

mint

# lounge

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13 2024

**15 YEARS OF EXPERIMENTER**

Their gallery having completed 15 years in 2023, Priyanka and Prateek Raja are busy with an array of exhibitions that embody the ethos of Experimenter—to create spaces for diverse practices and politically charged art

SEE PAGE 11

**HCL TECH SHINES AS WIPRO REVENUE LAGS | PAGE 16**

## WINTERING IN EUROPE

THREE ATYPICAL EUROPEAN WINTER HOLIDAYS: A UNIQUE MUSIC FESTIVAL, A NATURE-INFLUENCED DESIGN HUB, AND A PLUNGE INTO ICY WATERS



SOURCE

A curation of handcrafted objects to celebrate Sankranti

TASTE

*GenZ chefs are crafting a new work ethos*

VANTAGE

How content creators try to make sports simpler

FICTION SPECIAL

*'Paper Boat' by Manoj Rupda*

A NOTE FROM  
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

Wintering vs  
hibernation

I first learnt of hibernation through cartoons—a large, colourful bear was trying to fill up on berries to sleep through the long winter. It was a puzzling concept to child of the tropics.

In Bengaluru, Chennai and Coonoor, the places I am probably most familiar with, winter—or rather January—is a time of beauty. The air is crisp, the sky is bright blue, the sun is warming rather than scorching, and there's more than usual to do—from get-togethers and cultural festivals to meeting friends visiting from across the world.

Until I spent some small amount of time in London and then moved to Delhi, I never understood the equating of winter with sadness and struggle, though all of literature, art and culture did. Until then, it was a time to be outdoors and "enjoy the weather" rather than hunker down and hibernate. And in the

Nordic region, where winter can stretch to eight months of the year and temperatures drop to unimaginable levels, that's exactly what they seem to do—they enjoy the outdoors no matter what the conditions.

Swimming, dancing at music festivals, hiking... there are many ways to enjoy winter like a local in Iceland, Finland, Denmark and the rest of the Nordic countries. They "winter"—rest, relax and live in the moment—rather than hibernate and hide away.

At Lounge, January is also the month when we turn the focus on fiction. The spirit of last week's fiction special continues. This week, we novelist Manoj Rupda, who is the author of, among other books, the moving *I Named My Sister Silence*, has written an original short story for us. It's translated from Hindi by the talented Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, who previously, wrote his own short story for Lounge. *Paper Boat* is a compelling portrait of the nature of courage, the depth of convictions and our ability to change.

*Write to the Lounge editor at shalini.umachandran@htlive.com  
@shalinimb*

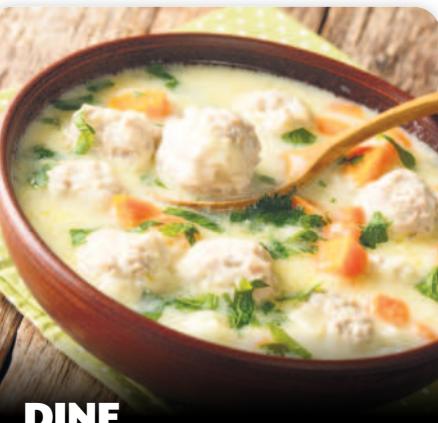
LOUNGE  
ONLINE

YOUR  
FAVOURITE  
WEEKEND READ  
NOW THROUGH  
THE WEEK

The best of Mintlounge.in from the week gone by and what to look forward to in the one ahead



✉ lounge@livemint.com  
@mint\_lounge  
@livemintlounge



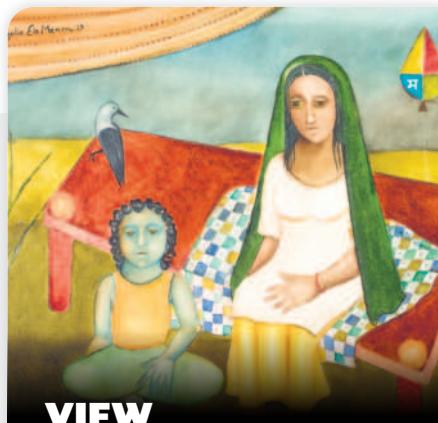
## DINE

When in Sofia, have a dairy good time

If cheese is your favourite food, a trip to Bulgaria's capital Sofia might be one to plan this year. The Balkan country serves a range of cheese, from the white *sirene*—which is similar to Greek feta—to the yellow brine cheese called *kash-kaval*. These are baked, stuffed into breads, fried, worked into salads and pies, sprinkled over sweet and savoury desserts or served on platters through the day. The per-capita consumption of dairy products and particularly yogurt, called *kiselo mlyako* (sour milk)—an ingredient of some cold soups—in Bulgaria is traditionally higher than the rest of Europe, finds Raul Dias, as he tries them all.



In Food >> Discover



## VIEW

A visit to the Mumbai Gallery Weekend

The 12th edition of the four-day Mumbai Gallery Weekend will draw to a close tomorrow, but there is still time to catch the many exciting talks, artist-led workshops, live performances and exhibitions that focus on contemporary art practices. More than 35 galleries from across the country are participating this year, making it the biggest edition of the event. The events are scattered across spaces across the city, and showcase an eclectic mix of the works of young, emerging and senior artists, whose art is a visual response to sociopolitical and cultural issues. Riddhi Doshi lists the events you could catch there this weekend.



In How To Lounge >> Art & Culture



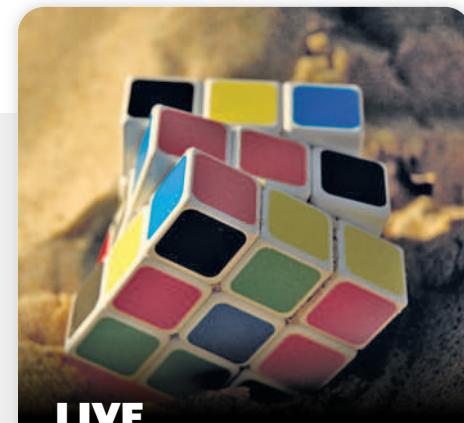
## READ

How Beckenbauer changed football

Franz Beckenbauer, one of the greatest footballers of all time, died last week at the age of 78. In the golden era of football in the 1960s and 1970s, Beckenbauer charmed the world with a willingness to play outside of prescribed roles, something very un-German at the time. An elegant player with a lust for life and success, Beckenbauer changed football forever as he revolutionised the role of the *libero*—a "free man" in defence who can sweep up and attack, writes Deepti Patwardhan. He was called "ahead of his time", and remains one of only three people to have won the World Cup as a player and a manager.



In News >> Talking Point



## LIVE

Time to build your 'adversity quotient'

Adversity quotient is the measure of your ability to go through a rough patch and come out without losing your mind. It has now become one of the metrics of a life well led, and helps to create a gentler place not just for ourselves but for others as well. It does, however, take work to build this quotient, and one way to gain resilience is by developing a growth mindset and changing the way we view a particular situation. Chandrika R. Krishnan writes that part of building resilience is cultivating a sense of long-lasting joy by doing good and displaying kindness, and by bringing awareness to our thinking patterns.



In Relationships >> It's Complicated

## NEW ON SCREENS

A thriller with Vijay Sethupathi and Katrina, Ridley Scott runs riot through history, and other things to watch



## MERRY CHRISTMAS

Sriram Raghavan is back, and with him hopes for a smart, well-directed, cinema-literate Hindi film after what seems like forever. This thriller about two strangers who meet on Christmas Eve has the unlikely central pairing of Vijay Sethupathi and Katrina Kaif. Sanjay Kapoor and Vinay Pathak feature in the Hindi version, while the Tamil-language release of the film has Radhika Sarathkumar and Gayathrie. (In theatres)



## CAPTAIN MILLER

The year's first big Indian action film. Dhanush stars as Easa, who must rise up against his former masters in the British Indian army. Directed by Arun Matheswaran, who made the brutal revenge drama *Saani Kaayidham* in 2022. In Tamil. (In theatres)

## ECHO

This new Marvel action miniseries features the deaf superhero Echo. Maya Lopez (Alaqua Cox) used to lead a criminal gang for Wilson Fisk, the primary antagonist in the Marvel series *Daredevil*, but is now taking back control of her life. (Disney+ Hotstar)



## NAPOLEON

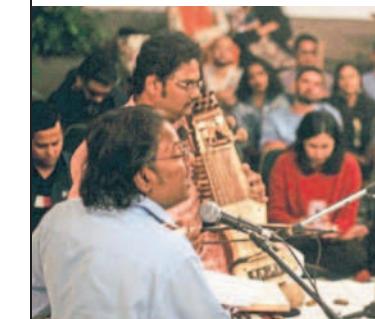
*Napoleon* begins with the future emperor (Joaquin Phoenix), a lowly army captain, and tracks his rise to world domination. One of the slickest ideas in Ridley Scott's 2023 film is to make Napoleon and Josephine's (Vanessa Kirby's) convoluted sex life and marriage the backdrop to his relentless militarism. Hard fact is sacrificed for a chance to run riot through history. (Amazon Prime, rental)

Compiled by Uday Bhatia

PLAN THE WEEK  
AHEAD

## LITERARY HUMOUR

Comedian Kanan Gill kicks off his much-awaited India tour of 19 shows across 16 cities this week. Titled the *Kanan Gill Experience—India Tour 2024*, on the show schedule is a double bill of side-splitting laughter and insightful humour. Beginning with his new hour-long newest stand-up special, *OK, Bye!*, the highlight of the show will be Gill doing a book reading from his novel *Acts Of God*, followed by a question and answer session and... some more jokes. At Jose Thomas Performing Arts Center, Kochi, on 13 January, 7.30pm; Kerala Arts & Crafts Village, Thiruvananthapuram on 14 January, 7.30pm; Good Shepherd Hall, Bengaluru, 19-21 January, 7.30pm. Book tickets on Insider.in



## A MUSICAL EVENING

Bengaluru's popular community space The Court-yard is set to host the 13th sitting of the Courtyard Baithak series. Conceived as a contemporary take on the golden era of informal small gatherings around music and poetry, the series hopes to dissolve the boundaries that exist between the artist and the audience. The Baithak will be a celebration of Sufi and ghazal music and the performance will be led by Ustad Faiyaz Khan of the Kirana gharana with curator Trilochan Kampli on the tabla, Sarfaraz Khan on the sarangi, and Sandeep Pillai on guitar. At The Courtyard, Shanthinagar, Bengaluru, on 17 January, 7.30pm. Book tickets on urbanaut.app.

—Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

# A masterclass by Hilary Mantel

## RE>READINGS

A monthly column on backlisted books that have much to offer in contemporary times

Reading the late writer's 'A Memoir Of My Former Self' is like looking through a scope into the inner workings of her mind

Somak Ghoshal

**A** new year is generally considered to be a good time to look ahead. We are told to bury the ghosts of the past, say goodbye to our inner demons, purge the irritants from our outer world, and make a fresh start.

The late Hilary Mantel, one of the greatest historical novelists of our time, would likely have scoffed at this myth of a clean break. She'd spent her life dealing with the dead, listening to what they said and what they left out. Kings and queens, royals and commoners, ghosts and witches, spoke to her, not only about the things that had once happened, but also about stuff happening here and now.

Like the angel in artist Paul Klee's iconic monoprint *Angelus Novus*, Mantel always had one twinkling eye looking behind her, even as she kept up with the goings-on of her time. As her long-time editor Nicholas Pearson puts it in a note to *A Memoir Of My Former Self*, her recently published posthumous collection of essays, "What emerges is a portrait of Hilary Mantel's life in her own words, 'messages from people I used to be'." We are haunted as much by messages from beyond the grave, as from the selves we have buried inside us.

For me, this volume of journalism, book



reviews and occasional pieces, collected between 1987-2017, felt like the best companion with which to begin the new year. If you haven't read the *Cromwell Trilogy*, Mantel's immortal masterpiece, this volume is, without a doubt, one of the tastiest appetisers to the treat that's awaiting you. And if you are already a fan of Mantel's historical saga, the pieces here will help you appreciate her masterwork even better.

In spite of the dazzling brilliance of each of the pieces in *A Memoir Of My Former Self*, there isn't any trace of the perfectionist's anxiety in this volume. If Mantel is cutting and unsparing about others ("Show me a man—it's usually a man—

who doesn't see the point of fiction, and I'll show you a pompous, inflexible, self-absorbed bore."), she doesn't hesitate to change her mind, revisit an idea with a reformed perspective.

In an essay dating back to 2007, she looks back on Princess Diana's death in 1997, and the intensity with which the British public grieved their beloved ex-royal. Mantel sounds mildly repelled by the "teddy bears, doggerel verse, and flowers rotting in cellophane", left by the public as tribute to their Princess. A decade later, she seems to have had a softening of heart. In another essay, she refers to the same excess of wilted flowers and padded hearts with far more sympathy. By this time, these relics present themselves as evidence of "the struggle for self-expression of individuals who were spiritually and imaginatively deprived".

Hilary Mantel (right) doesn't hesitate to revisit an idea with a reformed perspective, like the public grief over Diana's death.

One of the biggest advantages of being a career critic (or columnist) is that you usually get an opportunity (or several) to redeem yourself in print



sure maps, the marks on the paper are only symbolic indications of the riches to be recovered". It's hard to think of a better blurb to describe the achievement of Mantel's own collection.

Like an inscrutable RIB, *A Memoir Of My Former Self* hides more than it reveals. At its most obvious, it describes the evolution of an inspired genius, Mantel's decades of toil and trouble to get to the bottom of truths that are ephemeral, obscure, and often deeply contested. But, for us, the reader, reading this volume is like sitting in on a masterclass taught by Mantel. It is a 400-page journey that makes us learn and unlearn, teaches us the art of asking good questions, and, most of all, pushes us to reject clichés and stereotypes in the rulebook.

For instance, it takes Mantel a few carefully chosen words to put to rest the debate about fact and fiction. "In any novel, once it's finished, you can't separate fact from fiction—it's like trying to return mayonnaise to oil and egg yolk." Even as she writes about women and their lives (especially of her own body, riddled with the pain of endometriosis), Mantel likes to call a spade a spade. She has no patience with fellow writers "who want to write about women in the past but can't resist retrospectively empowering them". That's why her estimation of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Jane Howard shine through, because she sees through their fallibilities, rather than papering over their slips.

History, for Mantel, isn't an inferior form of the present that needs to be sanitised. The past, she wrote, "isn't a rehearsal; it is the show itself". We need to remember that "our ancestors were not us, in an unevolved form". Fundamentally, "history is not the past—it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past".

In a world where truth and falsehood are getting dangerously mixed up every day, where our moral compass can't identify genocide from self-defence, and myth keeps getting in the way of truth, we need the relentless rigour, clinical eye, and uncompromising humanity of Mantel to forge ahead.

Somak Ghoshal is a writer and editor based in Delhi



Where Development Values Nature

## A celebration of flying colors



13-14 January, 2024

at Baansera  
Near Sarai Kale Khan, New Delhi

About 100 acre of degraded landscape of C&D waste, restored and rejuvenated into an open breathable public green space under thick bamboo cover.

INAUGURATION BY

Shri Vinai Kumar Saxena

Hon'ble Lt. Governor, Delhi

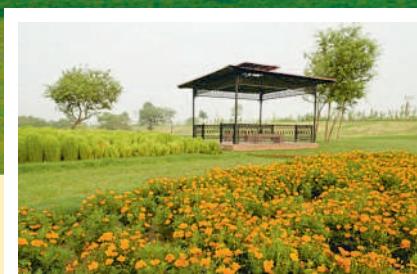
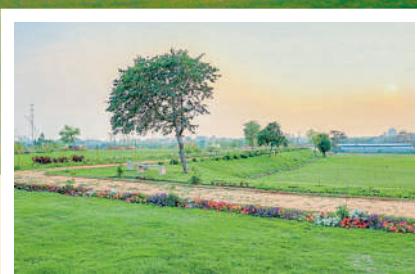
on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2024

For location,  
scan QR code



13<sup>th</sup> January 2024 | 12 PM Onwards

14<sup>th</sup> January 2024 | 10 AM Onwards



### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ◆ Showcasing innovative kites from India and abroad
- ◆ Theme pavilion on history of kites
- ◆ Patang Bazaar
- ◆ Traditional food and handicrafts stalls
- ◆ Cultural performances by folk artists
- ◆ Exclusive activities for kids

Celebrate Lohri, Makar Sankranti, Bihu, Pongal, Maghi and Uttarayani with us

DELHI DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Entry fee ₹50/- per person  
Free for children upto 10 years

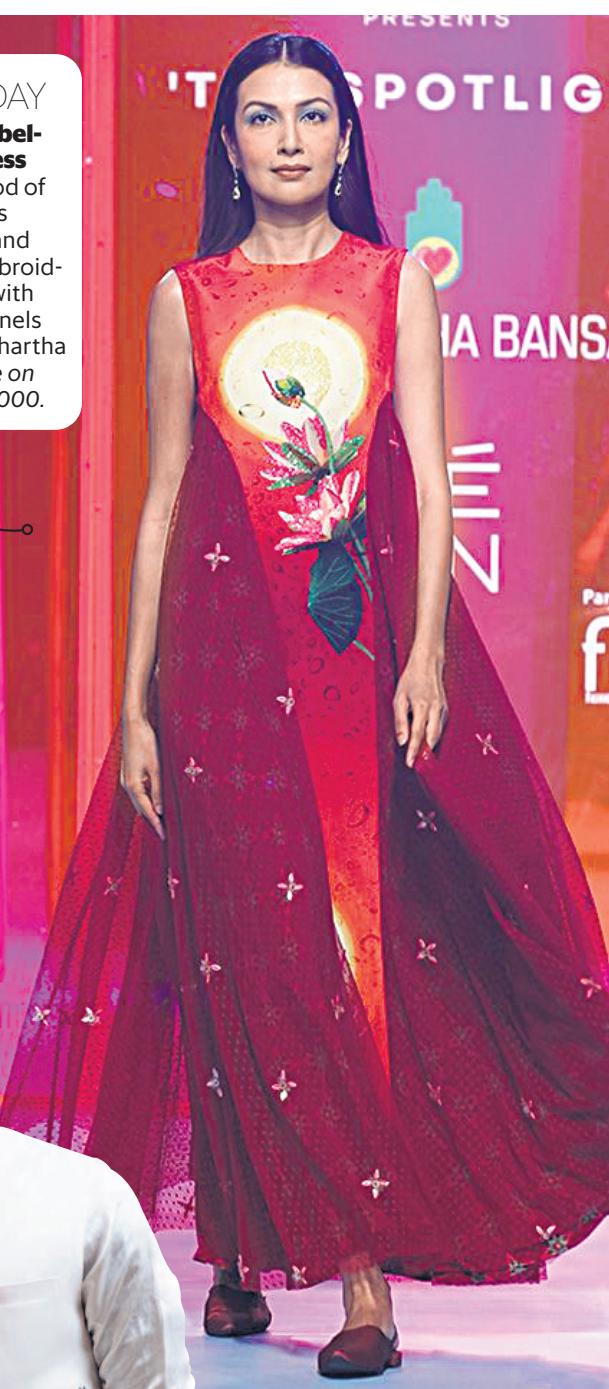
## FEEL BULLISH

**The Basava**  
This Channapatna toy by the Varnam Craft Collective is made with the wood of the *Wrightia tinctoria* plant and decorated with non-toxic oil paints. Available on [varnamstore.in](#); ₹675 onwards.



## RULE THE DAY

**Cherry Red Embellished Long Dress**  
Embody the mood of the festival in this cherry red "Sun and Flower" print embroidered long dress with gathered side panels by designer Siddhartha Bansal. Available on [ogaan.com](#); ₹25,000.



## Source

A curation of handcrafted objects to celebrate the spirit of Sankranti



## ON THE GREEN SIDE

**Embroidered Kouna Grass Clutch**  
Handcrafted clutch made from dried kouna grass native to the North-East by brand Forsares. Available on [flourish.shop](#); ₹1,050.



