENTS

(Clockwise from top) Sriram Raghavan; stills from Badlapur; Merry Christmas; Andhadhun

It is largely a single take. The idea was to have an improvised dance sequence. We did have a choreographer, but I wanted it to look spontaneous. Maria is dancing and at some point Albert decides to join her. There was the option to cut but for the sake of spontaneity, I thought let this be a single shot.

For the interrogation scene at the police station, you again opted for a single, long take.

It is a three-and-a-half minute single shot. If we had gone for cuts, it becomes like any other police scene. I have worked on the television show *CID* and similar things. So, when I have to do a police scene, I wonder how to get away from the typical shot-taking. We did rehearse the scene, mainly because it involves complicated camera choreography and captures the action in two different rooms. I love the work of French filmmaker Jean Pierre Melville, whose movie *Le Doulos* (1962) has a lengthy interrogation scene.

You often use old Hindi film songs in your movies. Is it an organic choice?

It does not come while writing the script. Normally, when we are editing it, I wonder if

we can use a certain song. When Aakash in *Andhadhun* is given anaesthesia and his kidney is going to be removed, he sees a tattoo of Shiv ji. I thought it would be great to use the song *jai Bhulanath jai ho prabhu* from *Kunwara Baap* (1974) there. But there is a fee involved and it is quite expensive to use old songs.

Why do you shy away from scaling up and taking on big projects?

My next film *Ikkis* (biopic of Param Vir Chakra recipient Arun Khetarpal) is a big production, in terms of scale and story. It will be Agastya Nanda's theatrical debut and Dharmendra is there. I wanted to work with Dharmendra again after *Johnny Gaddaar*. Working with big stars, it depends on the subject. If you

consider the films I have done, having other stars would not have made a big difference.

I do meet big actors, but they have to be in the same zone. Luckily, when I was doing *Badlapur*, Varun Dhawan was in that zone. After a few successes, maybe he would have found it too risky. With big stars, my worry is that if their earlier films have done humongous business, they should not look at my film and say that it has to beat their previous film's collection. By the way, Alfred Hitchcock did not always get the stars he wanted.

How was it working with Dharmendra after *Johnny Gaddaar*?

We have already shot quite a bit with him and he is fantastic in the film. When I got to

know the story, he was my first choice. We usually discuss a lot before shooting. His face is like a landscape and he has a great voice. However, the younger generation of viewers might not have watched his best work such as *Bandini* (1963), *Sholay* (1975), *Chupke* (1975) and *Pratiyoga* (1975). He is great in comedy as well as drama.

With opening weekend numbers becoming such a big deal, are stars taking only calculated risks?

For them, the number validates their star value. I don't have that pressure. If *Andhadhun* did X business, I am not starting my next film thinking that now I have to do more than X. One may make a huge extravagance but the collection might still not be great. If you have a big star, one assumes that you get a good opening. But nowadays, the word spreads within the first couple of days.

There is a great line by Quentin Tarantino regarding numbers that's etched in my mind. He says that in the grand scheme of things, opening weekend is the least important thing in the film's life. A film takes more than a year to make. So, three days in a weekend are not the most important days for me or Quentin

**BOOKS, PAGE 3**

- Abraham Verghese on researching for his colonial-era epic, *The Covenant of Water*
- Author Tanuj Solanki on recent works by Indian writers
- Author Devika Rege on the political novel

SHORT TAKE

Pooja Ladha Surti
EDITOR, WRITER

What I admire about Sriram is that he has a very healthy respect for the viewer. He wants to seduce, surprise, involve and entertain the audience. He remembers being spellbound by the movies inside a darkened theatre — and he tries his best to evoke, for his viewers, a dash of that same frisson and excitement.

He is a really solid writer. He's relentlessly hardworking, refuses to be happy with himself (or the rest of us), and keeps working the material this way and that, till there is a distilled thought driving every scene. And he'll still leave room for improvement — when actors enter the process or when other heads of department start weighing in. He's incredibly open to ideas and suggestions.

Sriram's vision is unique, quirky, fun but somehow also serious-minded, morally ambiguous but also deeply moral. Characters that attract him will usually commit some sort of crime and pay the price.

Vasan Bala
SCREENWRITER, DIRECTOR

More than his love for movies, books and old Hindi film songs, it's his everyday rigour and relentless pursuit to improve his craft, that's the real inspiration. He takes nothing for granted. He is a master because he is a great student.

Sanjay Routray
PRODUCER

From the days of our first collaboration, *Johnny Gaddaar*, I have been drawn to Sriram's distinct sensibility and his knack for telling highly unconventional stories in a consistently engaging manner. Sriram's passion for cinema is contagious and I must say that he introduced me to great cinema and helped me understand the finer nuances of a good film.

The secret to our enduring collaboration is very simple — it's about understanding, trust and respect for each other while filming. Be it *Johnny Gaddaar*, *Andhadhun* or *Merry Christmas*, I have always had belief in his vision.

(laughs). Though for many it is.

What, according to you, is the perfect love story?

I love *Roman Holiday* (1953). They share something unique and intimate for a short time. Yet, they know they can't be together. The audience knows they can't be together. I also love *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). The love stories that stay with the audience, are perhaps the unrequited ones. I also love *Love Actually* (2003), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995).

