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SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 2025

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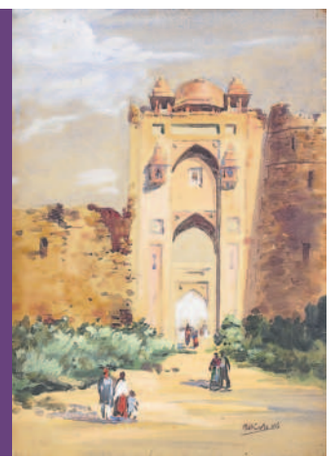
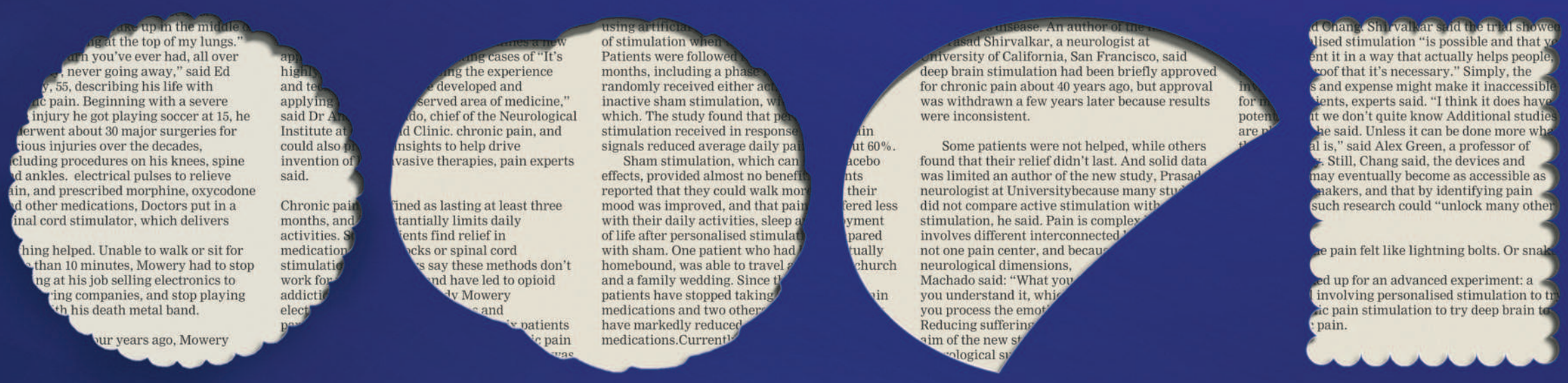
SEE PAGE 11





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mint lounge

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 2025

BREAKTHROUGH MEDICINE

A new book 'Vaccine Nation' by Ameer Shahul sheds light on how Alka Dwivedi's stellar research in immunology helped launch a world-class CAR-T therapy at one-tenth the cost of its Western counterparts for patients in India

SEE PAGE 5

APPLE ON TRACK FOR RECORD QUARTER ON IPHONE 17 SALES | PAGE 16

BREW AWAKENING

INDIA IS IN THE FIFTH WAVE OF ITS COFFEE JOURNEY WITH COFFEE LOVERS, PLANTERS AND ENTREPRENEURS PROMOTING HOMEGROWN VARIETALS IN BOUTIQUE SETTINGS

A WALK IN THE WOODS
The timeless value of 'wastelands'

TASTE
North-East food finds favour in Goa

STYLE
Have we fallen out of love with the dupatta?

PAUSE
Giving monkeys a shot at life in the wild

NEW ON SCREENS

Anurag Kashyap returns with 'Nishaanchi', 'Sabar Bonda' quietly breaks new ground, and other titles

NISHAANCHI
Twin brothers Babloo and Dabloo (Aaishvary Thackeray) team up with dancer Rinku (Vedika Pinto) to rob banks in Kanpur. This is one of two Anurag Kashyap films this year; the other, *Monkey in a Cage*, recently premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.(In theatres)

MIRAGE
Drishyam director Jeethu Joseph returns with another thriller for the big screens. Based on a story written by Aparna R. Tarakad, the Malayalam film revolves around an investigative journalist who is searching for answers. Aparna Balamurali and Asif Ali lead the cast. (In theatres)

BOONG
A precocious boy named Boong (Gugun Kipgen) sets out to find his father, who has ceased all communication with his family in Imphal. Lakshmipriya Devi's debut film is set in Manipur in the 1990s, unfolding against a backdrop of simmering political tension. (In theatres)

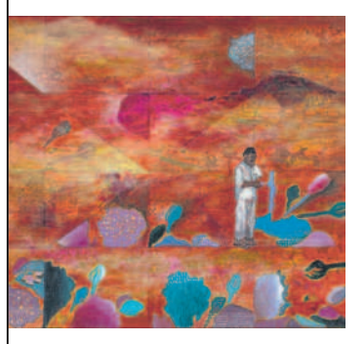
SABAR BONDA
Rohan Parashuram Kanawade's Marathi film, which won the prestigious World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival, gets a welcome theatrical release in India. Anand (Bhushaan Manoj) returns to his ancestral village to perform his father's last rites, and reunites with an old friend, Balya (Suraaj Suman). *Sabar Bonda* ('cactus pears') is a rare film to explore gay relationships in rural India. It does so with frankness and tenderness, showing the same kind of progressiveness that a mainstream film would trumpet as groundbreaking social service. (In theatres)

BLACK RABBIT
The owner of a high-end New York restaurant finds his world thrown into chaos when his loose cannon brother shows up. This new thriller series stars Jude Law and Jason Bateman. Created by Zach Baylin and Kate Susman. (Netflix)

JOLLY LLB 3
The franchise that began as an Arshad Warsi comedy and seemingly passed on to Akshay Kumar, now returns with both actors playing their respective unorthodox lawyers from the two films. Directed by Subhash Kapoor and co-starring Amrita Rao. (In theatres)

Compiled by Uday Bhatia

PLAN THE WEEK AHEAD



THE FEMALE FORM

Vadehra Art Gallery is presenting a solo show, titled *Woman Song, Looking Back*, featuring Vasundhara Tewari Broota's works. The selection, displayed in collaboration with Sangeet Shyamala, includes 35 paintings, created between the 1980s to the present. The artist has consistently represented the nude female form, "beginning with a deconstructed posturing... and growing into compositional renderings of the full figure," states the gallery note. Broota's work combines fantastical and otherworldly elements, and the artist often conjoins figures and other natural elements.

At Vadehra Art Gallery, D-40, Defence Colony, Delhi, till 11 October, Monday-Saturday, 10am-6pm.

A MODERNIST TOUCH

Bhunath Mukherjee's portraits have not been seen very often in the mainstream art space. And now 10 of those, made between the 1940s-50s, are being showcased at Art Exposure, Kolkata in the show titled *A Modernist Lineage of Bengali Portraiture*. You can see subtle shifts in Mukherjee's style in the portraits painted between 1944-52, before he enrolled at the Royal Academy in London, and those done in 1956. "The exhibition situates Mukherjee's practice within the larger lineage of Bengali portraiture...," states the gallery note.

At Art Exposure, Kolkata, till 31 October, Monday-Saturday, 11am-7pm.

—Compiled by Avantika Bhuyan

LOUNGE ONLINE

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The best stories from **livemint.com/mint-lounge** from the week gone by

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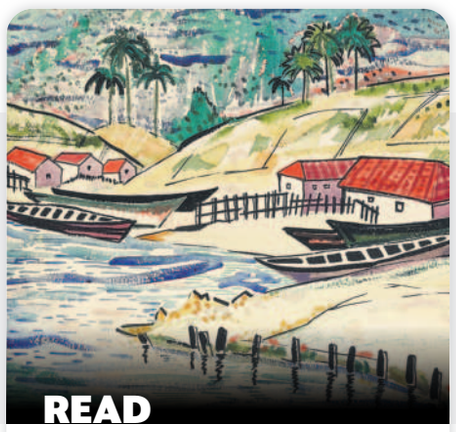
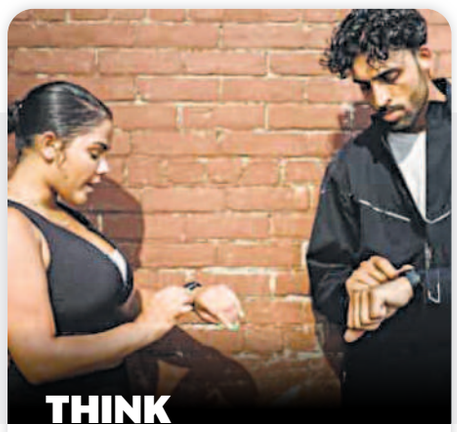
Are your movie nights marred by the hollow clatter of built-in TV speakers? Is the roar of the football crowd more of a meow? Are you left struggling to discern the dialogue over the background score on your favourite show? If you're looking to upgrade your TV sound, perhaps even dip your toes into the Dolby Atmos spatial sound pool with something living-room (and pocket) friendly, take a look at the Sama 5000 soundbar from Sonodyne. **Tushar Kanwar** writes about the homegrown brand—a well-regarded name on the pro-studio circuit—that has recently shifted its focus towards consumer audio, and its sleek soundbar, cheaper than most high-end ones at ₹24,999.



READ

Modern masterpieces under the hammer

To celebrate 25 years of its live flagship auction, Saffronart is hosting a sale of modernist masterpieces. At the heart of this bouquet of artworks are five precious lots from what was once the Jean and Krishna Riboud collection. **Somak Ghoshal** writes about the selection of paintings, which are unique not just because they were executed by the masters of modern Indian art, but also because they are imprimaturs of their early styles, when they were still young men on a quest to discover their artistic voices. A stunning panel by F.N. Souza, titled *Six Gentlemen of Our Time* (1955) makes a bold statement. Other highlights include M.F. Husain's *Floating Figure*, along with works by Jehangir Sabavala.



THINK

Are you too reliant on your smartwatch?

Smartwatches and wearables have made it possible for us to track everything from our steps to sleep, heart rate, menstrual cycles and breathing. However, a study by researchers at Leiden University in the Netherlands, published in the *Journal of Psychopathology* and Clinical Science in July, warns us not to believe everything the smartwatch shows because a lot of its data is error-ridden. In a three-month study of 781 participants, smartwatch stress readings did not align with self-reported stress levels. This study is significant in light of the fact that 43% of users of wearable devices prioritise mental health features like stress detection and guided breathing over traditional fitness metrics, writes **Shrenik Avlani.**

LIVE

When dogs bring the office together

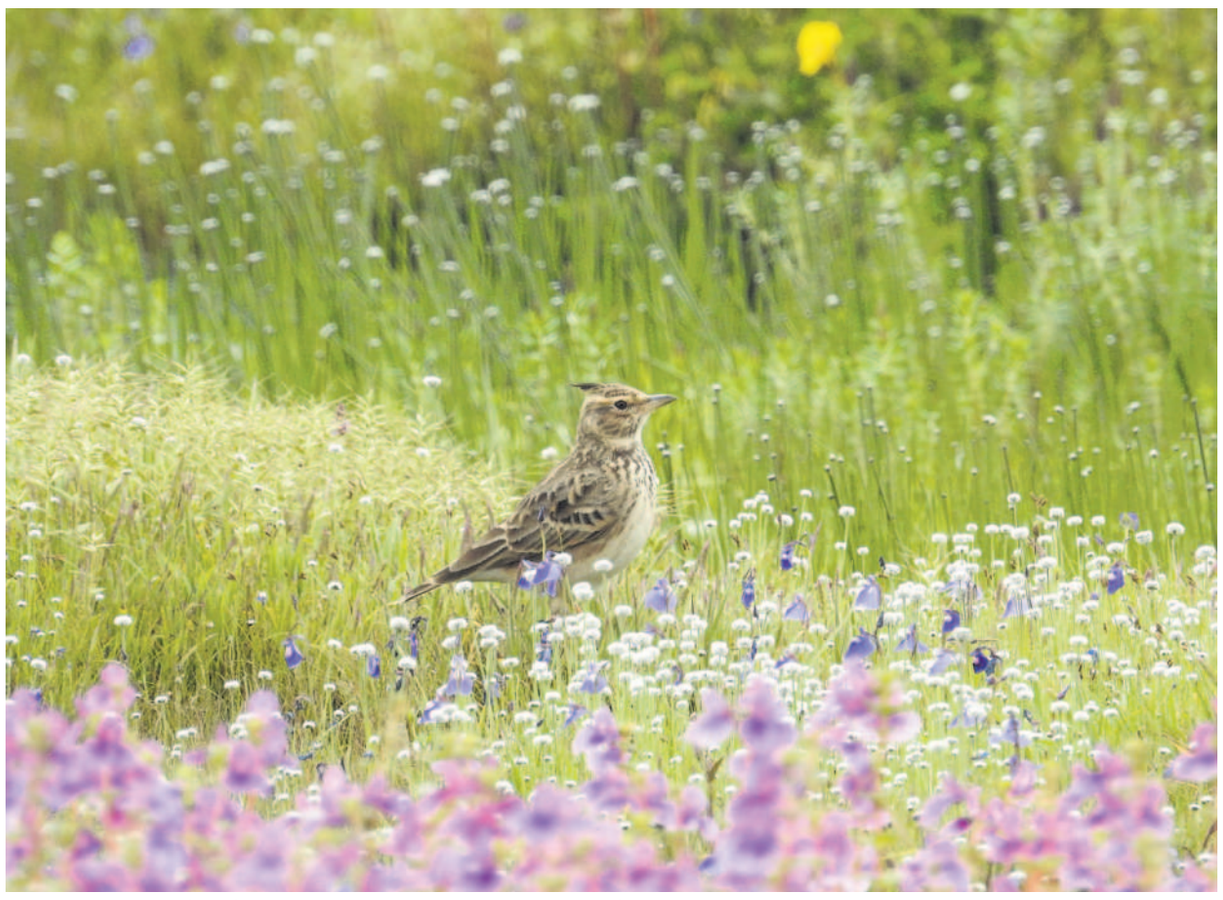
The corporate world is filled with more stories of competition than compassion. But there are working professionals and companies across the country who ensure that the dogs and cats around their workplaces are well taken care of. They coexist peacefully. Some companies also contribute to animal welfare organisations, build shelters, and have adoption drives and community animals as their mascots with designations. This sense of purpose and compassion towards community animals often permeates organisational culture, building tolerance, strengthening work relationships, fostering inclusivity, and offering another strong reason to come to work, writes **Reem Khokhar**.

ON THE COVER: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BENKI BREWING TOOLS

The timeless value of 'wastelands'

A WALK IN THE WOODS

NEHA SINHA



A Malabar lark, and (right) the Kaas plateau carpeted with seasonal flowers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEHA SINHA

The ground was a black, pitted surface and a white mist touched it with an old familiarity. A little drizzle lay on the proceedings: suspending rather than falling on petals, eyelashes, bark and skin. And through the mist, there were flowers—tens of thousands of flowers: blue swishing against white, dark pink with light pink, purple nodding against yellow, masses of electrifying pink on pink. The colours ran over the dark lunar-like slope in a frenzy, candy swirls melting into the ground.

We stood there, taking in the scene, trying to fold in our bodies to avoid damage to the flowers. *Impatiens lawii* was all around us, the flower pink with a purple throat—the colour of a rich, syrupy cocktail you have with friends when the sun is going down. Then there were purple flowers, layered with a lighter centre—Utricularia, a bladderwort species. They stood next to tiny white flowers which were reminiscent of carrot blossoms. Yellow, daisy-like *Linum mysorense* nodded gently. Near them were "mickey mouse" flowers—yellow petalled with red dots, looking like the ears of an animated childhood friend, like the plant would start speaking. Malabar larks whipped into the blooms, their wings a blur, their crest an exclamation. Frogs sat in rock pools. Crabs hid under grass. We were on the Kaas plateau in Maharashtra, and everything was urgently and vividly alive.

Every year in the post-monsoon time, around September, the lateritic plateaus of Western Ghats burst into dramatic blossom. Formed by continuous volcanic deposition, many of these plateaus appear flat, and so are also called tablelands. In summer, they look bare, even barren. Wind whips the land and the sun is pitiless. The soil is thin, appearing almost non-existent. But that is the nature of the area: harshness is its feature. And as usually is the case, this is a twin to abundance. Come monsoon, the plateaus soak up moisture, helped along by the porosity of the rocks. Streams gurgle. Rock pools high up the slope well up again. And the few centimetres of soil reveal riches—native wild flowers, colourful and mesmerising, full of the energy of little things that don't have a long time to live.

And what plants they are.

Between Kaas, Mahabaleshwar and Panchgani, we spotted marvels. The pretty pink impatiens—named so because their seed pods explode impatiently when touched—were ubiquitous. You may have another kind of impatiens in your garden. But on the plateaus, there were also less familiar plants. One had a striking pink flower, with arms splaying out in the aspect of an underwater octopus. The tentacles were covered with sticky drops, and the syrup on the drops gleamed with the promise of dense, luminous perfection. It was like pulling the sun into a glass jar, or seeing an heirloom moonstone in an old cupboard. This is the Indian sundew, a plant that shows teeth. Or to be more specific, a plant that eats insects—lured in by that fabulous "dew". The numerous purple flowers running over the plateau were also insectivorous—bladderworts with "bladder" like portions which snagged insects. There were other plants that were parasites, yet other which were epiphytes—orchids with delicate, ephemeral blooms that took turns flowering, depending on the month. In the rock pools, we saw the mist reflected whenever it stopped raining. A leech or two probed the air like a heat-seeking missile. Endemic plants grew in precarious places—the Konkan pinda with its white flowers was on the edge of the cliff in Panchgani. And the *Flemingia nilgheriensis* and *Delphinium malabaricum*, also endemics, had complex clusters of dazzling purple flowers. They grew with the forbearance of something which has adapted to its very own corner of the world.

We may not realise it, but plants chart our lives. We eat them, we gift them on dates, we are felicitated by them on stage, we walk in their shade. But mostly, we leave plants alone; lavishing our attention on things that talk back to us, or things that seem to be listening. The rock plateaus of the Western Ghats, also called the Sahyadris, have plants that don't really need us. Like the best of wild flowers, in the aspect of the rare Himalayan Brahmakamal, or southern India's glory lily—they do best without manure, without artificial watering, without swathes of pesticides. They contain generosities which reveal the true nature of the land: that these are places that support not just life, but thriving of life. That these are places that display the true turnings of the season, the true spectrum of nature—bare at one time, fabulously verdant in another.

Like most nature geeks, I confess I have a special interest in carnivorous plants, in a creature that looks like one thing but behaves like another. In Satyajit Ray's horror story *The Hungry Septopus*, Ray writes about a man who collects these plants. In this pursuit—a genteel chase which becomes an obsession—he brings home a plant that grows into a human-sized being, always hungry. At a certain time of the day, the powerful plant produces a smell—a kind of seductive fragrance that makes others lose their wits. You'll have to read the story for the rest. But in the real world, sign me up for plateaus full of insect-eating plants. Because this means the plant evolved to fill a niche that others were not occupying, its own space on the mountains, so to speak.

Seeing masses of Utricularia is a reminder that there is an entire world in the roots , where the "bladders" are, and that water-saturated monsoon soil has many hidden mysteries.

Tourists who visit these areas do so to enjoy the flowers, the climate, and their own photos between the blossoms. Seldom do they come to see the value of the endemic flower itself, the bluster of the wind constantly bearing down on the rock, the resilience of the runnelled floor. Neither is it well-known that not all plateaus in the world produce masses of flowers, that many of these flowers are found only in that region, or even that locality; that this vegetation supports animals which are found only on that mountain or that point.

It is these blind spots that have led the authorities to misclassify lateritic plateaus or rock faces as wastelands; that have led misguided steps to dump soil on the land, or to build over it. This needs urgent correction. These areas have survived centuries, we must ensure they survive our plans. These plants and their habitats don't need our care; but they certainly need us to leave them alone, and give them a chance to live unencumbered by invasive plants, concrete and mass tourism.

Whether we pay attention or not, plants present a daisy-chain of importance. They show us the places that support life, and through their own bodies, they support other creatures. They show their deep knowledge of the land, unlocking memories of natural abundance; of how the place may have looked decades, tens of decades ago.

At this time of the year, plants are not the side show but the main event in the Western Ghats. May we remember their names, and remember to tread softly.

As we climb down the tableland, I ask myself: Can we keep growing like plants? Can we open our minds to the possibility that something that looks bare can also be fruitful? Can we, in essence, allow a small, non-verbal plant to change our view of the world?

Neha Sinha is a conservation biologist and author of Wild and Wilful: Tales of 15 Iconic Indian Species. *Views expressed are personal.*

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Source

A compendium of all things fashionably feline

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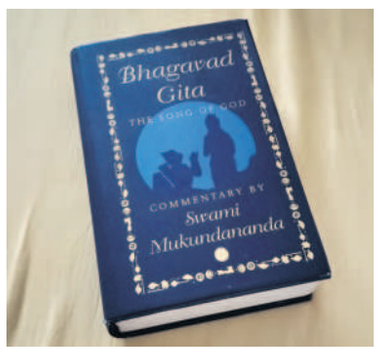
The house's stylised cat figure is made into a clutch with hand-painted details. *Available on Valentino.com; ₹5.26 lakh.*

Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

LOUNGE LOVES

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



CLASSICS FOR KEEPS

A friend gave me their copy of the Bhagavad Gita as a housewarming present recently, and it felt special on multiple levels. I've always loved the idea that books are meant to travel, to find new homes and readers... but I gift from my own library sparingly. So I know how much it means to part with your cherished books. The Gita holds a lot of meaning for me. Growing up in Kurukshetra meant I was introduced to this epic early on in life. I have fond memories of reading a Sanskrit-to-English translation as a child, discovering words like "renunciation" and "ascetic" long before I saw them anywhere else. It shaped my thinking in many ways. This gift also got me thinking about how we often reach for new titles when gifting books, but maybe we should give more classics, too?

—Shephali Bhatt

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

Last weekend, I watched *The Godfather* on a big screen for the first time. I had no need to follow the story, and could allow my eye to wander and seek out details that might not jump out on a TV or laptop screen. I can now confirm that a dark hall and giant screen is the only way to properly appreciate the genius of Gordon Willis. The cinematographer was dubbed "prince of darkness" for his dramatic, sparsely lit frames. A couple of days later, after the passing of Robert Redford, I revisited *All The President's Men*, another key work of his. The indelible image of Deep Throat in the parking lot, only the contours of his face visible... that's the artistry of Gordon Willis.

—Uday Bhatia

SINGING FOR GAZA

An evening of poetry and music to raise funds for the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA) turned out to be not just a worthy way to spend an evening but engaging as well. Organised by a Bengaluru-based group of activists, the event, which took place in the somewhat trippy setting of a tattoo studio, was a revelation in terms of local talent in the city, from the blues band Blues and Bread to a performance by poets Ruha Latif and Sadhana called *Malba*, in which they read out verses in Urdu and English about objects found in the rubble. There was storytelling and singing and dancing, reminding us of the importance of art and community even as the massacre in Palestine is finally recognised as a genocide by the UN.