## ON THE NOSE

**Athangudi 21**  
Handcrafted gold nose pin with meenakari detailing in green, red and white inspired by Athangudi tiles. Available on [mookuthi.com](#); ₹23,950.

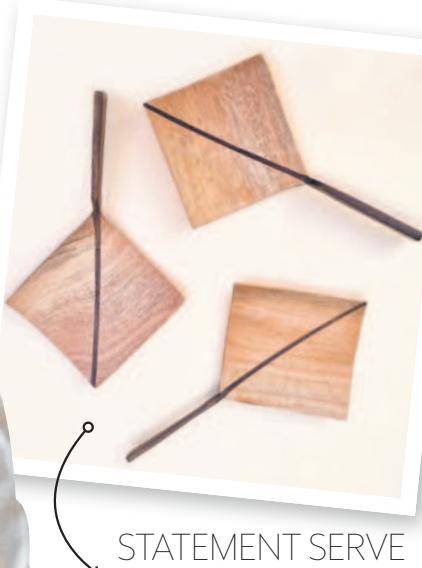


**SIX YARDS OF ART**  
**Archana Jaju Sage Kalamkari Saree**  
Khadi kanjeevaram silk saree with hand-painted kalamkari body and zari border. Available on [ogaan.com](#); ₹3,16,999.

Compiled by  
Mahalakshmi  
Prabhakaran

## 'DESI' SUAVE FACTOR

**Creamy Grey Phulkari Nehru Jacket by Paarsh**  
Nehru jacket in linen-satin base with phulkari embroidery. Available on [perniaspopupshop.com](#); ₹10,875



## STATEMENT SERVE

**Tessera Walnut Brown Kite-Shaped Servers**  
A set of three spiffy servers with long handles. Available on [perniaspopupshop.com](#); ₹1,850

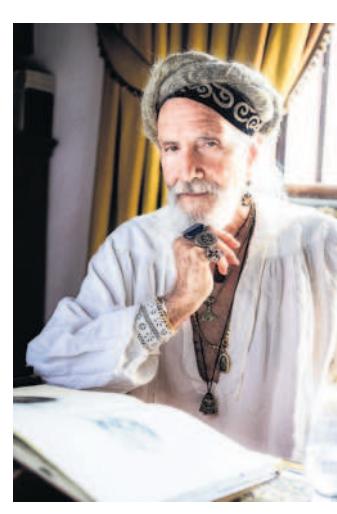
## LOUNGE LOVES

Things to watch, read, hear, do—and other curated experiences from the team



**A HEARTY BREAKFAST**  
India Hemp Organics' Hemp Hearts landed on my table a few months ago, when a friend dropped by. I had used skincare products with hemp extracts before, but this was the first time I was incorporating them in my diet. It was finding out that hemp-based protein supplements contain edestin, an easily digestible protein, that convinced me to try it. Hemp hearts, essentially the inner part of the *Cannabis sativa* plant's seeds, are supposed to be rich in nutrients. A few weeks in, I am unsure of their effect on my health, but the delicately nutty flavour of hemp hearts has meant that I can sprinkle them as a topping on any *upma* or chutney without having to, in the quest for more protein, change my diet drastically. The brand also sells hemp protein powder that can be folded into any flour or blended into smoothies.

—Vangmayi Parakala



**THE ROYAL GRANFLUENCER**  
How often do you come across a prince who takes you on a tour of his 1,000-year-old castle in northern Italy, while demystifying his collection of antique tantric paintings, old maps and jewellery? Meet Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, or Prince Stash, 81. He started sharing information about his life, both inside and outside the castle, over a year ago on TikTok and later on Instagram, where I discovered him last week. Through Reels, Stash shares his knowledge of things as varied as old Turkish swords and lapis lazuli jewellery. Recently, he asked his 267,000 Instagram followers to investigate the meaning behind a Tibetan shamanic object he picked up in Italy. The page is an entertaining deep dive into global history. —Poja Singh

**HOUSE BOUND**  
Eight Bardugo's adult fantasy series set in an alternate version of our reality, specifically Yale University, bristles with magic. In *Ninth House*, Bardugo, the author of fan-favourite Young Adult series like *Shadow And Bone* and *Six Of Crows*, goes to a really dark place—a prestigious university where secret societies dabble in magic and have done so for centuries, with sometimes disastrous results. This is not a benign Hogwarts replica—the magic practised by the "Ancient Eight" houses can be malicious and malevolent, and this, along with the efforts of the titular "Ninth House" that tries to keep them in check, form the crux of this tale. Can't wait to get on to the sequel, *Hell Bound*, which released a few months ago.

—Shrabonti Bagchi



**MAKING MAD MEMORIES**  
At a house party a few weeks back, I found myself arm-wrestling, then in a staring contest and finally, mimicking Rosesh Sarabhai (from the TV show *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai*). The prompts were a hoot but I'll credit the inventiveness not to my friends, but to a new party game called *The Ultimate Indian Drinking Game* by Dring (a house-party brand). Like every party game, this one's agenda is to get its players buzzed, all while they do silly and outrageous things for every round requires the person picking the card or the rest of the group to have a few sips of their drink. Containing 54 "fun cards" and a Dring bell, it's best played with a big group because that's when a prompt like "Ring the dring, click a goofy group picture and upload it on your Instagram right now!" can make for a cherished party memory.

—Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

**STREAM OF STORIES**  
RAJA SEN

## Too many flies in this soup



A still from 'Killer Soup'.

**G**ood soup is about more than its ingredients. In *Killer Soup*—a new Netflix series directed by Abhishek Chaubey—Konkona Sen Sharma stars as Swati Shetty, an aspiring chef who toils throughout the show's eight episodes over just one dish, a mutton *paya* soup. She has the ingredients but she doesn't have the balance, and this may also be said for this series. On paper, *Killer Soup* has a sharp director, a smashing premise ripped from the headlines, a superlative ensemble cast playing off each other, a riot of flavourful accents and whimsical twists, and yet...

In 2017, a woman in Telangana killed her husband, then poured acid on her lover's face in an attempt to pass him off as the husband. This is a news story wild enough to justify a true-crime thriller, but Chaubey—along with co-writers Anant Tripathi, Harshad Nalawade and Unaiza Merchant—went wackier not only by adding a soup-maker to their cauldron, but by casting the same man—Manoj Bajpayee—as the husband and the lover, the victim and the impostor. Add to that an obnoxious elder brother, a principled young policeman, an ambitious niece, and an old cop tripping over a book of poetry.

That weather-beaten cop is super. Played by the legendary Tamil actor Nassar, Inspector Hassan is a curmudgeonly veteran who likes his ice cream soft and his liquor local. Weeks away from retirement, he's wondering what to make of this strange case where bodies keep piling up. Valiantly barrelling forth with his mulligatawny-accented English and Hindi, the Inspector attempts to make sense of plot and poems. If it's the part of a bumbler, but Nassar—so natural when grimacing to hold his breath around a corpse, so delightful when saying the word *khanasa*, meaning "chef"—gives it a clumsy gravitas.

Bajpayee is less fortunate. He plays the overbearing Prabhakar Shetty, all burping and bravado, as well as the passive Umesh Mahto, a masseuse with a squint, but the actor doesn't get much besides reaction shots: he looks awestruck, he looks shocked, he looks nervous. Whenever allowed to actually do something—like when Umesh quickly and slyly massages the arm of a bouncer trying to beat him up—Bajpayee is great, but the script doesn't give him enough. As an actor, he seems limited by passivity... some actors make a meal out of reactions. Bajpayee merely bides his time.

Sen Sharma, on the other hand, gets everything. Her fiery eyes flashing with improvised determination, the actor makes Swati Shetty intriguing right from the start. She wants to cook, she wants to love, she wants to succeed. We accompany Swati as she dons a burkha, calls herself "Manisha Koirala" and proceeds to put on a variety of brave faces. Despite such a meaty part—and a characteristically faultless performance—the character feels like a misfit. Like someone from a sadder genre who accidentally fell into this comedy.

The most memorable performance comes from Lal, the Malayalam cinema veteran, playing a heavy called Lucas. Sayaji Shinde plays his colourful boss, Arvind, and has a blast throwing his weight around, but Lucas is the real lion, with his basso profundo voice and his disconcertingly magnetic eyes. Other hard to forget performers are Vaishali Bisht as Mehrunissa, the wizened old cook, and Anubhaswan as the rookie policeman Thupalli, all earnestness and Robert Frost.

There are a few intriguing ideas—like a Hindu woman on the run causing a witch-hunt for a "mysterious" woman in a burkha—but they aren't really taken anywhere. A vaguely incestuous relationship seems so forbidden even by the writers that they quickly write a way out by telegraphing an upcoming familial twist. Instead, we get characters saying anachronistic lines like "*Tera yeh ponzi scheme nahin jamta*," and clichés like coroners eating while standing over corpses.

Perhaps aware that *Killer Soup* is hard to swallow, Chaubey—a subtle director with a deftness of touch—this time spoon-feeds his audience. This is a mad and freewheeling series, and should have been a densely-plotted dark comedy on the lines of Carl Hiaasen's novels. Alas, plot machinations get bogged down by repetition, by over-explaining and by relentlessly underlining hints that would be better hidden in plain sight. This is quite a watchable show primarily because of its performances, but it hurts because it could have been great. Maybe if it was boiled down to four or six episodes instead of eight?

The plot mostly works, and the outrageous twists and convenient coincidences are par for the course. Unfortunately, the show never gets the tone right. With sentiment, as with sea-salt, a little goes a long way, but *Killer Soup*, not content to throw its characters on the boil, feels obligated to show them crying and defeated and beaten, heading into prolonged emotional and even melodramatic sequences just when the plot needs to get a move on. Thus the episodes feel overlong and there is a sense of inevitability to the proceedings. That doesn't feel like Chaubey, who made us read between the lines in *Dedh Ishqiya* or *Sonchiriya*—it feels more like someone reheated a bowl of Sriram Raghavan soup in a microwave.

The show is beautifully shot and art-directed, with cinematographer Anuj Rakesh Dhawan making a fictitious village town come alive. The show also features fireflies, the collective noun for whom is a sparkle. There are very many bright and shiny moving parts in this *Killer Soup*, but the show rarely sparkles. The issue may be one of over-seasoning. Too many kooks may have enjoyed this broth. One would do well to remember that having a fly—or a firefly—in the soup isn't a feature. It's a bug.

Raja Sen is a screenwriter and critic. He has co-written *Chup*, a film about killing critics, and is now creating an absurd comedy series. He posts @rajasen.

## STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK

*Killing It*, streaming on JioCinema, is the kind of show *Killer Soup* would love to have been. Starring Craig Robinson from *The Office*, the NBC comedy is about a man who ends up hunting and killing snakes for money. The plot is wild, and the humour is both absurd and relentless.

# The celebrity circus over the Maldives fracas

While it's a win-win for the celebrities who are rewarded with an instant following, Indian islands and their fragile ecosystems might well be the losers here



CULT  
FRICTION  
SANDIP  
ROY

jeopardise major infrastructure projects that are underway, according to *The New York Times*.

But what is fascinating about the Maldives kerfuffle are the outsize waves it's been making on social media, as celebrities trip over each other to be seen front and centre of the #Boycott-Maldives bandwagon. News channels are doing hysterical coral-by-coral comparisons between the Maldives and Lakshadweep, even as many anchors call it "Lakshwadeep". The Maldives, as some wits put it, would soon become Smalldives, once the social media warriors were done. Travel portal Ease-MyTrip did its bit by deciding to suspend bookings to the Maldives and instead asked Indians to "discover the enchanting beauty of Ayodhya and the pristine allure of Lakshadweep". InsuranceDekho, India's largest insurtech platform, sent out a press release saying they had decided to stop the issuance of travel insurance to the Maldives on their platform and offered sound bytes to media outlets. The talking points are the same and hashtaged. Let's #ExploreIndianIslands and let's #BoycottMaldives. The posts all came with tourist brochure-style pictures of pristine waters and golden beaches of those Indian islands. The only problem was that while they wanted to make the point that anything the Maldives can do, Lakshadweep can do better, many in their haste inadvertently shared pictures from the Maldives itself. Or French Polynesia. When it comes to virgin beaches and crystal-clear water, it's obviously hard for our stars to tell one from the other. Star-crossed beaches, if you will.

Looking at the social media uproar one cannot help but think that the level of celebrity outrage must somehow be directly proportional to the number of lavish holidays that celebrity must have spent on those islands. No one boasts too much about their trips to chilly Canada, but the Maldives is an Instagrammers' paradise. And now it's turned into an Instagrammers' shame and everyone is trying to out-cheerlead



The Maldives have turned from an Instagrammers' paradise to Instagrammers' shame.

ISTOCKPHOTO

each other as they extol the virtues of a *shuddh desi* beach holiday, where they can all paraphrase Cliff Richard as they chorus, *We're goin' where the sun shines brightly, we're goin' where the sea is blue, We've seen it in the movies (or on X). Let's see if it's true.* (Cliff Richard is India-born and someone should approach him for that song for Lakshadweep immediately!) Actor Poonam Pandey even posted a WhatsApp chat to prove she was cancelling her forthcoming shoot in the Maldives and said she was hoping to shoot in Lakshadweep instead. What none of them mention is poor Lakshadweep has about 1/10th the landmass of the Maldives. If all the celebrities and their entourages actually landed on these islands, the "moments of bliss" the Prime Minister so enjoyed there would evaporate in a heartbeat.

The Maldivian ministers' gaffe

deservedly got them in hot water. And the Indian government has shown it is more than capable of handling the fracas. The celebrity circus is playing to a different audience. As celebrities, they understand the utmost importance of being on the right side of every issue, especially when national honour is at stake. That's easy enough when it's about a terrorist attack in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir, a town none of them have been to. It's a little trickier when the place in the national cross-hairs is your favourite backyard *phoren* destination. In fact, some of the celebs waxing indignant were sharing their cycling, partying and snorkelling pictures from the Maldives a week back. As Shakespeare wrote, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

The celebrity tizzy is not entirely unexpected though. Joyojeet Pal, asso-

ciate professor at the University of Michigan School of Information, US, has long been tracking Twitter (now X) data to understand patterns around celebrity engagement with political issues from the rise of candidate Modi to the 2020-21 farmer protests.

When singer Rihanna weighed in on the Indian farmers' protest in 2021, it unleashed a celebrity Twitter-storm as well. In a 2021 public domain paper that analysed tweeting trends, Pal and other researchers affiliated with Microsoft Research observed that the more followers an Indian celebrity had, the lower the chance that they might speak up in support of someone like Rihanna. Only one celebrity with over one million Twitter followers, Swara Bhaskar, immediately endorsed her. They also saw "strong suggestion of collusive tweeting from the key Indian celebri-

ties, based on the timestamps of their tweeting, and the contents of the text." They noted that after a tweet from the Union ministry of external affairs, a flood of tweets followed from film stars, most of them diligently using the same hashtags like #IndiaAgainstPropaganda and #IndiaTogether. Looking at the trending topics and hashtags, they found that while at first there was "momentum on the side battling for the protesting farmers", the tide turned towards the side opposing Rihanna after the celebrities entered the fray and their hashtags all started to trend.

While it's a win-win for the celebrities who find they are rewarded with instant retweeting and new followers, sadly Indian islands and their fragile ecosystems might well be the losers here. As the clamour to develop India's answer to the Maldives grows, genuine debates about what is sustainable development and its ecological impact could easily be dubbed as "anti-national", the work of some nefarious Maldives lobby. As of now, only one daily flight connects Kochi in Kerala with Lakshadweep's Agatti. Other than that, there are six somewhat erratic passenger ships. Lakshadweep is actually not easy to get to even though many celebs have put it on top of their travel bucket list.

One actor said, she's on the "verge" of booking an "impulse holiday" there. Until the infrastructure ramps up though, the celebrity brigade is unlikely to head en masse to Lakshadweep. They will have to make do with the likes of Bali and Phuket, but they must be nervously hoping no foolhardy ministers in those countries decide to shoot their mouth off.

As for me, I am just hugely relieved that there is no danger of being caught trying to pass off my Maldives snorkelling pictures as a home-grown Lakshadweep holiday.

*Cult Friction* is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.  
Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

# An unrealistic vision of the future

'Breaking The Mould' is a pushback against production-linked incentives, but the alternatives it offers are not logical

Rahul Jacob

Decades ago, the great trade economist Jagdish Bhagwati observed that India's "misfortune" was to have almost too many "brilliant economists, an affliction that Far Eastern super-performers (Taiwan, Korea, etc.) were spared". His point was that there were always going to be Indian economists ready to argue one view or another and frequently justify government policy, no matter how misguided. Former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor Raghuram Rajan has long been an exception. His RBI press conferences were renowned for clear-eyed and accessible explanations of monetary policy, and he opposed demonetisation. During his three-year tenure that began in the midst of the 2013 taper tantrum caused by sharply rising Treasury yields and ended in 2016, the rupee was stabilised and inflation brought down.

In his latest book, *Breaking The Mould: Reimagining India's Economic Future*, co-authored with Penn State professor Rohit Lamba, Rajan begins well by explaining why the Narendra Modi government's subsidies to boost the manufacturing sector are the wrong strategy. But then the authors stumble in suggesting unrealistic alternatives such as moving the economy towards high-end services, including global capability centres, for large investment banks and consulting firms, while turning India's back on competing for low-end manufacturing because the margins are razor-thin. This is an overly defeatist approach regarding prospects for manufacturing in India, reminiscent of the export pessimism former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh argued against in his PhD thesis at Oxford in the 1960s.

While it is true that Vietnam and Bangladesh have received more foreign direct investment than India in sectors such as electronics and garments, respectively, as many firms adopt China + I strategies to minimise dependency on China, the move



The authors suggest moving the economy towards high-end services, including global capability centres; and (right) Raghuram Rajan.

out of that country will continue for many more years. Giving up on low-end manufacturing, as Rajan and Lamba seem to suggest, is a bad idea, even if global trade is slowing.

To drive home their point that India's comparative advantage is competing for high-end activities, the authors contrast Apple's \$3 trillion market capitalisation with Foxconn's of under \$50 billion: "Apple is sixty times as valuable, even though it manufactures nothing! That is because it provides the R&D and product design services at the beginning of the global supply chain for iPhones, as well as the branding, marketing and content at the end." What this muddled argument overlooks is: 1) no other company globally has the brand appeal or product innovation capabilities that Apple has in electronics, and no Indian company comes close; 2) At Foxconn's peak employment levels in China, it employed one million workers; their salaries may have been a fraction of those at Apple's headquarters in California, but Foxconn's investment boosted incomes for lots of families in China and helped build

a large suppliers' ecosystem.

Rajan and Lamba are on more solid ground debunking the Central and Gujarat state government's plans to offer massive subsidies to a US company to build a semiconductor plant in Gujarat. They calculate this amounts to a subsidy of ₹3.2 crore per assembly and testing job in a plant expected to create 5,000 jobs. Once again, New Delhi policymakers' obsession with capital-intensive industries, which goes back more than half a century, is all too apparent.

This book and its attendant cross-country tour is a useful pushback against the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme, which, partly because of its opacity, has not been given the scrutiny such a major policy merits. The PLI schemes now span industries as diverse as food processing and textiles, some consumer durables and solar photovoltaic modules. While the US and Europe are subsidising manufacturing deemed strategic, in no other major economy are the industries so haphazardly diverse and the procedures for claiming incentives so bureaucratically time-consuming.



New Delhi's PLI scheme thus increasingly looks like a microwaved serving of the license raj. At the end of December, auto manufacturers told Mint that almost two years after the scheme was announced there remains "a lack of clarity about the process to apply for subsidies". The scheme is creaking under the weight of requiring complex proof of domestic value addition as well as of sales and investments made by companies. Some apparel manufacturers say that instead of an subsidy they would be happier if the government concluded free trade agreements (FTAs) with, among others, the European Union, where the negotiations have been grinding on for almost a dozen years.