Are there actors whom you would like to work with?

Every time I have written keeping an actor in mind, I have not been able to come up with a good enough script. So, I now start writing and mid-way think of who we can cast. Many years ago, after watching *Raman Raghav, A City, A Killer* (1991), a docu-drama by me, Sunny Deol had called to say 'do a film with me'. He was at the peak of his career then. I kept writing and rejecting the ideas myself. I would like to do a film with him. There are also others on my list.

Is there any old song that you wanted to use in *Merry Christmas* but couldn't?

At the beginning of the film, I wanted to use *Rut jawan jawan, raat meherbaan* from *Aakhri Khat* (1967). Four years ago, when I was writing the script, I wanted to use this song or show a young Usha Uthap-like actress performing a recorded version at a restaurant where (its original singer) Bhupinder Singh is having a beer. But this was an expensive proposition.

You have dedicated the movie to Shakti Samanta.

From the age of 10, I have been watching his movies. I love that he had a terrific body of work that included crime thrillers and romances. Not many know about him today. The song *Yeh sham mastani* from his film, *Kati Patang* (1971), I watched it nine times.



DOWN IN JUNGLELAND

RANJIT LAL

Author, environmentalist and bird watcher



DIGGING DEEP

An organic encampment of a soldier crab

RANJIT LAL

Hup-two-three-four!

Tide-pooling can be as rewarding as birding, all you need is to allow your eyes to gently rest on the sand

IT'S AMAZING how similar tide-pooling is to birding. Of course, there's one big difference: For birds, you're looking up at the sky or the trees, while for hermit crabs and sea snails, you're looking down at the sand and rock pools. But for both, it takes a short while to get your eye in before you actually start spotting things – birds fly away or flit into the foliage, crabs bury themselves into the sand and vanish under your nose. Even static shells and starfish disappear as waves swoop in and whisk them away like a magician's sleight of hand.

But every trip has its highlights. My latest foray on Morjim Beach, Goa, was no different. A few beautifully gleaming shells in shades of cream and orange and the spiral-shaped 'ice-cream cone' shells, which hermit crabs love, as they lie around, being pushed back and forth by frilly wavelets. And then suddenly, just ahead is what can only be described as an encampment of soldier crabs. But, un-

•••
Enormous flotillas of turtle-moms-to-be swimming valiantly towards their home shores in the middle of the night, staggering up onto the sand, digging pits, laying their gleaming white eggs, covering them up with sand and then struggling back to the sea, their life's work done. Months later, their babies would break out and scamper helter-skelter to the sea drawn by the faint reflected light of the moon or stars – or tragically and more often now – turn around and head for the lights from the beach bars and restaurants and streets only to be run over by traffic or be trapped in drains. At the best of times, most get picked off by scavengers – gulls, crows, dogs and humans, who lie in wait for the bonanza hatching. There is yet more danger from predators in the ocean and they say only one in a thousand baby turtles make it to adulthood. Surely, they are a deserving recipient of the highest civilian award for courage in the face of overwhelming odds.

Back on the beach, we wander towards where the fishing boats have been drawn up and nets spread out. The sand here is littered with the corpses of crabs. A dead sea snake, thick as a giraffe, lies supine, covered with sand. Above,

Brahminy kites wheel and circle, being harried by crows.

Some of the nets have a wide enough mesh for small fish and crustaceans to get through, but then there are others, with a fine, sand-coloured mesh, like gauze, through which you know absolutely nothing could escape. How much of what is caught is actually taken to the market, and how much is left to rot? Judging by the number of dead crabs (and bits of crabs) littering the sand the by-catch must be humongous – and such a waste. One thinks of the sleek, beautiful baby sharks all lined up in a basket in the Mapusa fish market and wonder if they were among the protected species. (The lady selling them disapproved of us taking photographs of the sharks).

Trudging back, eyes still on the sand you notice a brilliant elongated emerald green beetle with eight black splotches on its body, trundling along slowly, as if taking a relaxed constitutional. It seems so completely out of place here and you wonder what the heck it's doing here. Certainly, tide-pooling has its eccentricities.

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like any neat military camp, it's untidy and higgledy-piggledy with balls of sand strewn all over the place. The owner of each bivouac stood at the entrance as if awaiting barracks inspection (which, they would fail *en masse*). It reminded me of illustrations in Asterix! And then, at the edge of the encampment was a small platoon of soldier crabs smartly marching single file – 'Hup-two-three-four' as if rehearsing for the Republic Day parade.

The rocks, too, were crawling with rock-coloured crabs. One had caught hold of a small silverfish. The crab kept dipping it into the waves as if wanting to wash it properly before eating it.

Morjim is a large expansive beach, with firm sand and clear water. Some Olive Ridley turtles had been reported to land here a few nights ago to lay their eggs and when you see the expanse of the ocean you can only wonder at their achievement.

The *arribada* (arrival) of turtles happens on beaches all over the world and remains one of the most spectacular events in the marine cycle of life.