—Shrabonti Bagchi

THE 'OFFICE' PRANKSTERS

Of late, I have been rewatching *The Office*. It is a little night-time ritual to close the day with a bit of a laugh. Lots has been said about the Pam-Jim romance, Michael Scott's eccentricities essayed to perfection by Steve Carell, and more. But the bits I look forward to are the pranks that Jim Halpert (John Krasinski), one of the salesmen at Dunder Mifflin, plays on colleague Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson). They are elaborate, often requiring weeks of planning, and are executed to the last detail—and promise a good laugh each time. These have acquired a fandom of their own. One page of *The Office* fandom mentions that Jim played 794 pranks on Dwight till 2012. One of my favourites is when Dwight's stapler and stationery are encased in Jell-O. None of these get old and make this series a great rewatch.

—Avantika Bhuyan

STREAM OF STORIES

RAJA SEN

So long, Sundance

Robert Redford and Jane Fonda in 'Barefoot in the Park'.

Robert Redford is out of breath. That beautiful man has just walked up six unexpected flights of stairs to his New York apartment and he is positively winded, far too tired to spar with his flammable new bride. In the 1967 screen adaptation of *Barefoot in the Park*, all the good lines belong to Jane Fonda while Redford complains, sneezes and puts up with it. It is incredible to see this gorgeous man—a man chiselled out of a classic superhero comic-strip—be this relatably helpless and browbeaten. Neil Simon's play can be seen either as an advertisement for marriage as well as a cautionary tale, and Redford's haplessness teaches us that it can be both.

Robert Redford always gave us more than we expected. More than the obvious. Initially dismissed by many—notably the late great film critic Pauline Kael—as a pretty blond, Redford reacted by leaning heavily into complicated roles that subverted his very handsomeness, roles where things were never what they seemed. His characters were always messier or smarter or fickler or slimier or braver or more cunning than they first appeared, the actor weaponising his impossibly good looks to somehow appear casually unassuming—always to prove otherwise. Never forget that the reason Redford is the most dangerous man in *Three Days of the Condor* is because "he reads."

What a titan. Redford died in his sleep this week at the age of 89, and has left behind an incomparable legacy. Not only that of a genuinely iconic movie star, but that of a significant filmmaker, an accomplished and self-aware character actor, a passionate environmentalist, and—most importantly of all—an unlikely saviour and fosterer of independent cinema. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is certainly a wondrous film, but it is the Sundance Film Festival that Redford built in Utah that brought us filmmakers like Steven Soderbergh and Quentin Tarantino.

What do we think about when we think about Redford? Him nursing his bloodied chin in *The Way We Were* while scolding an idealistic Barbra Streisand for telling off the world. Or the way he scowls sheepishly in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* before confessing that he doesn't know how to swim. Or that phone call in *All the President's Men* where he discovers where the campaign funds went, and his blue eyes gleam with epiphany even as he does his best to sound casual. Or that scene in *The Sting* where he, having found and sobered up a washed-up Paul Newman, tells this new apparent mentor that "I already know how to drink."

What shines through in these performances is not only a classic movie star, all-conquering and incandescent, but an intensely self-aware performer. One who knew the power of a smirk and the nudge of an eyebrow, one who could make us swoon over him and shrink from him. One who knew what he was capable of. This made Redford an insightful director, making films like *Ordinary People* and *Quiz Show*. This self-awareness also made him realise he could do more for the movies.

In 1981, a year after winning the Oscar for *Ordinary People*, Redford set up the Sundance Institute in the wild hills of Utah, far from the Hollywood crowd. Redford craved distance from the studio machinery, longing to create a community for independent artists and creators. These mountains, windbitten and unscripted, promised sanctuary. Nobody turned up at first, despite this movie-star beckoning the press, the filmmakers, the distributors. As with so many of powerfully progressive films he made or starred in, idealism eventually won through. In 1984, the writer-director labs got deserved attention, and in 1989, when the Sundance Film Festival crowned Steven Soderbergh's breakthrough film *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, it quickly became an outpost for independent cinema.

The raw young misfits flocked to Sundance. There was Quentin Tarantino with his *Reservoir Dogs*. There was Kevin Smith with his $27,000 film *Clerks*. Then came *The Blair Witch Project*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Whiplash*, *Get Out* and innumerable more triumphs—of innumerable shapes and sizes and genres—all the way to recent Indian successes like *All that Breathes* and this year's *Sabar Bonda*. These movies are all... Sundance's kids.

Is this the most that a movie star has ever done for the movies?

I believe so. Redford birthed a community that has celebrated and encouraged storytellers and creative thinkers on a massive scale. Sundance and its commitment to originality and free-spirited thinking has influenced other festivals and even other actors, like Robert De Niro who founded the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. There are other performers one may rate over Redford—though few leading men could ever be called as dreamy—but the way the actor built and nurtured this creative ecosystem, stars from which continue to build their own constellations, displays a remarkable vision and love for cinema. A true leading man.

It's taken me a long time to write about Redford, even as I have tried to type as fast as the actor did when playing Bob Woodward in *All the President's Men*. When I think about Redford, I think of one of those many moments where he took over the screen, so arch and sly and clever, always finessing his way out of predictability. Thus, instead of writing this two days ago, I ended up watching many a Robert Redford movie all over again, mesmerised and marvelling at the man and his astonishing legacy. The way he was.

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

Spend the weekend with Robert Redford. *Barefoot in the Park, All the President's Men, Ordinary People, Sneakers, The Electric Horseman*, and *The Way We Were* are all available to rent on Amazon Prime Video.

The yellow taxi gets a designer touch for 'pujas'

The wheezing cab might seem an odd vehicle to mark Durga Puja, but they once were part of celebrations, ferrying families to 'pandals'

CULT FRICTION

SANDIP ROY

SANDIP ROY

The yellow taxis have been transformed as part of a project for Durga Puja.

ISTOCKPHOTO

I was not sure whether to be awestruck or bemused.

A yellow Kolkata taxi with interiors covered by Sabyasachi wallpapers and textiles! Sabyasachi Mukherjee, a designer famous for being lavish and ostentatious, and yellow Hindustan Ambassador taxis, infamous for wheezing and rattling, make for an odd couple. It could be seen as one Kolkata icon's salute to another. But it could also be seen as a delusion of grandeur.

The interior of a Kolkata taxi is special. There's no air-conditioning and on hot muggy days you can leave sweat stains on the seats. These days the seats look even sadder, sometimes ripped and patched together, the seams showing. But these taxis had rich Sabysachi wallpapers and furnishing fabrics with opulent names like "Jamshed Jamavar", recalling the prized shawls of the Bengali elite, or "Chowringhee", evoking the majestic central boulevard of colonial Calcutta.

These taxis are Durga Puja specials.

Every year, like many other companies, Asian Paints gives out Sharad Samman awards to celebrate the best of Kolkata's Durga Pujas, and this year, to celebrate 40 years of the awards, they commissioned four artists to depict four decades of Durga Puja.

The canvas was the bodies of the yellow taxis. The artists filled that space with colourful drawings representing the changing face of Durga Puja—the woman in a white sari with red borders painting *alpana* or *rangoli* giving way to the razzmatazz of eye-popping lighting displays, traditional images turning into theme *pujas*. The rise of Bengali bands, celebrity theme artists and social media Reels all found place on the taxis' exteriors.

Yellow taxis have long been symbols of the city. When Chiranjeevi came to Kolkata to shoot the Telugu film *Bhola Shankar* in 2023, he shot a scene wearing the grey uniform of a Kolkata taxi driver, with 30 taxis and their real-life drivers as extras. Nothing says Kolkata like its trams and yellow taxis.

They have been on the road since 1962, largely unchanged. Bright yellow and rotund, sometimes described as a bowler hat on wheels, based on the Morris Oxford Series III, these are all Hindustan Ambassador cars. And the yellow taxi was the ambassador of the city in many ways. Sometimes down to its fabled inertia.

The cabbies would routinely refuse to go anywhere you wanted. Even the rise of app taxis like Uber and Ola seemed to make little difference to them. Sometimes they have "No Refusal" written along the side, but they treat it as little more than a decorative motif. No power steering, a clunky gear shaft and a gas guzzler—this is not a car that has kept up with the times.

Recently, the government announced it was the end of the road for yellow taxis. The Kolkata high court has prohibited commercial vehicles older than 15 years on the streets. Hindustan Automobiles has anyway announced it will produce no more Ambassadors. There are plenty of other cars to choose from that are sleeker and more fuel efficient. The last Ambassador rolled off their delivery line in 2014. It's only a matter of time before the ones still on the streets ride into the sunset one by one. This Durga Puja jaunt might well be their last hurrah.

Over a decade ago the writer and poet Jeet Thayil told me he got himself an Ambassador and jazzed it up with chintz curtains and rear view mirrors on the bonnet that did nothing. He said the person showing him the car demonstrated all the extras. And every time Thayil asked what it was for, the salesman would say, "For show" and Thayil would say, "Give it to me." His car was brand new, but it already felt like an idiosyncratic old lady, set in her ways, he told me. But he had no idea when he bought it that he might be one of the last people on earth to buy an Ambassador. The yellow taxis of Kolkata are the last public face of the vanishing breed.

Unlike the Ambassador taxi, Durga Puja has changed dramatically over the last 40 years. The more homespun *pujas* of old have given way to elaborate big-budget theme *pujas*, blessed by Unesco as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage since 2021. Now it comes with a preview like an art exhibition. An organisation called MassArt puts together preview tours of selected *pujas*. I have seen Durga Pujas paying tribute to Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*; turning an entire neighbourhood into pages from a beloved Bengali book of nonsense verse; and taking on heavyweight issues like climate change, plastic pollution and water conservation.

Last year, one Durga Puja had as its theme *Biheen* (the void). It covered 35,000 sq. ft, immersing the viewer into what the artist called a "black hole". That Durga had no body, her life force represented by a flickering candle. As I walked down dark corridors towards the Durga, I felt like I was entering an after-hours club. This was like no Durga I had ever seen. The ticket checker at the entrance scanned my pass. As his scanner beeped, he waved me on. And I would have never dreamt that one day I would be scanning a QR code to enter a Durga Puja *pandal*.

The unchanging yellow cab might seem an odd vehicle to represent so much change. But those cabs were the everyday companions of Durga Puja. Entire families could squeeze into them to go *pandal* hopping. We are talking five adults, five children, and an assortment of bags. Thayil said the Ambassador was perfect for carrying his band's equipment. The Durga Puja artists could carry their straw and equipment in them.

But the real reason the Sabyasachi-ed taxis are roaming around the streets of Kolkata is because it's a gilded nostalgia trip. Everyone has a childhood story about yellow taxis. At the event launching the painted taxis, Bengali film stars reminisced about how when they were young, taxis were a bit of a splurge for those who did not have their own cars. Sahapedia, an online resource on art and culture, writes about the Sikh taxi drivers of yore, famous for their honesty, who always went by the meter and used the shortest route. Jagdev Singh, a taxi driver since 1970, tells Sahapedia, "Bengali housewives and young girls would prefer to ride taxis after evening only with Sikh drivers because they had impeccable trust in them."

As she reminisced about her taxi driving days at the launch, Bengali actress Sauraseni Maitra said the painted taxis had triggered so much nostalgia that she really hoped she would get hold of one during the coming Durga Pujas.

I doubt she will actually go around in one. The rattling wheezing taxis with no air-conditioning are hardly the cars a movie actor wants to be seen in despite the Sabyasachi interiors.

But I am sure this Durga Puja, those taxis, just tailor-made for Instagram Reels, will be a hot commodity. Already when I spot them on the street, they make me smile. They are like murals on wheels, a riot of colours spurring a rush of nostalgia.

Plenty of Kolkatans will be hailing them. But chances are the driver will refuse to go wherever they want to go.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

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How one woman transformed cancer treatment in India

Alka Dwivedi's stellar research in immunology helped launch affordable gene therapy for patients in India

Ameer Shahul

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The incidence of cancer has been on the rise in India for a number of reasons; and (below) Alka Dwivedi.

In March 2024, *Nature* carried a striking headline: 'Cutting-edge CAR-T cancer therapy is now made in India—at one tenth the cost'.

Just a month later, the President of India Droupadi Murmu formally launched the therapy, hailing it as the country's first homegrown gene therapy for cancer. Developed by a team of Indian scientists and cleared by regulators in late 2023, the therapy marked a watershed moment in Indian biomedical innovation.

At the centre of this revolution was an unassuming but determined thirty-five-year-old scientist: Alka Dwivedi.

Dwivedi and her team had achieved what many thought impossible—they had indigenously redesigned the most cutting-edge, patented cancer therapy of the West, capable of curing advanced blood and lymph cancers, and slashed its price by nearly 90 per cent without compromising on efficacy or safety.

It was the kind of medical breakthrough that might have made Dwivedi a household name anywhere else. But lost among the 1.4 billion people of India, she was barely recognized outside her circles, save some mentions in the *Hindu* and *India Today*. The Indian media was busy covering political turmoil and parliamentary elections when the news broke, while social media was captivated by the Ambani wedding, celebrity airport looks and influencer feuds. Dwivedi's achievement—one that could save countless lives around the world for decades, if not centuries—was drowned out by clickbait content and election drama.

Dwivedi's journey to this milestone was as remarkable as this cancer vaccine itself. Raised in the narrow lanes of dusty Mirzapur in rural Uttar Pradesh, she completed her schooling and early university in Mirzapur. She then pursed biotechnology for her master's at a little-known university in Nagpur. A brief internship at IISc, Bangalore during her master's opened her eyes to the world of serious scientific research.

She gained some industrial exposure at Japanese life sciences firm Daiichi Sankyo in Gurgaon, followed by a year-long stint at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi. There, she worked on plant-nematode interactions using RNA interference—her first real brush with genetic engineering. After a year at IARI's iconic Pusa campus, she joined IIT Bombay's Biosciences and Bioengineering Department.

That's where she met Dr Rahul Purwar, an immunologist trained at Harvard Medical School and Hannover Medical School. Together, they set their sights on cancer immunotherapy—often referred to as 'cancer vaccine' because it helps the body to generate its own immunity against cancer cells. Their objective: bring the Western designed CAR-T cell therapy to India and make it accessible to Indian patients. They got medical support from Dr Gaurav Narula and Dr Hasmukh Jain, two expert oncologists at the nearby Tata Memorial cancer hospital.

CAR-T cell therapy, hailed as a breakthrough in oncology, involves extracting a patient's T-cells, genetically engineering them with synthetic receptors (CARs) and reinfusing them into the body to hunt and destroy cancer cells. This 'living drug' has achieved astonishing success in treating blood cancers like leukemia and lymphoma since its advent, especially in children.1 But the cost was prohibitive —up to ₹30–40 million (roughly $500,000) per patient even as cancer has been emerging as one of the worst killers in the modern world....

According to the National Cancer Registry Programme, the official source for India's cancer data, approximately 1.46 million new cancer cases are diagnosed each year in the country.... Besides this alarming data, a large number of cases go unreported beyond the coverage of cancer hospitals and in rural areas.

The incidence of cancer has been on the rise due to growing environmental pollution, over-use of plastics and chemicals and increasing dependence on processed and packaged food. The affected patients have been desperately seeking a cure. One of the reliable solutions that emerged in the West in the new millennium was CAR-T.

The concept of CAR-T originated in Israel in the late 1980s and was brought to clinical fruition by renowned oncologist Carl June's team in the US, with the launch of the first human trial in 2011. CAR-T cell therapy took immunotherapy to a highly personalized level—a patient's own T-cells are extracted and genetically altered to recognize cancer. When infused back into the patient, these tailored cells seek out and destroy malignant cells with heightened precision.

In 2017, US FDA approved two CAR-T therapies—Kymriah (Novartis) and Yescarta (Gilead)—that made headlines for their remarkable success in treating certain leukemias and lymphomas, especially in children. The therapy marked a new era of 'living drugs' that are custom-made to each patient's cancer. Despite its promise, high costs and complex logistics made CAR-T therapy inaccessible for most of the world.

When Dwivedi arrived at IIT Bombay in 2015, CAR-T trials in the US were gaining momentum. But in India—where nearly 1.5 million new cancer cases were being reported annually—the therapy was out of reach for most. When she witnessed cancer patients lining up daily at the nearby Tata Memorial Hospital, the mission became a personal one for Dwivedi, setting her on track to develop a safe, effective and affordable version of CAR-T therapy in India, by India, for India.

Dwivedi led the technical process—designing the CAR and producing the viral vector that delivers cancer-fighting genes into a patient's T-cells. But resources were scarce. A better equipped bioengineering lab was still under construction at IIT Bombay, and a variety of equipment had to be imported. Every step was a struggle. More significantly, researchers with know-how and hands on experience were hard to come by. The silver lining was that the project had received key support from Tata Trust in the beginning with ₹1.76 million and later from National Biopharma Mission through BIRAC, which sanctioned ₹191.5 million to fund the Phase I/II clinical trials.

A breakthrough came in 2017 after Dwivedi spent time at the US National Cancer Institute, where she picked up critical know-how in CAR-T cell manufacturing and viral vector development.

Returning to Mumbai, she cracked key challenges in CAR and vector production and began generating CAR T-cells in the lab. Animal trials showed promising remission rates. The project soon received a regulatory green light for clinical trials on cancer patients.

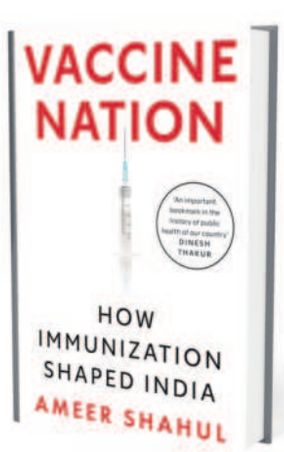
By 2021, the team had built a GMP-grade facility at IIT Bombay—one that met WHO standards for sterility and safety. Clinical trials began shortly after, enrolling informed patients from Tata Memorial battling advanced leukemia and lymphoma.

4 June 2021 marked a historic milestone in India's cancer care journey. At the Bone Marrow Transplant unit of Tata Memorial Centre (TMC) in Mumbai, the country's first CAR-T cell therapy was successfully administered to patients by Narula and team. The results were stunning. Nearly three of four patients responded to the therapy, and almost half of them went into complete remission. Even more encouraging was the reduced toxicity. By tweaking the therapy design, the team managed to minimize dangerous side effects, making treatment safer and more tolerable.

Just as important was how they did it. Every component—from viral vectors to cell-processing systems—was made in India. No costly imports. No reliance on foreign patents. The result: a world-class CAR-T therapy at one-tenth the cost of its Western counterparts. In October 2023, the therapy—branded NexCAR19—received approval from India's Central Drugs Standard Control Organization, becoming the country's first sanctioned CAR T-cell product.

By mid-2024, more than 150 patients had received NexCAR19. The team expects that number to cross 500 by 2025. Construction is underway on a larger manufacturing facility on the outskirts of Mumbai, with the goal of producing 1,200 treatments annually. The new site will house high-efficiency labs for vector and CAR T-cell production, along with expanded quality control units to accelerate turnaround time. The team dreams of bringing down the cost of the therapy to as little as ₹10,000 one day.

Excerpted from Vaccine Nation: How Immunization Shaped India *with permission from Macmillan India.*



Vaccine Nation: How Immunization Shaped India: *By Ameer Shahul, Macmillan India, 504 pages, ₹699.*

BREW AWAKE

COURTESY HIMANSHU KHAGTA

India is in the fifth wave of its coffee journey with coffee lovers, planters and entrepreneurs promoting homegrown varietals in boutique settings

Aravinda Anantharaman

Growing up in Bengaluru in the late 1990s, Suhas Dwarakanath wanted to open a coffee shop. "It was purely the cool quotient," says the founder of Benki Brewing Tools in Bengaluru, which he started in 2017, selling café equipment. As a high-schooler, he often cycled past Café Coffee Day in Jayanagar, then a quiet residential neighbourhood. "It was where the rich kids would hang out," he remembers. "I would save ₹50 to go buy a cappuccino there. Everyone used to bring their fancy cars. It was nothing to do with coffee," he recalls. It was all about the vibe and the experience it offered.

After pursuing a course in business management and international trade, in 2011 he moved to Dubai to work. There, he hung out at cafés often but was galled to realise that his colleagues seemed to know so much more about coffee, which he had grown up drinking. It goaded him to learn more—the Speciality Coffee Association offered a programme that Dwarakanath enrolled in. Around this time, he got a job as a brand manager at Cafés Richard, the French coffee roasting and equipment supply company, in Dubai. He spent the next three years at Cafés Richard, travelling the world and teaching people how to use the equipment. In 2017, having saved up enough to start his own coffee shop, he returned to India, which was waking up to speciality coffee. Today, alongside his coffee equipment business, he runs a café, a speciality coffee academy, manufactures brewing equipment, owns a coffee estate in Chikkamagaluru in Karnataka, and trains coffee planters. Dwarakanath is also this year's winner of the National Barista Championship. His is a story that seems to rise and fall with the "waves" in the coffee story in India.

Globally, coffee trends are tracked in waves—the first being when coffee is largely seen as a commodity, followed by the setting up of modern cafés, then discovering speciality coffee, and the fourth wave being bringing science and innovation to coffee. India is currently riding the fifth wave of the business of coffee, connecting with savvy millennial and Gen Z audiences and providing boutique coffee experiences.

Where a few decades separated the first and the second waves in India, subsequent waves have arrived far quicker from the mid-1990s to now. Chains like Café Coffee Day and the now defunct Barista, which grew throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, gave a taste of what the coffee experience could be like. But these were businesses run by corporates, not passion projects bootstrapped by economists or engineers intent on delivering refined, artisanal and boutique experiences.

Over the past decade, a new wave of coffee entrepreneurs, enthusiasts and experimenters has transformed Indian coffee from a commodity for export to a movement to promote homegrown varietals. In India, much of what's happening in coffee is led by those who began as nothing more than coffee drinkers. Never has a hobby inspired such a leap of faith as coffee has.

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Blue Tokai, the Gurugram-based coffee roastery and café that opened in 2012, is credited with changing how we perceive coffee in India. Its founders Namrata Asthana, a communications specialist, and Matt Chitharanjan, an economist, began as coffee drinkers, learning about speciality coffees when they lived in the US, where the latter grew up and Asthana went to college. In 2011, Chitharanjan moved to Chennai to work, where he met Asthana. Struggling to find "good coffee", despite India being one of the world's top 10 producers of coffee, set them on a path that has become a part of Indian coffee lore.

What they did was bring the coffee estate to the forefront, much like one would do for wine. Every coffee that they roasted or served has the estate's name. Transparency, a new concept for what was always sold by the kilo as a commodity, had arrived. They took the feedback to the growers, changing the relationship that existed between these two parts of the coffee ecosystem.

"Blue Tokai has brought about a lot of positive changes in the speciality coffee and home brewing market. Matt, the founder, realised very early that consumers need to start brewing coffee at home, and understand the flavours of a high quality speciality cup. He promoted 'Channi coffee'—basically, putting ground coffee in a regular chai *channi* (sieve) and extract a black coffee in a simple way—such simple initiatives, alongside their expansion of cafés across the country offering coffees from different smaller estates helped elevate Indian coffee as well as home brewing," says Abhinav Mathur of Kaapi Machines, a B2B coffee equipment company.

They inspired new businesses, offering a model to borrow from. "There are today more than 100 micro-roasters, 75% of them having come up during the past five years," says Mathur. Consumers have a choice they never did before and as micro-roasters compete for the best coffee, it pushes coffee growers to look at the processing quality and invest in the crop.