But, the authors do not spend many pages analysing why India's approach to PLIs may not work as they jump to their alternative to low-value-addition manufacturing.

To support their vision of high-end services, they invent a fictional character named Professor Erali, who, based in India and using virtual reality headsets, teaches "busy executives all round the world, doing an MBA while holding a full-time job". They lead us through his mind-numbing case study of the day, involving carbon taxes in Rajasthan. "And so the case went, challenge and counter-challenge, debate and argument, until everyone, even Professor Erali emerged wiser than before."

This is not a claim I would make for *Breaking The Mould*. The book's maddening digressions while stringing together plenty of compelling facts is a huge opportunity lost. Its biggest flaw is the argument that what the economist Dani Rodrik identified as "premature deindustrialisation", the early decline in the share of

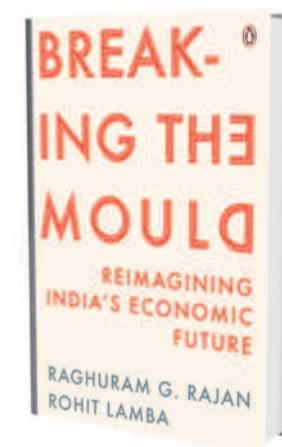
manufacturing in many developing country economies, is not a bad thing at all. Their "counter-challenge" to the PLI is primarily that India is now doing very well gaining thousands of remote financial analyst and management consultant jobs outsourced by firms in the West. This is a trend outlined in much greater detail by Neelkanth Mishra, chief economist, Axis Bank, in a report in August, which showed that our services export surplus now comfortably dwarfs our persistent trade deficit in manufacturing, making India's external accounts much more comfortable.

But can we therefore turn away from low-end manufacturing? This doesn't make sense, given that, as the authors themselves point out, India's labour participation rate has now fallen to just 46 out of every 100 in the working age cohort, significantly below levels in Brazil and Indonesia. Services exports from global capacity centres in India are growing apace. Yet, the multiplier effects from that in terms of low-end service jobs, such as being a cook, street cleaner or security guard, for Prof. Erali and others as the book approvingly outlines, are nowhere near sufficient. Before we dismiss certain manufacturing jobs as low-end, perhaps we could ask workers in garment factories whether they would prefer to be Prof. Erali's cook. And, rather than be further distracted, New Delhi needs to urgently conclude broader FTAs so our factories' products are not hamstrung by import duties for years to come when bidding for business against Vietnam and Bangladesh, whose garment exports are now more than double ours.

Once again, even as the authors make the sensible point that one large semiconductor assembly plant will not do much for us in terms of strategic security, they distract themselves by speculating about chip supply disruptions if the democratic world turned against India. That is a much less likely prospect than China invading Taiwan, manufacturer of 90% of the world's advanced chips, which, incredibly, the authors do not discuss.

As Bhagwati joked, eminent Indian economists often trip themselves up with their elaborate counterarguments. But, only Prof. Erali perhaps, with his virtual reality headsets, could divine how *Breaking The Mould* ends up reading as if it were written by a harried executive MBA student who has a deadline looming.

Rahul Jacob is a former South China correspondent for the Financial Times and writes the *World Apart* column for Mint.



**Breaking The Mould:**  
*Reimagining India's Economic Future*  
By Raghuram G. Rajan and Rohit Lamba, Penguin Random House India, pages 297, ₹799.

# 'THE BEAR' IS NOT TRENDING HERE

A young generation of chefs is crafting a new work ethos in the spaces they manage, based on empathy and communication

Suman Mahfuz Quazi

**E**arlier this week, American comedy-drama *The Bear* won big at the 81st Golden Globe Awards, clinching the Best Television Comedy, with lead stars Jeremy Allen White and Ayo Edebiri also winning in the acting categories. Created by Christopher Storer, the television series highlighted the "yes chef" culture. While dramatised, it depicts the often chaotic, high intensity, and relentless atmosphere in a restaurant, made worse by poor and inflexible work hours, low pay structures and questionable work-life balance. But as wining and dining makes way for "Girl Dinner" (a TikTok trend of eating snack boards) and nitro coffee swaps out the cold brew, the culture in restaurants, too, is shifting: slowly, subliminally, but surely. This is being brought about by a younger crop of hospitality professionals, keen on setting a new standard.

At this point, it's important to ask: what renders the work environment at F&B establishments so?

Chef Thomas Zacharias, founder of the multi-format culinary outfit, The Locavore who has worked with The Bombay Canteen in Mumbai and pan-India restaurant-chain Olive Group, says that the problematic aspects of the hospitality industry can range from gruelling work hours to a "sense of servitude" in the chain of command.

"Calling in sick is seen as a sign of weakness. There's poor pay. In a lot of the restaurants, the service charge, for example, which is supposed to go entirely to staff, is not shared with them. There's a rigid hierarchy—so, in the kitchen, even a Commis 3, which is the lowest rank in the permanent hires, will still exert a certain degree of authority over a trainee. The same is true in the bar and in the front-of-house, as well," says Zacharias.

(top) Anushka Malkani; and Vedant Shah.



started at 5pm, even when the restaurant has emptied out by 11pm. "That entire mindset is shifting—people now understand that without a happy workforce, the restaurant is going to suffer, guests are going to suffer, and there's going to be a lot of attrition," says Shah, who started his all-vegetarian, South-East Asian diner three years ago.

Shah is part of a growing community of hospitality professionals who seem keen on creating a new ethos, built on the tenets of inclusivity, work-life balance, empathy, equal opportunity and open channels of communication.

Zacharias says he is starting to notice resistance to the culture of conflating productivity with time spent at the restaurant from young hoteliers and cooks who know that they have multiple options and are quicker to quit. "I know chef friends who have had hires saying that they didn't want to continue working at their previous jobs because of the culture," he says.

Communication has been an integral tool at the ingredient-focused bakery, Masa, in Mumbai, owned and helmed by pastry chef Anushka Malkani, 28.

"The older generation felt that there's no need for work-life balance. Toxic

work culture is very prominent in the kitchen, so I speak to my employees regularly regarding the work environment," she says. Another example is menstrual leave, which a lot of people don't agree with. "It can be painful when you are standing, working in the kitchen for 12, 13, or 14 hours. So, I give my female employees one menstrual leave per month, which is over and above their weekly leave," she adds.

A similar practice of communication is prevalent at the Pune-based Japanese eatery, Gingko. Its co-founder, Siddhi Gokhale, 26, conducts monthly catch-ups with her employees, designed to address grievances at the workplace, but also to talk about their personal goals.

"It's more of a talk session, really, where they can come to me and my partner (chef Brehadeesh Kumar) and talk about anything—whether they want to do a master's, or if they are thinking of moving jobs. It's an open space, where they won't be judged. A lot of them are young graduates, looking for someone to guide them," she says.

This is a welcome departure—there's no denying that F&B is a highly competitive trade, which makes poaching a known grievance among managers and owners. Having said that, it's also entirely natural for an individual to seek new opportunities, and to that end, open discussions could go a long way.

In general, too, openness and flexibility seem to be the need of the hour, be it in terms of work hours, chain of command or hiring.

Rishan Keer, 26, a third-generation restaurateur and founder of Nikkei restaurant, Tando Tamari, Mumbai, says, "Our work culture is flexible and collaborative. We love bouncing ideas off each other, regardless of job titles. When it comes to hiring, it's not just about culinary chops anymore. We look for a mix of skills and adaptability. Sure, experience matters, but so does creativity. It's a bit of a departure from the more traditional focus on years in the kitchen."

A shift in approach in hiring also brings up the question of inclusivity. And this seems crucial for the new generation, especially as employees.

"It's not just about women. It's about being open to everyone, be it somebody with a different sexual orientation or different views, or younger professionals. It's about building a culture that makes everybody feel at home. And that's a change I would definitely want to see in the community," says Apoorva Kohli, 21, winner of the prestigious 50 Best Bars The Blend Scholarship and a mixologist with famed Delhi bar Sidecar, summing up the new perspectives of a generation of F&B warriors on the precipice of what hopefully is a new dawn.

Suman Mahfuz Quazi is a food writer and the creator of The Soundboard, a community dedicated to gourmands in India.



Plural's Charred Asparagus, Shiitake Mushrooms and Spinach Salad.

## What matters to GenZ chefs

• **SUSTAINABILITY:** "When I did my packaging, I curated the experience—where is the paper from? Is it food safe and biodegradable? These things should matter," says Malkani.

• **DIGITAL-FIRST:** "GenZ is all about digital platforms. Whether it's for marketing or just keeping the buzz alive, being tech-savvy is part of the game now," says Keer.

• **A GROWTH MINDSET:** "I want to see more successful and long-lasting restaurants that stay open through the years, and not just for six months," says Gokhale.



Silken Tofu Salad at Gingko.



# Tasting melon, soil and clouds

Wines from France's Laroque D'Antan are made soulful by the microbiologist family that runs it

Jahnabee Borah  
jahnabee.b@livemint.com

**N**ephéle is a cloud nymph in Greek mythology, and a spectacular French white wine is named after her. Néphéle by Domaine Laroque D'Antan is so soft on the palate that it reminded me of *daulat ki chaat*, the airy Delhi dessert, usually available in winter.

I tried the wine at the spirits trade event ProWine in Mumbai in November. It's a rare wine produced by a family of soil scientists: Lydia and Claude Bourguignon and their son Emmanuel. While Claude and Lydia work on the soil, their son makes the wines. The Néphéle, vintage 2021, had rich notes of melon on the nose, and when I looked surprised at how gentle it tasted, Claude explained, "It's due to the limestone."

Soils rich in this mineral imbue wines with a fine quality—or to put it poetically, make soulful vinos. The Bourguignon's vineyard Domaine Laroque D'Antan is located in Cahors in south-west France. The microbiologists selected this limestone-rich land about 20 years ago to produce small-batch wines by working with soil, microbes and natural yeast.

In a YouTube podcast, *Wines Of The Future* by Vinexposium, Emmanuel discusses changes in wine-making after the turn of the millennium. He says, viticulturists have started to recognise the "living dimension" or the biological aspect (fungi, microbes and yeast) essential for preserving soil in the last two decades. It is this unseen—and often too technical perspective—that gets lost in popular wine talk about terroir, taste and aroma.

Claude pulled out his phone and showed a video of their wines fermenting, with bubbles rising to the surface—much like a living-breathing sourdough culture. They use natural yeast, which breaks down the grapes for the bouquet of fruity aromas and amicable sweet notes, so evident in Néphéle. The wine has six grapes—Sauvignon blanc, Sauvignon gris, Verdan and Mauzac (vert, rose and blanc)—fermented together from start to finish. It is not to be confused with blended bottles which combine wines made with different grapes at various stages of maturation.

Apart from Néphéle, they had also brought a red blend, Nigrine, with Malbec, Cabernet Franc, and grapes unique to France such as Prunelard, Cot à Pied Rouge and Négrette. Similar to the white, its vintage is 2021, and it was an immensely enjoyable, medium-bodied drink with ripe fruit notes and silky smooth finish.

"We use different grapes, because each variety brings complexity," he said of the wines available only in Europe, the UK and the US, and which are priced around \$65 (about ₹5,000) a bottle.

Climate change is irrevocably transforming the world of wines by disrupting soil biodiversity. As temperatures rise, cold-weather grape vines—especially those in regions like Bordeaux in France—struggle to survive. The role of scientists, therefore, has become imperative. Microbiologists have the knowledge to fortify soil without excessive use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides. Those curious to know more could tune into the informative episode, *The Microbial Face Of Terroir*, in the podcast *Wine Blast*. After all, these tiny organisms create mighty wines.



# A rediscovery of India and lunch with 'Diana'

## OUR DAILY BREAD SAMAR HALARNKAR

In my early years as a penurious reporter at the dawn of the 1990s, I spent a lot of time in the vicinity of a south Karnataka taluka and town called Kollegal, often travelling by state transport bus and bumming rides off forest department officials. It was the age of Veerappan, a bandit, murderer, Robin-Hoodesque sandalwood smuggler and elephant poacher. The bloody trail that he left was the story of those years.

I remember many things: crawling through the forests with members of self-declared "commandos" of the Tamil Nadu special police; stumbling on Veerappan's mountainous cache of scented sandalwood; his gang's defiant firing of ancient blunderbusses at police armed with modern carbines; and examining the remains of his gang's recent meal of porcupine and rice in a cave redoubt.

These were memorable memories to a 20-something young reporter looking for adventure and the next big story. What was not as memorable was the food, since I only remember nondescript vegetables, some passable curry chicken and lots of white rice.

I specifically mention white rice because at the time I did not know or focus on any other kind of rice. I was dimly aware that when we visited Goa, the rice was different—red rice, as I later realised. In Kollegal itself, everyone ate white rice, including Veerappan. I remember seeing grains of it next to the porcupine quills and the blackened remains of the wood fire he and his men had made.

What I also did not know then, and what I got to know last week, was that under my nose, the locals selling meals in thatched lean-tos on the roadsides were probably eating an entirely different type of rice at home—or at least in some of their homes.

I was wandering with family through Bengaluru's Cubbon Park when I stumbled on "Diana rice", at a little store that sells millets and other traditional local produce.

Where is this from, I asked the young woman running the store.

"Kollegal, in Karnataka," she replied. "It's grown only there."

Yes, I know Kollegal, I said, thinking how with Veerappan's passing, the little town faded back into obscurity.

I had never heard of Diana rice, and I never knew that it was an ancient grain grown in the area. But then there is so much that we are learning about our own country these days because many good folks are involved in reviving heritage food and persuading us to eat it.

Last month, at a local fair, I ran into



Diana rice has a rich, nutty taste.

two young men from Kerala who were selling traditional rice varietals, at least three of which were unknown to me. They persuaded me to buy a "Black Glumed Navara", a "bone fortifying medicinal rice", according to the packaging, which touted it as an immunity booster, joint pain reliever and good weaning food. It is grown in Palakkad,

Kerala, and is well known to mainly Ayurvedic doctors in that state.

The Navara, sold by a company called Qidhan and available on Amazon, is a full-bran red rice varietal, which I have not yet cooked. I did try out the Diana rice though. It, too, was unhusked, which means the nutritious husk was intact, not stripped away in the polishing process. As is the case with the white rice that has taken over our kitchens and larders.

Red, black and brown rice in general tend to lend more nutrition to your meal. However, red and black rice can make you feel bloated and might cause indigestion, if you eat too much. As always, adhere to the thumb rule of everything-in moderation.

The Diana rice looks like red rice but is a shade darker than the red rice from Kerala or Goa. The woman who sold it to me warned that it needed to be soaked overnight and then cooked in double the water. Many traditional rice varieties require double or more water to ensure they become soft enough to consume.

In other words, Diana rice requires some love and patience. I gave it both and did not regret the effort. The rice had a rich, nutty taste and combined admirably with fish curry and a green salad. The daughter, a fierce advocate of white rice, doused it with leftover Naga pork curry and took a second helping.

A large portion of white rice often leaves me feeling full and sleepy, but two servings of Diana left me light and perky, even though it was dinner time.

So, how did Diana rice get its name?

I haven't the faintest idea. Multiple google searches threw up little information. I only learned that Diana rice is marketed today as "diabetes rice", known for its low glycemic index, which means it releases sugar slowly, has more fibre and protein and

fewer carbs and calories.

The rice is sourced, produced, and marketed by the Jaivik Krishik Society, a federation of organic farmers set up a decade ago by the Karnataka government (the website appeared defunct but perhaps you can email them: [jaivikalbagh@gmail.com](mailto:jaivikalbagh@gmail.com)).

Finding new rice varietals has been a revelation. Each time I find one, I feel like I am discovering a hidden facet of the country I knew so well. You could call it a rediscovery of India by rice, a reminder that so much that is ancient and good in our food is still unknown to most of us.

So, the Diana in my larder joins the Navara, Chak-Hao black aromatic rice from Manipur, another black varietal called "Forbidden rice" from West Bengal, Rajamudi rice from south Karnataka (once grown mainly for the Wadiyars, Mysore's royal family), red rice from Kerala and Goa, apart from sundry brown and white rice.

My next objective is to return to and rediscover Kollegal one of these days, to see how that once-remote land has developed, if Veerappan has faded from their memory, and to see if I can, finally, track down and have lunch with Diana in her own home.

*Our Daily Bread* is a column on easy, inventive cooking. Samar Halarnkar is the author of *The Married Man's Guide To Creative Cooking*—And Other Dubious Adventures. He posts at [samarII](http://samarII).



The 2023 M3 MacBook Pro is the most expensive laptop Apple sells right now; (below) the latest Apple M3, M3 Pro and M3 Max chips.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY APPLE

# A two-month test for a fast, light laptop

The top-drawer M3 Max MacBook Pro has the power to let you hook up high-refresh rate displays and external keyboards when tethered at home, and go flexible when out

Shouvik Das  
shouvik.das@livemint.com

**T**he first thought that is likely to strike you when it comes to most of Apple's top-drawer products is: Exactly how much really is too much? This particular epiphany is perfectly apt when it comes to the most expensive laptop that Apple sells right now—the MacBook Pro (2023).

Before we get into epiphanies, the new MacBook Pro costs up to ₹7.2 lakh for its maxed-out configuration of a 16-inch display, the 40-core M3 Max chip, 128GB of "unified" memory, and an 8TB SSD for storage. The version that I have used for the past two months has all the performance chops mentioned above, only with a 14-inch display. Let's take a closer look at how the laptop performed during this testing period.

You could buy a base-spec SUV from Renault or a sedan from Hyundai for the same amount of money. Chances are that you wouldn't be considering this laptop if your priority was the car. But, are such comparison metrics fair when it comes to the value of a laptop that's meant to run massive data models, edit multi-billion dollar blockbuster movies, and design the next all-conquering video game? That, as I found out, is an epiphany in itself.

## ARELIABLE WORKHORSE

There are a few things in the modern world as enduring as the nursery rhyme *Old MacDonald Had A Farm*.

It would be safe to say that for the most part, the MacBook shares some of this age-old rhyme's endurance when it comes to reliability.

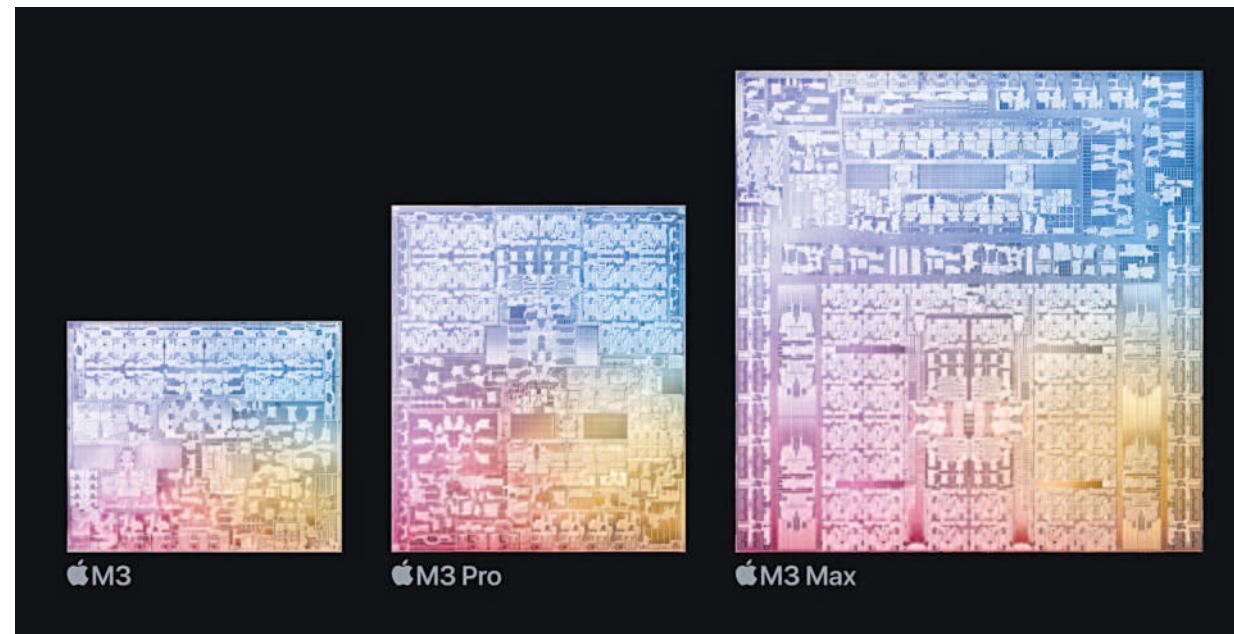
In the past two months, this durability and reliability showed up in the 2023 MacBook Pro's ability to do the simplest of things.