Soldier crabs are the only crabs that can march forward, all the others can only move sideways

•••
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Where Indian Miniatures Meet Hong Kong Manhua

With 114 galleries from 33 countries, Singapore's Art SG draws some of the leading names

Vandana Kalra

IN 2019, when Art Stage Singapore – a contemporary art event, with focus on Southeast Asian art – was cancelled less than 10 days before its opening, it was largely cited as a commercially driven decision with sceptics challenging the country's standing as the next international art world hub.

Years later, ART SG is attempting to reassert and reconstruct that positioning. On January 18, the tentpole event, first held in 2011, opened its second edition with 114 galleries from 33 countries. "Our exhibitors share our view that Southeast Asia is a crucial market that is developing rapidly and we are thrilled to work with them and our stakeholders to put the focus of the international art world on Singapore and Southeast Asia and to bring the international art world to the region," says Magnus Renfrew, co-founder, ART SG.

Held at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, the audience trooped

into the massive halls. Among them were prominent collectors and museum representatives, including Alan Lau, vice-chairman of M+ Hong Kong, co-chair Tate Modern Asia Pacific Acquisition Committee, Guggenheim Museum Asia Art Circle; Justine Tek, director and CEO, Yuz Museum, Shanghai; and Vir Kotak, founder, The Eight Foundation, Singapore. Occupying distinct spaces, meanwhile, were some of the world's leading galleries such as Gagosian, White Cube, neugerriemschneider and Goodman Gallery. Works of iconic artists such as Ai Weiwei, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Olafur Eliasson alongside Singaporeans Robert Zhao and Han Sai Por, and Indian artists such as MF Husain, FN Souza and Gulammohammed Sheikh were showcased. At the Berlin-based neugerriemschneider's booth, gallerist Burkhard Riemschneider noted how the narrative led to the coming together of Ai Weiwei's lego work *Mona Lisa Smears In Cream in Blue* with Shilpa Gupta's untitled 2018 knife wood and motor work.



PHOTO COURTESY: ART SG

WAYS OF SEEING

(From left) Studio Art's Megha Joshi's Quasi-Ritual Series XX to XXX; visitors at ART SG; DAG's MF Husain's Portrait of a painter surrounded by his own images

The number of Indian galleries participating this year at ART SG might have reduced from the inaugural edition, as have the total number of participants, but Shuyin Yang, fair director, ART SG, notes there is a substantial market to explore and many galleries intend to return in the coming editions. "This year, too, many are making an effort to come on personal trips to meet the collectors," she says.

Less than an hour after the fair opened, Vandita Misra, curator at Noida-based Anant Art, found herself acquainting curious viewers about the nuances of miniature art through works of artists such as Gulammohammed Sheikh, Alexander Gorlizki and Hammad Gillani, at the gallery booth. "People usually refer to traditional 18th-century miniatures but here we are showing how it is also modern and contempor-



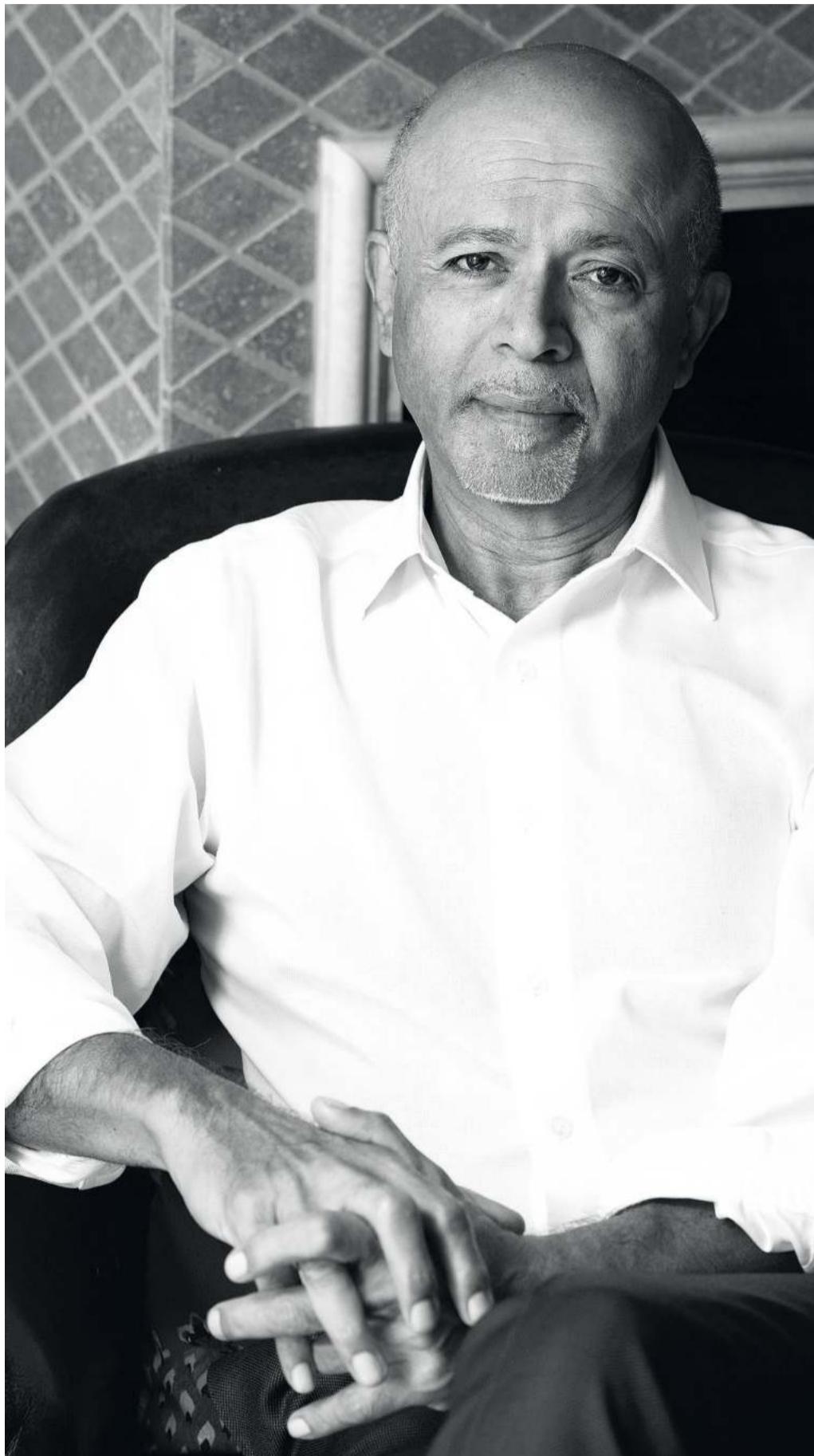
porary," says Misra.