Getting speciality coffee right isn't just about growing the beans—it is also about drying, fermenting and roasting them correctly. Of these steps, roasting is critical. Before roasting, the green beans are quite flavourless. The right temperature for the right amount of time unlocks the flavours, lends body and taste, and balances acidity.

"A generation ago, my grandfather-in-law would have dealt with traders or the curing works (where the bean is cured and cleaned so raw coffee becomes green coffee). Today, we speak directly with the roasters who will ultimately roast our coffee. This shift has allowed us to share our story more personally, and for roasters to carry that narrative forward to the consumer," says Komal Sable. Along with her husband, Akshay Dashrath, she runs the fifth-generation, family-owned Mooleh Manay coffee estate in north Coorg, Karnataka, and co-founded South India Coffee Company in 2017, a India and UK-based B2B venture promoting Indian coffee internationally.

Mooleh Maney, known for its carbonic macerated arabica, 120 extended carbonic macerated robusta and 84 hours fermented excels, also supplies to Blue Tokai.

"The right roastery should bring transparency and showcase the art of roasting to the public. It connects customers to the daily cup of coffee," says Marc Tormo, 55, of Marc's Coffee in Auroville.

In 1997, Tormo, then 26, closed his coffee business in Spain and moved to India, with which he's "always felt a connection" since his first visit as a 16-year-old. Tormo visited coffee estates and supported coffee growers, even starting a café in Chennai. But it was not until 2008 that he saw a niche and started roasting speciality coffee. "South India is a coffee drinking place. It's a culture, not commodity. The culture needed to be expanded and we picked up that thread."

Although cafés were popular, roasters were becoming more proficient, and customers were seeking options, the market for speciality coffee remained in pockets—until the pandemic. "I am a product of covid," says Shobhit Agrawal of Mushin Coffee House, Noida, explaining that it was the time spent at home during the lockdowns that persuaded him to give his dream of opening a coffee shop a shot.

Working as an engineer in Pune before the pandemic, his hangout was a local café, The Beans Talk, which he credits for his "discovery of coffee". Returning home to Noida in 2020, he remained a committed coffee enthusiast. "I contacted every roaster and brand to ask what to buy and how to brew at home. I must have tasted some 150 coffees in that one year," he says. It paid off. In 2021, Agrawal became the first home brewer to win the Aeropress competition.

In 2022, Agrawal pursued a master's in coffee economics and science at the Ernesto Illy Foundation in Italy. On his return, he opened Mushin Coffee House, a training centre for enthusiasts and professionals and a "brew bar" where anyone can pay by the hour to use coffees, equipment and experiment, "a playground" for speciality coffee.

Food and beverage ranked high in the list of "pandemic pastimes". Cafés lost business but roasters could still ship, and coffee drinkers learnt to replicate their favourite coffees at home.

Mathur of Kaapi Machines launched an online platform, Something's Brewing, for home brewing equipment in 2020. Bhavyesh Vyas, one of Mathur's regular clients, is a staff solutions architect in pre-sales. "I got my first espresso machine (Silvia) during the lockdown and it gave me lot of time to learn about espresso." About his home coffee setup, he says, "It is end-game minus one," going on to list several machines, including "an SSP burr grinder, every type of filter coffee brewer and a flow control espresso machine," along with a "very detailed plan for upgrades". He also spends close to an hour every day brewing and reading about coffee.

In October 2021 on International Coffee Day, Something's Brewing was opened as an "experience centre" in Bengaluru. "It has become a community hub for home brewers. Roasters and estate owners drop by regularly to launch their new coffees, take feedback from consumers. Our most popular one being 'BYOB—Bring your own Brewer' to get consumers to bring any coffee machine they do not know how to use so we can teach them. 'Coffee On the House' is where we allow newbies to get a café-style cup of coffee for free, but only if they brew it themselves."

Even coffee communities formed during the pandemic have lasted long beyond. Two years ago, Mathur opened Something's Brewing in Surat because "it is the most exciting home and speciality coffee market, not known to many."

(top, left) At Tinmos in Rohru, Himachal Pradesh; and (below) robusta beans ripe for picking at Harley Estate.

Much of what's happening in coffee is led by those who began as nothing more than coffee drinkers. Never has a hobby inspired such a leap of faith as coffee has

COURTESY HARLEY ESTATE

NING

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COURTESY SWA ARTISANAL SYRUPS

COURTESY BERMIOK COFFEE

A sensory evaluation of the coffee during the roasting process at the Bermiok roastery; and (top) at the Coffee x Cocktails competition hosted by Swa Artisanal Syrups.

"Did you know, in Patna, there is a street with 18 cafés," asks Sreeram G of Maverick & Farmer in Bengaluru and director of marketing, Speciality Coffee Association of India (SCAI). Patna joins Ajmer, Indore, Jalandhar, Pune, Amritsar and Surat in the growth of cafés, proving that coffee has cut through geographical, social and culinary barriers in India.

In Rohru, in Shimla district in Himachal Pradesh, Himanshu Khagta, a photojournalist and apple farmer, runs Tinmos, a speciality café that he started in 2022. His introduction to speciality coffee was a film he shot in 2021 at the Salawara coffee estate in Chikkamagaluru in Karnataka, where he met Dwarakanath. "Editing the film taught me more than I expected," he says, talking about the video on processing and roasting speciality coffee. Trying speciality coffee and enjoying it set him out on his own coffee journey.

"We sell four different coffees, an overkill for a place like Rohru," he says, adding that for many people in his town, this was the first experience of good coffee. Oddly enough, in the first two years, he sold more espresso, he says, and it's only now that milk coffees have caught on. He is planning to open a second café locally and set up speciality cafés in rural areas. "From a business side, it's a growing industry."

BEYOND THE BREW

Speciality coffee has catalysed new businesses, from selling coffee equipment and running cafés to setting up roasteries. It also gave us the barista, who is not just a "coffewala" but slowly—very slowly—finding acknowledgement as a skilled worker.

In July, at a Coffee and Cocktails Masterclass hosted by artisan brand Swa Artisanal Syrups in Bengaluru, Dwarakanath was joined by Avinash Kapoli, owner of Soka Cocktail Bar, also in Bengaluru, to talk about basics of mixology, how to think of the coffee and use it. It was followed by a competition where baristas and bartenders paired off to create a coffee cocktail and a shot at winning ₹50,000. What struck me was the synergy between the barista and the bartender. Speciality coffee has borrowed a lot from the bartending world, in the performative side of brewing and serving coffee.

Gurugram-based Rishab Nair, 26, who was the first runner-up in the National Brewers Cup organised by the Coffee Board and Speciality Coffee Association of India, started his coffee journey as a barista in Bengaluru. In 2022, with an engineering degree, Nair planned to enter the air force. With some time on his hands, he joined Starbucks and ended up staying for two years before taking up ad sales. Coffee came calling again and he joined Blue Tokai for B2B sales for the south in 2024. "I would cup coffees with the roasters," he says. "Quality really excites me. How did we not appreciate such variety when it was always right here?" Nair is the only one among those I spoke to who didn't start as a coffee lover. "I hated it," he says, of his first black coffee as a 15-year-old. Much has changed since. "The barrier is broken. I can taste bananas, pineapple, watermelon in coffee." Seven months ago, he started working as a roastery manager at Blue Tokai's Gurugram roastery.

In a café, a barista can expect to move up as shift manager, café manager, manager or head barista. If a café is attached to a roastery, that adds a lateral growth opportunity. Starting salaries for barista are between ₹15,000-20,000 but entry points are low, requiring only a class XII pass. And the training they get is invaluable—and expensive if one were to undertake it on their own.

Regular coffee drinkers are now asking for their baristas by name and there are competitions where they can showcase their skill. It's also a great marketing tool as every participant will speak about the estate and the coffee they are using.

Dwarakanath, whose company has been hosting the Indian Aeropress Championship since 2017, says two years ago they had 640 contestants, up from 35 in the first year. But competitions are an expensive undertaking. Dwarakanath, who is now set to represent India at the global Barista Championship has a fund-raising page on his company website, to raise the ₹27 lakh he needs to prepare for the event in Italy. Dwarakanath will carry three coffees, one of which is a green-tip geisha, grown only on one farm in India. Elsewhere the barista is already better recognised; Dwarakanath talks of last year's barista champion from Indonesia being signed on as a brand ambassador for a clothing line. "Like movie stars," he says. He believes that in the next few years, the barista will rise in reputation, "treated on par with chefs and bartenders."

A COMMUNITY OF COFFEE HEADS

Coffee's entry point is affordable and home brewing equipment costs significantly less than a few years ago. Coffee meet-ups, raves, Reddit communities, Instagram... it is fuelling a lot of talk online and offline. Having spent the last decade watching tea planters express frustration at the slow growth in speciality tea in India, I am examining coffee for clues to take back to tea. Maybe coffee brewing is more exciting, more performative. Or maybe the world of coffee is sufficiently nerdy, and provides scope for involved discussions about heat, flavour and more.

"Across India, there's a thriving exchange of ideas happening, from WhatsApp groups to Discord channels, and at coffee meet-ups," says Sable. "Conversations often dive deep into the science of brewing, extraction, water chemistry, grind size, pour technique, and temperature consistency. People are engaging with coffee at a granular level."

Tapaswini Purnesh, 38, a fifth-generation coffee producer and director of marketing and promotions at Harley Coffee, her family's estate in Sakleshpur in Karnataka, talks about an event she attended recently at a cafe, where home brewers showcased their brewing skills. "Some of the brewing methods were more sophisticated than any speciality cafe out there."

Even milk is a reason for the geeks to drill down. The milk that Dwarakanath used at the Brewers Championship, for instance, is a mixture of dairy, oat and almond milk with the dairy milk vacuum-distilled in a device that he had custom built.

I turn to Nikhil Pradhan from Bermiok estate, Sikkim, who straddles both tea and coffee. "India is, above all, a milk-drinking nation and tea and coffee are used with milk depending on where you are—coffee in the south and tea in the north," he says. "It's the specialty tea and coffee culture that is more interesting to observe, where milk is not part of the equation and complexity in 'flavour' and the nuances of 'quality' are sought after. This market in India is still very small and nascent when it comes to both tea and coffee."

But this niche customer is willing to spend. The Bermiok Station (a café, shop and gallery for local produce and artisans) at the Craft Theory Collective on Gangtok's high street attracts more Gen X and millennials, he says, for whom classics like the long blacks, lattes and flat white top the chart. Alongside this, they serve "tender coconut americanos, espresso tonics, fruit-based cloud coffees, and our riffs on some Vietnamese and European coffees besides the occasional tik tok trending ones," says Pradhan.

It does feel like the old favourite, the south Indian filter coffee, the only one I am familiar with and which reminds of chai for its deep cultural connect, has been sidelined. "I personally believe filter coffee is a phenomenal opportunity to own as Indian. Espresso is synonymous with Italy. Filter coffee could be ours. The whole theatre behind filter coffee lends itself brilliantly as a uniquely Indian coffee," says I.B. Bopanna, who returned to his birthplace in Coorg in 2019 after three decades spent working in international coffee trading and marketing. The last 15 years of his career were spent leading the coffee category for The Coca-Cola Company in Singapore and Atlanta, US.

In 2024, *Taste Atlas*, an online encyclopaedia of world food, listed south Indian filter coffee as the second-best coffee "for its rich, full bodied flavour and unique brewing process". But, café owners say filter coffee has not seen much innovation and can't be priced highly enough to warrant a café setting. The India International Coffee Festival (IICF) includes a 'Filter Coffee' contest, thanks to Sreeram's push for it but there's a long way to go before it can compete with single-origin estate coffees. As one of the judges, Sreeram himself says, "Table layouts are getting better but the signature drinks are predictable with jaggery and paan flavours."

GROWING COFFEE TODAY

With all these developments around coffee, surely coffee growers must be happy. More demand, better prices, one would assume, but that is an area yet to see the full potential of an aware and loyal domestic market.

"As per the Coffee Board of India, per capita coffee consumption in 2024 has increased by about 40% compared to the last decade but still stands at about 100g per capita per annum. This is still very low compared to Europe, where it is about 6kg," says Mathur.

"Speciality coffee is not yet a big enough market in India. The success stories are motivating of course, however the volumes of coffee roasted are relatively small in comparison to that exported," says Bopanna. While he maintains exports are the bedrock of demand for coffee growers focused on quality, he too is not immune to the growing demand for speciality coffee and has set up an artisanal coffee pulping and washing station and has a cupping room and an in-house private café at his plantation in Coorg, to showcase his coffees and the farm-to-cup experience to his buyers.

As in the rest of the world, Indian coffee is mostly grown by small growers, which comes with its own challenges ranging from quality to scalability. S. Karumbaiah, a third-generation coffee grower from Coorg who promotes the stories behind Indian coffee, processes and estates on his Instagram handle @socoffee.club, and is a coffee processor, says, "Most cafés source from 100-150 estates but we have 400,000 coffee growers across the country. With nearly 90% being small growers, the real gap is in quality processing after harvest and that has to be bridged for Indian coffee to reach its full potential."

Purnesh adds, "As domestic buyers increase, they want more differentiation, exclusivity. No one wants to serve the same coffees as the other cafés." This requires growers to be more innovative with fermentation and post-harvest processing.

At an IICF session with coffee planters, Rohan Kuriyan, fifth generation planter at the Balanoor estate in Chikkamagaluru, echoed this, when he said, "We are being pushed to do more with the process by customers. We've become like scientists with beakers and experiments during harvest time to improve our coffee."

India is a mainly robusta-growing country, when it's arabica that dominates the speciality coffee segment. The perception is that arabica is the more flavourful coffee, but with climate change, robusta trumps arabica as a hardier plant. "People are willing to pay for arabica; robusta is still a hard sell. It's the narrative told for a long time that robusta is woody and harsh. India has some of the best robustas in the world," says Purnesh.

Some have begun the good fight, creating awareness about robusta coffee. Bopanna offers a high-elevation premium washed robusta from his estates in Coorg and his brand, Chombuka Coorg Coffee. Marc's Coffee offers a session called "Robusta for arabica lovers" and Hyderabad's Last House Coffee takes it further by serving only robusta.

While the coffee story has been dominated by the south, especially Karnataka which produces close to 80% of India's coffee crop, change is brewing. Besides more cafés and roasteries, the coffee terroir is expanding beyond the traditional geographies in Karnataka and Kerala, to Odisha, Sikkim, Nagaland and Assam, although these states still produce very small volumes.

The success of Araku Coffee, a single origin, fair trade, organic from the Araku highlands in the Eastern Ghats that supports local tribal communities, shows the path ahead. Araku opened its first café in Paris in 2017, followed by one in Bengaluru in 2021. Bopanna feels Nagaland coffee is poised to become the next Araku, if they play their cards right. "It offers authenticity, and exclusivity, a culture that is one with nature, and a landscape ideal for shade grown agroforestry with coffee," he says.

I recall a remark I overheard about how coffee farmers in the past likely never drank the coffee they produced, prizing tea much higher and serving it in their own homes. They had no idea what became of the beans they sold. What the new wave of coffee has brought is a realisation of the value of something right in front of us. While studying in Italy, Agrawal was part of a group of 25 students from 17 countries. Everyone brought coffees from home to brew, and Agrawal's was a coffee from the Baarbara estate, in Karnataka's Bababudangiri Hills, with pepper and cacao flavours. It was a hit. It had body and flavour, which is hard to find together. "We have the coffees, have the knowledge. Let's not shy away."

At Marc's Coffee, we finish talking and I have savoured the flat white with its precise 3mm crema. Tormo talks about his long desire to find that perfect coffee. "It was a quest. I kept searching. I travelled north, south, east and west, the world." Lots of good, even superlative, coffees came his way. Then, a couple of years ago, a friend who is the custodian of the Silence Forest in Auroville called him to say he'd spotted a new plant in bloom—could it be coffee? The white flowers had a jasmine-like scent. The berries were small, barely 1-2mm. Tormo brought a batch to his roastery and very carefully processed them.

"It was the sweetest coffee I have tried. The coffee of my dreams, the one I was looking for." In 2011, the plant once placed in the genus *Psilanthus* was subsumed into genus *Coffea*. Now renamed *Coffea wightiana*, it is one of four heirloom Indian coffees. That it thrives at sea level under harsh summers is appealing in the age of climate change. There are about 1,800 *Coffea wightiana* plants in Silence Forest, producing a small bean that needs to be carefully processed, generating small volumes of coffee. Tormo shakes his head at the irony—the perfect coffee was right here all along, a lesson for all of us.

Aravinda Anantharaman is a Lounge *columnist.*

Goa's new culinary crush: the North-East

Ghost pepper, 'axone', 'anishi' and fermented fish—there's an increased interest in flavours from the North-East in Goa

Joanna Lobo

COURTESY OYAS_UMAMI/INSTAGRAM

Smoked pork sando at café alag; and (left) pork dumplings at Oya's Umami.

It's a happy table—we are busy using toothpicks to tease out the flesh of steamed snails paired with a spicy potato mash. Besides snails, our dinner spread at The Hungry Hornbill by Fat Panda at Candolim in Goa includes smoked pork ribs, beef cooked with *michinga* (Sichuan pepper) leaves, and smoked beef with yam.

My home state has awakened to the flavours of the North-East, offered in restaurants like Pots-N-Grillz, The Hungry Hornbill, Meiphung, Oya's Umami and (soon to relaunch) Soul Chef. Friends tell me about grocery stores and suppliers: Seven Sisters in Calangute and the Morung Market in St Inez. A peek at the menus of other restaurants and there are similar touches: a chicken bamboo shoot curry and Naga pork belly dish here, or an Assamese fish curry there. On Instagram, an ad pops up about The North East Tiffin Box, a cloud kitchen in Candolim serving special *thalis*, smoked meats and dry chutneys.

Goans liking this cuisine feels like a no-brainer: we love our chillies too, enjoy eating pork, and drying and salting fish is a common practice as is eating seasonal greens, and there's a shared love for rice and fish.

This fascination with food from the North-East isn't just a fling. It's a slow romance, aided by a growing community of work professionals making Goa their home since the pandemic, a larger awareness of India's diverse cuisines, customers willing to experiment, and a few spirited chefs from the region eager to showcase their skills.

At café alag in Siolim, co-owner and Assamese musician Uddipan Sarmah, and his partner Bompi Angu, source their coffee from Assam and Nagaland, make a latte with Lakadong turmeric from Meghalaya, and bring the smoked pork in their sando from Dibrugarh. "I guess the North-East is the new hype," laughs Sarmah.

In Goa, this statement holds true. The Naga-born Ati Aier, who moved to Goa in 2019, started cooking to satisfy a pregnant woman's craving for smoked pork and other treats from home. Since then, she has hosted pop-ups, run a stall at local festivals, retailed her products (pastrami, beef floss) at supermarkets and started a supper club. Earlier this year, she opened her first restaurant, Oya's Umami in Panaji offering Naga food and some Asian fare. "From my experience of having fed friends and guests over the years, I've seen how, once they taste the flavours, they stay with them," she says. It explains why the 35-seater Oya's Umami often runs full.

There are others who have trodden a similar path. Livingstone Shazia, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, came to Goa in 2008. Wanting to serve food from the North-East, the self-taught chef opened Meiphung North Eastern Kitchen in 2015, in Calangute. The menu is mainly Naga and Manipuri, including dishes like smoked pork with *axone*, Naga pork curry, and fish *tenga*, and some Thai offerings.

'Singju' at The Hungry Hornbill.
CAMEO SERRAO

At The Hungry Hornbill, chef Huto Chophi, who moved here from Nagaland about five years ago, worked odd jobs till he opened his restaurant, which now sits on a street lined with tourist-friendly, "pure veg" restaurants in Candolim. "I've always wanted to cook north-eastern food. When I got this place six months back, I was initially scared. But then, I have many friends and I knew they would come to eat my food," he says. The tourists come for Asian fare, but those in the know, go for their fill of *hamuk* (snails), smoked pork and chicken, *singju* (Manipuri salad) and Chophi's favourite chow.

Then there are couples like Monalisa Baruah and Saurav Parashar, who moved from Assam in June 2015 seeking a change, and it came to them in the form of a restaurant a few months later in October. Soul Chef began its journey in Candolim serving the Khasi delicacy *jadoh* (meat and rice dish) and pork curry with black sesame seeds. "We wanted to tell people there's more to the cuisine than bamboo shoot and ghost pepper," says Parashar. They also served a signature chorizo momos and recipes learned from friends back home.

Soul Chef has seen many changes: it moved to Mala, Panaji, then shut down because of real estate issues, became a cloud kitchen, and will now reopen this month in Caranzalem.

Another champion of the cuisine is the Dimapur-born Anglo Indian chef Alistair Lethorn, who left home in 2018 with an urge to cook the food he grew up eating. In Goa, he is known for his Naga pop-ups, and his former restaurant Aal's Kitchen, which shut down last year due to infrastructural issues.

At a recent pop-up at Westin Goa, Lethorn curated a five-course menu of traditional dishes, but with modern presentation: slow-cooked pork belly with dried bamboo shoots, smoked pork *galho* (a dish similar to porridge), banana leaf fish with *michinga* and bitter brinjal to name a few. "I still get reservation calls for the restaurant," he chuckles. Some clients will call ahead, order his food, freeze it and send it to family in other cities.

Chefs like Lethorn, Aier, Chophi, Parashar, and Shazia have now become ambassadors of the cuisine. They are aided by a stellar supporting cast, including suppliers filling their coffers with fresh vegetables like mustard leaves and taro leaves, *axone* (fermented soybean), *anishi*, pickles, and snails.

Take Morung in Panaji, a clothing and organic store selling smoked pickles, *axone, anishi* and snails. Opened less than a year ago, it is run by Wepelhiu Kapfo from Nagaland and her husband who goes by the name RK. "Even my Goan customers love the bamboo shoot and dried fish," says Kapfo.

"There's always been a love for food from the North-East in some way. Social media and the internet have only helped in highlighting it. While there's naturally a bit of trend energy, the curiosity and interest behind it feel genuine and have lasted," says Aier.

Suffice to say, the flavours of Aier's cold black sesame noodles and beef with bamboo shoot; Pots-N-Grillz' *eromba* (mashed vegetables with fermented fish) and chicken *thukpa* (noodle soup); Soul Chef's black sesame chicken and *masor tenga* (Assamese fish curry) and Meiphung's boiled mustard leaves, Naga garlic chutney and Manipuri *kangsoi* (stew) with fermented fish, certainly linger. They are bold, comforting and honest.

Joanna Lobo is a Goa-based journalist.

ISTOCKPHOTO

TEA NANNY

The many shades of tea

Aravinda Anantharaman

My 13-year-old has taken to sharing Reels on the absurdities of language and how it can confuse one terribly if you're a new learner trying to grasp the rules. Like how "height" and "weight" are pronounced in English, or how "French fries" may not actually be French. Every language seems to take a jibe at another. They are good for a laugh. And even as I chuckled, I thought about how tea suffers from a similar confusion in its many names and what they actually mean. It rang home as I set out to brew a yellow and a purple tea this weekend.

Let's start with black tea. The Europeans called it black tea for its dark oxidised leaves. In China, it is *hong cha*—red tea—named for the colour of the liquor. So, is the tea named for the plant or the cup? Or the leaves? It depends on the tea.

Green tea is not oxidised, indicating still green leaf. The liquor itself ranges from yellow-hued to yellow-green to green (like matcha). White tea is named for the downy hair on the buds after the tea has been processed. Many assume the name refers to the liquor colour—often judging it as overrated pale water. It's not. The liquor is creamy yellow and rather striking even in its subtlety.