Like many Mac users for whom work involves lots of writing, browsing and emailing, my previous work machine was an Intel-powered 2020 MacBook Air, the last Intel Air. In three and a half years, the laptop had slowed down considerably, and two browsers with around eight tabs each were enough to make the MacBook Air sweat. Yet, the performance decline wasn't emphatic enough for me to be bothered.

Switching over to this laptop, however, proved that even Old MacDonald's farm needs hydroponics. As I write this, I have two browsers open—Firefox with 38 tabs, and Safari with 19—alongside Spotify, Outlook, Notes, WhatsApp and DaVinci Resolve rendering a ProRes export of a 7-minute food showreel. The speed with which I can access any browser tab at will would give one the impression that the laptop has absolutely nothing running on it at all.

## LIGHTNING FAST

I loaded a 15GB single-level game design, built by Karteikay Dhuper, a final-year



Purdue University, US, student. Built on Unreal Engine 5 as an homage to the glorious video game *Firewatch*, this game level was loaded alongside a 25GB 4K uncompresssed video workflow on DaVinci Resolve. Loading and rendering all of the 365 individual elements of the game level, alongside applying multiple layers of colour grading for the entire 7-minute video showreel timeline, took less than three minutes to complete.

While doing this, I still had over 40 tabs open across two browsers, along with Microsoft's heavy email service and Spotify in the background. Cumulatively, the M3 Max-powered MacBook Pro consumed a generous 70GB of memory and 55% of CPU power, while completing the fairly heavy workload that I had just thrown at it.

Three things stood out. One, all of this was done on battery; two, even with not-so-light workload, I had nearly half of my performance resources free at hand; and three, the MacBook Pro lasted nearly an hour on battery even when rendering a game and a 4K ProRes video. Dhupe's game level, the poetically-titled *Epoch Noir*, even had hardware-level ray tracing enabled through the 40-core GPU of the M3 Max processor, and still played at a jaunty 50 frames per second.

## TOO CLOSE TO THE TREE?

Two months is long enough to settle in with a new laptop. Through this time, I have come to truly like the 2023, M3 Max-powered MacBook Pro. Apple's fast refresh rate Liquid Retina XDR "ProMotion" display, which goes up to 120Hz, makes the already-smooth laptop feel even smoother. Yet, you can't help but wonder if this Apple has fallen too close to its tree.

Nobody ever really doubted Apple's engineering capabilities, which is why Apple is likely one of the few remaining

## Behind the M3 chips

**A**pple describes the M3 family of chips as the most advanced chips for a personal computer. These are also the first PC chips built using the industry-leading 3-nanometer process technology, allowing more transistors to be packed into a smaller space, improving speed and efficiency.

What does it mean for users? As a comparison, Apple says the MacBook Pro with M3 Max is up to 2.5 times faster than the 16-inch MacBook Pro with the M1 Max chip, and up to 11 times faster than the fastest Intel-based MacBook Pro model.



consumer technology companies that is taken seriously when they lend the "Pro" moniker to their gadgets. To expect the M3 Max-powered MacBook Pro to be ludicrously smooth, would be well within your rights. After all, it does cost as much as a car.

The real challenge, however, would be for Apple to now be taken seriously by the game developer community. Sure, the natively ray-tracing M3 Max chip could be the start of a new chapter in gaming for Apple, and initial partnerships show promise. If there's also any company that can beckon serious developers to make blockbuster games for a new platform, it is, indeed, Apple.

But then, you look at the price tag. There's absolutely no reason why you cannot build an equally powerful gaming PC, with the same amount of memory and a top-drawer AMD Threadripper processor, and enjoy essentially the same smoothness in rendering games and video timelines. You'd also be able to make a supercharged desktop and get your hands on a new-generation Alienware laptop.

Yes, I can say that I designed a new game level on Unreal Engine 5 on battery power, but that's not of vital importance. What I can understand, however, is that the M3 Max-powered MacBook Pro is a true desktop replacement—letting you hook up high-refresh rate displays and external keyboards when tethered at home, and going flexible when out.

Then, there is the absolutely delightfully perfect keyboard. There's little to no reason to not like Apple's most exuberant laptop ever made—even though that notch on the display remains as ridiculous as ever.

## REVIEW | INSTA360 ACE PRO

# This next-gen action camera raises the bar

With a flip-up screen and low-light performance, the Insta360 Ace Pro is ideal for vlogging



The Ace Pro is waterproof up to 10m and mounts via a magnetic latching system.

Tushar Kanwar

Insta360 makes some epic action cameras, from the best 360-degree camera (X3) you can buy to the minuscule little Go3 shooter that gets out of the way better than most. Yet, for a brand that has made a habit of out-innovating each segment it steps into, Insta360 had yet to set foot into the big-boy territory of flagship standard action camera, a market that is dominated by GoPro and its years of experience in extreme sports.

The Insta360 Ace Pro (₹44,990) is designed to plug that gap, taking on the likes of the new GoPro Hero 12 Black, with its segment-first 8K video and flip-up screen and optics co-engineered with Leica. Is this the "ace up the sleeve" that the brand needs to truly take the fight to GoPro? Set beside a GoPro, the Ace Pro may not immediately stand apart, with a similar form factor, dimensions and buttons to the latest Hero 12 Black, although the Ace Pro is slightly thicker and heavier.

Build quality and the choice of quality materials is immediately evident when you lift the camera out of the box, particularly when you try to operate its other marquee feature—the 2.4-inch rear flip screen that hinges from the top—a first on a traditional action camera. The screen is crisp and bright, and it flips up to allow for framing yourself while vlogging or for hard-to-capture angles. The flip-up mechanism is similar to the one on the Insta360 Go3, which has held up just fine, even after months of somewhat rough use. This allays legitimate concerns of having moving parts on an action camera.

The Ace Pro is waterproof up to 10m without a case and it mounts via a magnetic latching system on to a variety of mounts (including helmets, handlebars and tripods), the latter allowing for far quicker switching between mounts than the GoPro's thumbscrew system while feeling just as sturdy when attached.

## CAMERA SENSOR

What you can't miss is the splashes of red all round, a not-so-subtle nod to the Leica partnership that starts from the Leica Super Summarit lens and extends to the 1/1.3-inch sensor. The sensor helps it take in more details than the comparatively smaller GoPro 1/1.9-inch sensor, allowing the Ace Pro to shoot at up to 8K resolution at 24 frames per second (fps), besting the GoPro's 5.3K output but likely not what you'd pick for fast-paced action sports. You can switch down to 4K shooting at 30, 60 and 120 fps, or slow motion at 240 fps at 1080p resolution.

Comparing the footage from the Ace Pro and the Hero 12 Black, they are quite evenly matched in daylight, with sharp details, similar colour handling, exceptional image stabilisation and great dynamic range, although one felt that the Ace Pro exposed the overall scene better while GoPro handled skin tones better. Both are great action cameras while out and about, though the Ace Pro pulls ahead slightly with its flip-up screen working better for vlogging.

## ENTER AI

Low light is where all cameras traditionally trip up. This is where the Ace Pro pulls ahead, and operates on a whole different level, crushing the grainy GoPro output with clean, noise-free footage that looks like it may as well have been shot in brighter environs. If you shoot a lot of low-light video in PureVideo mode, which uses the AI-boosted 5nm chip to de-noise the footage and bump up the dynamic range, the Ace Pro is head and shoulders above the competition. The AI on the chip handles bright light sources equally well, so harsh sunlight is handled better as well. Photos are handled quite well too, with image capture at up to 48 megapixels, with true-to-life colours and good HDR (high dynamic range) performance in the outdoors.

Video colour purists take note: the GoPro captures 10-bit colour with a robust GP-log profile, which opens up colour-editing options in post processing, while the Ace Pro captures in 8-bit and lacks log capture, which limits your colour-editing options. Like the Hero 12 Black, there's no GPS built into the Ace Pro. But fortunately, it's easy to get GPS data into your videos via a connected phone or if you have a Garmin fitness tracker or Apple Watch handy and within Bluetooth range. The Ace Pro can also connect to Bluetooth earbuds if you need, else the onboard audio with three microphones is exceptionally clean and clear. If you walk away from the camera, you can use gesture controls to start recording or take photos.

## APP SUPPORT

Insta360's companion app has, for a while, been a big reason to consider their otherwise excellent hardware, not only because of how reliably and quickly it connects to the cameras but how easy it is to retrieve and edit your clips, or to change aspect ratio (for YouTube or Instagram) for videos shot in FreeFrame mode.

Or the AI Highlights Assistant, which processes a bunch of videos you'd have shot and produces a highlight reel ready for you to share on social media.

Even after shooting a bunch of year-end vacation videos and transferring them back to the phone, the 1650mAh battery did well to last about 90–100 minutes for 4K 30 fps video recording, and the camera managed to stay cool while shooting on warmer-than-usual beaches. 30W fast charging is a bonus.

## SHOULD YOU BUY IT?

There's much to like about Insta360's first action camera and consider it a viable contender even for the most hardened of GoPro fans. Whether it's the versatile flip-screen, the premium build quality or exceptional low-light performance—the Insta360 Ace Pro raises the bar on what the next generation of action cameras will have to beat.

Tushar Kanwar, a tech columnist and commentator, posts @tsharkanwar.

# WINTERING

Three winter holidays in Europe—with a twist. Gather up your courage and pluck, which is both cutting-edge and rooted in nature. Marvel at lagom



## Not for the faint-hearted: ice swimming in Copenhagen

Denmark's 8,700km-long coastline offers numerous opportunities for winter swimming, with Copenhagen's frosty beaches and harbour baths ideal for a polar plunge

Teja Lele

**A**s the year draws to a close, Danes follow a tradition like clockwork: they stand on chairs just before midnight and jump off when the clock strikes 12, to avoid stepping into the space between the old and the new year. And Sondervig, a small town on the Danish west coast, has made another tradition mainstream: bringing in the new year with a jump into icy waters, followed by oysters, champagne and thick slices of *kransekage*, the Danish New Year cake.

Ice swimming, a common practice in Nordic countries and Eastern Europe, has now become popular in the US and Canada as well, with polar bear plunges often held to ring in the new year. But in Denmark, winter swimming is a national pastime.

The Danes have been throwing themselves into cold water on wintry days since the end of the 19th century, when the first winter bathing establishment was established in Copenhagen.

The Nordic nation's 8,700km-long coastline offers opportunities galore for ice swimming and polar plunges. As the days darken and the winds get colder, it's common to see locals head to frosty beaches and secluded harbour baths to get rid of winter blues by jumping into chilly waters. Winter runs from December to March, with temperatures hovering around freezing. February is usually the coldest month—and the warmest is August, when temperatures touch 15 degrees Celsius.

No wonder, then, that Copenhagen-based photo-

grapher and teacher Daniel Hjorth says ice swimming is common in Denmark. "The sea is never more than few hours away and with summer lasting just a few months, we need to get used to the cold to enjoy the outdoors and water round the year," says Hjorth, who captured a particularly cold winter through *Ice Swimmer Kids*, a photography project he did close to 10 years ago while interning at the Danish newspaper *Politiken*.

In Copenhagen, most ice swimmers make a bee-line for the historic Helgoland Bathing Institution on Amagerstrand. Built in 1913, this is one of the oldest sea baths in the city and home to the 6,000-member strong winter swimmer's club, Det Kolde Gys (The Cold Shiver), since 1929.

The Danish capital has beautiful harbour baths, public swimming pools along the waterfront that are ideal for relaxing. The Islands Brygge, opened in 2002, designed by architect Bjarke Ingels and still the most popular, is a 75m swimming and diving pool located in the midst of the city. The chance to ice-swim amid soaring high-rises isn't one to be missed.

Across the country, going by a December 2022 tally, there are 182 winter swimming clubs with more than 68,000 members. In Sluseholmen district, the Coral Bath, named for its shape like a coral reef. This is less busy than Islands Brygge and offers similar facilities: a swimming pool, a diving pool, a children's pool and a paddling pool.

Then there's Copenhagen's first specially designed dipping zone. The mobile, architect-designed swimming circle, opened in late 2020, is cur-

rently located by Kalvebod Bolge, an extension of the waterfront at Kalvebod Brygge. The choices are plentiful for those who want to dive into icy waters. There is Sandkaj, a bathing zone in the Nordhavn quarter, where the boardwalk and cafés create a beach-like vibe; Fisketorvet, with recreational bathing facilities lined up along the waterfront; Søndre Refshalebassin, a small bath located on the industrial island of Refshaleøen; and Hellerup Beach, a small, sandy, child-friendly beach. People typically don full-body swimming gear to do polar dips.

While swimming in the sea and canals is free, a one-hour session at an upmarket club can cost between Danish krone 100-250 (around ₹1,200-3,000). A hot shower can cost upwards of DKK 30.

Maja Olsen, a true-blue Copenhager and barista, says the Kastrup Sea Bath is one of the most beautiful places for outdoor swimming. Constructed in 2005, it is a "conch-like structure with many diving towers and a fabulous view over the sea and Øresund bridge to Sweden," she says.

Research shows that winter swimming offers a variety of health benefits. Apart from strengthening

Jumping into icy water has an unexpected side effect: it can have leave you feeling warm and happy.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TEJA LELE

Denmark has 182 winter swimming clubs with more than 68,000 members. The capital has harbour baths, swimming pools that are ideal for relaxing



Amos Rex—Lasipalatsin Aukio (Glass Palace Square), Finland..

## Beyond Santa and sauna: Finland

Finland is big on the outdoors. Fittingly, nature filters through a lot of its innovative design work, from buildings and sculptures to everyday items

Uday Bhata  
uday.b@htlive.com

**O**n a cloud map of Finland, you would likely find Santa, saunas, snow, reindeer, Northern Lights. An impressive 75% of the land area is covered by forests. It has over 180,000 lakes, and a population that's keen on hiking, foraging and generally being active outdoors. It's not surprising, then, that tourism there is in large part connected to nature. But there's another, differently rewarding way of exploring Finland: as a design hub.

Design has always been a big part of Finnish culture. There are brands that have been around for over a century. Furniture legend Artek was founded in 1927, Iittala began as a glass workshop in 1881. The very popular Marimekko is a relative newcomer, starting in 1951. More recently, in 2012, Helsinki, Finland's capital, was designated World Design Capital for that year, and in 2014 was named a "City of Design" by Unesco.

One of the founders of Artek was Alvar Aalto, the starting point for any discussion of Finnish design. Aalto had a profound influence on the evolution of modernism, working on everything from buildings

to his famous furniture and glassware. You can visit Studio Aalto in Helsinki, or the Aalto Museum in his hometown of Jyväskylä, some 270km away, to get an idea of the breadth of his artistic practice. Aalto—like many Finnish artists—drew from nature and indigenous cultures. The inspiration for the billowing shape of one of his famous pieces, *Savoy Vase*, has been variously attributed to ocean waves and the skirts of Sami women.

"Finnish design has oftentimes been put in the same box as Scandinavian design, which is not true," collector Kyösti Kakkonen said in a 2022 interview to the art website *Widewalls*. "In fact, we have a characteristic design of our own that shows a particularly distinctive relationship with nature."

In 2022, Kakkonen lent some 1,300 works to EMMA—Espoo Museum of Modern Art. I saw the collection when I toured Helsinki and Espoo in October 2023, on a trip organised by Visit Finland and Finnair, which celebrated its own centenary in 2023. The collection was a terrific introduction to Finnish ceramic and glass art. I was especially charmed by Birger Kaipiainen's *Bead Bird (Curlew)* (1960), and Kim Simonsson's beguiling *Reading Sleeping Moss Girl* (2022), from the sculptor's series of "moss people". You can see how nature filters through most of these works, lightly, playfully.

This connection with nature shows up in a much more modest piece of design. I first saw it on a foraging expedition, when our guide Anna handed out what looked like wooden cups and poured us "mushroom tea". I drank from these cups again at Finland's southernmost reindeer park in Nuukse, and bought a couple at the Finnish Nature Centre Haltia (after a bracing nature walk). It's a simple but fetching creation, made from a natural fibre composite, with a flat handle that unfurls from the cup, like a ladle. Kupilka, a Kontiolahti-based brand, has been making these since 2003, a modern, outdoors-friendly alternative to the traditional wood-carved *kuksa* cups of the Sami people.



For a more cutting-edge art experience, I'd recommend the Amos Rex museum in Helsinki. It's

# G IN EUROPE

unge into icy water in Copenhagen. Explore the vivid world of Finnish design, oons and glaciers while attending a music festival in Reykjavik



the immune system, it leads to changes in haemato-logical and endocrine function, reduces upper respiratory tract infections, and enhances general well-being, say various studies. An icy dip also releases adrenaline, noradrenaline, cortisol, serotonin, and dopamine. Jumping into icy water has an unexpected side-effect: it can have you feeling warm and happy.

Susanna Söberg, the founder of the Copenhagen-based Soeberg Institute and a leading cold and heat scientist, says ice swimming can improve health and sleep, reduce stress and optimise performance. The author of *Winter Swimming* (*Hop i havet* in Danish), a best-seller that was translated into 13 languages, she has researched the science of "micro-stressing the body" and says good health is "achieved by small doses of healthy stress; cold and heat". Her research shows that "deliberate cold protocols" can improve glucose metabolism and insulin sensitivity, and trigger the release of neurotransmitters like dopamine and norepinephrine, which enhance energy, mood and focus.

Yet, the idea of jumping into bitterly cold, sometimes frozen waters can be scary. Olsen, who has

been at it for more than 10 years, reveals her trick to a successful polar plunge. "Steel yourself for the initial shock of the biting cold and the consequent intense tingling in the body. Stand your ground by moving a lot, flap your hands and legs," she advises. Andrew Huberman, a neuroscientist and tenured professor in the department of neurobiology at Stanford School of Medicine, US, has outlined a plunge protocol: "Aim for a temperature that makes you feel uncomfortable (want to get out), but still safe; remember that the colder the temperature, the shorter amount of time you need to be in the ice bath; and ice bathe the first thing in the morning as the adrenaline rush will keep you up if you do it in the evening".

Don't forget the Soeberg Principle to maximise the health benefits of a polar plunge: End with cold, or force your body to reheat on its own to enhance the metabolic effects of cold. Towel drying, a hot shower, or a steamy sauna may feel good, but takes away the beneficial effects.

This winter, are you up to letting things go swimmingly by taking the plunge in Copenhagen?

*Teja Lele writes on travel and lifestyle.*

## and as a design hub



branching into visual art. On screens ranging from TV-size to gigantic, scientific data from NASA, the Human Genome Project, CERN and other sources is interpreted as complex shimmering, mutating patterns accompanied by a reverberating electronic score. "Ikeda's highly abstracted works are intellectually suggestive, but at the same time bring to the viewer an extremely physical experience," writes US-based curator Mika Yoshitake in an essay on the exhibition.

