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HOW HER DETECTIVE
NOVELS REFLECTED
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JANUARY 4, 2026

THE WEEK

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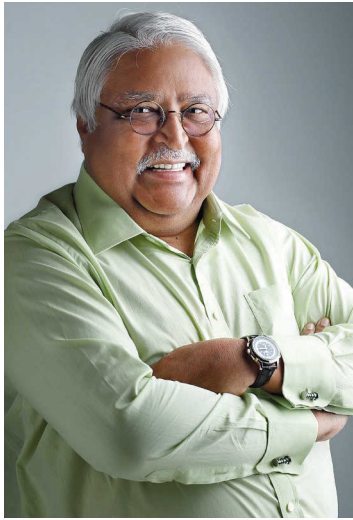
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OVER 43 YEARS, many words have appeared and reappeared on THE WEEK's cover, except one. 'Scoop!' made a solitary appearance on our 1996 cover of the Purulia arms drop case, and never reappeared despite many exclusives gracing the pages in the years that followed.

The reporter, Jon Stock, later wrote Last Word for THE WEEK. He is now an author who writes thrillers under his own name and the pen name J.S. Monroe. Jon's wife, Hilary, is a fine-art photographer. He worked in THE WEEK and lived in Kochi for a year or so with their three children, before moving back to England.

In the cover article, Stock painted a vivid picture of Peter Bleach. "So, who exactly is Bleach, known as 'the Milk Tray man' because of his ability to get in and out of anywhere?" Stock asked and answered in the article. "(There is a famous television advertising campaign in Britain featuring a stealthy man in black who delivers boxes of Milk Tray chocolates to women by parachute and speedboat.) And how come he is languishing in the squalid Presidency Jail in Calcutta?"

Why am I writing about this now? This is the 30th anniversary of the case. Special Correspondent Prema Rajaram and Photo Editor Salil Bera visited Purulia and met original witnesses and other stakeholders. One of the CBI investigating officers of the case, former Kerala DGP Loknath Behera, now heads the successful Kochi Metro Rail. Senior Special Correspondent Tapash Ganguly, who contributed to the original cover, passed away in February 2023.

All this talk of spies and guns will be complete

only with wine and women. Blame James Bond and shaken vodka martinis for that. But there is only wine in this issue, figuratively. There is a lot of it, and it is all Indian. Senior Assistant Editor K. Sunil Thomas looks at Indian alcohol brands that are the toast of the world, and how the Indian tippler is shedding the colonial hangover to embrace spirits born closer to home.

Having been involved in newspaper and magazine redesigns over the years, I should appreciate the thought that goes into bottle and label design. One of my pet peeves is the *sarkari* sticker slapped onto these finely designed labels. Lately, some labels have incorporated the statutory warning and other information into their designs. That is pre-emptive design thinking at its finest, I should say.

I should clarify that THE WEEK does not endorse the consumption of alcohol. As a media organisation, we are interested only in the industry itself and the trends it drives.

Chief of Bureau (Chennai) Lakshmi Subramanian looks at the young crop of archaeologists who are driving discoveries in Keeladi, the Iron Age site near Madurai, which has been in the news recently.

There is Ajay Kumar Ramamoorthy, who graduated in commerce before being drawn to archaeology. Victor Gnanaraj, who wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, led a team that found the first scientifically dated terracotta sarcophagus in Tamil Nadu. R. Kavya studied science and aspired to join the civil services before discovering the Konthagai burial cluster, where the ancients interred their dead. When I look at the achievements of our youth, I do not doubt that we live in wonderful times.

Let me close with the maker of mysteries. Special Correspondent Anjuly Mathai marks 50 years since the passing of Agatha Christie. On THE WEEK's desk, editors think that half the pull lies in the name of her novels. *They Do it with Mirrors, A Pocket Full of Rye, Elephants Can Remember, Murder on the Orient Express, Death On The Nile, Murder in Mesopotamia, And Then There Were None....*

Do you have a favourite? And, why? I'd love to know. Merry Christmas.

Anjuly Mathai

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The growing global prominence of Indian-made alcoholic beverages reflects both the ingenuity of domestic producers and the newfound confidence of the Indian consumer