In the classification of tea, yellow tea is actually a green tea variant because, like green tea, it's not oxidised. There's an additional step of *menghuang*, where leaves are wrapped in small batches under precisely controlled times and temperatures. This "sweating" mellows the flavour: less vegetal, more sweet, gently earthy. I am trying a yellow tea. I steeped mine a little strong; it smells warm, like hay. But more brown-yellow than sunshine.

And there's purple tea. This *Assamica* varietal underwent a mutation increasing anthocyanins—seen in purple cabbage and carrots—turning its leaves purple. Although the varietal originates in China's Yunnan, and Assam, Kenya took to cultivating and marketing it more aggressively from 2011. Today, we see some Indian purple teas. And while the purple leaves are noticeable in the plant, you see only hints of it in an otherwise yellowish cup that turns purple with the addition of lime. Adding to the confusion is the entry of the butterfly pea flower that makes a blue cup turn purple with lime. A different plant, a different brew.

But, we have our own blue tea—the oolong. Though its name translates to "black dragon", it's sometimes called blue or blue-green tea. Why? Who knows... a story lost in translation.

This colour conundrum has been both good and bad. On one hand, it simplifies tea types into broad categories. On the other, it has led to adulteration issues, with unscrupulous traders adding colour to tea. Still, it has inspired Pantone to name some of its colours after tea—Green Tea, Rooibos, Chai Tea. Perhaps that's what we really need—a shade card of the full tea colour spectrum.

Tea Nanny is a fortnightly series on the world of tea. Aravinda Anantharaman is a tea drinker, writer and editor. She posts @AravindaAnanth1

Flex those flaxseeds for an extra dose of nutrition

DOUBLE TESTED

NANDITA IYER

This seed ties together fabric, food and fine art.

Flaxseed is one of the oldest cultivated crops in the world. Evidence of its use dates back over 6,000 years, with origins in the Fertile Crescent region in West Asia and North Africa. The plant's stalks were initially grown for their fibres, used to produce linen fabric, one of the earliest textiles in human history. Ancient Egyptians prized linen for clothing and burial shrouds. The seeds, long considered a by-product, were eventually discovered to be a nutritious addition to diets.

Flaxseed oil, also known as linseed oil, has been used since medieval times and played an important role during the Renaissance when oil paints became the medium of choice for artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. Its availability and versatility made it an essential material in Europe's artistic traditions.

Cut to the early 2000s—my early blogging days were full of discoveries. How to use the internet to publish my kitchen experiments, connect with like-minded people from around the world, and also learning cooking tips and tricks from fellow bloggers.

One such tip I picked up as early as 2006 was how to use flax-egg to replace eggs in recipes—a topic that's still hot in 2025. It's a simple and effective replacement: to swap one egg, combine 1 tablespoon of flaxseed meal (ground flaxseeds) with 3 tablespoons of hot water, whisk well, and let it sit for 10-15 minutes. The mucilage in the outer layer of the seeds creates a gummy texture (similar to what you see in okra) that thickens when mixed with water. This works wonderfully in recipes like muffins, cookies, pancakes, waffles, or even vegetarian "meatballs" or burgers—especially those that require just one or two eggs to be replaced. That said, using too much flaxseed can sometimes overpower a dish in both texture and flavour, so moderation is key and I would not recommend trying to replace five-six eggs in a recipe with this method.

Another discovery came to me while being stuck in Bengaluru traffic with my neighbour and friend, Janaki, a curator of beautiful things. From her bag, she pulled out a delicately etched silver box. Inside were roasted flaxseeds. At first, they didn't look exciting, but when I bit into them, they were crisp, salty and utterly delightful to munch on. So get yourself a lovely little handmade box and carry some salted roasted flaxseeds with you to brave any traffic jam, and get your doses of omega 3 fatty acids while at it.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANDITA IYER

(left) Flaxseed 'podi' on 'idlis'; and bean and flaxseed burger patties.

The last tip I learned came from another neighbour and friend, Anindita. I once remarked how soft her hands felt, especially compared to my rough, workman-like palms. She graciously shared her secret, which I'm happy to pass on to you.

Boil a handful of flaxseeds in water for about 20 minutes until the mixture thickens into a jelly-like liquid. Strain it through a sieve, mix in a couple of vitamin E capsules (for extra nourishment), and apply generously on your hands. Leave it on overnight or wash it off after an hour. The result is soft, nourished skin hands, a little act of self-care using a simple ingredient like a flaxseed.

So the next time you top your oatmeal with flaxseeds or mix them into granola, take a moment to appreciate this humble seed and how it has clothed and nourished us for nearly 6,000 years.

FLAXSEED PODI

Makes a cup

Ingredients

Quarter cup split *urad dal*
Quarter cup *tur dal*
Quarter cup flaxseeds
2 tbsp black sesame seeds
Half tsp oil
8 Byadgi red chillies (for a spicy version, use Guntur chillies)
1-1.5 tsp salt

Method

Dry roast the *urad dal* and *tur dal* until aromatic and the *urad dal* turns golden. Remove to a dish.

Now roast the flaxseeds over a medium flame, continuously stirring, until they start popping. Wait for the popping sounds to stop and then remove it to the plate to cool. Similarly roast the sesame seeds until it has popped and remove to cool.

Add the oil to the pan and roast the chillies for 4-5 minutes on low flame, until they puff up. Remove to a plate to cool. Grind them to a coarse powder along with the salt. Transfer to a bowl.

Grind the flaxseed and sesame seeds using the pulse mode for a few seconds at a time, so you get a dry coarse powder and not an oily paste. Remove to the bowl.

Grind the roasted *dals* to a fine powder. Combine all the ground ingredients in the bowl. Taste and adjust the salt as required.

Store in an airtight container once cooled.

Mix with oil and serve along with *idlis* or *dosas*. This can also be sprinkled on steamed veggies.

BEAN AND FLAXSEED BURGERS

Makes 4

Ingredients

1 cup black beans soaked overnight
1 tbsp olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
1 tbsp minced garlic
100g grated *paneer*
2 tbsp flaxseed meal
2 tbsp almond meal
1 tsp cumin powder
1 tsp paprika or chili flakes
Salt
Pepper
1 tbsp dried mixed herbs

Method

Drain and pressure cook soaked beans for 10 minutes in salted water.

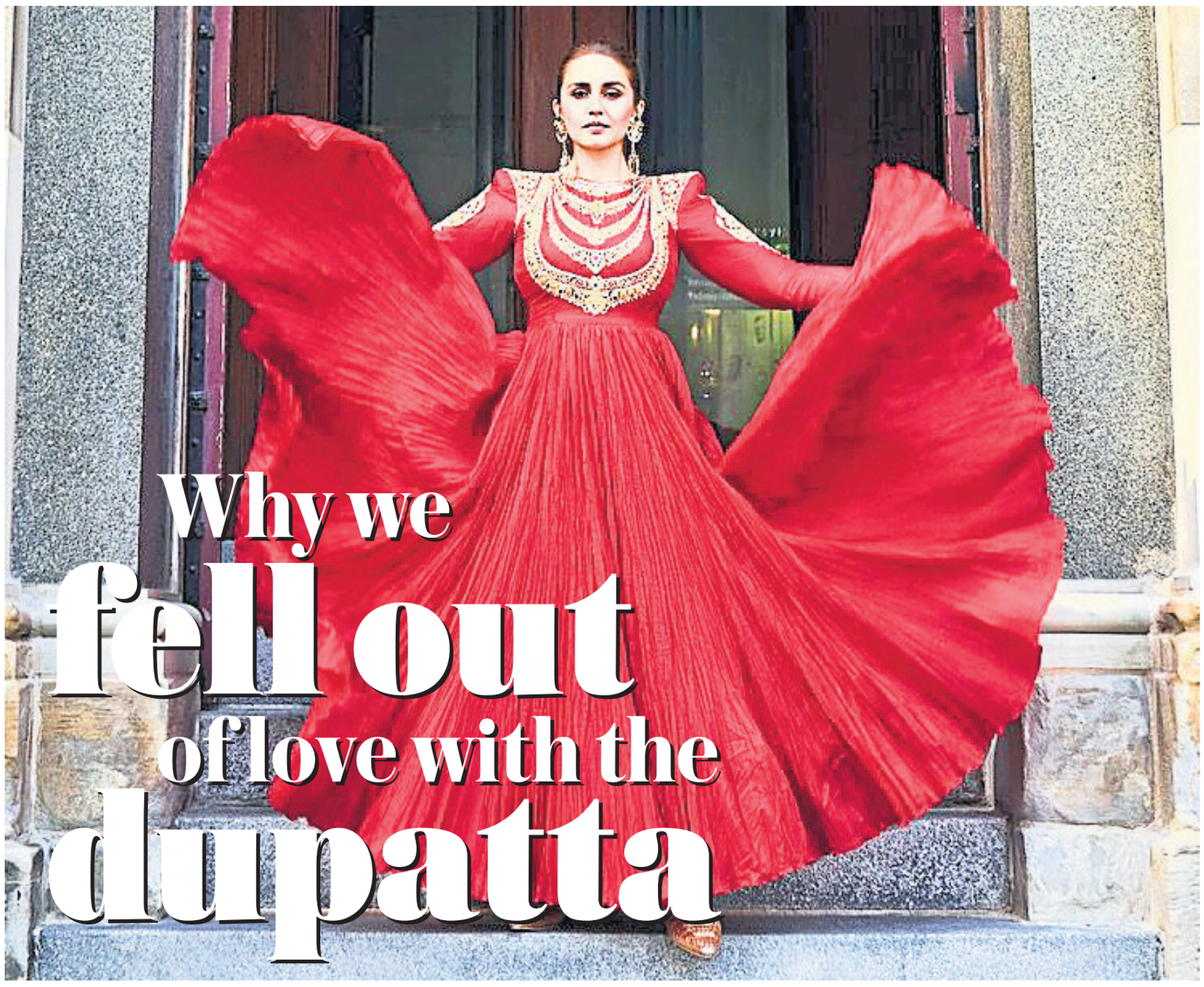
Drain beans for 30 minutes. Spread out on baking tray and bake in 180-190 degrees Celsius oven for 10 minute to dry out excess moisture.

In a pan, heat the olive oil and saute onion and garlic for 6-7 minutes.

Mash the beans with a potato masher and combine all the ingredients. Divide into 4 portions and pat into burgers. Bake in an oiled baking tray for 6-7 minutes per side or cook each side on a *tava* for 7-8 minutes until golden brown on the outside.

Serve as is with a salad or in a burger bun with lettuce and sliced tomatoes.

Double Tested is a fortnightly column on vegetarian cooking, highlighting a single ingredient prepared two ways. Nandita Iyer's latest book is The Great Indian Thali. *She posts @saffrontrail on Instagram and X.*



Why we fell out of love with the dupatta

The two-metre length of fabric, part of traditional wear, is struggling to find a fit in the modern woman's wardrobe

Pooja Singh
pooja.s@livemint.com

My mother recently threatened to upcycle my *dupattas*: "These can be curtains, these pillowcases and *razai* covers." My response, as always, was a vehement "no".

I have more than 100 *dupattas*, collected over the past 15 years. While I wore them regularly in my early 20s, nowadays the only time they see the light of day is during Diwali or a wedding. They no longer feel like a seamless fit in my daily wardrobe. Many friends feel the same: "It's too cumbersome to wear unless there's an occasion."

Nandini Khanna, a government official, also said something similar when we met last Saturday evening at K.C. Creations, a four-storey shop in Delhi's Central Market, famous for its variety of fabrics. She was looking for a chinon *dupatta* to match a salmon pink *kurta*-palazzo set.

"The only time I wear a *dupatta* is when I go to the *gurudwara*," Khanna, 55, says. "In our Sikh household, the women always had a *dupatta*; it was part of the daily uniform. Now, they (the women) don't wear them as often—not even my mother. I own only three (*dupattas*)."

Rajesh Kumar, a salesperson at K.C. Creations, has seen the drop in demand for *dupattas* closely. "She is the first person today who's looking for one," says Kumar, pointing towards Khanna.

"Hardly anyone comes looking for a *dupatta* to go with a cotton *kurta* (referring to daily wear clothes). Maybe one or two in a day. When I started working here 15 years ago, every customer wanted a matching *dupatta*. Now, people buy readymade *kurtas* with embroidery or that don't need any covering (like ones with a Nehru collar). Why would you need a *dupatta* then?" says Kumar.

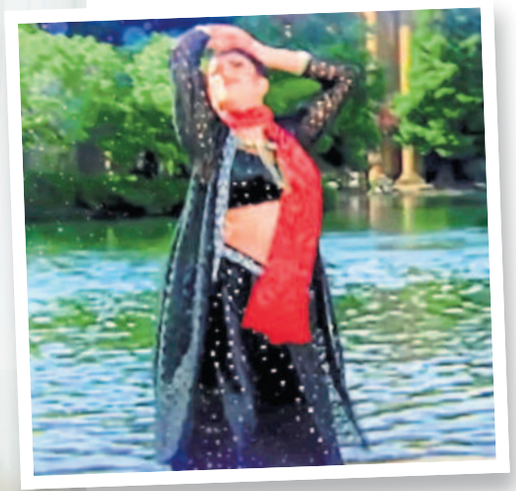
The two/two-and-a-half metre length of cloth immortalised in songs like *Hawa Mein Udtaa Jaaye Mora Laal Dupatta Malmal Ka* (*Barsaat*; 1949), *Chunari Chunari* (*Biwi No.1*; 1999), and *Chuni Meri Rang De* (*Ikky and Karan Aujla*; 2023), has been fading from our wardrobe for some years.

It once completed the traditional *salwar-kameez* look, then became trendy with jeans and *kurtas*. Once modern silhouettes and casualwear options entered wardrobes, the *dupatta* became an extra that doesn't quite fit into daily life.

Its old functions—as a sun-shield, a head covering, or a Do Not Disturb sign during a flight—no longer makes sense. And so, the *dupatta* has become restricted to occasionwear.

"It's slowly disappearing in occasionwear too," says couturier Sandeep Khosla of the brand Abu Jani Sandeep.

"If you look beyond the bridal *lehnga*, the *dupatta* has been replaced by a cape, a long train, or the structure of the *kurta* has been changed to suit the demands of today. The young especially don't want it," he says.



(clockwise, from above) A still from the song 'Chunari Chunari'; a Bodice dress with an attached 'dupatta'; a double bridal 'dupatta' by Neeta Lulla; and Huma Qureshi in an Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla 'anarkali'.

JUST A PROP

Mumbai-based college student Anaya Shroff certainly doesn't like the idea of a *dupatta* flowing over the shoulders, billowing gently—an idea often romanticised in Bollywood films as a show of femininity.

"I style it like a bandana, a belt, or a corset when I'm in mood for some traditional, boho-Indian vibe. Even during weddings, I am not a big fan of them," she says.

Of the 10 brides that come to designer Neeta Lulla in a week, half ask for a *dupatta*. Lulla, famous for her double bridal *dupatta* that offers more trail to the bride's outfit, has worked as a costume designer for over 400 films, including *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) in which Aishwarya Rai Bachchan wore a 52-inch net *dupatta*, and *Life in a... Metro* (2007), where Shilpa Shetty wore *dupattas* with long skirts and T-shirts for a boho look.

"The *dupatta* has become more like a prop or a decorative item now," says Lulla, who doesn't wear a *dupatta*, not even as part of her occasionwear. "It can't die, though, since it's part of our history and culture, but yes, it's become more like a decorative item now."

She notes that the shift is class-specific: "The middle class still regularly wears the *dupatta*; it's among the upper middle class and beyond that you see the *dupatta* has faded away."

MADE FOR TODAY

The reason for the missing *dupatta* isn't just about a change in fashion trends. "The *dupatta* has long been a symbol of modesty, but the fact that women are choosing not to wear it as much shows how self- and body-confident we've become," says Madhu Neotia, the founder of The India Story, a platform that supports homegrown designers. A decade ago, Neotia would regularly wear a *dupatta*. "I used to carry a spare *dupatta*, which I would wear to an event in the evening; it would instantly change my look and mood. Now I don't wear them at all. Of course, the cuts of *kurtas* have become so flattering and comfortable that I don't feel the need for it, but I have also become more okay with the idea of not having something on my shoulders as a protective shield."

A NEW SPIN

To ascertain whether a certain style or a silhouette is still popular, it always helps to turn towards the world of Bollywood.

During the Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations in Mumbai earlier this month, actor Deepika Padukone was seen at a temple in an *anarkali*-style *kurta-churidar* ensemble, minus the *dupatta*. A week ago, actor Huma Qureshi was at the Toronto International Film Festival in an Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla puff-shouldered *anarkali*, also without a *dupatta*.

"*Anarkali* suits always come with a *dupatta*, but the fact that you're seeing them without one on the red carpet tells a lot," says Khosla. "May be the *dupatta* will make a comeback like it always happens in fashion. Who knows?"

For now, designers are certainly experimenting with the idea of *dupatta*, trying to make it work for the modern wearer.

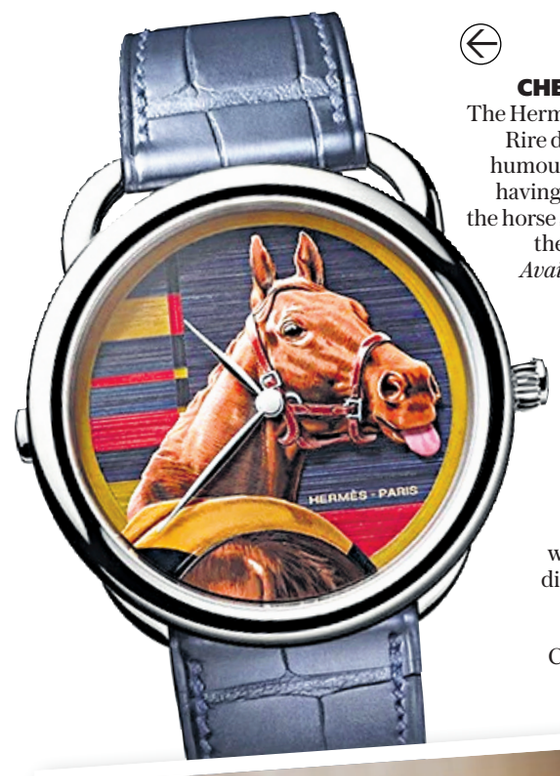
Ruchika Sachdev, founder and creative director of contemporary label Bodice, recently created a blue dress that comes attached with a matching *dupatta*-like scarf covering the shoulders.

"The *dupatta* has evolved into different shapes and forms since its practical aspect is discouraging women to wear it on a regular basis," says Sachdev, who personally finds the *dupatta* more manageable than a sari. "There are a lot of *dupatta*-inspired scarves nowadays, which point towards a transformation that's more relevant for this day and age."

To keep any fashion tradition alive and relevant, it's important for it to evolve with the times. But then what do you do with the piles of beautiful *dupattas* lying in your closet?

Dial it up: Pretty little chunky things

Watches with dials that are a work of art, perfect for everyday wear and the festive season



CHEEKY TIME-KEEPER
The Hermes Arceau Rocabar de Rire dial comes with a sense humour. Hand-engraved and having horsehair marquetry, the horse sticks out its tongue at the push of a tiny button. *Available in stores, price on request.*

SILKY SMOOTH
Maison Celadon's Celestial Silk dress watch has a Suzhou silk dial, hand-embroidered with silk threads by craftswomen in China. *Available online, price on request.*

ARTY WRISTWORK
Carry maximalism on your wrist with Hublot Big Bang One Click Marc Ferrero. Its dial is based on the famous *Lipstick* painting by contemporary artist Ferrero. *Available in stores, price on request.*

SHADES OF SEA
The Ressence Type 8 dial design is simple yet complex. The timepiece uses indigo-dyed silk threads to cover the dial in a spiral pattern, creating a range of shades, from electric blue to almost-black. *Available online, ₹28 lakh.*

FREE FORM
The Piaget Hidden Treasures Cuff is a nod to evocative designs, with its half-hidden dial design. *Available in stores, price on request.*

SET IN STONE
Designed in the 1980s, the Panthère de Cartier watch dial uses techniques like enamelling and stone-setting to draw the movements of a panther, the brand's emblematic animal. *Available in stores, ₹17.30 lakh.*

Compiled by Pooja Singh

Giving monkeys a shot at living in the wild

A rehabilitation project in Maharashtra is giving orphaned or abandoned monkeys a chance to live freely in the wild

Riddhi Doshi

ISTOCKPHOTO

RIDDHI DOSHI

(clockwise, from above) Bonnet macaque in the wild; enclosures at RAWW's facility; and Shoora and Veera being fostered by Sanskriti Baptista Poojary, a volunteer with RAWW.

They found Veera, just a few hours old, tucked between her dead mother's breasts, the umbilical cord still attached to the newborn. The mother had shielded her baby until her last breath. Shoora's exhausted mother, on the other hand, abandoned him as soon as he was born. Shoora and Veera were found in the suburbs of Mumbai that sit on the fringes of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park.

These tiny bonnet macaques wouldn't survive without their mothers or their troops. Their rescuers were sure of that. Who would nurture them or teach them to find food or fight rivals for territory?

Bonnet macaques are social animals and best survive in the troops into which they are born, formed by related females. A few males usually find another tribe, but only after they mature. Every monkey has a role in the group. A few nurture the young, some protect them from harm. There is also a leader who keeps everyone in check. The structure ensures security.

Monkeys born in cities or its fringes, like Shoora and Veera, also have to deal with urban stressors—dog bites, electrocution and death by consuming food not meant for them. The danger of being taken captive by a *madari* (animal trainer), tied up and beaten for the rest of their lives is real too.

Even if none of this happened to Shoora and Veera, they, like hundreds of other monkeys across the country, would likely spend a lifetime in captivity in state-run animal orphanages or zoos. But Shoora and Veera's fate might turn out to be different. They will get a real shot at living in the wild due to the efforts of their rescuers from the Mumbai-based not-for-profit organisation Resqink Association for Wildlife Welfare, or RAWW.

The organisation, founded in 2013, has been rewilding bonnet macaques (*Macaca radiate*), rhesus macaques (*Macaca mulatta*) and grey langurs (*Semnopithecus*) since 2019. The organisation works with the local administration and the state forest department of Maharashtra, also taking in animals and insects, including monkeys, rescued by the department's officers.

Their work involves rescuing, rehabilitating and then systematically regrouping orphaned, abandoned single monkeys from around Maharashtra. Once these monkeys establish a troop, they are released in the wild in areas that are conducive to their survival. They are then monitored for a few days to check how they are coping in the new environment, explains Pawan Sharma, founder and president of RAWW.

Thus far, the group of 60 volunteers has rewilded about 30 monkeys in Maharashtra. The entire process takes a year or more. It also involves extensive behavioural studies, regular health check-ups, nutrition plans, a few trials and errors and an army of people who must raise the monkeys, bring them up like their own, and then nudge the animals away so to live their lives back in the wild.

It starts with rescue. RAWW's team has had to rescue monkeys from *madaris*, homes, buildings, forests. Some of the monkeys don't make it.

"Monkeys who have been electrocuted and suffered dog bites or those who have spent years in captivity and are malnourished have lower chances of surviving despite our efforts," says Ritu Sharma, an animal rehabilitator with RAWW.