You can get a bit of everything—history, innovative design, great sea views—at Hanaholmen, the Swedish-Finnish Cultural Centre on the outskirts of Helsinki (it was founded in honour of Sweden cancelling Finland's wartime debt in 1967). On a blisteringly windy day, we were offered a tour of their art park. The exhibits were all outdoors, on the lawns or under trees, as if they had naturally sprouted. I'd walked the grounds in the morning, and as I passed a particular spot, I was confused by a faint sound from a source I couldn't place. It turned out to be a 2023 installation called *The Mushroom*, a bronze sculpture that emits the kind of sounds one might encounter in a meditative sci-fi film. In a happy coincidence, the artist, Gunzi Holmström, was there at the time of the tour, and explained that the sound was from biosensors that captured the transmissions of fungi, tree roots and other subterranean life. Here, literally, was nature talking to us.

Recently, I came across a Reddit page that posed the question: "Any truth to the saying that Finns design, Swedes build, Danes sell, Norwegians buy?" The comments range from Iceland slander to the history of saunas to the sci-fi Western *Moon Zero Two*. Yet they mostly agree on one thing—Finns design

mostly underground, beneath a functionalist building from the 1930s called Lasipalatsi, now a cultural hub that includes a café, shops and a cinema. The design of the museum is minimalist and striking, with vast, uncluttered rooms and halls and strategically placed skylights. The current exhibition, *Ryoji Ikeda* (ongoing till February), had five works by the Japanese artist, who began as a DJ and composer before



(above) DJ Yamaho (Natalie Gunnarsdottir) performing in 2014; and festival goers at Iceland Airwaves Blue Lagoon Chill Party, 2014.

## The music festival you have never heard of

Every winter, Iceland hosts a music festival across multiple venues in Reykjavík—and you can steal away to take in the natural beauty

Shrenik Avlani

**I**t is in the middle of nowhere. There is no easy way to get there as there are no direct flights from any Indian airport. But such is the reputation of this island just south of the Arctic Circle that even Schengen visa struggles and lack of direct flights can't keep it off travel wishlists. Iceland is that kind of a wonderland, indeed.

You are probably visualising the Northern Lights, volcanoes, geysers, lagoons, hot springs, glaciers and scenes from *Game Of Thrones*. It is all that and more. I ended up in Iceland in November, not by design but by accident. I was in Europe for Oktoberfest and had to fly to the US. A friend suggested Icelandair, which offers a free stopover for up to seven days when you fly transatlantic with them. Before long I was picking up my backpack from the Keflavik airport baggage belt in Iceland.

That was also the day the Iceland Airwaves music festival began. Unlike Glastonbury, Tomorrowland or Lollapalooza, which all take place in a single expansive venue with multiple stages, the venues for Iceland Airwaves, which has been held since 1999, include bars, theatres, parks and hostels spread across the country's capital, Reykjavík. There are gigs even at the airport.

The line-up is an eclectic mix of new and upcoming bands, DJs and musicians from across the world. Last year's headliners were the excellent Bombay Bicycle Club. I heard an Irish band, Pastiche, doing a soundcheck at the KEX Hostel bar while I was washing down a pizza dinner with a beer. I posted a video of the soundcheck and the lead singer slipped into my DMs asking for the original video. Would any artist at any other festival do that?

The festival is designed to let you enjoy all the music while taking in the splendours of Iceland. Acts aren't scheduled back-to-back, so people can make their way from one venue to the next while finding time to hike to a volcano, visit a glacier, spot the Northern Lights, soak in



### HOW TO GET THERE

► Swiss International Airlines and Finnair offer the best one-stop flights from Delhi to Keflavik International Airport in Iceland.

### WHERE TO STAY

► Iceland Parliament Hotel in the heart of the city.

► Budget option: KEX Hostel. The building used to be an old biscuit factory and has an excellent bar with affordable pizzas.

### WHAT TO DO

► The Golden Circle Tour (which takes you to Thingvellir National Park where the Rift Valley is, geysers that shoot hot water and steam high into the sky, and Gullfoss Falls).

► See the black sand beaches of Reynisfjara.

► Boil eggs and bake bread by burying them in the geothermal sands at the lakeside town of Laugarvatn.

► A happy hour bar crawl in Reykjavík.

► Visit the Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon.

► *Game Of Thrones* fans could opt for a private tour visiting the sites where the hit series was shot.

a lagoon or enjoy the bars in Reykjavík. The festival includes plenty of un-ticketed gigs that are open for all.

One word you will hear often in Iceland is "geothermal". No matter what you do in the country, geothermal activity will feature prominently—from baking bread and boiling eggs to soaking in one of the luxurious lagoons to taking a hot shower in your hotel. Since hot water is naturally and abundantly available, and there is infrastructure to deliver it to every home, Icelandic people don't think twice before enjoying long showers that could last up to an hour. Many have hot tubs at home, where they spend time with family and friends, even in peak winter.

Icelandic people love the outdoors and one of their favourite year-long activities is swimming in the sea and alternating it with long dips in the natural hot water that rushes up when you dig the sand on the beach or in the readily accessible hot tubs on beaches. However, if you want to live like a true Icelander, hit a swimming pool. Iceland's freezing weather cannot stop the locals from having a family outing at a public pool. For less than \$10 (around ₹830), you can access these pools and spend as much time as you like. Apart from indoor and outdoor lap pools, there are multiple hot dipping pools at various temperatures, hot water fountains, saunas and steam rooms.

Then there is the city itself. Reykjavík's biggest attraction is the big church, Hallgrímskirkja, which is visible from almost anywhere in the city. Iceland produces some excellent gin and vodka, and the city has a bustling bar and restaurant scene.

The main attraction, of course, are the Northern Lights. The best places to catch them are the Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon, Reynisfjara, Snæfellsnes peninsula and Reykjanes peninsula. Watching the magical dancing lights of the Aurora Borealis requires patience. While the guide can take you to the best possible locations as close to the predicted time as possible, nature puts up a show only when it feels like.

The only thing likely to bother you in Iceland is wind. Sometimes winds are so strong that cars and buses are blown off the roads, which is why the government closes those areas whenever the wind picks up. While in Iceland, don't fear the cold, ice or snow—it's the wind that will get you.

*Shrenik Avlani is a writer, editor and the co-author of *The Shivfit Way*, a book on functional fitness.*





Shashwat Mishra, 32, is better known as The DrogBaba on Instagram and his other social media handles.

COURTESY SHASHWAT MISHRA

# Sports goes simpler, one reel at a time

Instagram content creators are breaking down the nuances of football and Formula 1 with interesting snippets

Nitin Sreedhar  
nitin.s@htlive.com

**T**he year was 2014, and Sam-aakshi Jha, then 13 years old, was watching the Copa Del Rey final between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona with her two football-crazy elder brothers.

That match is famous among LaLiga viewers for a winning goal by former Madrid player Gareth Bale. But for Jha, that goal was the moment she fell in love with football—and Real Madrid.

Since then, Real Madrid has been a constant presence in Jha's life, pushing her to make content around football through her popular Instagram handle @littii\_chokha (with around 243,000 followers) for the last three years. "I am not a football analyst. For me, the key is to create content that is easy to understand and enjoy for non-fans," says Jha, who is from Raipur, Chhattisgarh, on the phone.

A mural artist by profession, Jha often dives into the meme culture to create her football reels. A vlog on football *rakhis*—made using club crests—went viral with 5.3 million views. Her reel documenting her meeting with former footballer David Beckham during his recent visit to India has more than 9 million views. "I was connected with Peña Madrileña de Bombay (the first official Real Madrid fans' association in India) through social media. I used to make bite-sized social media content for them, which gave me some more visibility on Instagram," says Jha, who now plans to create football content full-time.

Jha, 23, is part of an exciting crop of Indian sports content creators on Instagram who break down the nuances of different sports through exciting formats, topics, and content on the social media platform in Hindi. There's trivia, interviews, explainers, comedy and other snippets that just make these sports simpler.

**FANDOM NATION**  
The recent 2024 Instagram Trend Talk insights, which were released in December and looked at how Gen Z in India will influence culture in 2024, revealed that most Gen Zs in the country belong to a select fandom—be it music or gaming.

**BETTING ON HINDI**  
Indian football has also found a new lease of popularity through these creators.

Shashwat Mishra, 32, is better known as The DrogBaba on Instagram. A fan of Chelsea FC, some of his reels, a mix of trends and storytelling, on India's prospects of qualifying for the 2026 World Cup and a tribute to famous Mohun Bagan player Subibal "Chuni" Goswami, have racked up millions of views.

Mishra grew up loving both cricket and football, but in 2017, while working in Delhi, he experi-



Creators like Pranay Singh, 29, have tapped into this fandom. Singh (@pranayfb) started Tackle from Behind, one of India's largest online football communities, in the middle of covid-19 lockdowns in 2020, with his brother Prateek, inspired by football memes their friends shared on WhatsApp. Tackle from Behind has around 136,000 followers on Instagram.

While Tackle from Behind grew into a "desi football community", including an online store for footballing calendars and merchandise, Pranay started documenting his football journey two years ago on his Instagram page, which has more direct and newsy content. His most recent series of reels, *Behind The Crest*, looks at stories behind football club logos. He has even posted explainers on transfer deadline day and news from the Indian Super League (ISL).

"My earliest memory of watching any sport is football. I have even attended matches at the Ambedkar Stadium in Delhi. I also want to connect with Manchester City fans in India through my work," says Pranay. "The goal for 2024 is to become a proper creator, travel more to watch football and document it. Apart from European football, Indian football fascinates me the most," says Singh, who works with ISL club Punjab FC as a digital reporter.

**SAMAAKSHI JHA (@littii\_chokha)**  
Content based on football, memes and comedy  
243,000 followers



enced the football screening culture. "It was the 2017 FA Cup final between Arsenal and Chelsea. I was blown away by the turnout," says Mishra on a video call from Jaipur. "When I came back to Jaipur in 2018, I wanted to bring a similar culture to the city. So, I founded Pink City Blues, which is the official supporters' group for Chelsea in Jaipur."

Mishra worked with Bajaj Electricals between 2019-22 as territory head for Jaipur, but when the covid-19 lockdowns were implemented, he started creating content on football. In 2021, he started his YouTube channel and Instagram handle. "I used to upload videos on football discussion with my friends. That's when I saw this untapped space—not many people were creating football content in Hindi," he adds. "I took a leap of faith in May 2022 and started creating content full-time," says Mishra, who now makes a financially stable living thanks to YouTube ad revenue and brand collaborations.

While cricket and football have a massive fan following in India, Formula 1, and motorsports in general, is still niche. But Geet Bagrodia, 32, who started the popular channel *F1 With Geet* in 2022, has found a unique space on Instagram with his analysis, and explainers on the highly technical sport.

"I fell in love with Formula 1 when Sebastian Vettel conquered the Indian Grand Prix (winning all three editions between 2011-13). Since then, I have been in and out of the sport, and started the channel in 2022," says Jaipur-based Bagrodia, who has a background in mechanical engineering and runs his own brand agency in Dubai and Jaipur—his primary source of revenue. "I have slowly moved away from long-form content on F1. That was tough. Now I do bite-sized content in the form of Instagram reels and YouTube shorts." Bagrodia's F1 handle on Instagram has 40,000 users.

His content is based on a pick of interesting topics—the evolution of safety cars in F1, the science behind the downforce that F1 cars generate, and more. "When you watch F1, there are so many technical questions... I asked myself: why not make a video on these questions for a normal viewer, because they won't have the time to do all this research," Bagrodia explains.

Bagrodia says creating content in Hindi has not only worked with Indian viewers but also F1 fans in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). "A lot of the people who share my content have texted me to say that there are very few Hindi content creators on F1. I think that has become the USP for the channel now," he adds.

Despite the exciting nature of sports content, there are challenges. Jha says fan abuse in sports is much stronger towards women content creators compared to the rest. "It can go to a whole different level," she adds. For the likes of Bagrodia and Mishra—who often rely on big updates from F1 and football—the off-season is a tricky time to navigate. "Content drought is still a big challenge. Staying self-motivated in this space can be difficult," says Mishra. Despite the bumps, Mishra is optimistic. "India has a crowd for every sport," adds Mishra, whose aim is to become the "Sportscenter of football for India".

## CES 2024: Best of EVs, flying taxis and more

A look at some of the most exciting updates and launches from the world of cars at CES 2024



The Kia Concept PV5 is a modular van with many different use cases. REUTERS

Sahil Bhalla

**T**he annual CES (formerly called the Consumer Electronics Show) technology show in Las Vegas, US, one of the largest on the calendar, sets up the year ahead with plenty of announcements and previews.

Like other areas at CES—held this year from 9-12 January—there were some key announcements in the world of automobile and car technology. With Kia returning after a five-year hiatus, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominating press conferences, we take a look at everything from the world of cars at CES 2024.

### HONDA WITH ITS FUTURISTIC EV CARS

Honda's press conference was probably the biggest and most significant among the automakers at Las Vegas this year. The company announced two Honda O Series EV concepts—the Space-Hub and Saloon (*pictured below*). While there is no confirmation about the Space-Hub, the Saloon (which looks like it's Cyberpunk-inspired) is being targeted for a 2026 production model by Honda. The Saloon will be the first production model for the new O Series.

The Saloon is a wedge-shaped sporty car. The taller and more van-like design is the Space-Hub. Both these concepts are based on a thin battery design that helps boost interior space. The concepts feature thin, low-height dedicated EV platforms. Honda wants to achieve a low floor height and high aerodynamic performance from these cars. The use of smaller, lightweight batteries provides for a sporty drive and high efficiency. Altogether, it is part of the new design approach "man-maximum/machine-minimum". There's the e-Axle setup that combines an inverter, motor and a gearbox. Honda even goes as far as saying that the cars should provide lightning-quick charge times by the late 2020s. The O Series models, according to Honda, will go from 15-85% power in just under 15 minutes.

### KIA'S PLATFORM BEYOND VEHICLES

Kia came to the CES show floor with a new type of EV (in production). It was part of the company's "Platform Beyond Vehicle". The company's ultimate goal? To put a fleet of self-driving vans on the road starting with the Motional-operated robotaxi version of the PV5. A dedicated plant in South Korea is being set up with a target date of 2025 to become operational.

Kia claims that the vehicles can go from "a taxi during the day, to a delivery van at night, and a personal recreational vehicle on the weekends." The vehicle can also be used as a living room, an office, or even a pop-up shop thanks to its highly modular design.

The Kia Concept PV5 is a modular van with many different use cases, including ride-sharing and caters to different types of users—including those with disabilities. The concept car features a universal chassis with a series of interchangeable modules that can be reconnected in various combinations. Kia says it will "allow for the quick and simple in-field transformation" and reduce the environmental footprint as the base remains the same.

There's also the PV1 and PV7. The PV5 has three different versions. In total, Kia announced five options. It's competing with companies like Waymo and Zoox. Additionally, the company wants to evolve and incorporate AI features. They want these particular EVs to be completely AI-based.

### TWO FLYING TAXIS

Hyundai and XPeng showed off their flying taxis on the show floor. Hyundai came armed to Las Vegas with the Supernal S-A2 electric vehicle takeoff and landing (eVTOL) craft. The S-A2 debuted in 2020 but hasn't made it to production yet (some reports state 2028 as the earliest date). The S-A2 seats five passengers (including the pilot) and can fly at a speed of 120 mph at 1,500ft. The range is anywhere from 20-40 miles. It is powered by electricity, and noise has been cut down to match that of a dishwasher. Test flights for the S-A2 are expected at the end of 2024.

XPeng AEROHT is a flying car concept with eight carbon fibre whirling blades. The blades fold into the body, making the car ready for you to drive on the roads. The "dual-mode cockpit" can seat only two people.

Pre-orders for AEROHT begin in the fourth quarter of 2024. The company plans to start mass production by the end of the year, and if everything goes smoothly, this will become the first mass-produced detachable flying car for individual consumers.

### MERCEDES' UPGRADED OS

Mercedes came to CES to showcase their latest tech, integrated into their MBUX infotainment system (that features on wall-to-wall Hyperscreen displays). The MB.OS was showcased in the Concept CLA Class (making its US debut). The three components of the new tech are: MBUX Virtual Assistant, MBUX Surround Navigation and MBUX Superscreen. There's also a feature called MBUX Collectibles.

The virtual assistant uses sophisticated AI to move towards more natural interactions. It can now deliver more empathetic responses and inflexions. The virtual assistant can also learn the driver's routine, calendar and suggest taking conference calls from the car itself if the user is running late for a meeting.

The MBUX Surround Navigation combines Google Maps with Level 3 autonomous assistance (also known as "conditionally automated driving"), a system wherein the vehicle can manage most driving aspects without any human intervention), projecting through a high-quality graphic display. It's reliant on visual communication and presents a real-world view of the surroundings.

The MBUX Superscreen integrates three displays into an end-to-end architecture (powered by an Nvidia chip). There are four kinds of controls and information: infotainment, automated driving, comfort and charging.

MBUX Collectibles is the company's first in-car app that showcases digital art and collectables (based on NFTs). It's a private art gallery connected to NFT wallets.

*Sahil Bhalla is a Delhi-based journalist. He posts @IMSAhilBhalla*

# 15 years of fearless exhibition-making at Experimenter

Prateek and Priyanka Raja have created spaces for diverse practices and politically charged art that appeals to all

Avantika Bhuyan  
avantika.bhuyan@htlive.com

**A**n octopus. That's how Priyanka Raja, co-founder of the contemporary arts gallery, Experimenter, sees the space she and her co-founder Prateek Raja have nurtured over the past 15 years. "One head and many arms—even though we work across multiple galleries and different kinds of programming, the vision remains the same," she explains.

As the gallery, with three spaces in Kolkata and Mumbai, completed its 15 years in 2023, Priyanka and Prateek are busy with an array of exhibitions that embody the ethos of Experimenter—to have a politically charged programme, democratise art and show diverse practices.

As part of the ongoing Mumbai Gallery Weekend (on till 14 January), Experimenter has chosen to come out of the white cube space by showing art collective CAMP's seven-channel installation, *Bombay Tilts Down*, at the Sassoon Docks. Presented in collaboration with St+art India and supported by the Mumbai Port Authority, the experimental film was created during the covid-19 pandemic, with six CCTV cameras perched atop a 35-floor building on E Moses Road, Mumbai, to descend into vertical landscapes, filled with unfinished construction and sprawling haphazard settlements.

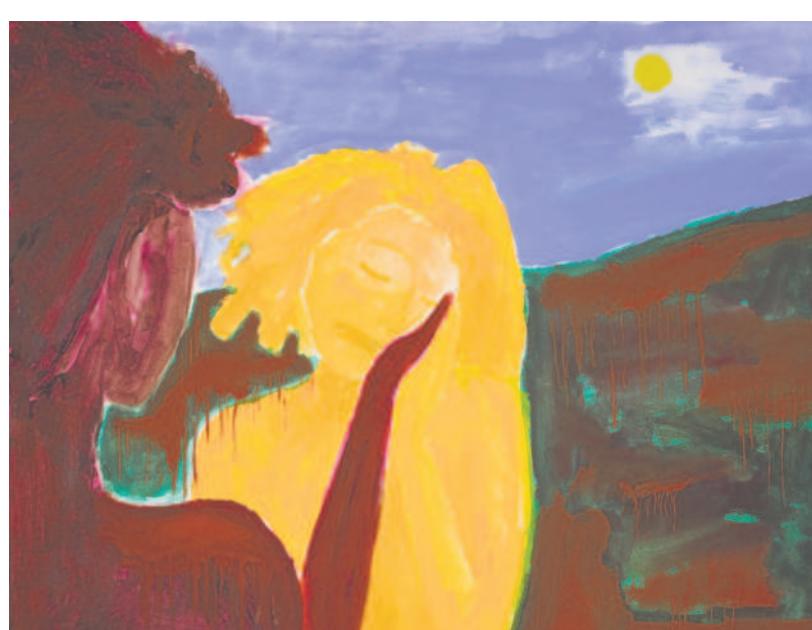
Within its Colaba gallery, which opened in 2022, the gallerists are showcasing a shift in artist Sohrab Hura's practice with *Ghosts In My Sleep*, on view till 16 March. Practising photographer Hura is presenting an entirely new language—works on paper made with gouache and pastel drawings based on the short film, *Bittersweet*. It shows the artist's continuing engagement with images, albeit in different vocabulary and medium. This exhibition also highlights the gallery's long relationships with artists; they first showed Hura's work in 2017.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY EXPERIMENTER

At the Hindustan Road gallery in Kolkata, a new practice will take centre stage. A narrative video game, *Nobody Knows For Certain* (2023), by Goa-based artist Afrah Shafiq, centred on India's cultural engagement with the erstwhile Soviet Union in the form of illustrated children's books and magazines during the Cold War years, will be shown from 19 January to 2 March. And at its Ballygunge space—the gallery's first home in Kolkata—a novel interdisciplinary approach will be on display in the performance, *Notes On Becoming*, the first solo in India by Zurich-based visual artist and choreographer, Alexandra Bachzetsis. Her performance is located at the intersection of dance, visual arts and theatre and looks at the many ways the body can manifest in a conflation of spaces.