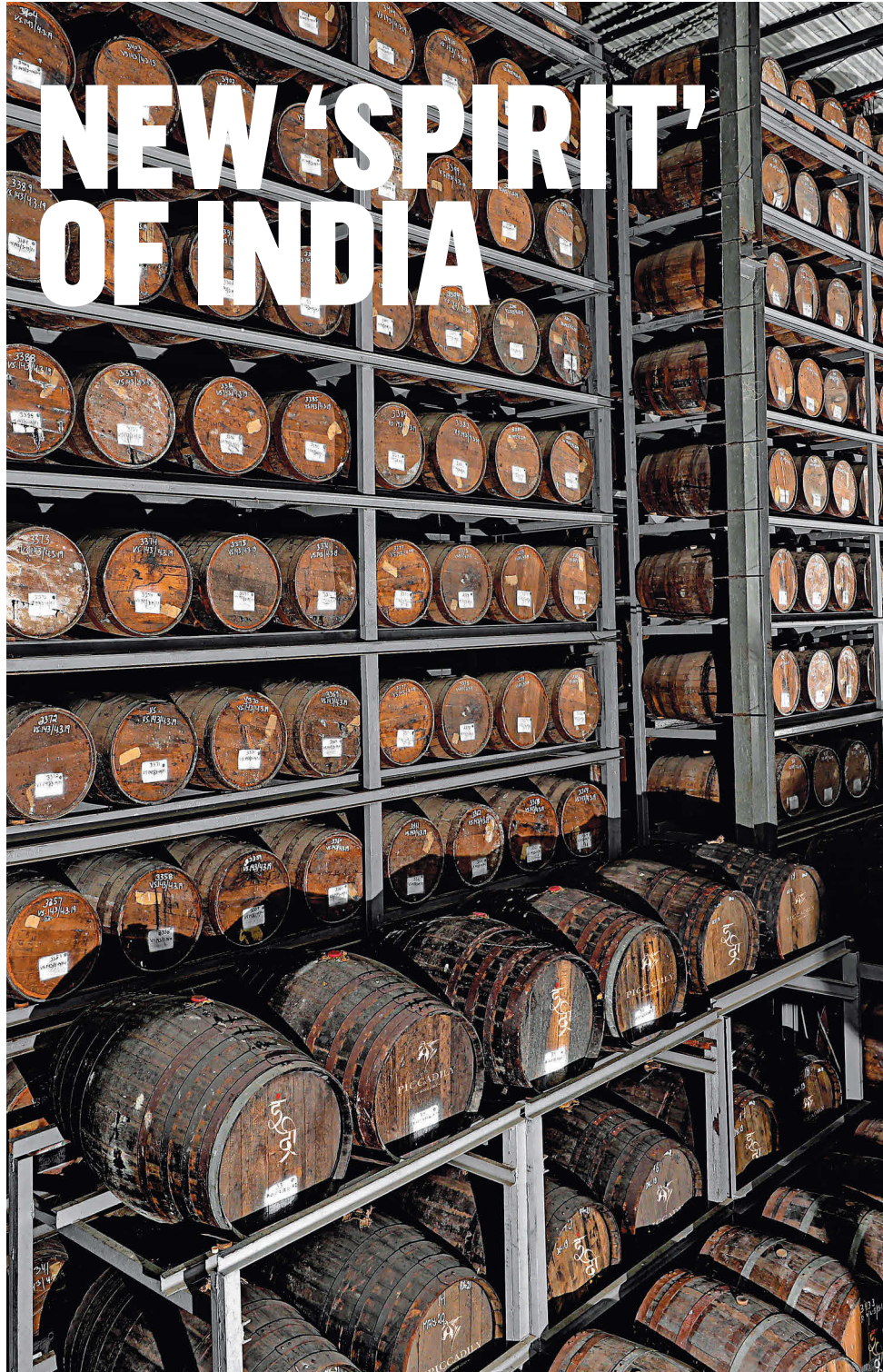
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Barrels at Piccadilly Distilleries, makers of Indri single malt



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For elected representatives, the presence of cameras often triggers a performative instinct—the

temptation to speak over colleagues, and, instead, address an external audience. In Parliament, this has often translated into grandstanding and disruption by the opposition....



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Fifty years after her passing, we unravel how **Agatha Christie's** life shaped her writing

PLUS

“Her books are at heart about human nature. They are about people”—James Prichard, CEO at Agatha Christie Ltd, and great grandson of Christie

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COVER PHOTO **SANJAY AHLAWAT**

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Leadership rooted in character

Congratulations to Shubhanshu Shukla, astronaut and Group Captain, Indian Air Force, on being named THE WEEK's Man of the Year. His journey from a middle-class upbringing in Lucknow to an 18-day mission on the International Space Station is a testament to his perseverance, excellence and aspiration ('Shux and the blue marble', December 21).

What stands out is not only the rarity of the achievement, but the grace with which it has been carried out. Shukla's composure under pressure, intellectual humility and partnership with his wife Kamna reflect leadership rooted in character rather than spectacle.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
On email.

Congratulations to Shukla on being bestowed with THE WEEK's Man of the Year—an honour that carries special prestige. Shukla comes across as a humble individual—a quality that feels especially refreshing in these times.

Shukla has so much to share from his experience in space, which is certain to inspire generations to dream boldly and aspire to reach for the stars.

Anjali Saxena,
On email.

Shukla's journey reminds us that success in science and space is rarely the result of sudden brilliance; rather, it is the product of sustained public investment, discipline and teamwork built over years.