Shoora and Veera were rescued soon after they were born and taken to a veterinarian. "When they came to me, they were terrified. Veera couldn't even regulate her body temperature," says Priti Sathe, a veterinarian, who checks RAWW's patients for free; but medicines and surgeries have to be paid for. The two did not have infections or serious injuries. Sathe recommended a human infant diet and care.

The process of rewilding includes extensive behavioural studies, regular health check-ups, nutrition plans, and an army of people who must raise the monkeys

So, Shoora and Veera went to RAWW volunteer Sanskriti Baptista Poojary's Andheri home to live with the businesswoman, her husband and parents. Poojary, 31, is among four monkey fosters that the organisation currently has. Poojary has been fostering birds and insects since she was in school. It's the first time she is taking care of monkeys after being trained in the same by the NGO's experts.

"They are just like human babies. They need warmth, love and lots of attention," says Poojary. "They are all over my house, climbing things, jumping over furniture, trying to open the refrigerator and opening bags and purses."

Shoora and Veera are now six months and three-and-a-half-months old, respectively. Poojary never calls them by their given names. The names are only for their human team for reference, explains Pawan Sharma. "We don't want the monkeys to associate with any word or name, as that's not how it happens in the wild."

The monkeys will be emotionally and physically fit to leave Poojary's home by the second week of October. They will be taken to RAWW's centre in Badlapur, on the outskirts of Mumbai, to be quarantined for a few days. Once they are familiar with the place, they will be moved to small cages. A few days after, the cages will be moved into a larger enclosure, which currently has four to five other monkeys. Three are about six months old.

The RAWW team hopes that the five will accept Shoora and Veera into their troop as well. "Only when the older monkeys start interacting with them and are amicable towards them will we let them out of the cage, minimising the chances of fights and injuries," says Pawan Sharma.

Once in the big enclosure, Shoora and Veera will start getting ready for the real world. Their human caretakers will hide their food, which they must find. Once in a while, they will not be given any food in order to teach them how to survive on leaves and even bugs.

"These exercises are important to build instincts to survive the wild," says Ritu Sharma. These exercises will also help them establish a social hierarchy, interact with each other and form a troop, which is the ultimate goal. After spending a year in the enclosure, exposed to different seasons, the monkeys will be released in the wild. The group will be released in an area where there is no or limited threat of predators or rival gangs, yet with an ecosystem that's conducive for their survival.

Soham Mukherjee, a wildlife specialist, has his doubts about the rewilding efforts. "I am not too sure if hand-raised monkeys can ever survive in the wild," he says. "Also, releasing them in the wild could also add to the man-animal conflict in that area, especially because these monkeys are a lot more comfortable with humans," he adds.

Pawan Sharma admits that these monkeys' survival instincts and skills may not be as strong as those who were raised in the wild, but it's good enough to live in a carefully chosen landscape. In India, one is legally not allowed to place trackers on monkeys. So, there is no scientific method of tracking their survival. But RAWW usually creates a network of local volunteers who track the monkeys in the areas they are released in. The Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Assam is another organisation that re-wilds rescued monkeys. "Animals are more resilient and adaptable than we know. They do adjust to their new surroundings and strive to live," says Pawan Sharma.

Baiju Raj, head of conservation at conservation non-profit Wildlife SOS seconds Pawan Sharma. "I have known of a female rhesus macaque adopting orphans and raising them as her own, and I have also seen these primates learn to co-exist with one another," says Raj.

Having said that, the post-rewilding monitoring process is limited. "They are not revered in the way tigers or lions are in the world of wildlife conservation. The funds are limited, the efforts huge and there is hardly any recognition. But hardly anyone is advocating for them and thinking about their lives. So we are," says Ritu Sharma.

Aunil Limaye, former chief wildlife warden with Maharashtra's forest department lauds RAWW's efforts. "This project not just helps the monkeys but also mitigates the man-monkey conflict in the cities, and helps reduce forest department's workload," he says.

Riddhi Doshi is Mumbai-based art, culture, travel and lifestyle writer.

The healing power of writing retreats

People are signing up for writing retreats, and seeking healing through the old-fashioned pen-to-paper techniques

Abhilasha Ojha

ISTOCKPHOTO

Writing helps in the process of healing; and (above) Bhavna Kher's Writing Retreat held at Woods at Sasan.

Two months ago, I was in a therapist's room, finding it tough to cope with a challenging time—the death of my mother, the unfortunate loss of another significant relationship and moving to a new house with my eight-year-old daughter. Handing me a pen and some blank pages, my therapist urged me to write a letter to my mother. "After that," my therapist added, "Write a letter to yourself in your mother's voice."

This "letter-response therapy" became a cathartic exercise, reminding me of a similar writing exercise I'd done three-and-a-half years ago at Creativegarh Retreats, a five-day programme to help people rediscover themselves, mainly through writing therapies.

In the beautiful environs of Kasauli's Meadow on the Ridge, a colonial bungalow with expansive views, various pen-to-paper techniques worked, even for those who considered themselves non-writers. A "Time Travel" exercise encouraged participants to write about the voices that shamed us and shaped us; memoir exercises allowed us to unlock our earliest memories; a "mapping" exercise let us assess various areas of our life—spiritual, health, relationships, social, professional, self-care, among others.

A strong desire for both experiential and solo travel, finding a safe, non-judgmental community, and discovering oneself through writing are among the reasons why writing-specific retreats are gaining popularity. There are various studies and reports, including a 2024 one by Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, which say writing is known to improve cognitive abilities and memory and lower stress levels. People are increasingly turning to writing as a tool for self-help. Luxury retreats and hotels are tying up with writing experts to create holistic workshops and retreats.

Bhavna Kher, former advertising professional, screenwriter, and creative writing expert, is conducting her second Writing Retreat from 2-6 October, at Woods at Sasan near Gir National Park. According to Kher, the landscape of the property is conducive to immersive writing sessions that focus on emotional healing and holistic well-being.

Kher turned to writing when she was at a crossroads almost a decade ago after a career in advertising. Kher, who later became a screenwriter for the Netflix series *Dabba Cartel*, initially went through a "full-blown identity crisis" when she realised that she didn't have a clear roadmap. She started jotting down her thoughts in a notebook that would eventually become "a support system like no other". That notebook became a reservoir of self-curated writing techniques. Initially she started guiding some of her friends and family through techniques that had benefitted her personally. Gradually she started getting enquiries to create workshops. It finally came to fruition last year as a writing retreat.

Kher clarifies that she's not a certified therapist, but considers writing an effective tool for wellness. "With over two decades of professional writing, I have used writing for personal healing and along the way gone deeper into the subject. Now I am bringing my own structure and system to help others," says Kher.

According to Delhi-based lawyer Tanisha Samanta, who attended Kher's retreat last year, over the course of four-five days, she began to unravel many of her hidden feelings and articulate them. "In my hectic profession, I don't get the time to think. Doing a retreat specifically focused on writing allowed me to get closure on some very personal matters," says Samanta.

Shabnam Samuel says writing digs through the emotions to excavate one's authentic voice. For the last 10 years, Samuel has been leading an annual eight-day writers' retreat in Panchgani, Maharashtra, in the Sanjeewan Vidyalaya boarding school.

While the retreat's focus is creative writing, including fiction, non-fiction, screenwriting and poetry for budding authors, over time it has attracted people, including repeat participants, who return to it from a perspective of enjoying the meditative aspect of writing.

Given the increasing number of enquiries, by next year, she plans to host a separate "writing as wellness" course. "I will be building a course on writing as 'therapy' in consultation with certified counsellors," she says. Samuel's memoir, *A Fractured Life* (2018), which talked about her life as an abandoned child and her difficult marriage, came about as a result of letter writing to herself, a "therapeutic exercise" which she's done for decades.

Her workshop is focused on creative writing but has ample exercises that allow participants to have personal breakthroughs as they dig into their own past and allow their stories to be written.

Himalayan Writing Retreat in village Satkhol in Uttarakhand is hosting "Healing and Self-Growth through Writing" workshop in November, designed by Vandita Dubey, the retreat's co-founder and a clinical psychologist from Illinois School of Professional Psychology.

Former journalist, screenwriter, lyricist and film director, Anu Singh Choudhary, who had facilitated a screenwriting seminar in Himalayan Writing Retreat roughly two years ago, says: "The therapeutic aspect of writing is obvious; in the workshop I'd conducted, the first exercise was to let go of whatever was stopping the participants from believing in themselves, thereafter becoming that pipeline which could lead to a flow of ideas in an organic manner."

Most of these retreats limit participation—between 7-15 participants—and they run for 4-14 days. The cost is typically in the range of ₹75,000 to a little over ₹1 lakh. This includes accommodation, meals, experiences, therapies and one-on-one sessions with the mentors. The retreats draw a mix of people—lawyers, storytellers, government officials, IT professionals, besides journalists, poets and budding authors. The age group, too, is varied, between 20-70.

Bengaluru-based neuro psychiatrist Ooha Sushmita, while acknowledging the benefits of writing as part of counselling, issues a warning. According to her, when there are underlying issues of clinical depression, complex trauma issues, nothing should be quick-fix. "The root cause has to be understood in totality, it's not enough to put just a Band-Aid on what's a deep-seated mental issue," says Sushmita. In her view, the amount of regulation in self-help is not much, and due diligence must be done to understand that a wellness retreat can't always fix more deeply entrenched mental issues.

Natasha Badhwar, author, filmmaker, and writing coach, who conducts creative writing workshops and teaches memoir writing as a course at Ashoka University, Haryana, recently held a workshop on leadership and selfhood. She engaged participants in various exercises to help them overcome obstacles and showcase their leadership skills. This was achieved through writing prompts that encouraged changing the narrative or script of one's life, writing to understand one's life stories more from an affirmative standpoint.

Badhwar, who plans to roll out writing workshops in collaboration with certified narrative therapists by next year, says, "Writing lives in our bodies like walking or dancing. It's a natural expression, much like drawing. It's part of our essential humanity."

Now, who could disagree with that?

Abhilasha Ojha is a Delhi-based art and culture writer.

Viewing Delhi's past through a human lens

DAG's 'Sair-e-Dilli', looks at the lived experiences of Delhi's inhabitants between the 19th and 20th centuries

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Is there any one "Delhi"? It is a question that *Sair-e-Dilli*, a new publication by DAG, seeks to answer. Through diverse visual representations of the city in the form of maps, paintings, photographs and illustrations spanning 19-20th centuries, the book looks at how cities shifted shape as empires rose and fell, and centres of power moved to newer locations, thus expanding the breadth and scale of Delhi. "The many historic cities of Delhi were not built on top of the other—like those of Rome or Istanbul—but laid out side by side on Delhi's more expansive plain; and as each fell into decay, they created a sort of open-air archaeological park," writes Ashish Anand, CEO and managing director, DAG, in a note in the book, which was published as a companion to the recently concluded exhibition of the same name in the Capital.

Sair-e-Dilli, edited by historian Swapna Liddle, features essays by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, chancellor and professor of history at Ashoka University, Haryana, and A.G. Krishna Menon, an architect, urban planner and conservation consultant. For Liddle, it was important that the publication looked beyond a Western construct of Delhi's history, which focused more on the chronology of its historic "seven cities" and their architecture, rather than on the sociocultural milieu at the time.

As Menon writes in his essay, *Preserving Delhi's Past and Drafting its Future*, "At one level, the prints, paintings and photographs draw attention to some of the familiar tropes of Orientalism that the foreign gaze signified in the representation of the modern cultural landscape of India, but at another, it signals the elision of the local gaze, which is seldom foregrounded." He asserts that the significance of this local gaze has seldom been interrogated by contemporary architects, urban planners and conservation professionals as a polemic issue. Today, it is civil society that is more aware of the importance of viewing local heritage beyond the colonial viewpoint. And that is evident in the kind of walks and talks that have been taking place across Delhi. And that's where this book plays a role too in spotlighting local cultural histories.

Though Delhi has a very long and layered history, with the Tomar dynasty establishing its seat of power in the 11th century, the city's visual record—in terms of depiction of built spaces—dates largely from the late 18th century onwards. According to Liddle, the 19th century thus becomes a fascinating period in this sort of representation, through paintings, prints and photographs. "This coincides with some important writings on these historic places by Indian as well as colonial writers. It is therefore a rewarding and instructive exercise to study this period to see how different artists and writers were viewing the city, at the same time as these visual representations were being created," she says.

In the works of colonial administrators and historians such as Alexander Cunningham, who was appointed by the Government of India in 1862 to study historical remains from Delhi to Bihar, these historic sites were merely ruins or monuments, a way of understanding the past, but with limited relevance to the present. But when Liddle read Indian writings of the 18th-19th centuries, she realised that Indians saw these places as living sites, which had their histories, but were also a part of the present, for instance, as places associated with social and cultural beliefs and practices.

Take, the four-volume *Asar-us-Sanadid*, published in 1847 and written by Syed Ahmad Khan, a judicial officer in the East India Company's government. He too, like Cunningham, was a member of the Archaeological Society, but in his works, he focused on the culture of contemporary Shahjahanabad. He added nuggets from his own interactions to his writings, highlighting people that inhabited different sites of the city, be it Miyan Ghulam Nur, the *khadim* of the *dargah* of Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, or accounts of his visit to Kalkaji temple in Bahapur.

The publication shows the changes that took place in the city, especially post the first war of independence of 1857 and after the capital was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912, and the subsequent building of New Delhi. In the early photographs, there are visible changes in the landscape of Shahjahanabad in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt, with demolition of buildings, new construction in Chandni Chowk and the erasure of a canal that had once flowed through the city.

"Most visual representations of the city's historic monuments and sites seen here happened under the influence of colonial rule, and followed conventions that were influenced by the colonial lens. Hence we frequently see picturesque idealisation, or the emphasising of the architectural at the expense of the human element," says Liddle.

(from top) Delhi artist (Company school), 'Naqsha-i-Lahori Darwaza, Quila Mubarak (Lahori Gate, Red Fort)'; William Carpenter, 'Delhi. A Street at back of Jumma Masjid', 1857; and V.B. Pathare, 'Indraprastha, Delhi', 1950.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY DAG

> For colonial historians, ruins were merely a way to understand the past. But Indians see these places as living sites, which are also a part of the present

The challenge was, given the limitations of this visual record, how to illustrate accounts of Indians in the 19th century, such as Syed Ahmad Khan, which went against colonial understandings of historic cities as only remnants of the past. "...they are there if we look closely—the mundane activities on a rooftop terrace outside the northern gate of Jama Masjid as seen in a Company painting, or the homes of the village of Indarpat within the Purana Qila in a photo by an unknown photographer," she elaborates.

The visual material also sheds light on what the city's landscape could have been. For instance, in a map of New Delhi, you can see some important features marked, which were not ultimately built. One of these included an enclave for higher education planned between Ferozshah Road and Connaught Place.

"In the 1910s, it was thought that colleges would be located here, so we see 'Great College Street' and 'University Square', as well as plots for individual institutions marked on it. But politics overtook town planning," says Liddle.

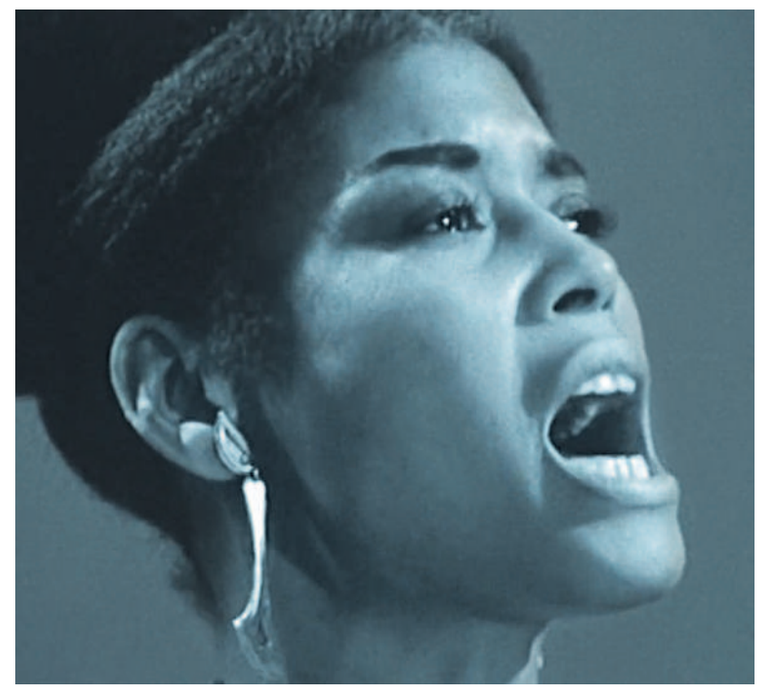
Student agitations against British rule made administrators change their mind in favour of a university campus at a safe distance from the new capital city. Many such details in several maps highlight how such political conditions impacted the development of the city.

"By bringing this rich collection of visual records into the public eye, it invites all of those who are interested in Delhi's heritage to explore the history of these sites through these materials. It also encourages us to go back and rethink our own engagements with the sites, which are in fact living spaces in our own time," she says.

'Sair-e-Dilli' is available at DAG galleries in Delhi and Mumbai, and on the website.

Weaponising blue notes in DR Congo

'Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat' is a bracing political documentary about Lumumba's assassination



Abbey Lincoln performs on Belgian TV.

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In December 1960, jazz drummer Max Roach released *We Insist!* The album's five tracks were inspired by the Civil Rights movement in the US and the burgeoning freedom struggles in African colonies. Singer Abbey Lincoln is featured on all the tracks, most memorably on *Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace*, where her wordless vocals are a visceral protest of historic and ongoing racism. Roach and Lincoln performed the album on Belgian TV in 1964 (you can see it on YouTube). In a grim coincidence, there's a genocide ongoing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) at the time, backed by Belgium.

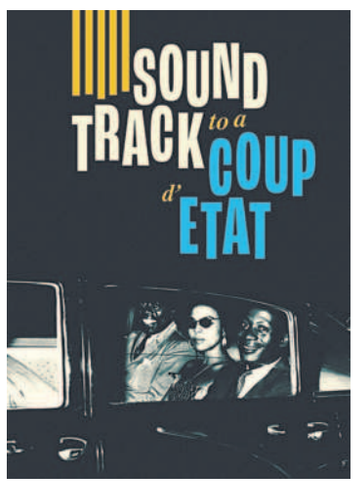
Roach and Lincoln's performance is at the heart of the conflicts powering *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*. Johan Grimonprez's 2024 documentary looks at the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of DRC, in 1961, just months after their independence from Belgium. This was a Katangan operation, with Belgium pulling the strings and the CIA assisting (with the approval of US President D. Eisenhower). It sparked furious protests in several countries, including the US, where 60 Black activists crashed a UN Security Council meeting. Among the protestors were Roach and Lincoln.

WORLD VIEW

A look at what's making waves on the global cinema scene

These are just a few of the cross-currents in Grimonprez's dense, exciting film. Instead of trying to straighten out the historical material—as most fiction films tend to do now—the Belgian director lets the events and personalities rub together and generate sparks. Lumumba is a focal point but there's so much more going on: the United Nations as a staging ground for Cold War powerplays; the CIA as an agent of chaos; the violent last days of colonialism; the brief heydey of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Underpinning it all is jazz, a movement then at its most innovative and politically charged. After World War II, American stars like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington were sent as emissaries to thaw or cement relations with other countries. "America's secret weapon is a blue note in a minor key," a 1955 *New York Times* headline read. This wasn't lost on the musicians. Quincy Jones, then Gillespie's arranger, complained, "We were the black kamikaze band, sent to every problem post."



Few posts were more problem-ridden than DR Congo ("If Africa is shaped like a revolver, then Congo is the trigger," Frantz Fanon wrote). Lumumba had fought to wrest his country's independence the year before. The Belgians quickly installed a proxy government in the state of Katanga, retaining control over the mines there, which provided the US with uranium to build atomic bombs. They knew, though, that Lumumba had to be removed. The US, too, was wary of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's support for Lumumba. Louis Armstrong was sent to DR Congo—he later felt he was a decoy—at the same time teams arrived to take care of Lumumba.

Nearly all the interviews and footage in *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* are archival. But Grimonprez generates electricity from material's placement and juxtaposition. These layers and rhymes have satirical bite; when Khrushchev talks about monopolies whose "strings extend from Brussels to the major Nato capitals", his speech is intercut with a mixed-race audience of children watching a hand-puppet show. The dense sprawl is reminiscent of the acidic work of documentarist Adam Curtis, though Grimonprez, unlike his English counterpart, balances the sourness by allowing for the saving grace of art.

"Rhythm is my business," Dizzy declares at one point. The same polyrhythms that drive jazz provide this film its skittering, energetic style. Even with the soundtrack muted, you can tell from the cutting and the cascading images what music is playing (Grimonprez also borrows the visual aesthetic of classic album artwork). The score is almost wall-to-wall: tracks by John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Eric Dolphy, Nina Simone. Given jazz's debt to Africa, it's a politically apt choice for this film: a complex matrix of influence and inspiration. There's rhythm even in the rare moments when the soundtrack is silent. As writer In Koli Jean Bofane reads excerpts from his book *Congo Inc*, his hand draws elegant patterns in the air, in time with some unheard music.

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat is an elegy for a more hopeful era of global politics, when nations across Asia and Africa freed themselves from colonial rule. But one only has to look at DR Congo since the 1960s, rarely untroubled by conflict, to know that some wounds don't heal easily. The idealism of the Non-Aligned Movement as shown in the film looks almost quixotic now. The crisis in Palestine today shows how little can be changed if the US doesn't wish it so, and how hollow the UN is in times like these. Grimonprez reaches the same conclusion in his film, placing the blame on the Belgians and the US but also on the UN, under whose protection Lumumba was supposed to be.

One of my favourite passages involves the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Belgian surrealist René Magritte says, in reference to his painting *The Treachery of Images*, "The image of a pipe is not a pipe", followed by a clip of then CIA director Allen Dulles smoking *his* pipe. We then hear the voice of William Burden, founder of MoMa, stakeholder in Katanga's mines and US ambassador to Brussels: "Lumumba was such a damn nuisance. It was obvious the way to get rid of him was through political assassination." Like a Thelonious Monk solo, what seem like tangents in *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* are actually connections waiting to be made.

Life's little tragedies, comedies and ironies

Hindi journalist Anil Yadav's short fiction in translation throws light on corruption, hypocrisy and everyday absurdities in Varanasi, and beyond

Aditya Mani Jha

The titular novella is a masterful three-dimensional portrayal set in Varanasi. ISTOCKPHOTO

If you're Indian, you are in all likelihood familiar with the concept of double lives hidden in plain sight. Due to the entrenchment of sociopolitical orthodoxies, people resort to the most comically transparent ruses. Your mother uses separate utensils for certain guests because she's organised and fastidious. The lads from the *mohalla* are definitely not drinking away the *chanda* (donations) they collected for Durga Puja. And your widower uncle is simply a "well-wisher", wink-wink, of the woman he visits like clockwork on weekend evenings. We Indians don't need narrative crutches like Santa Claus or storks dropping babies off—right from birth, we operate in far more sophisticated realms of hypocrisy and cultivated delusion.