The DAG booth, meanwhile, saw collectors browsing works of modernists such as SH Raza, Bireswar Sen, Gopal Ghose, Shanti Dave and GR Santosh. Noting that DAG's selection for the booth "is as much about commercial considerations as about the need to educate and inform art-lovers and visitors about the extraordinary richness and depth of Indian modern art," Ashish Anand, CEO

and managing director of DAG says, "Singapore's standing as a financial centre has grown significantly in the last two decades as has the percentage of Indian professionals who have powered this. This diaspora is mostly young, first-generation and enthusiastic about their cosmopolitanism as well as their Indian identity. Art as a measure of culture resonates well with them. And their taste and appetite for the consumption of Indian art has grown considerably in the last few years." The gallery also participated at Art Stage Singapore in 2015 and 2016.

While New York-based Aicon Gallery is also participating in the event with paintings by Indian artists, including Anjolie Ela Menon, Paresh Maity and Rekha Rodwittiya, Delhi-based Studio Art is the only gallery from India in the Focus Section. At the booth, director Ashna Singh was seen with participating artists, including Megha Joshi and Shivani Aggarwal. While Joshi noted that many connoisseurs had reached out to her to learn about her process and material that borrows from Hindi rituals, including *rudraksha*, *mauli* and *janeyu*, to assert the need to look inward, Singh shared that the sales enquiries had begun hours within the commencement of the fair. With an existing collector base in Singapore, Singh adds, "There is an open market for Indian art now... Singapore, too, has a huge potential, especially the Indian collectors and international travellers."

'I wanted to go against the grain and the reader's expectation'



A RETURN TO ROOTS

Writer and Physician Abraham Verghese

Abraham Verghese on researching *The Covenant of Water* and how the giant manuscript was tamed

Udbhav Seth

AFAMILY, CURSED: every generation will lose a member to drowning. The same family: a 12-year-old bride who grows into an ageing matriarch in 20th-century Kerala, her granddaughter who resolves to medically research the root of this curse, and a young Scottish doctor grappling with the legacy of colonialism. Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* is a multi-generational epic inspired by his grandmother's memoirs of what it felt to be a child. On a recent visit to India, he spoke to us about the research he undertook, why long books are difficult to publish today and the under-appreciated role of editors. Edited excerpts:

The heart of the story is a young girl's difficult and loving marriage to an older man. Were you tempted to comment on the power dynamics involved?

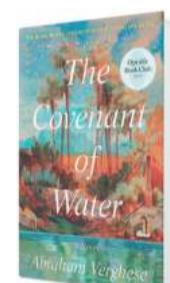
I was much more inclined to present the facts and let readers infer the moral and ethical situation. Looking back, it was a very daring thing to start a story with, especially for Western readers, who tend to struggle with that element. In the Kerala of the era I'm writing about, 12-year-olds often married 12-year-olds, entered another household, and were supervised by their mothers-in-law, who became closer than their own mothers. What was really daring was to get a 12-year-old to marry an older widower. I wanted to go against the grain and the reader's expectation that this is going to be miserable.

The book is full of botanical, floral, topographical, medical and political details. Did research ever overwhelm the writing?

Yeah, sometimes research becomes an excuse not to write because you can endlessly go down these rabbit holes. There comes a point when you just have to write. In preparing for the novel, I took several trips to Kerala and called on my relatives and friends living there who had more immediate knowledge than I did. One of my worst nightmares is to write something that doesn't seem authentic to a local.

The story spans three generations, two continents and a broad cast. How did you ensure it didn't get out of hand, turning into what Henry James called "loose, baggy monsters" of novels?