The programming shows the fluidity with which the gallery moves across spaces, practices, mediums and messages. It is no wonder then that in November 2023, London-based contemporary art magazine *ArtReview* hailed Experimenter as a "space for fearlessness". Priyanka and Prateek are part of its 2023 annual Power 100 list, which picks individuals, groups



and collectives shaping the art ecosystem of our times. Artists Bose Krishnamachari, Dayanita Singh and curator Natasha Ginalwa from India are also on the list.

"From the beginning, Experimenter has been an extension of our way of looking at the world—the way the world reveals itself to us. The artists add to that by bringing in a certain unique political voice, and we map this collective thinking across our spaces," says Prateek. The gallerists have carefully chosen the struc-

tures for their three spaces—be it the restored 1930s buildings in Kolkata or the 1890s structure in Colaba, Mumbai. The idea of revival and re-use of architecture is important to them, to usher these heritage structures into the contemporary era. The showcase of CAMP's film at Sassoon Docks is an example. Similarly, Shafiq's video game is rooted in Kolkata's fascination with everything Soviet in the 1970s-80s. "We all grew up with Soviet literature; some of my cousins have Russian names like Pushkin. In our programming, we are constantly thinking about the site," she says.

The seeds of Experimenter were sown in December 2007 during a conversation between Priyanka and Prateek about setting up an independent arts space. At the time, Priyanka was working as India media manager with Proctor and Gamble in Mumbai, while Prateek was an arts consultant in Kolkata. When the gallery opened in 2008, they were clear that the programming would not be limited to Indian artists, but to voices from across South-East Asia, including Naeem Mohaiemen, Bani Abidi, Aziz Hazara and Ayesha Sultana.

Earlier they each had clearly demarcated roles—with Prateek taking the lead curatorially, and Priyanka looking after the logistics and commercials—but things have changed now. Over the years, the gallery has grown like a collective. "With the scale of our operations and country-wide programming, it is no longer just Prateek and I running everything. We run the programme collectively with a group of 30 very talented and dedicated colleagues," says Priyanka.

It is relationships with colleagues and artists that power the gallery. Priyanka and Prateek Raja call them 'Experimenter's nervous system'.

It is relationships with colleagues and artists that power the gallery. The couple call them "Experimenter's nervous system". Some of the artists such as Julien Segard, Soumya Sankar Bose, Sahil Nail and Prabhakar Pachpute have been working with the gallery since its inception. "It excites us to know what occupies their



(clockwise, from left) Alexandra Bachzetsis, 'Notebook: Denim', (2023); Afrah Shafiq, 'The Bride Who Could Not Stop, Crying', (2023); Sohrab Hura, 'Winter sun', (2023); and Prateek and Priyanka Raja of Experimenter

mind, what challenges them and how they go on to show the mirror to the world. What then gets shown at the gallery is not just our collective vision but also a reflection of the times that we live in. It becomes a contemporary statement," says Prateek.

Take the work of Aziz Hazara, an artist born in Wardak, Afghanistan, who works between Kabul and Berlin across media such as video, photography, sound and sculpture. His work constantly questions what it means to be born and live in a war-torn world, one which is caught in the cross-currents of political ideologies. "A gallerist's role is to be as close to the voice of the artist. Our programmes evolve as their work and practice evolves," says Prateek. Priyanka adds: "Even though we get divergent practices from all over the world, we look at ones that take a strong position."

While the gallery has always supported moving image and installation practices, the team is now witnessing an interesting moment in art with the advent of Artificial Intelligence. "Some artists are experimenting with AI, some are already working on post-Internet moments. We are interested in the minds of those artists, and how that impacts the medium they choose to express their idea," says Prateek.

There are some new developments at Experimenter in the new year. For one, they have signed up a new artist, Christopher Kulendran Thomas. Hailing from the Sri Lankan diaspora and based out of Berlin, the artist is known for politically charged works such as *New Elam*, which lies somewhere on the boundaries of art and a startup enterprise. "Apart from such exciting practices, right now my current interest is in everything slow—things that happen within a certain considered pace. For instance, Sohrab (Hura) has been moving towards this body of work for over two to three years. In productions that are nurtured over time, one never knows what direction they will take next. And that is exciting to me," says Priyanka.

## If you could choose only five albums ...



FIRST BEAT  
SANJOY NARAYAN

**W**hen I find it difficult to fall asleep because of a long-haul flight, a bout of stress, or just plain garden-variety insomnia, I reach for a little pill of melatonin, the hormone that helps your body to naturally regulate your sleep cycle. It helps. My sleep quality improves and I feel refreshed the next morning. But with melatonin-induced sleep comes a side-effect: vivid and, often, weird dreams. I have read that because melatonin can increase the amount of time you spend in REM sleep, which is the stage of sleep where most dreaming occurs, it could lead to more vivid or intense dreams.

I think because of my rapidly advancing age, some of those dreams that I have are tinged with themes of mortality; and also, increasingly, with elements of dystopia.

Whatever may be the reasons, last week after a long flight had disturbed my circadian rhythm and I had popped a melatonin pill, I dreamt about the slow expiry of the world as I knew it. In it I was confronted by a strange choice. It was an internet-less world that we were in; my easy access to whatever music I wanted to listen to had gone for good; and we (I and everyone else I knew)



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

were left with only one possible option: we could choose only five albums that we could have access to.

In that strange dream, I found myself trying to select five albums. With intermittent bouts of fear, paranoia and despair, I tried to do that. And here's what I ended up with:

**'Astral Weeks' by Van Morrison:** Released by the legendary singer-song-

writer from Northern Ireland in 1968, *Astral Weeks* will turn 55 this year. Morrison will turn 79 this year and he has released more than 40 studio albums during his career, of which *Astral Weeks* is his greatest. Morrison is known for his soulful voice and poetic lyrics and on this album he melds folk, jazz and blues. His unique vocal style, notable for its scratchy soulfulness but also his unusual use of repetition and harmony is

### THE LOUNGE LIST

Five tracks to bookend your week

1. 'Cypress Avenue' by Van Morrison from 'Astral Weeks'
2. 'Locomotive Breath' by Jethro Tull from 'Aqualung'
3. 'My Old Man' by Joni Mitchell from 'Blue'
4. 'Pharaoh's Dance' by Miles Davis from 'Bitches Brew'
5. 'Jump Over' by De-Phazz from 'Death By Chocolate'

unmistakable.

*Astral Weeks*, an album I can easily listen to over and over, showcases his style the best. All the eight songs on the album are beautiful but my favourite is *Cypress Avenue*. It's about a residential street in his hometown of Belfast where Morrison used to walk and dream of a better life and the lyrics are steeped in feelings of nostalgia, yearning and wonder. It is an infectious song that can invoke nostalgia in listeners as well. I usually think about the streets that I wandered in the city that I grew up in several decades ago with fondness, old memories, and much sadness too.

**'Aqualung' by Jethro Tull:** I heard *Aqualung* for the first time in 1971, not long after the English rock band, Jethro Tull, released it. Tull, led by

singer, flautist, guitarist, and songwriter, Ian Anderson, 76, was among the first rock bands that we discovered as teenagers growing up in an Indian city in the early 1970s.

*Aqualung* is a mix of folk, prog rock, and hard rock, with some acoustic ballads and electric riffs, and its songs explore themes such as homelessness, religion and society. Yet, according to Anderson, it is not a concept album. My favourite song on it is *Locomotive Breath*, with its long bluesy piano introduction and a flute solo. The lyrics use the imagery of an impending and unavoidable train wreck as an allegory of a man's life falling apart. At 15, for reasons I truly am unable to fathom, I loved that song.

**'Blue' by Joni Mitchell:** It was the first album by Joni Mitchell (now 80) that I heard and it was enthralling. Her emotional depth, and her complex harmonies accompanied by unusual guitar tunings, are always distinctive. *Blue* is the Canadian-American musician's masterpiece album, released in 1971. My favourite is *My Old Man*, a tender tribute to her lover—a singer, a walker, a dancer and a source of joy. Simple and intimate, it expresses the loneliness and longing she feels when he is away, and the warmth and comfort she finds when he returns.

**'Bitches Brew' by Miles Davis:** I discovered *Bitches Brew* almost a decade after it was released in 1970 when a senior in college, who has now passed, introduced me to it. A landmark album that fused jazz with rock and psychedelic influences, it features a very large ensemble of musicians playing electric

guitars, keyboards and drums, and has a complex, textured sound that introduced me to musical improvisation and the appreciation of jazz.

It's difficult to choose one track from the seven expansive ones on that album, which is best heard from start to finish continuously but the opener *Pharaoh's Dance* stands out. Composed by the keyboardist, Joe Zawinul, it is a multi-layered, multi-textured 20-minute composition that reveals new aspects of itself every time I listen to it, even today.

**'Death By Chocolate' by De-Phazz:** The last of my five-album list is unusual and it is by a German band that plays a mix of downtempo jazz, blended with turntable manipulations, Latin, and soul music. Founded in the late 1990s by Pit Baumgartner, 65, each of De-Phazz's albums has a different lineup of musicians. *Death By Chocolate*, with which a friend tried to coax me towards electronic music, is a tribute to the 1960s, with references to pop culture and art of that era. The songs explore reggae jazz, Latin, and other styles of music and when I heard the album, it pushed me out of my comfort zone and towards genres such as acid jazz, and lounge that I had not explored before. The track I keep going back to is their take on dub, *Jump Over*—it's reggae with a twist.

So those are the five albums that I would carry when dystopia hits us. What about you?

*First Beat* is a column on what's new and groovy in the world of music. He posts @sanjoynarayan

# PAPER BOAT

Two men stand on a causeway, arguing about the nature of change and the fragility of lives

Manoj Rupda  
Translated from the Hindi  
by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

**W**hy do you keep on falling into trouble?" "Just like that."

"What do you mean by 'Just like that'?" Are troubles ever any good?"

"There's a special kind of pleasure in enduring trouble, especially if one endures that trouble to alleviate the pain of others."

"That means you keep looking for opportunities to land yourself in trouble."

"There was a gang of unruly kids in my school who used to bully and beat up someone or the other just to maintain their clout."

"And you used to jump into those fights for no good reason, right?"

"Yes, I don't know what happened to me at those times. I felt an unseen power take hold of me. And that unseen power dragged me into those fights. But I did not get into those fights to fight back. I got into those fights to get beaten up. I often returned home with broken/missing/butttons and a torn shirt and bruises all over my body. I graduated from school, but this habit of mine seems to have stayed on."

"Well, this matter is no longer a 'habit' anymore. And these fights too have grown in magnitude. They are not those small street fights anymore. You do realise that you have got yourself into a bigger battle, don't you? Do you even know its consequences?"

"Yes, I am aware of the fact that my troubles will grow. Earlier, my mother would get worried when I returned home with bruises and torn clothes after a street fight. But my mother doesn't worry about me anymore. She has perhaps realised that I am beyond any and all correction now."

"I do not understand why you need to get into such fights..."

"You won't be able to understand."

"Why? Why won't I be able to understand?"

"Because you are too wise."

"Wah! What makes you think so?"

"It's just that wise people often do not understand small things."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means that there is pleasure even in trouble. You perhaps haven't understood this yet."

"But why would one need such pleasure?"

"It's necessary, as a human."

"Right. So, you mean to say that any person who is not in trouble is not human?"

"Yes. Like you. You're a successful agent, but you're not human."

The conversation came to a halt after that rejoinder as the two men stood staring at one another.

They stood in the middle of a low causeway built over a river in a desolate, forested area.

The man who was called "agent" wore black trousers and a shirt the colour of the sky with a tie around his neck. He held a briefcase in his right hand and from his left, he slung his coat. Even during that short conversation, he had glanced several times at his wristwatch, indicating that he did not have much time to spare. It was quite unbelievable to see a successful city slicker like him there, on that bridge in that desolate, forested area; but then, time and circumstances can compel a person to end up just anywhere.

The other man was dressed in a crumpled kurta the colour of dirt, and a pair of cheap jeans that could have been purchased anywhere. He had a gamchha around his neck, and rubber flip-flops on his feet. He looked so relaxed—as if he had all the time in the world.

The causeway was built so low that one could bend and touch the water flowing below. The river flowed strongly, nowhere in its course did it allow the earth to rise above the surface of the water. There were tall trees by that river, their tops susurrating in the wind. Herons glided over the shimmering water of the river. Creepers, twined around the shoots and branches of the trees, were in full bloom, their leaves and petals raining over the river in a colourful shower before being carried away in an equally colourful tableau. Just like the landscape, the



ILLUSTRATION BY PRIYA KURIYAN

sounds of the forest too were enchanting. There was the soothing clamouring of birds, the gurgling of the river, and the occasional cooing of a cuckoo.

The successful agent, however, was oblivious to it all. He could see neither the creepers laden with blossoms, nor could he hear the cuckoo singing. He could see only that man standing with him on that causeway, the man he was supposed to deal with on behalf of the Company.

He took another glance at his watch and, opening his briefcase, very decisively, took out a sheaf of papers and showed them to the other man.

"Look," the man in formal clothes said to the man with the gamchha around his neck. "These papers bear the signatures of all those people who have, under this con-

tract, handed over their lands to the Company. But now, they too have started opposing this project. I have been told that you are leading this protest."

The man with the gamchha around his neck listened attentively and replied, "These papers and the signatures on them are the legal proof of the contract you speak about. But do you know the reality on the ground? Do you know how the police dragged the farmers and held guns against their heads to make them sign these papers?"

"I'm not here to investigate all that," the agent said brusquely. "I'm here only to talk about things that matter."

He placed the sheaf of papers in the briefcase and retrieved another paper, a single sheet, which he handed to the other man and said, "This is a special proposal

Once he had taken off all his clothes, the agent turned towards the man with the 'gamchha' around his neck and said, 'I can do it. I can run. It's easy.'

from the Company, and it is only for you. Read it, and tell me your decision immediately."

The man with the gamchha around his neck took that sheet of paper from the agent and, without even reading the proposal, started folding the piece of paper.

His eyes were fixed on the agent, even as he deftly shaped the sheet of paper into a boat.

"This is my decision," he said, waving the paper boat before the agent's face, as if mocking him. "I can do it. See, it is so easy."

Then he looked lovingly at the boat he had created, bent down, and placed it in the flowing river.

The river carried the boat away. It

seemed that the boat would topple and capsize, but it didn't.

It maintained its balance, steadied itself, and flowed away.

"Do you see that?" the man with the gamchha around his neck asked the agent. "How easy it is to make a boat of paper and launch it on its journey in a river! But sad, you won't be able to accomplish even a task as simple as this."

The agent looked on as his proposal flowed down the river in the shape of a boat.

Gradually, the boat turned into a speck, and then it disappeared. What remained were the river, its gurgling, the trees on its banks, the creepers, and the clamouring of birds.

The agent could now see it all, hear it all. He craned his neck up at the sky and took in its blue expanse. Then he began speaking like someone who had seen it all, knew it all.

"This nature, humans and animals and birds, the love for nature...these cannot be bought and sold. But I work in an office that stinks of conspiracy, where day and night plots are hatched to grab everything that is invaluable. I feel helpless, working there as a convict imprisoned for life. It struck me several times that perhaps I should not do this work. It struck me several times that perhaps I should do what you are doing. But destiny perhaps chose me for this work. To destroy nature and lives. Your paper boat stands no chance before the flood of anarchy that I have been assigned to unleash."

The agent paused. He took a few deep breaths, then said, "No person can change their destiny. But they can certainly run to save themselves from that destiny. No matter what dangers that person may have to run through."

He paused again and stood silent for some time.

He placed his briefcase and coat on the causeway and began taking off his shoes and clothes.

Once he had taken off all his clothes, the agent turned towards the man with the gamchha around his neck and said, "I can do it. I can run. It's easy."

Then he stepped off the causeway and into the river. He stumbled, initially, almost slipping on the stones in the river, almost falling; but then he found his balance and steadied himself, like that paper boat.

He went far in the river, deep into the water.

Knee-deep.  
Waist-deep.  
Chest-deep.  
Mid-river, the agent looked up at the sky.

He turned around and looked at the man with the gamchha around his neck. He had taken the gamchha off his neck and stood holding its ends. Stretched. Tense. Surprised. As if he could not understand what the agent was trying to do.

The agent spoke loudly, almost hollering, so that the man standing on the causeway might be able to hear him.

"It is said that people who are afraid of forest and water should not venture into the forest and step into the water. I too used to fear the forest and the water. But now I fear neither. Look, I am going into the forest through this river. Could you take my briefcase to my office? Could you place the contract papers in my briefcase on the table of the Managing Director of the Company and fold those into paper boats? Perhaps, no. You won't be able to do it."

The man standing on the causeway was unable to speak a word.

He just kept on looking at the pile of clothes and the briefcase the naked man had left behind.

Manoj Rupda writes in Hindi, and is the author of the collections of stories *Tower Of Silence*, *SaaZ-Naasaz*, and *Aamaajgaah*, and the novels *Pratisansaar* and *I Named My Sister Silence*, shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature 2023.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is the author of a collection of short stories *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and the novels *My Father's Garden* and *The Mysterious Ailment Of Rupi Baskey*. He has translated Manoj Rupda's Hindi novel, *Kaale Adhyaay*, into English as *I Named My Sister Silence*.

**m MINT SHORTS****RBI deputy governor Patra's tenure extended by one year**

**Bengaluru:** India has extended the tenure of central bank deputy governor Michael Patra by a year to the beginning of 2025, according to a government document seen by Reuters. Patra is a career central banker, and was first appointed as deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in January 2020 for a three-year term. He handles the crucial monetary policy and economic research departments, among others, and is also a member of India's monetary policy committee.

REUTERS

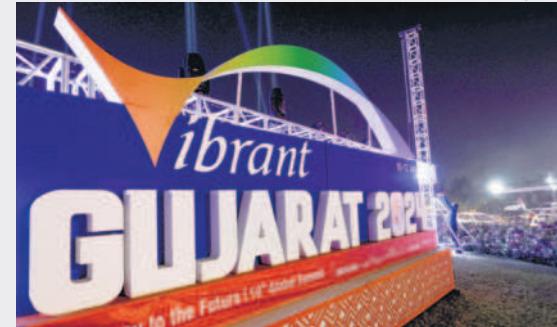
**India conducts successful test flight of Akash-NG missile**

**New Delhi:** India on Friday successfully flight-tested a new generation Akash-NG missile off the coast of Odisha, in a major boost to the country's military prowess. The missile was test-fired from the integrated test range in Chandipur at 1030 hours, the defence ministry said. The Akash-NG system is a state-of-the-art missile system capable of intercepting high-speed and agile aerial threats, with a range of around 80km.