The titular novella in Hindi journalist and writer Anil Yadav's collection *Courtesans don't Read Newspapers*, titled *Nagarvadhuyen Akhbar Nahi Padhtin*, translated into English by Vaibhav Sharma, is a masterful, three-dimensional portrayal of one such realm. The setting in question is Varanasi, where a famously crooked cop named Ramashankar Tripathi is trying to sanitise his public image by driving the city's sex workers out of Manduadih, the neighbourhood they've inhabited for several decades. Tripathi, widely believed to have killed his socialite wife Lovely years ago, is aided and abetted by a nexus of local politicians, real estate developers and compliant journalists skilled in the art of propaganda (especially of the religious persuasion).

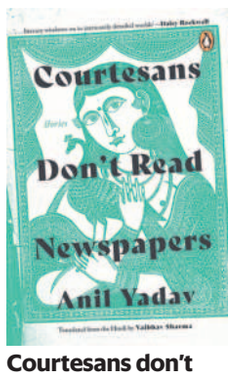
To heighten the irony and the poignancy of the situation, Yadav narrates the action through a pair of young lovers, photo-journalist Prakash and his girlfriend Chavi, who runs a beauty parlour. Their names are indicative of their respective narrative-symbolic purposes—*chavi* literally means "image" and that's precisely what Chavi does for a living, concealing the bruises and black eyes of battered wives (like the late Lovely) and protecting the images of their husbands. *Prakash* means light, and for much of the story, Prakash tries and fails to shine a light on the corruption around Manduadih, or Ramashankar Tripathi's role in his late wife's death. Even when he does manage to collect evidence for both scoops, the newspaper's corporate owners shut him down rapidly—turns out their business interests are intertwined with the real estate serpents looking for a quick land-grab in Manduadih.

Yadav's ironic nomenclature of characters is stretched to the limit with "C. Antaratma", Prakash's skinflint senior colleague who is revealed to be super-corrupt, willing to support any degree of fabrication for the right price (*antaratma* is the Hindi word for conscience).

Yadav repeatedly comes up with emotionally devastating one-liners, especially sentences offering oblique, omniscient commentary on the events unfolding before the reader's eyes. Sometimes, these lines are laugh-out-loud funny despite the deadly seriousness of the situation. For example, Yadav does not flat-out tell us that a lot of the people currently condemning sex workers were, in fact, their regular customers until last month. Instead, he writes, "The old accountant at the police station stopped dyeing his hair." It's well-executed minimalism.

The novella takes up about half of this 200-page collection; the other half is divided up between five short stories. *The Magic of Certain Old Clothes* is a wicked post-mortem of a romance that unravels because of an unlikely tipping point—a visit to a second-hand clothes market that ends up betraying the couple's divergent attitudes towards class and etiquette. *The Road to the Other World* is a slender, nostalgia-soaked eight-page missive about gender dynamics told through the eyes of a man reminiscing about his childhood, especially his late maternal aunt who suffered from tuberculosis.

Lord Almighty, Grant Us Riots! is a biting satire on the plight of Mominpura, a ghettoised Muslim neighbourhood in Varanasi, where the government is invisible—until, of course, there are communal riots. *RJ Saheb's Radio*, which concludes the collection, is an experimental tale written in a markedly different register from the others, leaning into an almost magical-realist style to depict the middle-aged male protagonist Ratanjot's Proustian reveries about his childhood.



Courtesans don't Read Newspapers: *By Anil Yadav, translated by Vaibhav Sharma, Penguin Random House India, 224 pages, ₹299.*

Impressive as these short stories are, the one that really stayed with me was *The Folk Singer's Swan Song*, an indictment of the way in which indigenous artistic traditions are co-opted, commercialised and cynically deployed to shore up petty electoral math and ensure the unencumbered march of Big Capital. At 35 pages, it is the second-longest entry after the titular novella, and it's clear that Yadav rolled out his full array of narrative and rhetoric techniques for this one.

The protagonist Janam is a talented *birha* singer—*birha* is a folk music tradition popular among Bhojpuri and Awadhi speakers. Structurally, a *birha* is always a song about missing the beloved. But *birha* singers use newspaper headlines, popular sayings, and so on to comment on current affairs and socio-political injustices while staying within the formal constraints of the medium.

The inception of Janam's art, his development as an artist, and the eventual corruption of his soul, are all depicted with compassion and pathos, without once resorting to saccharine. *The Folk Singer's Swan Song* is perhaps the only "pure" tragedy in a collection where tragicomedy is the norm, and for that reason it stands out.

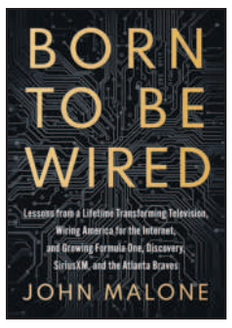
For the most part, Vaibhav Sharma's translation is elegant and acutely aware of the subtleties of Yadav's language. In the original titular novella, Yadav uses several different Hindi words and phrases to describe sex workers, and in each case, the choice is quite deliberate, intended to highlight hypocrisies in a contextual, quicksilver manner. Sharma, too, keeps pace with this demanding linguistic game, rolling out "prostitute", "sex worker", "courtesan" et al as and when required. In a cheeky bit of translator-polemic, Sharma also chooses to italicise the English versions of folk songs and leave the originals in the regular font (it's usually the other way round).

These are all excellent signs for a translator still in his late 20s who has just finished his second full-length translation. However, Sharma's relative lack of experience does come through here and there. In *The Folk Singer's Swan Song*, Sharma trusts his readers enough to leave *bathua* (a kind of winter-growing leafy green plant used to make *saag*) as is, untranslated. And yet, in the titular novella, *arhar* and *chana* (kinds of pulses) are rendered as "black gram" and "pigeon pea", respectively. Mind you, this is a very small complaint because this kind of dissonance is (I have now come to accept) par for the course for not only translated Indian literature, but also Indian English-language fiction. On the first page of a recent, well-received English-language work of Indian queer fiction, Durga Puja is explained in a tortuous fashion ("the annual worship of the mother goddess over five days") while the phrase "*kalboishakhi* clouds" whizzes past uninterrogated.

Minor quibbles aside, *Courtesans don't Read Newspapers* is a hugely enjoyable collection, one that represents the best work of one of Hindi literature's most distinctive contemporary voices.

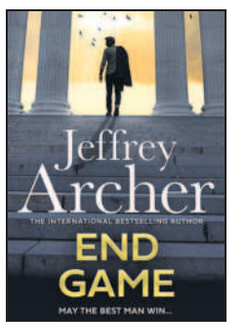
Aditya Mani Jha is a writer based in Delhi.

NEW ON SHELVES



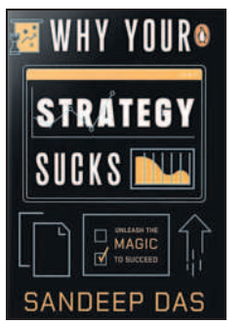
An alumnus of the famous Bell Labs, John Malone may not be a well-known name, but his contribution to the US entertainment industry is immense. Dubbed as the "cable cowboy" for his media deals and land ownership, he is responsible for launching some of the first cable networks in the country and building an empire eventually. This is where he tells it all.

'Born to be Wired', by John Malone, Simon & Schuster, 432 pages, ₹899.



Jeffrey Archer's much-awaited finale to the William Warwick novels, the eighth in the series, is on pre-order. Set against the backdrop of the 2012 London Olympics, it has the eponymous hero, Commander William Warwick of Scotland Yard, engaged in a battle of brains and brawn against an assassin poised to create havoc by carrying out an international conspiracy.

'End Game', by Jeffrey Archer, HarperCollins India, 384 pages, ₹499.



In his new book, business expert Sandeep Das explores the art and science of creating good strategies, be it at work or in our lives. Drawing on his extensive experience as an executive coach, he brings a blend of storytelling, case study, easy-to-apply frameworks and actionable tools to help the reader make decisions that they won't regret, especially in a world where priorities keep shifting continuously.

'Why Your Strategy Sucks', by Sandeep Das, Penguin Random House, 284 pages, ₹399 .

The chief business officer of Atomberg, one of India's fastest-growing digital-first consumer brands, draws on learnings from his career to create a playbook for building and scaling new ideas. From finding product-market fit to distribution and customer acquisition, he outlines the challenges and pitfalls in granular detail.

'Zero to Scale: A Playbook to Build Consumer Brands in India', by Arindam Paul, Wyzer, 264 pages, ₹599.

Speculative fiction rooted in India, yet free

A new anthology of Indian speculative fiction showcases the breadth of the genre as it is practised today

Shrabonti Bagchi
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In his preface to the *The IF Anthology of New Indian SFF*, the first volume of a planned series of speculative fiction anthologies by Westland Books, editor Gautam Bhatia admits that while the process of putting this collection together was made as bias-free as possible with an open call for submissions and double-blind readings, his own leaning towards what he calls the "science fiction end of the SFFH (Science-fiction, Fantasy and Horror) spectrum" may have influenced the selection of stories.

Despite these protestations, the 11 stories in this volume are very different from one another, and most cannot be slotted neatly into any of the SFFH boxes, which is why, as Bhatia says, speculative fiction is a spectrum. Goodreads and the global SFF community might be a bit unhealthily obsessed with labelling—this is Climate Fiction, that is Hopepunk, something else is New Space Opera—but clearly, our homegrown speculative fiction writers are not interested in slotting themselves into these (mainly marketing-led) groupings.

The anthology begins with a story that, in my view, not only illustrates this clearly but is among the strongest of the selection. *The Last Projectionist* by Ajay Patri is a chilling—bordering on horror—story about an imagined practice involving people who could literally project their imaginings on to a screen. Unfolding in the form of disconnected voices giving their opinion on a proposed documentary film about the last known human to practise this skill, it invites the reader to piece the story together—an unflinching account of exploitation and retro-fitting the past into convenient narratives.

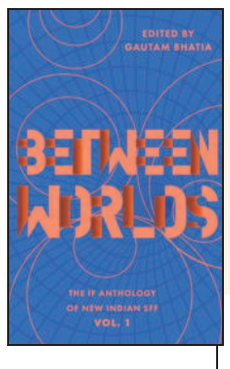
Like the protagonist of *Heartland* by Anushree Nande, who can move among other people's memories in search of her own origin story, speculative fiction too travels between the past, the present and the future. In *Muniyamma* by Prashanth Srivatsa, a woman—who is no longer quite flesh-and-blood human being, perhaps—remembers her past as she helps birth the future in a new world.

Climate anxiety suffuses the book—in *Tomorrow's Ancestors*, a descendant of a poet who survived the 2015 Chennai floods travels through time, pulled into the past through writing, even as she allows her ancestors to dream of a better future than the one of hard labour they currently lead.

Some of these stories are intimate tales of rebellion and connection. ISTOCKPHOTO

In Priyamvadha Shivaji's lyrical, abstract story *Sudden Showers*, the sea disappears even as a community of women seemingly alienated from the rest of the world strive to return home—it contained echoes, for me, of Anton Hur's *Towards Eternity*, a deeply philosophical epic saga spanning centuries in which a group of women soldiers search for their humanity.

It is inevitable that in an age of rapidly proliferating AI, questions about what it means to be human—is it biology, or something more ineffable?—would show up in a collection like this. They do so, in uniquely Indian ways. In Shobhita Narayan's *Of Holo Maa*, a woman in a post-apocalyptic far future carefully preserves her *kanjeevaram* and *kalamkari* saris, and is herself given a second life through technology we do not yet possess.



Between Worlds: The IF Anthology of New Indian SFF Vol 1: *Edited by Gautam Bhatia, Westland Books, 272 pages, ₹599.*

Some of these stories are intimate tales of rebellion and connection, while others are more epic and sweeping in scope. Most are, of necessity, bleak—we are not living through one of contemporary history's more hopeful eras and this is inevitably reflected in the stories these writers have chosen to tell. Dystopian futures and alternate universes have always fascinated SFF writers, even more so in the 21st century, when they have reached peak popularity.

We probably love fictional dystopias because they help us downplay, for a short while, the ones we are actually living through—at least we are not at the stage where we are sending our children to participate in killing games for entertainment, not yet, we tell ourselves. In this collection, *Dilli Circa 50 NE* by Shubham Mamgain imagines a near-future national Capital that is only a few steps ahead of the real-world city in being a place of constant danger, discomfort and censorship. It is a deeply political story, more effective for being written in a light, half-amused tone.

Westland's 'IF' imprint, of which this is the first title, is an attempt to bring together Indian speculative fiction writing. Going by the promise of this volume, it will be an exciting space to watch for new talent in the genre.

Together, the 11 stories in this collection display the depth and breadth—in terms of subject, tone and style—that speculative fiction writing in India has achieved. It has come a long way from the early SF of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and Rahul Sankrityayan's *Baeesveen Sadi*, but is close to them at the same time, remaining rooted and yet free.

The acquisition will give Jindal a foothold in the lucrative European market. PTI

German steel major bid a litmus test for Jindal scion

FROM PAGE 16

ces in Oman, which could serve as the feeders for low-emission steelmaking at Thyssenkrupp.

The group also plans to ship iron ore from Africa to Germany to be used at Thyssenkrupp's upcoming DRI furnace which is under construction. The acquisition will also give the group a foothold in the lucrative European market which throttles imports to protect its domestic steelmakers.

Jindal's acquisition bid for Thyssenkrupp comes at a time when the young scion's cousin, Parth Jindal, 35, has successfully led a major acquisition of AkzoNobel India as well as the public market listing of JSW Cement this year. His other cousin, Abhyuday Jindal, 34, has successfully scripted the turnaround of Jindal Stainless from near bankruptcy. He also leads the industry body, the Indian Chamber of Commerce, as its president.

The Jindal Steel Group did not respond to *Mint*'s request for a comment.

Venkatesh joined the family business around five years ago. Before that, he was a summer associate at Boston Consulting Group in 2017 and an investment banking summer analyst at Religare in 2016.

Jindal shuttles between London and New Delhi, where he has offices, and is being groomed by his father and senior group executives to succeed as the group's next leader, persons in the know said.

He looks after the group's private business overseas, including mines in Mozambique and Cameroon, a 3-million-tonnes-per-annum (mtpa) steel complex in Oman and a downstream steel processing plant in the Czech Republic, said two people in the know.

Venkatesh is also overseeing the development of a 5-mtpa direct reduced iron plant at Duqm in Oman. Scheduled to start in two phases from 2028, the furnaces will run on natural gas until green hydrogen is readily available. The plant is the outcome of a project during Jindal's MBA at Harvard.

During Venkatesh's time with the firm, Jindal Steel International acquired Czech Republic-based Vítkovice Steel in December for an undisclosed sum and a coal mine in Mozambique from Brazil's Vale in 2021 in a $270 million deal.

Interestingly, Venkatesh Jindal holds no formal position within the group companies. He serves as an advisor.

For an extended version of the story, visit livemint.com

Sun Pharma rejig sets stage for Shanghvi's succession

Dilip Shanghvi is now executive chairman, son Aalok to oversee critical US business

Jessica Jani
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MUMBAI

Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd, India's largest drugmaker, is steering itself onto a new course with sweeping leadership changes. Starting this month, Kirti Ganorkar, who headed its India business, assumed the role of managing director while promoter and founder Dilip Shanghvi transitioned to the role of executive chairman.

Shanghvi's son Aalok has been set on the leadership track, overseeing the pharma giant's most important market. Richard Ascroft, ex-Takeda Pharmaceuticals executive appointed to run its North America business in June, reports to the junior Shanghvi, who is now chief operating officer.

Ascroft succeeded long-standing company executive Abhay Gandhi, who left the company in June. Sun Pharma also appointed Jayashree Satagopan as chief financial officer designate to succeed C.S. Muralidharan starting 1 July.

The drugmaker has previously brought in professional leadership from outside—it appointed ex-Teva Pharmaceuticals head Israel Makov as chairman in 2012—and shuffled senior management. In 2017, Abhay Gandhi, who then headed the India and subcontinent business, took over as North America chief executive from Kal Sundaram, who took on the role of chief executive officer (CEO), India and emerging markets.

However, the current churn involves its globally critical functions, including the India business, the US, and its long-term speciality focus.

"...it's not unprecedented for Sun Pharma to have leadership change or bring outsiders in, but this scale and the coordination across functions suggest a more decisive phase of evolution," independent pharma analyst Salil Kallianpur told *Mint*. Over the last few years, with generic price erosion and recent policy uncertainties in the US, the company has sharpened its focus on bolstering its global innovative drug pipeline. It has indicated that the top-deck changes are part of a "structured and forward-looking succession planning process".

With succession transitions, timing is everything, said a pharma analyst at a brokerage. "Sun Pharma is in good shape right now, their business is strong and growth is coming...this is a good time for them to institute management changes or bring in strategic shifts," the analyst said, on condition of anonymity.

In the last five years, Sun Pharma's market capitalization has more than doubled to ₹3.97 trillion.

The firm has delivered a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10% in sales between 2018-19 and 2024-25, HDFC Securities said in a July note, adding that it expected a similar CAGR for the next three years until 2027-28, with a steady Ebitda margin of 29%. Ebitda is short for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization.

In 2024-25, the drugmaker's total revenue from operations rose 8.4% to ₹52,578.4 crore on domestic growth and its global speciality business. It expects its consolidated revenue to rise in mid-to-high single digits in 2025-26.

Sun Pharma didn't respond to queries.

As US generics growth slows, Sun Pharma has shifted its focus to its innovative drug pipeline. Executive chairman Shanghvi will be in charge of strengthening the speciality portfolio, the company said earlier.

Aalok, whole-time director and chief operating officer, will oversee the North American business, which is being run by a professional.

"The US leadership change is critical—that market is arguably the toughest globally for pharma (due to pricing, regulation). Getting someone with global pharma experience could help Sun Pharma compete better, protect margins, accelerate launches, etc.," said Kallianpur.

For an extended version of the story, go to livemint.com.

As US generics growth slows down, Sun Pharma has shifted its focus to its innovative drug pipeline. MINT

GEN NEXT

THE churn involves its globally critical functions, including India biz and its long-term speciality focus

WITH generic price erosion, US policy uncertainties, the firm is focused on its global drug pipeline

IT hinted that the top-deck changes are part of "forward-looking succession planning process"

IN the last five years, Sun Pharma's market cap has more than doubled to ₹3.97 tn currently

Blackstone-backed Nexus Reit in talks to buy Kolkata mall

FROM PAGE 16

A spokesperson for Nexus Select Trust said, "We don't comment on market speculation. As of now, Nexus Select Trust does not have any physical presence in Kolkata."

Nexus Select Trust, incorporated in August 2022, is India's first publicly listed REIT. Its tenants typically include international and premium brands such as Zara, H&M, Apple to Lifestyle, Cinepolis, Starbucks. The company already operates malls in Amritsar, Ludhiana, Delhi, Indore, Navi Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Bhubaneswar.

"Our acquisition pipeline remains robust. We have got around 10 plus assets in the pipeline across different states in India. Multiple conversations are going on, both on the Asset Acquisition as well as a couple of conversations on the greenfield development," Pratik Dantara, head of strategy, Nexus Select Trust, said during its June quarter earnings call. "We are hopeful that once the Hyderabad acquisition closes, we will be able to close a few more in this financial year."

Typically, Blackstone acquires the assets, which are then added to the Nexus portfolio. The Reit is also evaluating multiple deals across the east.

"There are discussions going on for a potential buyout of malls and shopping centres in Kolkata, as well as smaller cities such as Ranchi and Jamshedpur," said the second person in the know, who didn't wish to be named.

In fiscal 2025, Nexus Select Trust's revenue from operations stood at ₹2,282.9 crore, up 19% from the previous year. It had a total area under lease of 1.1 million square feet with a 97.2% occupancy rate. These properties house over 1,000 domestic and international brands in more than 3,000 stores.

In February, Nexus announced the buyout of the MBD Neopolis mall and its attached Radisson Blu Hotel in Ludhiana for ₹490 crore. It also closed the acquisition of Vega City mall in Bengaluru for ₹913 crore. In 2024, it announced plans to acquire three grade-A malls in Hyderabad from Larsen and Toubro (L&T) for ₹1,000 crore.

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Blackstone acquires the assets, which are later added to the Nexus portfolio. REUTERS

In fiscal 2025, Nexus Select Trust's revenue from ops stood at ₹2,282.9 crore, up 19% from the previous year

Jensen Huang walks an AI tightrope between the U.S. and China

FROM PAGE 16

ting-edge products for training AI models, but the commitment was still viewed by many in Washington as a way to curry favor with Trump, whose administration seeks to build up domestic semiconductor manufacturing capacity. The agreement showed how deeply the administration has entwined itself with the industry, bringing together a company that has made the U.S. government its largest shareholder with one that has agreed to give the government 15% of its China chip sales revenue.

Huang said Thursday the two sides had been talking for nearly a year and that the administration wasn't involved. He added, however, that Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick was "excited" by the news when informed about it.

Nvidia is at the center of U.S.-China trade talks, making Friday's call between Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping to complete an agreement to transfer ownership of video-sharing app TikTok to U.S. investors another potential pivot point for the company.

Some observers expect the TikTok deal and an agreement to export the more powerful Nvidia chip to be part of a broader agreement between the two countries. They view China's recent crackdowns on Nvidia as posturing to get access to a Blackwell product with much greater capabilities.

Others feel differently. AI czar David Sacks and his allies have said China's actions show they don't need Nvidia chips as much and are improving their manufacturing capabilities more quickly than many industry analysts realize. They have argued that limiting chip exports only benefits Huawei and other Chinese players that can improve their capabilities domestically, then take them to other countries.

"If people are advocating the same policies that Huawei wants us to do, I probably have some questions about that," Sriram Krishnan, senior White House policy adviser on AI, said at an Axios event Wednesday. He works closely with Sacks, who has aligned with Huang on the issue.

"They have enough chips," Krishnan added about China. "I see this as a way of them doing an AI Belt and Road Initiative."

Many industry analysts say China's chip companies are still well behind Nvidia and its competitors.

People familiar with Beijing's thinking say officials still view Huang, a Taiwan-born U.S. citizen, as a friend of China. But Beijing officials think Nvidia's lead in AI chips is being wielded by the Trump administration to hurt and insult China. Lashing out at Nvidia—and at Huang, whom Trump has called a friend—is a way of hitting Trump.

Banning certain Nvidia chips is also a way for some officials in the nationalist camp to prod Chinese companies to catch up with Nvidia and build a domestic supply chain that won't be vulnerable to U.S. threats.

Particularly galling to some Chinese officials was Trump's August comment that the H20 was obsolete. He went on to say he would be open to approving sales of a Blackwell version with at least 30% less capability. The company has presented an early version of such a product, which it calls the B30, to U.S. officials, according to people familiar with the matter.

Some Republicans in Congress oppose the chip exports. Sen. Jim Banks of Indiana is leading an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would require companies to satisfy all U.S. demand before exporting. Nvidia says it never deprives American customers and compares the policy to Biden-era export restrictions Trump dismantled.

The amendment and the bill focused on trackers, known as the Chip Security Act, highlight discontent over how quickly Nvidia has won over the president.

"It is mortgaging our future as a country to sell these chips to China," Dario Amodei, CEO of AI model developer Anthropic and a proponent of export controls, said at the Axios event. "It could be the single most disastrous national security decision made in this term."

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Even as Nvidia earns applause in the U.S., obstacles for the world's most valuable company are piling up. BLOOMBERG

Vi investors cheer on hope of AGR solution

FROM PAGE 16

Supreme Court.