To be honest, it did get out of hand. It's easy to go into long digressions which were sometimes hundreds of pages and months



THE COVENANT OF WATER
BY ABRAHAM VERGHESE
Penguin
736 pages
₹899

of work, only to realise that they weren't the story. But it wasn't hard to keep the characters intact. It was difficult to find out where it was all going. In my lifetime, medicine has changed from a disease having no name to (being caused by) a molecular organism to having a treatment and being a thing of the past. I wanted to show a sweep of medical progress evolving with three generations.

Suddenly seeing the ending was a pivotal moment. Once I saw that halfway through the book, it became easier to go back and fix things. I'm blessed to have a great editor. Readers underestimate the role of the editor. In my view, editors should be on the book cover with the author. As the author, you lose all objectivity.

Colonialist guilt, class envy and cultural ignorance govern how the story's Europeans interact with Indians. In your diverse experience, has the perception of first-world artists and scientists changed towards the so-called developing world?

I've lived in many places. And Kerala has been very aware of the legacy of colonialism and casteism. People have asked whether I introduced Western characters in the story to relate to Western readers. But the Indian Medical Service was created by the British. There were also Scottish and Swedish people. It's an accurate representation of the mix of people at the time.

Is it difficult for writers to publish long works today?

Covenant... has a chequered publication history. I took a big advance from one publisher, and it was my mistake because I don't perform well under the pressure of time. Eventually, it became clear that my and their view of the novel was different. I had no choice but to break away from that publisher.

Now I had a tainted novel. People knew it had some trouble with that publisher so they weren't quite excited. But I was lucky to find Peter Blackstock, who published *The Sympathizer* and *Shuggie Bain*. He was more open about the length. *Shuggie Bain* was rejected by many publishers and finally came to him, became a classic and Booker winner.

Publishing can get orthodox and constrained. So the dictum appears that long novels are harder for readers. When Oprah picked it up, she checked the number of pages left because she didn't want it to end. If you can create that effect, the reader paradoxically likes the length. It can get dicey. A big book on the shelf faces resistance and needs endorsements, which I luckily got. I hope we've broken a stale trend of slice-of-life novels.

Look back in wonder

Making sense of the past year through Indian fiction in English

Tanuj Solanki

LIFE IS short; the years pass by quickly. And there are too many books. Each December, I do this little exercise of selecting the ones I might like to read from the pile I've read during the year. I'm a fiction writer myself, and so, despite all year-end resolutions, the majority of the books I end up reading (and re-reading) are fiction.

In my assessment, the last 12 to 18 months have been especially good for Indian fiction in English. One is speaking, of course, of the quality of the works published and not their commercial performance. The small readership subset that enjoys intelligent fiction remains biased toward Booker Prize announcements and other foreign markers of quality, and Indian titles, even by relatively well-known names, struggle for discovery and discussion. But good books tend to find their way.

Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri* and Anees Salim's *The Bellboy* are the two coming-of-age novels I've marked for a re-read. One is set in an all-too-real Mumbai, the other on a little island that looks like a bra on maps. Pinto's novel is an extraordinary Mumbai novel but a reader who's never been to the city can love it as much. It gives us one of the best male friendships I've seen in literature, a friendship made real by Yuri's, and his mate Muzammil's, successes and failures in maintaining a bond across a class divide masquerading as implacable grudges and misunderstandings. In Salim's novel, the enormous labour undertaken to create a "complete" world is hidden masterfully. A unique slant of observation is given to Latif, our neurodivergent protagonist. The narration has a melancholy yet light air all through, which leaves us unprepared (by design) for when a real, ugly world comes crashing in and tragedies accumulate.

The Trump years brought "post-truth" and "alternate facts" not only to American polity but a reckoning with these in American fiction. An equivalent treatment of the early Modi years in Indian fiction was becoming due. In Devika Rege's *Quarterlife*, which I called "a landmark novel" in this paper last year, we see the most direct fic-



tional approach to the creation of the times we live in. The novel, set mostly in Mumbai in 2014, traces the psychologies of a bunch of youngsters as they negotiate fresh conflicts between the personal and the political. It uses an external event — an unfolding riot in the city — to arrive at its denouement in full kaleidoscopic mode, a choice that may have divided critical opinion but has confirmed Rege's as one of the bravest debuts in recent years.

Anjum Hasan's *History's Angel*, set in Delhi around the turn of the previous decade, marks itself as a political novel in markedly different ways. Its middle-class Muslim protagonist, Alif, is a school history teacher. He's angelic, too, in the sense that he can mentally float above his social-real station and the attendant antagonisms brewing around him. Unlike *Quarterlife*, *History's Angel* is a novel not of "Event" but of incidents. By "event" with a capital E, I mean that hub of significance or signification that novels that mine history or aim to be called political feel obliged to provide — where, say, a matter of life or death finds eerie direction, or where crumbling circumstance and awful agency play out the direst consequences for the protagonist, or where antagonisms between characters find the fullest voice, or, more generally, where a bunch of pages are designed to land as the loudest thuds. An incident, in comparison, is a milder occurrence, like, say, a Muslim school teacher being suspended from his job after a minor incident with a Hindu pupil. As is clear, said mildness is not a compromise on depth of meaning. Both *Quarterlife* and *History's Angel* work with different, equally real, models of realism. I look forward to reading them again, perhaps simultaneously.