PTI

**SC stays Delhi HC ruling on TRC benefits for foreign investors**

**New Delhi:** The Supreme Court (SC) has put on hold a Delhi High Court (HC) ruling that had allowed foreign investors to benefit from zero or reduced tax rates in India based solely on possessing a tax residency certificate (TRC). Foreign investors can avail these certificates based on treaties between India and tax haven countries such as Singapore and Mauritius. The SC's decision on Friday was in response to a petition by tax authorities challenging the Delhi HC's decision in a case involving Blackstone Capital Partners, a Singapore-based company facing a tax notice of about ₹108 crore. However, the apex court restrained the tax department from acting against the company based on the tax notices, and deferred the case until March. KRISHNA YADAV

**41,299 MoUs worth ₹26.33 tn inked at Vibrant Gujarat**

**Gandhinagar:** The Gujarat government signed a record number of deals for 41,299 projects worth ₹26.33 lakh crore over the three-day-long Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024 that concluded on Friday. Adding the numbers of memorandums of understandings (MoUs) signed in 2022, when the summit was postponed due to pandemic restrictions, it goes up to 98,540 MoUs worth more than ₹45 lakh crore, breaking all previous records, Gujarat chief minister Bhupendra Patel said. At the 2019 event, a total of 28,360 MoUs were signed, while 24,774 deals were inked in 2017 and 21,304 in 2015.

DHIRENDRA KUMAR

**Forex reserves fall sharply by \$5.89 bn to \$617.3 bn: RBI data**

**Mumbai:** India's forex reserves declined sharply by \$5.89 billion to \$617.3 billion for the week ending 5 January after rising for four consecutive weeks, weekly central data released on Friday showed. So far this fiscal, the reserves have increased by \$55.72 billion, according to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). In the previous reporting week ended 29 December, the reserves had risen by \$2.759 billion to \$623.2 billion, the highest so far this fiscal. In October 2021, India's forex kitty had reached an all-time high of \$645 billion. The reserves took a hit after the central bank stepped in to defend the rupee amid pressures caused majorly by global developments last year.

PTI

**Remote workers are losing out on one key aspect: getting promotions**

FROM PAGE 16

the conversation. "I just didn't realize the impact of not being able to grow as much, being hands-on in the office," she adds.

Remote work can be especially costly for young women trying to build their skills, says Emma Harrington, an assistant economics professor at the University of Virginia, who recently co-wrote a paper that found software engineers at a Fortune 500 company who worked in the same building as their teammates received 22% more feedback on their code than engineers who didn't share an office with their colleagues.

"Because I'm a little earlier on in my career, I feel like it does benefit me to show up," says Rodriguez, 30, a technical accounting manager at Egnyte, a software company in Mountain View, Calif., adding that she also enjoys collaborating face-to-face. "I definitely have a

ment on their code than women engineers who weren't on the premises. By contrast, men working in the same building with their teams got 18% more feedback than men at other locations.

Some workers who aren't required to do their jobs onsite say they are opting for the office anyway, mindful of the impact on their careers. Marylyn Rodriguez lives in Sacramento, Calif., 130 miles from her company's Silicon Valley headquarters, but she still goes in at least twice a week. She leaves home around 4 a.m. to beat the traffic and gets to the office 2 hours later.

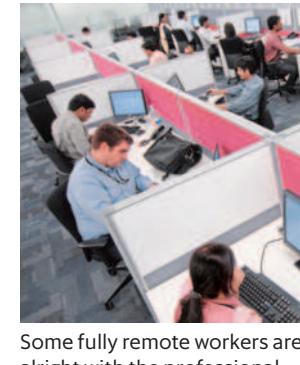
"Because I'm a little earlier on in my career, I feel like it does benefit me to show up," says Rodriguez, 30, a technical accounting manager at Egnyte, a software company in Mountain View, Calif., adding that she also enjoys collaborating face-to-face. "I definitely have a

lot more face time with leadership this way."

As the white-collar job market has tightened, more company leaders have been vocal about the need to show up in person, with high-profile employers such as Meta Platforms and Google calling workers back to the office several days a week.

Egnyte is using badges to track attendance in several of its offices, and has asked employees within a 50-mile radius of its offices to come in three days a week. The company says that 46% of its more than 1,000 workers are assigned to offices, with the rest remote.

"People may not like it, but I can't build a company by playing to the lowest common denominator," says Vineet Jain, Egnyte's chief executive. "If you don't show up and work with the rest of your colleagues, it's showing a lack of connectiv-



Some fully remote workers are alright with the professional trade-offs.

MINT

ment, she adds.

For Americans who are still fond of working from home, one piece of good news is that data shows no difference in promotion rates between hybrid workers and those who come to the office five days a week, says Bloom, the Stanford economist, who co-wrote a related 2023 National Bureau of Economic Research paper.

Bloom's research has found that fully remote workers are more productive than their fully on-site peers, but because remote workers miss out on casual in-person conversations around the office, relationships suffer, and their promotion prospects tend to take a hit. Remote work tends to be a better fit for people who are

already more established in their careers and have the skills and relationships to help them win promotions, Bloom and other researchers who study workplaces say.

"Three days a week is enough," Bloom says. "You're not out of sight and forgotten about."

Particularly when promotions mean an elevation into management, where in-person meetings have long been the norm, remote employees can face disadvantages. At the same time, those happy with their all-remote status may also be disinclined to put their hands up for opportunities that require more of an office presence, Bloom notes.

Some fully remote workers are comfortable with the pro-

fessional trade-offs. Christy Tabor, 35, says she worked remotely from Van Alstyne, a small town outside Dallas, as a contractor for Meta in user experience until she was laid off last spring. She says staying close to her family matters more than the ability to get about.

"If I can make enough money to pay my bills and have a balanced life for me and my kid, I'm fine doing that," she says. Tabor now works remotely for a financial-services company.

Remote workers exhibit higher levels of overall well-being, says Ben Wigert, director of research for Gallup's workplace-management practice. Twenty-three percent of remote workers report feeling very often or always burned out at work, compared with 28% of hybrid workers and 31% of fully on-site employees, Gallup's data finds.

©2023 DOW JONES &amp; COMPANY, INC.

**Factory production cools in Nov, food fuels Dec inflation**

FROM PAGE 16

December CPI inflation remained higher than RBI's target of 4%, but still within its tolerance range of 2–6% for the fourth consecutive month. In December 2022, retail inflation was reported at 5.7%. A Mint poll of 19 economists estimated retail inflation to rise to 5.9% in December.

Food inflation, measured by the consumer food price index, which accounts for nearly half of the overall consumer price basket, rose to 9.53% in December, up from 8.70% in November, 6.61% in October and 6.62% in September.

Meanwhile, factory output measured in terms of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) rose by 7.6% in November 2022. In November, output in the manufacturing sector rose 1.2% annually, mining

6.8%, and power 5.8%. Capital goods production, a proxy for fixed investments in the economy, contracted 1.1% annually during November. Alongside consumer durables production, which highlights consumer sentiment, also contracted 5.4% on an annual basis during the month.

During November, the monthly industrial output growth was the slowest in the April–November 2023 period.

The sequential increase (in retail inflation) was led by food inflation, which increased to a four-month high of 9.53%. Food inflation was led by fruits, vegetables, pulses and spices. The good

news on inflation in general and food inflation in particular is that after a gap of 15 months, cereals and product inflation declined to single-digit and fifth consecutive month of decline," India Ratings said in a statement. "Core inflation has declined to 48 months low of 3.89% in December 2023. Declining core inflation at a time of strong economic growth is a conundrum," it added.

**Mumbai gets closer to mainland, via Atal Setu**

PM Modi opens India's longest bridge; calls it reflection of 'Developed India'

PTI  
feedback@livemint.com  
MUMBAI

**P**rime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday inaugurated the country's longest sea bridge 'Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu' which connects south Mumbai with the satellite city of Navi Mumbai, and said the completion of the Rs 17,840 crore project was the reflection of a changed India.

Modi said that when he laid the foundation stone of the project on 24 December, 2016, he had resolved that the country will undergo a change, noting that the bridge's construction got completed despite the covid-19 pandemic. The six-lane trans-harbour bridge is 21.8 km long with a 16.5 km sea-link.

"(Earlier) People were fed up with mega projects getting stalled and had given up hope that such projects would ever be completed. It was Modi's guarantee that the country will change," the prime minister further said.

"The sea bridge is a reflection of 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India)," Modi said. The upcoming Navi Mumbai international airport, Mumbai coastal road, AURIC (Auranga-Bad Industrial City) in central Maharashtra's Marathwada region, the Mumbai-Delhi Industrial Corridor and the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project will boost Maharashtra's economy in the years to come, the prime minister said.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi walks on the newly-inaugurated Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu, the longest sea bridge in India, after its inauguration on Friday. PTI

A senior RTO official said Atal Setu, also called Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL), will have an open tolling system due to which vehicles won't have to stop at the toll gates.

**SEA CHANGE**

**THE** six-lane trans-harbour bridge is 21.8 kilometres long with a 16.5-kilometre sea-link

**PRIME** Minister Modi laid foundation stone for the project on 24 December 2016

**MTHL** will have an open tolling system which won't require vehicles to stop at toll gates

"The toll amount will be debited even if the vehicle is speeding. Hence, motorists will be saved the snarls that get created at these booths. There will be a few lanes for paying toll in cash as well if there is any

The sea bridge brings Raigad, Pune and Goa closer to Mumbai, Modi said, while also thanking the Japanese government for its financial assistance for the project.

**Ayodhya runs out of 'parking'**

FROM PAGE 16



Direct flights from Delhi to Ayodhya are sold out for 21 January.

PTI

similar patterns.

"Our demand trends indicate increased interest for the destination from customers across segments, with an uptick of 400% versus pre-pandemic levels," said Indiver Rastogi, president and group head—global business travel, at Thomas Cook (India) and SOTC Travel. "Given the limited hotel inventory, customers are inclined to look at day trips to Ayodhya and are booking accommodations in Lucknow and Prayagraj."

Lucknow and Gorakhpur are about 135 km from Ayodhya by road, and Prayagraj

**Hotel tariffs in Ayodhya peaked at ₹45,000 per night for a room that would otherwise cost about ₹4,000**

Tata Group-backed Air India Express offers daily flights between Ayodhya and New Delhi and tri-weekly flights to Bengaluru and Kolkata. Low-cost carrier SpiceJet recently announced that it will operate a special flight on 21 January from Delhi to Ayodhya, and a return flight the following day.

anu.sharma@livemint.com

**TCPL buys Capital Foods, Organic India**

FROM PAGE 16

"Overall, Capital Foods has number one or number two positions in five large categories. This acquisition will enable Tata Consumer Products to expand its product portfolio and further strengthen its pantry platform. There are significant synergy benefits with the existing businesses of Tata Consumer Products in areas spanning distribution, logistics, exports and over海a d s," TCPL said in its filing.

Tata Group-backed Air India Express offers daily flights between Ayodhya and New Delhi and tri-weekly flights to Bengaluru and Kolkata. We believe this is a good strategic and financial fit. It will open up significant market opportunities in the fast-growing non-Indian cuisines segment, leveraging the sales and distribution platform that we have built."

"This transaction will accelerate momentum in our business and is margin accretive to

our business," said D'Souza. On Organic India, he said, "This transaction aligns well with Tata Consumer's overall strategic objectives and presents exciting market opportunities in the rapidly growing health & wellness segment. In addition, Organic India has built very strong relationships with farmers to create a robust organic supply chain with a trusted brand and a loyal consumer base. Organic India's differentiated products and robust supply chain together with Tata Consumer's distribution strength across channels in India and specific geographies globally make us confident of accelerating momentum in the business while improving our margin profile."

The overall size of the categories in which Capital Foods operates is estimated at ₹21,400 crore, while the total addressable market for the categories that Organic India is present in is ₹7,000 cr in India. Capital Foods' distribution strength across channels in India and specific geographies globally make us confident of accelerating momentum in the business while improving our margin profile." The overall size of the categories in which Capital Foods operates is estimated at ₹21,400 crore, while the total addressable market for the categories that Organic India is present in is ₹7,000 cr in India and ₹75,000 cr in international markets.

**Ayushman Bharat cap may double to ₹10 lakh**

FROM PAGE 16

four of the five states that went to polls recently. The success of state-led health schemes and their popularity are now proposed to be replicated at the Centre with enhanced insurance coverage under Ayushman Bharat, the officials cited above said.

Started in 2018, Ayushman Bharat offers insurance for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization across empanelled public and private hospitals. It covers up to three days of pre-hospitalization and 15 days post-hospitalization expenses for diagnostics and medicines. So far, the scheme has benefited 600 million people.

"It is worth noting that Rajasthan's health coverage scheme has now come under AB-PMJAY, where an insurance cover of ₹25 lakh is being extended to beneficiaries. Though the government may not scale up the coverage to the levels in the state, an enhanced coverage is being considered,

which will also cover the rising cost of hospitalization in the country," the official cited above said.

Ahead of the Lok Sabha election, the health ministry is focusing on enhancing schemes to benefit women, tribals, youths and poor. The ministry may also raise funding for the sickle cell programme, which mainly targets the tribal belts.

"More investment is needed with a customized long-term outlook. In fact, much of the healthcare needs of the general public in India are met by the small neighbourhood single-person clinics, especially in rural areas. While tertiary centres are no doubt important for providing more specialized care for select conditions to a small percentage of the population, most regular healthcare needs and preventive health is the work of small clinics. They need to be bolstered, supported and steps taken to prevent them from closing down. The common man depends on them for everyday needs at low cost," said Dr Rajeev Jayadevan, a public health expert.

## Realme to expand local output of 5G devices, wearables

Gulveen Aulakh  
gulveen.aulakh@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI



Realme has surpassed the 100 million milestone in smartphones sales in the Indian market since its entry in 2018, and expects a further rise in numbers as the market rebounds this year from the slump witnessed in 2023, the Chinese company's founder and chief executive Sky Li said in an email interview.

Realme, the second largest smartphone brand in India, is also planning to begin manufacturing of wearables locally, besides expanding its existing capacity to also cater to export demands, he added.

"We have seen a remarkable 51% quarter-on-quarter (qoq) growth in Q2 2023. Our sustained efforts and innovative offerings have led us to secure the second spot among top 10 smartphone brands. Besides, within just five years of inception, Realme has crossed the milestone of 100 million shipments in India and will be expanding to 100 markets. Realme is committed to strengthening its export plan, facilitating distribution of its diverse product line to markets worldwide."

"This proactive approach reflects Realme's dedication to not only meet but exceed consumer expectations at a global scale," Li added.

The recovery in the Indian market will lead to higher sales of 5G devices at affordable prices as consumers continue to buy premium devices via value-based offerings and finance schemes. "Despite uncertainties like the global economic

**Realme has secured market share with the introduction of the sub-₹10,000 smartphones category**

Realme founder and chief executive Sky Li.

situation and sticky inflation, we expect Indian consumers to take up positively to the premiumization push."

Realme has secured market share with the introduction of the sub-₹10,000 smartphones category

Realme has secured market share with the introduction of the sub-₹10,000 smartphones category

Our strategies are designed to eliminate financial hurdles and ensure our products are attainable for a broader consumer base, he added.

Li said Realme will expand its local manufacturing capacities to make smartphones and smart TVs in India to support the Centre's Make in India initiative. At present, 60-70% of phone components are locally sourced. "We plan to grow this approach to make wearable devices in India. Our belief in local manufacturing, job creation and market growth showcases strategic alignment with India's economic objectives."

The recovery in the Indian market will lead to higher sales of 5G devices at affordable prices as consumers continue to buy premium devices via value-based offerings and finance schemes. "Despite uncertainties like the global economic

However, there is room for improvement as the current figures exceed those from a year ago. To put it in perspective, a year back, cost as a share of revenue for TCS, Infosys, Wipro and HCL Tech was at 55.8%, 52.9%, 58.6% and 53%, respectively. That said, wage costs typically surpasses 60% of total expenses for IT services firms heavily reliant on manpower.

Recruiters expect a further reduction in employee costs for IT services companies, with the likes of Infosys and Wipro tightening their campus hiring initiatives. However, the costs are higher than the year-ago period as

**60.5%**  
of revenue spent  
on employee  
benefits by Wipro

SAT gives Sebi four weeks to comply with Karvy order

Priyanka Gawande  
priyanka.gawande@livemint.com  
MUMBAI

**S**ecurities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) on Friday directed Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to release Axis Bank's client shares pledged by Karvy Stock Broking within four weeks of its 20 December order.

"Accordingly, it is clarified that four weeks from the date of the order were available, both to appellant Axis Bank and to Sebi, the NSE (National Stock Exchange) and NSDL (National Securities Depository Ltd) to implement directions given by this tribunal in its order dated 20 December 2023," it said.

"Further, while delivering the judgment, the interest of justice, the tribunal was conscious of not depriving parties right to challenge the order in the higher court, if so desired."

Earlier this week, Axis Bank had filed an application before SAT, requesting the tribunal to direct Sebi to immediately comply with the 20 December order and remove lock-ins and other obstacles in invoking pledged shares, and their sale by the bank. On 20 December, Justice Tarun Agarwal permitted Axis Bank to invoke the shares pledged in its favour, and directed Sebi, the NSE and NSDL to restore the pledge in favour of lenders within four weeks. "In an alternative, Sebi, NSE and NSDL to compensate the appellants with the value of the underlying securities pledged in their favour along with an interest of 10% per annum," the order read.

Marriott's Moxy brand debuts in India at Bengaluru

Varuni Khosla  
varuni.khosla@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

**T**wo years after announcing its intention to introduce its 'young' hotel brand Moxy in India, Marriott International Inc. is set to open the first property, a 128-room hotel, at Bengaluru Airport, which will be owned by realty developer Prestige Group, the American firm that operates hotel chains like JW Marriott and W Hotels, said.

Marriott's vice president for South Asia, Ranju Alex, said the firm will open three more mid-market, economy lifestyle hotels, including one each in Mumbai and Chennai, and a second property in Bengaluru.

"It is a very successful brand around the world, and we are very confident it will do well in



Currently, there are 125 Moxy hotels in 24 countries.

India because of the country's large young demographic and the pace at which they travel. To begin with, the segmentation will be to focus on the big cities because that's where the travellers go most. Currently, there are 125 Moxy hotels in 24 countries," she said.

The decade-old brand does not feature check-in counters,

and instead has spacious communal areas. Instead of a traditional reception, these hotels have a lobby bar that serves as a check-in counter.

Marriott operates 148 hotels in India, including eight which are operational since April last year, when global chief executive Anthony Capuano visited India. It is planning to launch 15

more properties by the end of 2024.

Capuano had said that India will have 250 Marriott hotels by 2025, making it the third largest market for the firm. Since July 2023 Marriott's India business posted revenue of \$1.4 billion.

In 2025, it will also grow its Edition, Autograph, and AM brands in India. However, W Hotels and JW Marriott are also expected to drive a lot of business here, Alex said.

There is a huge appetite for leisure travel in India, she added. "The overall hotel development market in India is very bullish over the last few years, and we are very confident and pursuing overall development strategy as there

is big demand for all categories of hotels right now, including other brands like Courtyard by Marriott and Westin."

This year, Alex expects hotel operations and occupancy to witness rationalisation over

2023, when events like the G20 summit and ICC Men's World Cup took place. "Growth in 2022-2023 was hyper and off the charts. This year, the rates will continue to remain strong."

Alex said the firm has hiked room rates over 2022. "This shows the market continues to be positive, but, there could be some rationalisation in growth rate." Its India occupancies stand at around 71, exceeding 2019's 69.1%.

## Q3 moped volumes up, UVs make up 62% of PV sales

Alisha Sachdev  
alisha.sachdev@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

**A**fter a two-year decline, a moped sale rebounded in the December quarter, driving two-wheeler sales on a growth path after a strong festive show, data from automotive industry body Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) showed.

Besides, passenger vehicles (PVs) and three-wheelers recorded record sales in Q3, while two-wheeler volumes rose 22.6%. Commercial vehicle sales also inched up 3.5% in the quarter, over the year-ago period.