Chief Justice B.R. Gavai observed that since the court had already passed orders in four earlier petitions on the matter, there has to be finality. "Now, there has to be some final proceedings," he remarked.

Shares of Vodafone Idea shot up 12.35% on the BSE, before shedding some gains to close 7.13% higher. The benchmark Sensex index closed 0.5% lower. The government came to own half of Vodafone Idea, after converting ₹53,083 crore of its dues into shares.

Vodafone Idea already owes around ₹83,400 crore in AGR dues, with annual payments of ₹18,000 crore starting March. Including penalties and interest, its total liabilities to the government are estimated at around ₹2 trillion. Vodafone Idea has previously said that its cash flows are insufficient to pay up the dues that have mounted over the years.

Vodafone Idea's former chief executive Akshaya Moondra said in August that early resolution of the AGR dispute was critical for the telecom operator to secure bank funding.

The telecom operator has asked the Supreme Court to quash DoT's additional demands for FY17 and earlier, and order a comprehensive reassessment and reconciliation of all AGR dues for that period. It warned that the hefty liability threatened its survival and "the livelihood of thousands of employees working directly or indirectly" with the company. Vodafone Idea serves about 198 million subscribers and employs more than 18,000 people.

Vodafone Idea also argued that DoT's revised calculations—relating to licence fees (a percentage of AGR) and spectrum usage charges—are erroneous. If spectrum usage charges up to FY17 are included, the additional dues amount to about ₹6,800 crore as on 31 March 2025, it said.

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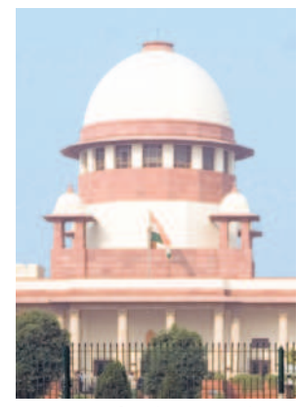
For an extended version of this story, go to livemint.com



In 2020, SC fixed Vi's AGR dues based on DoT calculations. MINT

New iPhone sales may lift Apple India to record quarter

FROM PAGE 16

ing options, is adding value as a purchasing option for buyers—and incrementally adding value to Apple's India sales as well," he said.

Singh and Pathak concurred that Apple is likely to outsell its annual projection of 1.5 million iPhones in India this year. "The festive season sales are expected to be 28% higher than last year, leading to yet another consecutive year of record sales for Apple in India," Pathak added.

Apple did not officially comment on the first day of sales in India.

"Overall, supplies of the Pro model to retailers are likely to ramp up over the coming weeks," said Omdia's Chaurasia. "The iPhone 17's strong demand is being fuelled by the significant jump in overall features, making it attractive for buyers."

Three retailers that *Mint* spoke with said that supplies of the 'Pro' and 'Pro Max' variants comprised roughly 3% of the first round of sales. The second round of supplies of these devices are expected by Monday, accounting for 10% of all devices being supplied to sellers across the country.

However, supply shortage was not the only reason behind the sellout. A person close to the developments on Friday said that based on preorders, Apple's top iPhones were sold out until 2 October.

In Delhi, the person cited above said, more than 600 people had queued up even before the Apple store opened at 8 am on Friday. Videos of long queues surfaced from Apple's store in Mumbai as well.

Apple's iPhone 17 series was launched on 9 September, priced ₹82,900 onward in India. A second person close to developments said that while all units of the iPhone 17 and 17 'Air' were assembled in India, the Pro variants have mixed sourcing to manage supply chain demands across global markets.

MINT SHORTS

Xi tells Trump he's open to TikTok negotiations

Washington: Chinese President Xi Jinping told US President Donald Trump that Washington should stop imposing unilateral tariffs but that it welcomes negotiations over TikTok, according to a Chinese state media summary of the leaders' call on Friday. The official readout described the first call in three months between the two men as positive and constructive. REUTERS

AFP

'Regulator still reviewing other allegations against Adani'

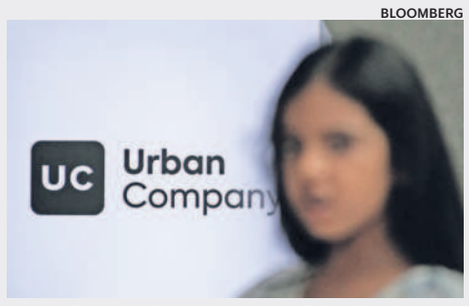
Mumbai: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) is still looking into more than a dozen allegations that Adani Group and its offshore funds broke securities regulations, two sources with direct knowledge of the investigations said on Friday. They spoke a day after Sebi dismissed two allegations—one of stock manipulation, the other non-disclosure of related party transactions—made two years ago against Adani by US short-seller Hindenburg Research. REUTERS

Central bank said to urge lenders to cut retail charges

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is pushing lenders to lower fees for some consumer products, according to people familiar with the matter, a drive that may jeopardize the billions of dollars they get from fees. RBI officials have conveyed to banks in recent weeks that it wants a reduction in service charges, including those for debit cards and minimum balance violations, the people said. BLOOMBERG

REUTERS

Urban Company plans bet on instant home services



BLOOMBERG

Bengaluru: Urban Company will double down on offering services within an hour, in a bid to attract more clients who are used to instant deliveries of everything from groceries to gadgets, its top boss said. The company, which made a stellar trading debut on Wednesday after launching India's most sought-after IPO of the year, has traditionally allowed customers to schedule services. REUTERS

Piyush Goyal expected to visit Washington for trade talks

PTI

New Delhi: With the India-US trade talks moving in the right direction, commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal is expected to visit Washington soon, people familiar with the development said. The visit comes in the backdrop of recently concluded daylong discussions here between US chief negotiator Brendan Lynch and his Indian counterpart Rajesh Agrawal on the proposed bilateral trade agreement. PTI

Indian, Canada officials agree to take steps to restart talks

New Delhi: Indian and Canadian officials met as part of pre-foreign office consultations on Friday and agreed to take steps to restart dialogue across areas including trade, defence and critical minerals, New Delhi said. REUTERS

'Economy resilient despite US tariffs, fiscal tightening'

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Chances of growth surprising on the upside are quite high, Neelkanth Mishra said.

India's economy remains resilient despite fiscal consolidation, slowing credit growth, and US trade frictions, said Neelkanth Mishra, chief economist at Axis Bank and a member of Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council.

The Centre has reduced its fiscal deficit substantially over the past few years—by 80 basis points (bps) in FY24, 80 bps in FY25, and another 40 bps in the current year's budget, said Mishra, who is also the head of global research at Axis Capital.

On the monetary side, however, credit growth slowed sharply from 16.3% in March 2024 to about 9.8% in May 2025, Mishra said in an interview. "Given that bank credit equals about 56% of gross domestic product (GDP), this slowdown shaved off around 2-3 percentage point growth," he said. "A significant portion of this was unintended, resulting from tight liquidity driven by slow base-money injection and intervention in foreign currency markets. Capping of LDR ratios for banks also contributed."

RBI's softer stance and GST cuts equivalent to 0.5% of GDP offer fiscal stimulus, boosts likelihood of growth outlook

Conditions are easing now. "The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has softened its stance, and fiscal drag is also reducing. In fact, we now have a fiscal stimulus of about 0.5% of GDP from goods and services tax (GST) cuts. Taken together, the likelihood of India's growth surprising on the upside going forward is quite high," he said.

Mishra downplayed the risks on the US tariff hike, saying "The 50% tariff is more of a negotiating tactic and unlikely to last. Even if tariffs remain at 25%, the impact is limited."

At 25%, exporters would pay about $18 billion in duties versus $12 billion at 15%.

"That $6 billion difference is small in the context of a $4 trillion economy. Further, much of this is likely to get passed on to the US importers and consumers," he added.

Mishra expects global commodity prices to see some volatility, especially with several countries likely to attempt currency debasement. "Precious metals are already reflecting this. But China's slowing economy and excess industrial capacity should help keep prices in check. We don't expect sustained upward pressure, though volatility will remain a feature of the coming years."

"Core inflation remains stable and close to target. Headline inflation has fallen sharply as vegetable and pulses prices moved below trend after two years of strength," he added.

For an extended version of the story go to livemint.com

Amazon's big play is ads and q-comm the new billboard

Streaming ads set to contribute more in next 1–2 years, while marketplace remains dominant

Sowmya Ramasubramanian & Sakshi Sadashiv
BENGALURU/NEW DELHI

Amazon India's advertising revenue grew 25% in FY25, comfortably outpacing the 21% growth in its core e-commerce marketplace business. REUTERS

Amazon India's advertisement revenue engines, which already outpace its e-commerce business, may get further fuel with the expansion of Amazon Now, as the quick commerce venture opens up more advertising space. Yet the company still has catching up to do, since rivals Blinkit, Zepto, and Instamart are already far ahead in the game on their established quick commerce apps.

Amazon India's advertising and allied services revenue grew 25% in FY25, against a 21% growth in its mainstay marketplace business, making it one of the fastest-growing segments, data from business intelligence platform Tofler showed.

However, the marketplace remains the backbone; it contributed ₹17,328 crore, or 58% of operating revenue, while ads and logistics brought in another ₹8,342 crore. The balance ₹4,468 crore came from other services. The Tofler data showed Amazon Seller Services posted a 19% jump in revenue to ₹30,139 crore in FY25, up from ₹25,406 crore a year earlier, as more customers transacted on its platform. Losses shrank sharply, with the net loss narrowing 89% to ₹374.3 crore from ₹3,469.5 crore in FY24, driven by tighter cost control and improved operating efficiency. To this, Amazon Now is expected to add a fresh stream of advertising revenue.

19% growth in revenue for Amazon to ₹30,139 cr in FY25

Marketplace is the consumer-facing platform, while Amazon Seller is the corporate entity running and monetising that marketplace, earning money from seller commissions, fees and ads.

Amazon India appears to be in the middle of a pivot, where its anchor remains online retail, with advertising becoming the tailwind.

Amazon India can well maintain its lead in ad revenue even without quick commerce, said Siddharth Jhawar, country manager at AI-driven ad-tech company Moloco. Its comprehensive full-funnel strategy, which combines the e-commerce marketplace and Prime Video, is already robust enough to offer advertisers a strong return ROI, Jhawar said.

While most of Amazon India's ad revenue comes from marketplace services, the share from streaming ads is set to grow, he said. "In the next one or two years, a good part of Amazon's ad revenue will come from streaming. But marketplace will continue to enjoy the most advertising attention."

Its quick commerce has potential but is in a nascent stage. "Advertising requires scale. Right now, Amazon Now is tiny and that alone may not be attractive to advertisers. But once they expand into a couple of cities and grab at least a double-digit market share, it could convert into meaningful ad dollars," Jhawar said.

89% decline seen in the firm's net losses to ₹374.3 cr last fiscal

Amazon Now was launched early this year in Bengaluru, before expanding to Delhi and parts of Mumbai. it promises 10-minute delivery of grocery and other daily essentials. Amazon has about 100 micro-fulfilment centres and plans to add hundreds by the year end. Order volumes in Bengaluru and Delhi are reportedly growing around 25% month-on-month since launch.

Amazon Now's rivals, however, have a far wider footprint: Blinkit operates in over 100 cities with roughly 2,000 dark stores, while Zepto covers about 40 cities with around 1,000 stores, and Swiggy Instamart runs in over 100 cities with 1,021 dark stores.

Digital media makes for over half of all advertising spending in India, and e-commerce firms together generated $3 billion worth of advertising revenue last year, according to Jhawar. Amazon India already accounts for a third of this number. With a total ad revenue of about $600 million last year, quick commerce is now adding up to be a valuable lever for platforms, with advertisers rushing to make the most of growing engagement from online shoppers.

Rival Flipkart is not too far behind in reaping ad revenues. In FY25, it logged an advertisement revenue of ₹6,317 crore, up 27% year-on-year.

Mint reached out to Amazon India and Flipkart for comments, but there was no response till press time.

While the competition is stiff in the online advertising space, the shift indicates dilution for tech giants Google and Meta, who have long dominated the scene. However, there seems to be space for all in the online advertising universe, experts said.

Amazon continues to hold a significant advantage, given its wider adoption in metro cities, particularly in the electronics and fashion categories, according to Ashutosh Sharma, vice-president and research director at Forrester Research.

Quick commerce also stands to benefit from advertisements, with revenue from the stream potentially seen outpacing income from the core business over time.

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For an extended version of this story, go to livemint.com.

Net direct taxes up by 9%, refunds down 24%

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The central government's direct tax collections have risen over 9% this fiscal year, to ₹10.83 trillion by 17 September, despite a slowdown in personal income tax revenue after recent tax cuts.

Official data shared by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) showed before adjusting for refunds, direct tax revenue from corporate and personal income tax grew 3.4% so far this fiscal year to ₹12.43 trillion. The period covered is 1 April to 17 September.

The Income Tax department has issued ₹1.61 trillion in tax refunds, which is around 24% less than a year-ago. Personal income tax refunds saw the biggest drop, even as corporate tax refund kept rising.

"The net direct tax revenue growth reflects a combination of modest rise in gross receipts and a sharp decline in refunds issued," Amit Maheshwari, Tax Partner at AKM Global, a tax and consulting firm, said.

The fall in personal income tax refunds helped net non-corporate tax revenue—primarily personal income tax—rise 13.67%, despite under 1% growth before adjusting for refunds.

Meanwhile, advance corporate tax collections are up 6.1% to ₹3.52 trillion, while advance collection of non-corporate tax dipped by 7.3% to ₹96,784 crore. "A key factor influencing this decline is the new tax relief introduced in the Union Budget 2025, which provides for zero tax liability on income of up to ₹12 lakh," Maheshwari added.

For an extended version of the story go to livemint.com

SandLogic eyes $40 mn at $200 mn valuation

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Semiconductor producer SandLogic is in early talks to raise $30-40 million in Series A money at a valuation of $200 million, two people in the know said.

The Bengaluru-based firm is among few chip builders in India targeting commercial-grade artificial intelligence (AI) applications. The firm has already appointed an investment banker. Besides, domestic and foreign venture capitalists have been approached, one of the two people said on the condition of anonymity.

Founded in 2018 by Kamalakar Devaki, Jesudas Fernandes, Radhika Kanigiri and Ravi Kumar Rayana, the Texas- and Bengaluru-based firm started as a low-code or no-code platform, before entering enterprise AI and designing its own chip prototypes. Its low-power Krsna chip aims to facilitate on-device AI and has already achieved 22 trillion of operations per second (TOPS).

Devaki refused to comment on the funding round.

AI chip startups have seen increasing investor interest. While Netrasemi raised about ₹107 crore in Series A funding led by Zoho and Unicorn India Ventures, Maieutic Semiconductors secured $4.15 million seed money from Endiya Partners and Exfinity. SandLogic had earlier raised 3.5 million.

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A tough test stands in the way of ₹10 lakh-plus funds

FROM PAGE 16

open for subscription. SBI MF and Mirae Asset Investment Managers have announced brand names for their SIFs but are yet to launch their funds.

People who appeared for the derivatives exam say it is very technical with more calculations than the basic MFD exam. Moreover, the exam has a negative marking of 25% for every question. The basic mutual fund exam does not have any negative marking.

SIF is designed for investors who can take higher risks than a mutual fund. ISTOCKPHOTO

Suraj Shroff, founder of Infiniti Investments and a mutual fund distributor, who recently appeared for the NISM XIII exam, said unlike the basic MFD exam—which mostly covers regulations and can be cleared by reading the material a few times—the derivatives exam involves technical concepts such as put, call, and other concepts.

The derivatives exam also has application-based numericals, said Shrey Mehta, director at Sanjay Mehta Financial Services. For example, one may be asked what happens to the value of a put if you buy it at a price and the value of the underlying moves from point A to B, he said.

Emails sent to NISM and Sebi on the new exam remained unanswered.

Indeed, the low distributor numbers could be an issue for SIFs to take off. It will not be fully understood by every distributor, said Amit Sahita, director, Fincode Advisory Services. "Of 180,000 distributors, fewer than 10,000 at present will get SIF-registered, that's less than 5% which will be a very small percentage of distributors to start with."

However, the exam is rigorous for a reason. According to Venkat N. Chalasani, chief executive of the Association of Mutual Funds of India, since SIF is an evolved product, it is important that the person selling it understands its structures, trade strategy, risk management and regulatory issues. "Hence, the difficulty level of the exam for MFDs selling SIFs is high," he added.

SBI MF and Mirae Asset Investment Managers have announced brand names for their SIFs but are yet to launch their funds

Suranjana Borthakur, head of distribution & strategic alliances at Mirae Asset, echoes the view and says the stiff standards will raise distribution quality and boost investor trust. "Every new category in the industry takes time to build scale. Just as the number of ARN holders has steadily risen, the base of SIF distributors will also grow with awareness and confidence."

To keep pace with the supply of SIFs, AMCs are training distributors to clear the exam. Deepak Jain, president and head - sales at Edelweiss Asset Management said since the first key challenge for scaling up SIFs would be the limited number of distributors, AMCs like his own are training their people. As a result, those who've passed the exam and sought SIF registration is up from 248 in July to 1,009 now, said Syed Hassan, chief program officer at CAMS.

Some experts flagged the risk of mis-selling and say the rigour would help avert it. SIFs carry higher commissions .

For an extended version of the story, go to livemint.com.

TCC Concept set to acquire Pepperfry

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Realty services company TCC Concept has signed a term sheet to acquire up to a 100% stake in omni-channel furniture and home goods platform Pepperfry, according to a stock exchange filing on Friday.

The company did not disclose the deal size or timeline for completion of the deal.

Following the news, shares of BSE-listed TCC Concept hit the 5% upper circuit on Friday, and closed at ₹543.35.

The firm signs term sheet to acquire 100% of Pepperfry to boost presence in e-comm, digital marketplace

TCC Concept said the proposed acquisition is aimed at strengthening its presence in the e-commerce and digital marketplace space, complementing its focus on technology-led platforms. It added that the integration of Pepperfry would enhance customer experience, create operational synergies and open new growth avenues.

Founded in 2012, Pepperfry competes with e-commerce majors Amazon and Flipkart, as well as Reliance-backed Urban Ladder. Its business is primarily driven by commissions on product sales.

In June, Pepperfry raised ₹43.3 crore from existing investors, including Norwest Venture Partners, Goldman Sachs, General Electric Pension Trust, Growth Equity Opportunity Fund and Panthera Growth Partners. Pepperfry has cumulatively raised over $300 million (roughly ₹2,600 crore) and was valued at over $341 million.

Pepperfry had earlier shelved its initial public offering (IPO) plans, despite converting into a public entity in 2022 to prepare for a proposed $250-300 million offering. Co-founder Ashish Shah had said the firm was prioritizing growth and profitability instead.

Pepperfry has remained a largely loss-making firm since its inception, posting a net loss of ₹117.5 crore on operating revenue of ₹188.9 crore in FY24.

For an extended version of this story, go to livemint.com.

Food safety watchdog sniffs for spice adulteration

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India's food safety regulator has ordered an enforcement blitz on spice manufacturers across the country, in a move to combat adulteration and safeguard public health. The drive will specifically target black pepper, cardamom, chilli, cinnamon, coriander, cumin and turmeric, all key ingredients in Indian recipes.

The FSSAI action targets a key segment of India's $20 billion spice market. The month-long drive, starting 1 October, coincides with the peak festive season and follows earlier checks that revealed widespread non-compliance with quality and safety standards.

The push for stricter controls is seen as both a public health imperative and a strategic effort to protect India's global reputation as a major spice exporter. This reputation has recently been dented by international scrutiny, including a high-profile recall of Indian spice products in Singapore last year due to the presence of ethylene oxide, a known carcinogen.

An FSSAI communication on 17 September outlines the scope of the operation. The directive, sent to food safety commissioners across all states and union territories, orders inspections and sampling to be limited to manufacturing units "to check the compliance at the source."

FSSAI launches nationwide, month-long spice crackdown to fight adulteration and protect public health

The FSSAI has mandated that all samples drawn during the drive must be sent to accredited laboratories with a full scope for testing all prescribed parameters. The consolidated report on the findings is due by 20 November, highlighting the urgency and seriousness of the crackdown.

FSSAI did not respond to queries, while Tata Sampann, Catch, Zoff, and Somaiya Foods declined to comment. MTR, Nirapara, Galaji, and Brahmins didn't respond.

For the Centre, the drive is a dual-pronged effort to protect citizens and economic interests. Medical experts said consumption of adulterated spices can lead to health issues.

Dr. Pavan Hanchanale, a consultant in gastroenterology and liver transplants at Jupiter Hospital in Pune, highlighted risks associated with chemical adulterants like ethylene oxide that can increase the risk of cancer and damage DNA and the nervous system. "While spices are at the heart of Indian cuisine and tradition, growing health concerns over their quality and contamination pose serious health risks," Hanchanale added.

For an extended version of the story go to livemint.com

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First published in February 2007 to serve as an unbiased and clear-minded chronicler of the Indian Dream.

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Tata, Eka, Volvo selected for e-bus sops, 15 others miss out

Requirement to source at least 50% of parts locally likely the main hindrance, experts say

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Only three automakers out of 18 have qualified for subsidies for electric buses under the government's production-linked incentive scheme for automobiles and auto parts (PLI-Auto), through which it plans to disburse nearly ₹26,000 crore to strengthen India's clean-mobility ecosystem.

The three companies—Tata Motors, Eka Mobility and Volvo Eicher Commercial Vehicles—have collectively received approvals for eight models of e-buses, the scheme's portal showed.

India's clean-mobility push comprises schemes such as PM E-drive and PM eBus Sewa, which aim to boost demand for cleaner buses on Indian roads. Simultaneously, the PLI-Auto scheme provides incentives to manufacturers of electric vehicles, including buses. However, the PM E-drive scheme's target of reducing the upfront cost of 14,028 buses and PM eBus Sewa's target of deploying 10,000 e-buses cover only a fraction of India's buses.

"Central government schemes are largely targeting the urban bus segment, which makes up only about 2% of the overall bus market. The big question is how to extend electrification to the remaining 98% of the bus market. That will be key to truly achieving scale," said Amit Bhatt, India managing director, International Council for Clean Transportation.

The PLI-Auto scheme requires bus makers to source at least 50% of parts locally, which is likely to be the main hindrance for them, domain experts said, as India's electric vehicle ecosystem is hugely dependent on imported Chinese components.

Bhatt said, "Sourcing bus components locally comes with two sets of challenges—technical and financial. The technical challenge is that many parts cannot yet be manufactured in India, while the financial challenge is that many components that can be produced domestically are still cheaper to import. The only way to make these components affordable for Indian manufacturers is to achieve scale by generating strong demand for e-buses. China, for instance, was able to build scale by ensuring robust and consistent demand for e-buses," he said.

The PM E-drive scheme targets reducing the upfront cost of 14,028 buses. PTI

E-buses saw a rise in overall demand in fiscal 2026, with over 2,000 units registered in the first half. In fiscal 2025, e-bus sales dipped marginally to about 3,300 units from 3,500 units in fiscal 2024, according to data from the road ministry's Vahan portal.