The land's richest literary prize, The JCB Prize for Literature, was awarded to *Fire Bird* by Perumal Murugan, translated from Tamil by Janani Kannan. This made it the fifth time out of six that the prize has gone to a translated work. It goes to show the richness of Indian literature, and it is only fair that English literature in India accepts itself as one of many. One wishes, however, for a similar flow in the other direction, wherein more English works get translated into other languages.

Tanuj Solanki's last novel is *Manjhi's Mayhem* (2022)

SHELF LIFE

REFILL THE INKPOT

Writers share with us their New Year resolutions for art, creativity and life



ANCHAL MALHOTRA: Apart from research notebooks, I've never been one to keep a daily journal and I'd like to cultivate that habit this year. Also, I'm in awe of authors who write books that are succinct yet memorable, so I will be spending time reading and learning from shorter texts.

TASHAN MEHTA: I don't usually make New Year resolutions (I never keep them anyway) but this year I wanted direction, an anchor to hold on to. So my resolution for 2024 is to "live as closely to the art as possible". That means writing the new book, but also cook-



ing the meals of my novel world and drawing the illustrations that capture its tone. It means dancing (on land) and swimming in the sea, and looking at my relationships with the unflinching but tender gaze that art asks of us — to see clearly, always, but with love.



TEJASWINI APTE-RAHM: First, I'd like to set aside at least a couple of hours each day for reading, to explore new writers and genres, particularly science-fiction and horror, which I'm not familiar with and would like to explore. Second, I'd like to spend more time outdoors in nature. I think

both these things will help me in my writing journey.



HUSSAIN HAIDRY: I think the only practical (and boring) resolutions I had were: Finishing the ongoing projects and travel for sometime in the first half of the year, and write something new from scratch in the second half of the year. Also, protecting my writing hours a tad better than what I did in 2023. And yes, need to write more poems in 2024 even if nobody reads poems anymore.

UDBHAV SETH

How did we get here?

The uncomfortable questions inherent in writing a political novel of this time

Devika Rege

I HAVE spent the better part of a decade writing a novel about young Indians arriving at their politics. The story is an attempt to understand how, around 2014, our political identities became all-encompassing in a way that they had not been before, and what this meant for the spread of Hindu nationalism. Since the work is set in a real-world context, it called for years of on-ground research to understand why people felt the way they did. Besides this, every headline I read, debate I encountered and public event I witnessed recalibrated what I made of my subject.

The most obvious challenge to such an endeavour is that the novel is a long-gestated form while the moment evolves in rapid and unpredictable ways. What seems urgent on one day might soon fade into irrelevance. The history books which will contextualise significant turns are yet to be written. As the

smoke and mirrors clear, one has to be careful in developing characters whose wisdom stays true to the indeterminacy of the hour at which the story is set without creating a text that revives old blind spots.

In an increasingly polarised time, I was also weary of depicting the country in binaries like Left and Right or liberal and conservative. I wanted to explore the fault lines within a liberal living room or how Hindu nationalism manifests differently across right-wing parties in a single state. But when one gets so granular, how not to lose sight of the universal in the particular? Is it possible to be local, regional, national, and transnational at once, without reducing any one dimension in service of another? To hold in focus both the drop in the ocean and the ocean in the drop, not to mention all the currents in between, remained one of the tougher aspects of the work.

Nevertheless, over time, I closed in on a set of characters that I hoped both exemplified

and nuanced the strains in our current political discourse and their underlying psychologies. And the rising conflict between them spawned a new set of concerns. How, for instance, should the writer balance empathy and judgment while crafting arguments or situations in which the actors deeply hurt each other? Can the story give equal weight to multiple points of view without courting moral relativism? To write about a political moment is also, ultimately, to confront the violence it unleashes both in the real world and the world of the text. But does depicting an assault on a woman or a bigotry between communities in detail confront the truth or amplify a culture of violence?

This uneasiness over whether art, in its reach for a truth beyond polemics, absorbs and sustains what is most treacherous about our politics also led me to question the ways in which we tell stories altogether. I asked myself what it says about a novel that critiques social inequality if it is told from the point of

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view of only three characters: one White, and two upper-caste. How would it change the plot if I brought in a greater diversity of voices? I didn't know, but I wanted to find out. That is why the perspectives in the novel go from three characters to nine to those of a whole city on a night when it descends into violence. The way the story unfolds reveals its own expanding democratic consciousness.

Of course, no one novel can represent an

entire city, let alone a country. The protagonists in my novel remain from the lower to upper middle class, and even when it goes beyond, the overarching structure still betrays a privileged perception of what constitutes a good democracy. There are also other unresolved questions in the work. For example, does such a scheme correct existing erasures, or create a liberal utopia where everyone gets a voice and the reader is comforted by a fiction that is far from the reality of our public discourse? And does ventriloquising other positions permit the writer to escape her own?