The high growth seen in two-wheeler sales in Q3 also points

to improving sentiments in the rural economy, Vinod Aggarwal, president, SIAM, said.

"If you look at Q3 numbers, they are far better compared to the nine-month period (April-December), especially in case of two-wheelers, wherein sales are largely impacted by rural economy. Nine-month growth is 10% but Q3 growth is 23%, so the rural economy is definitely doing better now," he added.

In 2023, 170 million two-wheelers, including scooters and motorcycles, were sold in India, up 13% over 2022, but that is still 21% lower than the peak levels seen in 2018 at 21.6 million units. PV sales were at 4.1 million units in the 12 months to December, and commercial vehicle sales were

at 978,000 units, lower by over one million units compared to 2018, the data showed.

In December, utility vehicles accounted for 62% of PV volumes, the highest level on record, while sales of passenger cars continued to decline, accounting for 33.9% of the segment.

The slowdown observed in light commercial vehicle sales and moderating CNG (compressed natural gas)-run vehicles is responsible for the slightly moderate growth in commercial vehicles in 2023, Aggarwal said. But, robust replacement demand for

**PVs and  
three-wheelers  
posted record  
sales in Q3, while  
two-wheeler  
volumes rose  
22.6%**

BS-VI, phase-II compliant trucks, especially in the medium and heavy duty segments, and sustained investments in India's infrastructure suggest sustainable demand for

trucks and buses in fourth quarter. "Because the upcoming budget is only an interim vote-on-account, as industry body we aren't putting many asks, but we hope the government continues its capex programme," Aggarwal said.

In 2023, electric vehicles (EVs) accounted for less than 2% of PV sales, and about 5% of two-wheeler sales, but Aggar-

wal said a substantial drop in EV battery prices will fuel "slow and steady" adoption of EVs.

Shipments to overseas markets declined across segments in 2023, barring PVs, which showed a marginal increase. "In fact, if you look at two-wheeler exports, sales are down 15%, and even more so for three-wheelers. That's the situation in the export markets overall. However, they should start improving now because the Bangladesh elections are over. Then multiple other countries are facing diverse issues, but eventually they will be overcome as economies can't remain subdued. Thus, the future is going to be better than the current scenario in exports," he added.

## Tech stocks power market to new high

FROM PAGE 16

(technical & derivatives), Axis Securities.

The rally from Nifty's 20 March 2023 low of 16,828.35 has been driven by strong mutual fund and FPI flows of ₹84 trillion and ₹1.71 trillion in the previous calendar year.

"Investors are hoping that likely rate cuts by the Fed later this year would improve the scenario for IT companies," says Prashanth Tapse, senior VP (research), Mehta Equities.

JM Financial Institutional Securities analyst Abhishek Kumar maintained a Hold recommendation on both TCS and Infosys, setting price targets at ₹3,840 and ₹4,480, respectively.

The outlook for TCS includes a projected -1.1% quarter-on-quarter (q-o-q) dollar revenue growth, with expectations of 24bps expansion in EBIT (earnings before interest and taxes) margin led by lower sub-con expenses, better utilization and currency benefits.

Similarly, for Infosys, a -1.1% q-o-q dollar revenue growth is anticipated, with a 30bps q-o-q decline in Ebit margins by the two-month impact of wage increment in November.

ram.sahgal@livemint.com

### CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Mint welcomes comments, suggestions or complaints about errors. Readers can alert the newsroom to any errors in the paper by emailing us, with your full name and address to feedback@livemint.com.

It is our policy to promptly respond to all complaints. Readers dissatisfied with the response or concerned about Mint's journalistic integrity may write directly to the editor by sending an email to asktheeditor@livemint.com

Mint's journalistic Code of Conduct that governs our newsroom is available at [www.livemint.com](http://www.livemint.com)

# Wage costs of IT firms ease

Let-up follows clampdown on excessive spending such as counteroffers, significant increments to retain talent

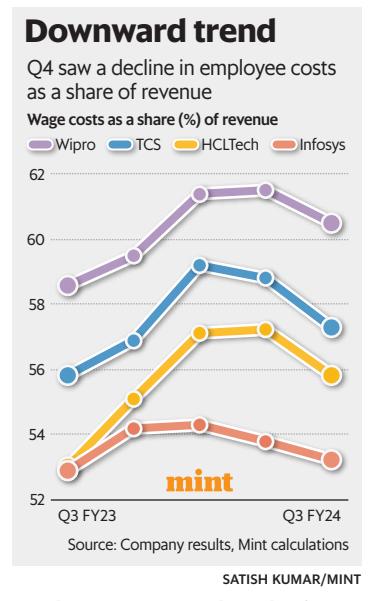
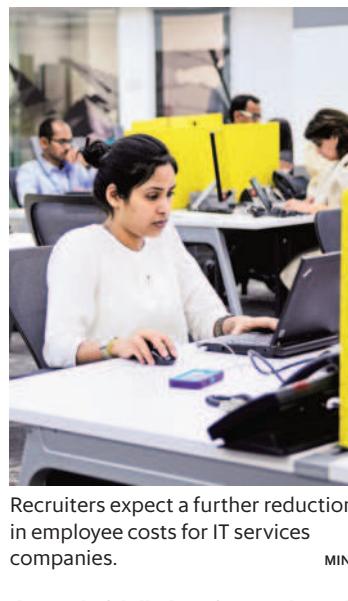
Manjul Paul & Devina Sengupta  
NEW DELHI/MUMBAI

India's leading information technology (IT) services companies witnessed a consecutive decline in employee costs as a percentage of revenue for the second time in the December quarter.

The gradual reversal in wage costs indicates a deliberate effort to clamp down on excessive spending on talent, including measures like counter offers and substantial increments to retain talent. Besides, the steady drop in employee costs also reflect a hesitancy among job seekers, suggesting a shift towards an employers' market for the next few months.

According to Mint analysis, Wipro, which had the highest wage burden among Indian IT companies, spent 60.5% of revenue on employee benefits, down from 61.4% in Q1FY24 and 61.5% in Q2FY24. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) spent 57.3% of revenue for employees in Q3, compared to 58.8% in Q2 and 59.2% in the first quarter of the current fiscal year. HCL Technologies allocated 55.8% to employee costs in Q3, down from 57.2% in Q2 and 57.1% in Q1, while for Infosys it was at 53.2% in Q3, declining from 53.8% in Q2 and 54.3% in Q1.

Recruiters expect a further reduction in employee costs for IT services companies.



SATISH KUMAR/MINT

Aditya Narayan Mishra, chief executive of CIEL HR Services, expects the three leading companies to adjust bonuses and salary hikes for key talent. In fact, even in a muted job market the firms will retain them by offering higher payouts, Misra added.

"Over the next few quarters while employee costs may continue to dip it will not be a drastic fall, as retaining key talent will remain expensive for the companies."

GCCs are the biggest recruiters for skilled IT professionals and they have large mandates with skillsets similar to experienced professional with 4-10 years behind them.

In Q3, Infosys's attrition rate was at 12.9%, the lowest in 12 quarters, while TCS, at 13.3%, posted lowest attrition rates in nine quarters. The highest rates for the companies were at 28.4% (Q1FY23) and 21.5% (Q2FY23) respectively. Wipro clocked 14.2% attrition in Q3 versus 21.1% a year ago.

The drop in attrition is in contrast to the levels exceeding 25% observed a year after the end of the pandemic, when IT firms recruited extensively from campuses and industry, even at times doubling salaries. The job market underwent a U-turn since then.

## HCL Tech shines as Wipro revenue lags

FROM PAGE 16

declined to \$733 million—a drop of 2.3% during the period.

HCL's growth came off the back of a boost in its software and services division, which received a shot in the arm with US networking major Verizon's \$2.1-billion deal that the service provider signed in August. Further deals, such as its software collaboration agreement with global cloud leader Amazon Web Services, are said to have strengthened the business significantly.

Wipro, meanwhile, had a better than expected December quarter by posting higher profitability. Industry analysts said that a better billing environment of already-signed deals, coupled with a better-than-expectation quarter in Wipro's consulting business, as potential factors that contributed to this.

HCL may see a stronger calendar year ahead than its peers, owing to its manufacturing and engineering focus

formance was better than what most in the market expected. "Despite a recent dip in quarterly revenue, Wipro's future appears promising, supported by a solid business pipeline. The company has a strong vision and transformation capability, which influences client satisfaction," said Biswajit Maity, senior principal analyst at Gartner.

Still, Wipro's net headcount declined by 4,473 employees, while HCL reported a net addition of 3,617. This made HCL Technologies to also be the only firm of the top four that reported a net headcount addition in the quarter—Wipro, along with TCS and Infosys, decreased their net employee count by 16,254 during the December quarter. This left cause for concern, since the \$245-billion IT services industry is

one of the biggest mass recruiters for tech talent across India's engineering institutions. "Enterprises are prioritizing operational cost improvements, as well as low-code capabilities that boost efficiency. We see great potential in generative AI, but the programs in this segment will be small in the near-term. We signed 31 deals in generative AI, but most of them are of sub-\$1 million ticket sizes. We expect them to ramp up in the coming quarters," said C Vijayakumar, chief executive and managing director of HCL Technologies.

porates high and impact earnings.

Data released by the government on Friday evening showed IIP growth in November decelerating to an eight-month low of 2.4%, while retail inflation in December grew by 5.69%, the most in four months.

"Investors are hoping that likely rate cuts by the Fed later this year would improve the scenario for IT companies," says Prashanth Tapse, senior VP (research), Mehta Equities.

JM Financial Institutional Securities analyst Abhishek



Saturday, January 13, 2024

# mint

livemint.com

Rs.10.00 . Price with Hindustan Times Rs. 15.50



After two years of decline, moped sales rise in Q3 ►P14



Realme to expand production in India: Founder Sky Li ►P14

SENSEX 72,568.44 ↑ 847.26

NIFTY 21,894.55 ↑ 247.35

DOLLAR ₹82.92 ↑ ₹0.11

EURO ₹90.91 ↑ ₹0.12

OIL \$80.8 ↑ \$2.13

POUND ₹105.74 ↑ ₹0.03

## HCL Tech shines as Wipro revenue lags

Revenue growth highest at HCL Tech; Wipro profitability rises

Shouvik Das &amp; Jas Bardia

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU

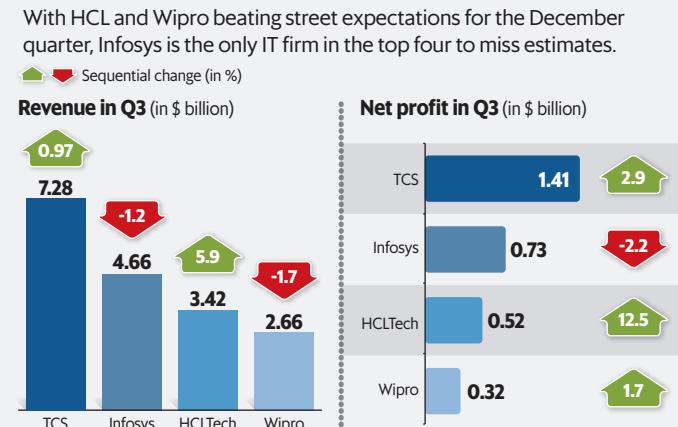
**H**CL Technologies Ltd emerged as the best performer out of the top four IT services firms in India, reporting 5.9% sequential revenue growth and 12.5% sequential net profit growth for the December quarter. In comparison, Wipro Ltd's lacklustre FY24 continued with a 1.7% sequential revenue decline, although there was a surprise uptick to its net profit—which rose 1.7% sequentially, thus beating analyst estimates.

HCL Technologies reported \$3.42 billion in revenue, while net profit was \$522 million for the quarter. A poll of 25 analysts by Bloomberg had projected \$3.37 billion in quarterly revenue, and \$496 million in net profit for HCL, for the December quarter. Operating margin for HCL stood at 19.8%, up 1.3 percentage points.

Wipro reported \$2.67 billion in revenue for the quarter, and \$323.9 million in net profit. A poll of 22 analysts by Bloomberg expected \$2.65 billion in revenue and \$321 million in net profit for the period, for Wipro. Operating margin for the quarter fell 10 basis points (bps) sequentially to 16%.

Both HCL and Wipro, therefore, beat market estimates for the quarter,

### ABOVE PAR



### BITS & BYTES

**WIPRO** registered a sequential dip of 1.7% in its revenue in Q3

**HCL Tech** reported a sequential revenue growth of 5.9% in Q3

**BOTH HCL and Wipro beat market estimates for Q3**

SARVESH KUMAR SHARMA/MINT

ter, making Infosys the only one of the top four to miss street expectations when it announced its earnings on Thursday.

On 11 January, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), India's largest IT services firm, reported \$7.28 billion in operating revenue and \$1.41 billion in net profit, beating street estimates of \$7.23 billion and \$1.38 billion, respectively. TCS' revenue rose 1%

sequentially, while net profit rose 2.7% in the December quarter. Infosys, meanwhile, reported a 1.2% sequential decline in revenue to \$4.66 billion, while net profit

TURN TO PAGE 14

**Wage cost eases at IT firms**

&gt;P14

## Factory output powers down in Nov, food fuels inflation in Dec

Rikhi Kundu

rkhik.kundu@livemint.com

NEW DELHI

**T**he Indian economy faced a double whammy towards the close of the year as industrial output cooled and inflation jumped, data released on Friday showed.

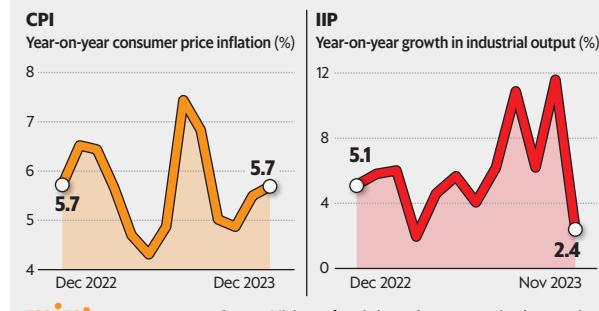
While industrial output growth fell to an eight-month low of 2.4% in November, consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation rose 5.69%, its fastest pace in four months in December, the statistics ministry said.

Though factory output points to a slowdown in manufacturing growth momentum in November, in the April–November period of this fiscal, it expanded 6.4%, a notch above the 5.5% figure in the same time a year ago.

Inflation at elevated levels underlines the central bank's cautious stance on interest rates, signalling possible measures by the government to curb rising prices.

### Down time

Industrial output growth fell to an eight-month low of 2.4% in November, while CPI-based inflation rose 5.69% in December.



PRANAY BHARDWAJ/MINT

Retail inflation rose to 5.69% in December, up from 5.55% the previous month, the steepest monthly rise since August 2023. Interestingly, during the April–December 2023 period, the highest monthly retail inflation was reported during December, after July and August, with July reporting the highest inflation rate of 7.4% in 15 months due to a sharp rise in prices of vegetables and other food items such as pulses, spi-

ces and cereals.

The high inflation levels earlier had prompted the government to take supply-side measures such as releasing substantial cereal stocks from reserves while proactively managing the imports and exports of pulses to ensure supplies. The government had also restricted exports of rice and sugar to tame inflation.

TURN TO PAGE 13

## Tata Consumer acquires Capital Foods, Organic

Suneera Tandon

suneera.t@htlive.com

NEW DELHI

**T**ata Consumer Products Ltd (TCPL) on Friday signed definitive agreements to acquire 100% equity shares of Capital Foods, owner of the brands Ching's Secret and Smith & Jones, and Organic India, a company that sells organic herbal teas and health foods.

While the acquisition of Capital Foods will be in a phased manner, TCPL will acquire 100% of Organic India in an all-cash deal.

TCPL will pay an enterprise value on a no cash-no debt basis of ₹5,100 crore for 100% stake in Capital Foods. While 75% of the equity shareholding will be acquired upfront, the remaining 25% will be acquired within the next three years, TCPL said in a filing to the exchanges on Friday evening.

For a 100% stake in Organic



Tata Consumer Products will acquire 100% of Organic India in an all-cash deal.

BLOOMBERG

India, TCPL will pay ₹1,900 crore, along with an additional earnout for the shareholders linked to FY26 audited financials of the company. The estimated turnover of Organic India for FY24 is ₹360 - 370 crore, up from ₹324.4 crore in FY23.

The signing of the share purchase agreement with Capital Foods has ended months of speculation over the latter's ownership that saw

rivals such as Nestle and ITC bid aggressively. In May last year, Mint reported that food giants Nestle India and ITC were in the fray to acquire Capital Foods.

The acquisition is consistent with Tata Consumer's strategic intent to expand its product portfolio and its target addressable market.

Capital Foods has strong umbrella platform brands with a portfolio of unique products for in-home consumption in fast-growing categories. In FY23, Capital Foods reported revenue from operations of ₹705.5 crore. The estimated turnover of Capital Foods for FY24 is ₹750 to 770 crore.

Ching's Secret is a market leader in Desi Chinese across its product categories - chutneys, blended masalas, sauces and soups. Smith & Jones is a fast-growing brand catering to in-home cooking of Italian and other Western cuisines.

TURN TO PAGE 13

## Remote workers are losing out on one key aspect: promotions

Te-Ping Chen  
feedback@livemint.com

**F**or a while, remote workers seemed to have it all: elastic waistbands, no commute, better concentration and the ability to pop in laundry loads between calls.

New data, though, shows

full-time remote workers are failing

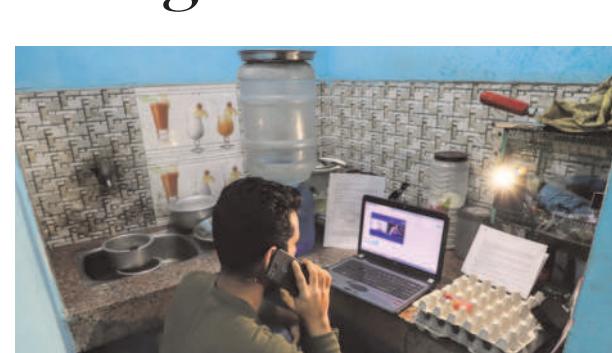
behind in one of the most prized and important aspects of a career: getting promoted.

Over the past year, remote workers were promoted 31% less frequently than people who worked in an office, either full-time or on a hybrid basis, according to an analysis of two

million white-collar workers by employment-data provider Live Data Technologies. Remote workers also get less mentorship, a gap that's especially pronounced for women, research shows.

Of employees working full time in an office or on a hybrid basis, 5.6% received promotions at their organization in 2023 , according to Live Data Technologies, versus 3.9% of those who worked remotely.

"There's some proximity bias going on," says Nick Bloom, an economist at Stanford University who studies remote work and management practices, of the challenges fac-



New data shows that people working from home five days a week get fewer promotions and less mentoring than those in office. GETTY

ing remote workers. "It literally call it discrimination."

In the four years since the Covid-19 pandemic upended the way Americans work, forcing companies and employees

adopted hybrid policies or reverted to a fully in-person approach, nearly 20% of all employees with college degrees or higher still work on a fully remote basis, according to December data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Nearly 90% of chief executives who were surveyed said that when it comes to favorable assignments, raises or promotions, they are more likely to reward employees who make an effort to come to the office. In the online survey of 1,325 CEOs of large companies in 11 countries, conducted last year by professional-services firm KPMG, almost two-thirds of respondents said they expect most employees will be work-

ing in offices full-time in another three years.

Erin Villela, 26, moved last year to Tampa, Fla., to work on a fully remote basis and be closer to her family. Since then, Villela, who works for a staffing company based near Charlotte, N.C., says she hasn't been copied in on as many emails and has had trouble staying abreast of company news. When she was up for a promotion, she says she was passed over after being told the company wanted leadership to be in the office.

"I feel a little lost," she says.

During one recent tricky call with a client, she missed not having a co-worker nearby to discreetly coach her through

TURN TO PAGE 13