In PLI-Auto's first year of disbursal, fiscal 2025, the government provided ₹322 crore to three vehicle makers, Tata Motors Ltd, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd and Ola Electric Mobility Ltd, and one component maker, Toyota Kirloskar Auto Parts Ltd. The government expects a surge in disbursals in fiscal 2026, with nine companies claiming ₹2,000 crore, Union heavy industries minister HD Kumaraswamy told *Mint* in June. The scheme provides a 13-18% benefit on annual incremental sales of zero-emission vehicles. It is set to run for five years.

Email queries to the heavy industries ministry, Tata Motors Ltd, Volvo Eicher Commercial Vehicles Ltd and Eka Mobility, a subsidiary of Pinnacle Mobility Ltd, remained unanswered.

The government's area of focus in electric mobility has shifted from private vehicles to public transportation with the third iteration of a scheme meant to reduce the high upfront cost of electric vehicles. The PM E-drive scheme has allocated about 40% of its ₹10,900 crore outlay—₹4,391 crore—for electric buses. Under the scheme, manufacturers sell electric vehicles to customers at a discount and the government reimburses them for it.

Earlier schemes with the same goal—specifically, the two iterations of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric and Hybrid Vehicles (FAME) from fiscal 2015 to 2024—provided subsidies to buyers of electric scooters, three-wheelers and cars. To be sure, e-buses were also incentivised under the FAME schemes, but not nearly at the same level. Under FAME 1, about 280 e-buses were incentivised, while FAME 2 aimed to reduce the cost of 7,000 e-buses.

The PM E-drive scheme aims to incentivise 14,028 buses by fiscal 2028. Of these, the government has already allocated 10,900 buses to be procured by state transport utilities in five cities—Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad and Surat. The remaining buses will be deployed in Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata and Chennai, and in hilly areas and tourism hubs.

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GREEN TRANSPORT

TATA Motors, Volvo Eicher and Eka Mobility received approvals for eight models

INDIA'S EV ecosystem is hugely dependent on imported Chinese components

E-BUSES saw a rise in demand in FY26, with over 2,000 units registered in the first half of the year

ABOUT 40% of the PM E-drive scheme's ₹10,900 crore outlay has been allocated to e-bus procurers

India secures third credit rating upgrade in FY26

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The move follows similar upgrades by S&P Global in August and Morningstar DBRS in May. ISTOCKPHOTO

India notched its third sovereign credit rating upgrade this fiscal year with Japan's Rating and Investment Information Inc. (R&I) raising the country's long-term rating to BBB+ from BBB, with a 'stable' outlook.

The move follows similar upgrades by S&P Global in August and Morningstar DBRS in May, marking a rare streak of upgrades for a major emerging economy at a time of global uncertainty.

R&I's rating upgrade for India on Friday comes as the economy navigates tariff wars in a volatile world. A stronger credit rating enhances India's standing in global capital markets, paving the way for cheaper and more predictable access to funds for both the government and private sector.

For nearly two decades, India's sovereign debt was at the lowest investment grade of BBB- at S&P. It has risen above the threshold now. This year, Morningstar DBRS upgraded India's rating to BBB from BBB (low).

To be sure, economists and policymakers have long pressed for a higher rating, citing India's strong fundamentals and sustained efforts at fiscal consolidation.

R&I highlighted buoyant tax revenues, fiscal discipline, and resilient domestic demand as reasons for India's sovereign debt ratings upgrade.

The agency also underscored the Indian government's ability to reduce fiscal deficit while maintaining elevated public investment. It also pointed to external resilience, supported by modest foreign debt, a manageable current account deficit, and steady inflows from services and remittances.

"Despite the uncertainties surrounding the global economic environment, India's economy can be expected to maintain firm growth thanks to the economic structures driven by domestic demand and the policies of the administration of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi," R&I said in a statement.

"The government has made progress in reducing the fiscal deficit at a moderate pace, and the government debt ratio will likely fall. In addition, external stability has been strengthened, as seen in the current account deficit staying at a low level, the narrowing negative net international investment position, and other factors," it added.

R&I added in its statement that its rating upgrade for India reflected the "recognition that the risk related to the financial system is limited."

India's economy is projected to grow 6.5% in fiscal 2026, the Reserve Bank of India said, citing strong consumption and public investment.

The central government aims to narrow the fiscal deficit to 4.4% of Gross domestic product (GDP) in fiscal 2026 from 4.8% in fiscal 2025, extending its path of long-term fiscal consolidation.

"R&I believes that the economy will maintain the growth rate in the mid-6% range from fiscal 2026 onwards, backed by the population growth, the catch-up effect of income, and the government's public investment and economic policy, among other factors," R&I said in the statement.

"The external debt ratio to GDP is low, and foreign exchange reserves are sufficient to cover imports and short-term external debts. The concern on an external front is small," it added.

Among major rating agencies, Moody's has a Baa3 rating for India with a stable outlook, while Fitch has BBB-, both at the lowest investment grade.

"The Government of India welcomes the decision by the Japanese credit rating agency, Rating and Investment Information, Inc. (R&I), to upgrade India's long-term sovereign credit rating to 'BBB+' from 'BBB', while retaining the 'Stable' Outlook for the Indian economy," the Union finance ministry said in a statement.

A stronger credit rating boosts India's global market standing, enabling cheaper, more predictable fund access

ASCI to educate children on risks of dark patterns

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Manisha Kapoor, CEO and secretary-general, ASCI.

India's advertising industry's self-regulator plans to educate children about dark patterns that are used by online retailers to trick users into making unwanted purchases.

"Kids are a good focus area for us over the next few months, and we have just started a pilot to look at building advertising literacy for school kids," Manisha Kapoor, chief executive officer and secretary-general at the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), told *Mint* in an interview. The body will conduct classroom sessions for kids, starting with the Delhi National Capital Region, to help them understand the commercial intent of advertising.

The idea, Kapoor said, is to ensure children, who are digital natives but not exactly discerning consumers, know of the kind of questions they must ask before they believe what is said in an ad, buy these products or ask their parents to buy them.

Issues such as online safety or when children should give out details will be examined over the next 18 and the programme aims to reach one million children in classrooms across 10-12 cities.

E-commerce dark patterns are deceptive and manipulative user interface designs that trick online shoppers into making unwanted purchases, signing up for services or sharing data by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities. Children are even more vulnerable as such interfaces can trick them into sharing personal information and purchasing items without understanding the true cost.

In India, dark patterns are regulated under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 and, the Central Consumer Protection Authority has issued Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns, 2023.

The government recently asked all e-commerce firms to conduct an audit of dark patterns that may have crept into their work and share the results. Kapoor said it is working with the government to train companies to conduct these audits. ASCI will also develop an e-learning programme on dark patterns.

ASCI plans to focus on advertising literacy for children and companies as it completes 40 years next month. ASCI is seeing greater willingness from advertisers and companies to comply with guidelines, according to Kapoor.

On Thursday, Sudhanshu Vats, managing director of Pidilite Industries Ltd, was named the new chairman of ASCI. S. Subramanyeswar of Mullen-Lowe Global was appointed vice-chairman, and Paritosh Joshi, principal at Provocateur Advisory, the honorary treasurer.

For an extended version of the story, visit livemint.com.

ASCI will conduct sessions for kids to help them understand the commercial intent of advertising

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OFFICE OF MUNICIPAL CORPORATION, GWALIOR
WORKSHOP DEPARTMENT

File No. 08/25x4/19/WS/2025-26/612 DATE : 16/09/2025

जनसम्पर्क RO क्रमांक 607 DETAILED NOTICE INVITING TENDER दिनांक 18-09-2025

Online tenders are invited on behalf of Gwalior Municipal Corporation by undersigned from firm registered in appropriate class in following Tender Bids will be received online as per key dates. Complete detail can be seen online in concern Tender.

Sr. no.	Name of Work	Probable Amount of Contract	Tender ID no.	Date of release of Tender	Last date for purchase online tender dated
1	Supply of Tyre-Tube, Flap to workshop Department Gwalior Municipal Corporation 2025-2026 File no. 08/25x4/19	1,00,00,000/- (With GST)	2025_UAD_438365_2	12-09-2025	29-09-2025

Further details can be seen at http://mptenders.gov.in

Nodal Officer, Workshop
Nagar Nigam Gwalior

EASTERN RAILWAY
Corrigendum

Corrigendum in previous L/No-KE/cont./2025/NS/KPA, dated 18.09.2025 published earlier by Chief Medical Superintendent, Kanchrapara, Workshop Railway Hospital, North 24 Parganas, PO. Kanchrapara, Pin-743145. The GeM Bid should be read as GeM Bid No. **GEM/2025/B/6682034, dt.-18.09.2025** instead of GeM Bid No. GEM/2024/B/6682034 dt. 18.09.2025. The other terms and conditions will remain unchanged.

MED-06/2025-26

Tender Notices are also available at Website www.er.indianrailways.gov.in/www.ireps.gov.in

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A quiz on the week's development.

HT FIRST VOICE. LAST WORD.

CENTRAL RAILWAY
OPEN E-TENDER NOTICE NO. DY.CE (C) BZU/04 of 2025

Dy. Chief Engineer (C) BZU@NGP Central Railway, Chhunabhatti Road Ajni / Nagpur-3 for and on behalf of The President of India invites e-tenders online through **www.ireps.gov.in**, from reputed contractors for the following work: **Name of Work:** Construction of Washable apron to P/F No. 4, Carriage Watering Arrangement & Drain to P/F No. 3 & 4 at Godhani Station. **Approx. Cost:** ₹4.97 Cr. **Completion Period:** 06 Months. **Validity of Offer:** 60 days from date of opening of the tender. **Bid Security:** ₹398700/-. **Cost of Tender:** Nil. **Availability of Tender Documents:** Tender document for the above work is available on website **www.ireps.gov.in Date & Time of Submission & Opening of Tender:** The e-tender duly completed in all respect should be uploaded electronically upto **15.00 hrs.** on **10/10/2025** on the above mentioned website and will be **opened after 15.00 hrs. Important Note for Tenderers: a)** Prospective Tenderer/s are advised that before tendering their offer electronically, they should refer to the Tender details regarding terms and conditions, eligibility criteria etc. **b)** All intending Tenderers need to first register with **IREPS** website **www.ireps.gov.in** For any additional information/clarification contact on above address on any working day between 10.00 hrs. to 18.00 hrs. Contact No. 7219612275 (M).

Dy. CE(C),BZU, Nagpur

रेलवे फाटक को बंद स्थिति में पार करना मना है

Sai/NGP/208

EASTERN RAILWAY

Tender Notice No. ELD-125-WC-OT-11A-25, Dated 15.09.2025. E-tender Notice is invited by the Senior Divisional Electrical Engineer (TRD), Eastern Railway, Howrah, DRM Building, near Howrah Railway Station, Howrah-711101 against Tender No. **ELD-125-WC-OT-11A-25** for the following works: **Name of the work with its location:** Replacement of Jumper for Isolator and Drop Jumper in Howrah Division of Eastern Railway. **Approx. cost of the work**: ₹ 3,00,78,131.50. **Cost of Tender Form:** Nil. **Earnest Money/Bid Security to be deposited :** ₹ 3,00,400.00. **Completion period of the work:** 12 (Twelve) months from the date of issue of LOA. **Tender Closing Date & Time:** 10.10.2025 at 15.00 hrs. **Opening of tender:** Tender will be opened at any time after closing of tender. Tenderers may visit website **www.ireps.gov.in** for full details/ description /specification of the tenders and submit their bid online. Manual offers are not allowed against this tender and any manual offer if received shall not be accepted and will be summarily rejected.

HWH-301/2025-26

Tender Notice is also available at websites : www.er.indianrailways.gov.in / www.ireps.gov.in

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Saturday, September 20, 2025

mint

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Shanghvi plans succession as Sun Pharma rejigs top deck ▶P13

India secures third credit rating upgrade in FY26 ▶P15

Apple on track for record quarter on iPhone 17 sales

Sales volume, value expected to rise; top models sold out at three Apple Stores

Shouvik Das
shouvik.das@livemint.com
NEW DELHI

Apple Inc.'s iPhone 17 smartphones saw strong demand, and the top models sold out instantly on the first day in India as its stores opened to long queues, masking the slow pace of innovation in artificial intelligence.

People started gathering outside each of its four outlets on Friday in the country before the new generation of devices went on sale, and the crowds sustained through the day. Chief executive Tim Cook even tweeted a photograph of Apple's Mumbai storefront.

Preorders were nearly 10% more than last year, according to three analysts that *Mint* spoke with. One of them said the sales may surge 19% on-year in the first week itself.

Apple is poised to surpass 5 million iPhone sales this quarter, potentially pegging the July to September period as the 15th straight quarter of record sales in India, the analysts said.

"Preorders for the iPhone 17 series have been stronger than last year. Overall, early sales are expected to be higher this year, with shipments in the September quarter this year expected to cross 5 million units," said Navkendar Singh, associate vice-president at market researcher, International Data Corporation (IDC) India. "The high interest is being driven by the base version of the new iPhone, the iPhone 17, being a considerable upgrade over previous base models—which is likely drawing users in to upgrade their older devices."

Sanyam Chaurasia, principal analyst at market research and advisory firm, Omdia, said "The preorders of the iPhone 17's base model, compared with the iPhone 16, were higher by as much as 30% this year—fuelling scope for higher sales of the new phone this year in general."

Three of its four stores in India reported a sellout of the company's 'Pro' and 'Pro Max' variants of the iPhone 17 series. Third-party retailers also concurred, adding that supply itself was short for Apple's top devices this year.

"Apple, with its aspirational brand image, is successfully riding the premiumization trend in India," said Tarun Pathak, partner and director at fellow research firm Counterpoint India. "It's strategy across product portfolio, channels and manufacturing is paying off, with the initial demand in the first week of sales for the iPhone 17 series being 19% higher than the iPhone 16 series."

Pathak said that Apple is seeing growth in value as well as volume in sales. "The 256GB storage coupled with two-year, no-interest financ-

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PHONE FRENZY

Apple is set to surpass 5 million iPhone sales this quarter, pegging the Jul-Sep period as the 15th straight quarter of record sales in India.

UPGRADE FEVER

PREORDERS were nearly 10% more than last year

AMID short supply, Pro, Pro Max models sold out instantly

FESTIVE season sales projected 28% higher, fuelling record year

SATISH KUMAR/MINT

A tough test stands in the way of India's ₹10 lakh-plus funds

Srushti Vaidya
srushti.vaidya@livemint.com
MUMBAI

Mutual funds are rolling out specialized investment funds (SIFs) with a minimum ₹10 lakh ticket size, but the product faces a distribution hurdle. Only a fraction of India's 180,000 mutual fund sellers are qualified to distribute this product to the end consumer, given the tougher derivatives exam required to sell them.

There is a mandatory hurdle to be cleared—the National Institute of Securities Markets' NISM XIII (derivatives) exam to get a permit for SIF distribution. The exam is a tougher nut to crack as compared to the mutual fund distributor exam, the NISM VA, multiple industry participants told *Mint*.

There are over 1,000 distributors who have cleared the NISM XIII derivatives exam and applied for SIF registration as of 19 September, data by CAMS shows. The number of mutual fund distributors (MFD), on the other hand, is much higher at 180,000.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India had in February launched SIF to bridge the gap between retail-focused mutual funds and portfolio management services (PMS) that target the rich. SIF's minimum ticket size is ₹10 lakh, while that for PMS is ₹50 lakh. SIF is designed for investors who can take higher risks than a mutual fund.

As of now, Edelweiss Mutual Fund has announced the launch of Altiva Hybrid Long-Short Fund, the new fund offer for which will open on 1 October. Quant Mutual Fund has announced the QSIF Equity Long-Short Fund, which is

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Sebi had launched specialized investment funds in Feb. REUTERS

DON'T MISS

MINT

TCC Concept to acquire 100% in furniture retailer Pepperfry

Realty services company TCC Concept has signed a term sheet to acquire up to a 100% stake in omnichannel furniture and home goods platform Pepperfry. The company did not disclose the deal size or timeline for completion of the deal. >P14

Tata, Eka, Volvo selected for e-bus sops, 15 others miss out

Only three automakers out of 18 have qualified for subsidies for electric buses under the government's production-linked incentive scheme for automobiles and auto parts, through which it plans to disburse nearly ₹26,000 crore. >P15

Net direct taxes up by 9%, refunds down 24%

The central govt's direct tax collections have risen over 9% this fiscal year, to ₹10.83 trillion by 17 Sep, despite a slowdown in personal income tax revenue after tax cuts. Income Tax department issued ₹1.61 trillion in tax refunds, around 24% less than a year-ago. >P14

Amazon's big play is ads and q-comm the new billboard

Amazon India's ad revenue engines, which already outpace its e-commerce business, may get further fuel with the expansion of Amazon Now, as the quick commerce venture opens up more ad space. Yet the company still has catching up to do. >P14

Thyssenkrupp bid a litmus test for Jindal scion

Nehal Chaliawala & Dipali Banka
MUMBAI/BENGALURU

Jindal Steel International's pursuit of Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe marks a crucial moment for the group, and for its next-generation leader-in-waiting, Venkatesh Jindal. At just 29, the Yale and Harvard-educated son of chairperson Naveen Jindal is part of the core team currently in Germany negotiating the high-stakes acquisition.

The team also includes Naveen Jindal, Narendra Misra, Jindal's director of European Operations, and a handful of other executives.

The third-generation successor of steel magnate OP Jindal has his task cut out for him. The negotiating team has to convince the German government and labour unions for the deal. Labour unions have a significant sway over mergers and acquisitions in Europe. The German government will also need comfort before allowing the sale of a strategically important asset and a large employer to a non-European owner.

The team from Jindal Steel has started canvassing with unions for the deal, said a third person, who is based in Germany. All three people spoke on the condition of anonymity as they are not authorized to speak to the media.

Jindal Steel International has not yet submitted a firm financial offer for Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe as it has to evaluate the value of the asset after going through its books.

Unions and government aside, Jindal will also have to contend with the Czech Republic's energy company EP Corporate Group (EPCG). Thyssenkrupp, which has been trying to divest from its steel business for several years now, sold a 20% stake in its steel business last year to EPCG, which is controlled by billionaire Daniel Kretinsky. The two partners are discussing a further 30% stake sale to form a 50:50 joint venture.

Thyssenkrupp AG has not disclosed the valuation at which it sold the 20% stake in Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe to EPCG.

Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe complements Jindal Steel's private assets. While the group gets its iron ore in Africa, it turns that ore into direct reduced iron (DRI) and then into steel in Oman. The group is setting up two new DRI furna-

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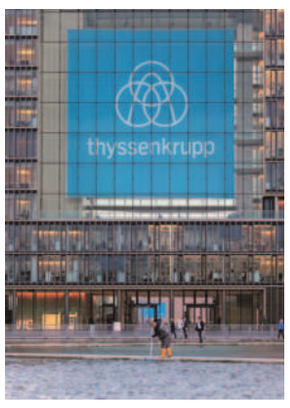

Naveen Jindal's son Venkatesh is part of the deal team. REUTERS

Vodafone Idea investors cheer on hope of solution to new AGR case

Krishna Yadav & Jatin Grover
NEW DELHI

Vodafone Idea Ltd investors celebrated after the Centre sought time to resolve the latest dispute over its statutory dues, citing consumer interest and its own stakeholding in the beleaguered telco.

Solicitor general Tushar Mehta told a Supreme Court bench that since the government now holds a significant stake in the country's third-largest telco, there has to be a solution that benefits consumers. He urged the court to hear the matter urgently next Friday to work towards a resolution.

"In the larger public interest—and essentially in the interest of consumers to maintain a balance in the competing market—the government of India has also infused 50% equity. So, we are stakeholders as well. Some solution may need to be worked out, subject to Your Lordships' approval. If it can be taken up next week, we can also consider possible options," Mehta told the court. The court will hear the case on 26 September.

The dispute traces back to March 2020 when the top court finalized Vodafone Idea's adjusted gross revenues (AGR) dues up to FY17 based on calculations by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and barred any self-assessment or reassessment. However, DoT demanded an additional ₹9,450 crore this year, prompting the telco to move court on 8 September, arguing that most of the new demand relates to periods already settled by the

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Vi already owes around ₹83,400 cr in AGR dues. AFP

Nexus may buy Kolkata mall for up to ₹600 crore

Suneera Tandon & Madhurima Nandy
MUMBAI

Nexus Select Trust, a Blackstone-backed retail real estate investment trust (Reit), is in advanced talks to buy Kolkata's Diamond Plaza for an estimated ₹500-600 crore, adding to its existing portfolio of 19 malls, according to two people familiar with the developer's plans.

The move is linked to the company's focus on the organized and branded consumption segment, where per capita usage still remains low, one of the people quoted earlier said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "They feel there is a market retail penetration per capita very low and they are trying to bridge that gap."

The gap between demand for mall space and available supply widened for a third straight year in 2024. According to data by Anarock Research, 6.5 million sq. ft was leased against a new supply of 1.1 million sq. ft That reduced vacancies and pushed rentals higher as brands target affluent shoppers seeking premium experiences. The property consultant estimates that over 16.6 million sq. ft of new grade A mall space will enter the top seven cities during 2025 and 2026.

Diamond Plaza, which opened in September 2012, is a neighbourhood shopping centre in North Kolkata. Its tenants include Pantaloons, Trends, Max, Reliance Digital, W and Manyavar.

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16.6 million sq. ft of new grade A mall space will enter the top 7 cities in 2025 and 2026. MINT

Nvidia's Huang walks an AI tightrope between US, China

Amrith Ramkumar, Raffaele Huang & Robbie Whelan

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang is trying to keep both the U.S. and China happy. It is proving to be a tricky high-wire act.

The chip maker drew praise from President Trump for its $5 billion investment in rival Intel, which recently struck a deal to give a 10% stake to the U.S. government. Huang was beaming on a joint video call with Intel Chief Executive Lip-Bu Tan as he discussed a new partnership to make processors for data centers and personal computers.

Even as Nvidia earns applause in the U.S., obstacles for the world's most valuable company are piling up. This week, China told companies not to buy a key Nvidia product and accused the chip designer of violating an antimonopoly law. Influenced by the government, Nvidia customers there have spurned the H20, an artificial-intelligence chip the company designed specifically for that market and that Trump approved for export last month.

Huang's challenge is to remain in good standing in the U.S. while pursuing opportunities in China's vast market. He is making the case that allowing Nvidia to sell its coveted AI chips with minimal restrictions is the best way for each country to advance its national interests.

The clock is ticking as Chinese companies like Huawei continue improving their chipmaking capabilities. On Thursday, Huawei unveiled a new generation of chips that could challenge Nvidia products in the country.

Administration officials are weighing whether to approve a more advanced product that runs on Nvidia's Blackwell architecture for sales in China, but it is far from a done deal. Trump is under pressure from national-security hawks who don't think the deal should be allowed, and he could throw a curveball into the agreement, as he did when he demanded a cut of H20 sales in return for approving the exports.

In Congress, some Republican lawmakers are pushing legislation that would effectively curb most chip exports if there was a potential U.S. buyer for them. They have also introduced a bill that would require trackers to be put into American chips to make sure they don't fall into the wrong hands, legislation that prompted China to tell companies to stop using Nvidia chips.

"I don't envy Nvidia's position," said Ryan Fedasiuk, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. "It's proving untenable for the company to attempt to serve so many masters."

Under their new deal, Intel won't be making Nvidia's cut-

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Huang's challenge is to remain in good standing in the U.S. while pursuing opportunities in China's vast market. AP