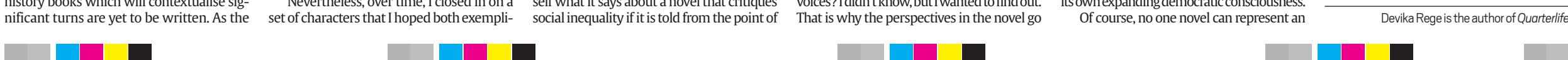
There is a point in any long-laboured project when one is utterly in the dark. When the only way out is through, and the work proceeds in a series of experiments, each a response to the last. It was only gradually that I realised the essence of my endeavour, given its form and subject, lay in these very questions and the novel's evolving response to them. The poet Lu Chi has written "a composition comes into being as the incarnation of many living gestures." This conception gave me hope that, however incrementally, it is possible for art to look over the walls of the political culture that births it and begin the search for new horizons.

Devika Rege is the author of *Quarterlife*

THE UNIVERSAL IN THE PARTICULAR

Set in Mumbai, *Quarterlife* takes on a nation's political coming-of-age

WIKIMEDIA



Living each day, Parkinson's didn't own them

Two patients decided to reclaim their life with determined effort. One chose gardening, the other underwent a surgical procedure



PAVANKHENGRE

The green thumb stopped the tremors

Anuradha Mascarenhas

WHEN THE doctor told 75-year-old Suryakant Champhekar that his hand tremors were because of Parkinson's, a degenerative brain disease, he decided to take up gardening, his long-time passion, to steady them. Now, five years down the line, his fingers do not shake as he slits the stem of a hibiscus plant to make a graft and prunes leaves at his greenhouse. Surrounded by the winter bursts of vibrant flowers, Champhekar looks at them with pride as he has become quite the master grafter whose Ameya Nursery has become the go-to spot for Pune's plant lovers. Walking between the rows of seedlings, he doesn't use a stick. "Sometimes, I cannot keep my balance but then I keep going. There are so many flower

species that I can create," says Champhekar, whom you will find at the nursery between 9.30 am and 5 pm daily.

Not surprisingly, his treating doctor and the Director of Neurology, Jupiter Hospital, Dr Rajas Deshpande, took to social media to write about him. "While early detection, regular medication and exercises are necessary for Parkinson's patients to manage their motor functions, Champhekar had a rare positive spirit to keep going. He is more active than many youngsters and has won the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Horticulture Society for being the most skilled and efficient participant. Nobody would guess his condition," he says. In fact, Dr Deshpande admits to learning some lessons from his patient: "His passion for work, his ability to be content with himself and his mental alertness." Mobility and coordination are affected in Parkinson's as you have low levels of dopamine, a neurotrans-

mitter that controls how neurons communicate with each other. Later stages of the disease affect how your brain functions, often causing dementia-like symptoms and depression. That's why Champhekar tries to work the brain as much as possible.

However, something else is disturbing Dr Deshpande these days. While Parkinson's is usually detected in the 50-plus age group, he has been seeing early onset in some of his patients, the youngest among them being just 25. "There are various types of Parkinson's disease and the causes are largely unknown. However, some are genetic while those who have had head injuries may develop Parkinson's in later life. There are reports (though more evidence is required) linking Parkinson's to long-term use of antipsychotic drugs. Other studies show that exposure to herbicides and pesticides may increase one's risk of Parkinson's disease," Dr Deshpande adds.

Champhekar, who decided to consult Dr Deshpande after he had problems driving and negotiating turns, is already feeling the pace of progressive degeneration. He has become slower, his joints seem to stiffen up faster and he has trouble balancing himself too. "Most days, I can't sleep. Sometimes, I am awake from 2 am to 4 am. But since such symptoms can only increase, why fret and complain? I will just get on with my work," says Champhekar.

A former civil engineer, he briefly coached the national basketball team in the 1970s. Since gardening was his passion, he helped farmers along the Mumbai-Goa highway improve yields of mango and cashew plants. "I read a lot, did grafting experiments and now my nursery supplies to many plant collectors," says Champhekar, whose wife stands in when he feels too ill. A support system helps Parkinson's patients manage their condition better.

While Champhekar's green thumb has been a source of joy to him and others, he is looking forward to playing his harmonium, again a good finger exercise for dealing with Parkinson's. Life, indeed, is beautiful.

LIFE
POSITIVE



AMIT CHAKRAVARTY

DBS helped her pick up a glass of water

Rupsa Chakraborty

THIRTEEN YEARS ago, 52-year-old Akshada Shinde needed help while drinking water, couldn't walk ten steps and required help in the bathroom. "My hands would bend backwards, my words would slur and I was bed-ridden," she says. Now, thanks to a Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) surgery, she can do more than just pick up a glass of water. She is up and about and even danced at her recent birthday party.

Akshada was diagnosed with Parkinson's at a relatively young age of 39. Her family was affected the most as she was its most functional member. "My children and husband would coordinate between themselves to ensure that

one would stay with me at home at all times," she says. Conventional medications proved futile, worsening her condition. Normally Parkinson's has a span of around 40 years. By the time motor symptoms such as tremors and stiffness manifest, the patient has already lost around eight years. Since the disease is caused by low levels of dopamine, initial therapy with medication like Syn dopa helps patients maintain a semblance of normalcy, a sort of a "honeymoon period." However, given the degenerative nature of the disease, the requirement for dopamine increases. The body needs a higher dose which, in turn, has debilitating side effects, like low blood pressure, confusion and uncontrolled muscle movement. It was at this low point



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you can be on a beach and swim in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

The Great Barrier Reef, renowned as the world's largest coral reef system, has long been a major attraction for visitors to Australia. Its sheer magnitude, boasting around 400 varieties of coral, 1,500 species of fish, and 4,000 types of molluscs, makes it an underwater marvel. However, while the Great Barrier Reef continues to draw global attention, the focus of many travellers has shifted to another spectacular part of Queensland - the Whitsunday Islands. The Whitsunday Islands, a stunning archipelago located in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef, offers a unique blend of serene beauty and adventure. Among these islands, Hamilton Island stands out as a particularly captivating destination. Hamilton Island's popularity has surged due to its accessibility and the variety of experiences it offers.

Finally, I have seen a growing curiosity about Australia's indigenous culture and unique wildlife too, with increasing interest in experiences like spotting kangaroos in the wild, swimming with seals and sea turtles, and hot air ballooning in the Australia Outback.

Together, all of these reasons have cumulatively transformed Australia into a multi-visit destination for the Indian traveller. Like I mentioned earlier, I have been to the land Down Under 8 times and by the time this piece is published, I will be on my flight to Australia where this time, it's only a 7 day trip for us. We plan to explore the newer areas of Melbourne and witness the Australian Open for the first time ever. So my travel score for Australia will soon hit 9. When are you opening your account and getting off the mark?



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Australia: Then & Now!

Today, a trip to Australia is talked about in the same breath as other multi-visit destinations like Switzerland, Japan. Why is that?



Neil Patil
Founder, COO & CTO-Veena World
neil@veenaworld.com

not just in numbers but in the nature of traveller visits. Even at Veena World, we have seen a steady increase in the number of enquiries flowing in at our offices all through India. These enquiries are not limited to the summer holidays alone, but more so for travel through the year. What do you think has fuelled this change? Why has Australia suddenly become top-of-mind for all of us? I think there are a few reasons for this.

One of the biggest things that got the ball rolling was MasterChef Australia. This one reality show, which first aired in 2009 fuelled the Australian fascination. It brought the three judges: Matt Preston, George Calombaris and Gary Mehigan into Indian living rooms, making them a part of the daily conversation. More significantly, the local culinary delights on showcase accompanied by the picturesque settings of stunning Australian landscapes, sparked an interest and increased curiosity about Australia in the minds of the Indian audience.

On the other side is the key role played by both, the Government of Australia and Tourism Australia who have put a lot of effort in the last 15 years to streamline visa processes for Indian travellers. The introduction of electronic visas and more user-friendly application methods has reduced the hassle and uncertainty that often accompanies international travel planning and visa applications, a move that resonates well with potential travellers. The game-changer, though, is the provision for multi-entry, multi-year tourist visas for Indians in many instances. Indian tourists today plan multiple trips to Australia over a span of years without the need for repeated applications. This has allowed Indian travellers a level of flexibility and convenience that was previously unavailable. This flexibility is particularly appealing for those wishing to simply indulge in leisure travel across the diverse Australian landscape.

This ease of repeated access encourages tourists to consider more extensive and varied itineraries, exploring beyond the typical tourist hotspots. The long-term visa not only

caters to the immediate travel plan but also sows the seeds for future visits. This aspect has significantly contributed to the rise in the number of Indian tourists choosing Australia as their destination. It reflects a growing trend of viewing Australia not just as a one-time vacation spot, but as a recurring destination for exploration, adventure, and cultural exchange.

Speaking of flight connectivity, direct flights have made Australia a more accessible destination for Indians. The recent launch of Air India's direct

service thrice a week from Mumbai to Melbourne is a notable milestone in this development. By the time this article is published, my wife Heta and I will be on this very flight direct to Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport from Mumbai. This new route complements existing direct flights from major Indian cities like Delhi and Bengaluru, greatly easing the journey for Indian travellers. Moreover, increased seat capacity due to these direct flights has a beneficial ripple effect on airfares. With more seats available, airlines can offer more competitive pricing, making travel to Australia more affordable for a broader segment of the Indian population.

Affordable fares open the door for more travellers, who previously may have considered Australia out of their financial reach. This progress in connectivity reflects a growing recognition of the importance of the Indian tourist market and is a testament to the strengthening relationship between India and Australia.

When I think about what you see in Australia, while the Great Ocean Road and the Sydney Opera House continue

to be timeless draws, there's a growing curiosity for the less-explored, yet equally captivating parts of Australia. One such emerging highlight is the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG), now garnering more attention from cricket enthusiasts, especially since the inauguration of the Sachin Tendulkar gate. This tribute to Sachin has added a sentimental value to the SCG, transforming it into a pilgrimage site for Indian cricket fans.

Perth is coming into the spotlight as a new focal point for Indian tourists. Traditionally overlooked in favour of more famous eastern cities, Perth is now known for its unique blend of urban sophistication and natural beauty. For cricket fans, the top draw here is the legendary WACA stadium. There are also its pristine beaches, sprawling parks, and a vibrant cultural scene that are captivating Indian tourists. The city's relative proximity to India compared to other Australian cities also makes it an appealing entry point to explore this vast country. And speaking of its proximity to India, Perth is the only major Australian city where