In an age captivated by instant results and loud claims, this story makes a calm yet persuasive case for continuity, long-term funding and research training. Only by respecting time and process can such achievements become enduring milestones rather than rare exceptions.

S.M. Jeeva,
On email.

I read your article on Shukla and found it really fascinating. His life journey is thrilling, and his achievements deeply commendable.

I would like to request THE WEEK to bring out more such stories, as they can inspire and guide future generations.

Anil Deshpande,
On email.

Maritime ambition to national gain

A close reading of your article reveals a story less about new sea routes but more about the patience required to turn geography

into advantage ('Ocean therapy', December 21).

The promise of Eurasian and Arctic corridors lies not merely in speed, but in the discipline of aligning diplomacy with ports, skills and environmental stewardship at home. Without such balance, connectivity risks remaining aspirational. A sustained focus on institutional capacity and long-term planning would allow maritime ambition to mature into durable national gain.

Abbharna Barathi,
On email.

Difficult questions need answers

The verdict in Kerala's most polarising actor assault case came as a shock to me ('Low point', December 21). That said, there are many who feel that the full truth of the matter is yet to emerge. There are so many unanswered questions and lingering doubts in the public mind. Were there others involved? Was Dileep wrongly accused, as some believe?

These are difficult questions, but one that needs clarity—for only then can one find a sense of closure and peace.

Vandana Balagopal,
On email.

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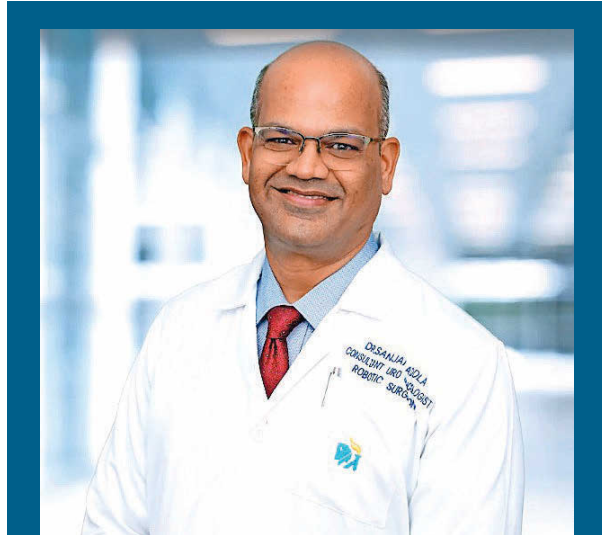


Prostate Cancer: Should YOU Be Worried?

Prostate cancer is increasingly being recognised as a major health concern among men in India. Once considered relatively uncommon, recent evidence suggests that prostate cancer is the commonest cancer in men above 65yrs. More concerning is the fact that a large proportion of Indian patients are still presenting with advanced disease at the time of diagnosis. At this stage, treatment becomes more complex and often requires a combination of therapies such as hormonal treatment, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or surgery sometimes all of them together.

The tragedy is that prostate cancer is one of the most easily curable cancers if detected early. In its early stages, prostate cancer is usually silent, causing no pain or urinary symptoms. When diagnosed before it has spread beyond the prostate, cure rates are extremely high and long-term outcomes are excellent. Localised prostate cancer, depending on how aggressive it is, can often be treated definitively with surgery or radiotherapy, offering patients a normal life expectancy.

Diagnosis has also entered a new era. Advanced MRI scans can now identify suspicious areas within the prostate, allowing doctors to target these lesions precisely during biopsy using real-time fusion techniques. This improves diagnostic accuracy and helps determine the true aggressiveness of the cancer. As a result, treatment can be personalised- ranging from careful observation for low-risk disease, to surgery or radiotherapy for higher-risk cancers. A particularly



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exciting development for select very low-risk patients is focal therapy, where only the cancerous portion of the prostate is treated using minimally invasive techniques, often as a day-care procedure without surgery.

Surgical treatment itself has evolved dramatically. With the advent of robotic-assisted prostate surgery, recovery has become faster, safer and predictable. Many patients are able to go home the very next day after surgery and return to routine daily activities within a week. Concerns that surgery necessarily leads to prolonged hospital stays or loss of quality of life are increasingly outdated. There has been a significant evolution in radiotherapy treatment moving from the standard photon therapy to the more modern proton therapy which has improved the efficacy at the same

time has lesser side effects.

There is an important lesson from Western countries such as the United States, where prostate cancer screening was made less stringent over the past decade. This has led to a worrying rise in advanced-stage cancers, making treatment more difficult and outcomes less favourable.

The message is clear: early detection saves lives. Men above the age of 45 should consider consulting a trained specialist for evaluation. A simple blood test- Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) can detect prostate cancer at a stage where cure is possible. Fear and hesitation should not stand in the way of health. Getting checked early is not a cause for anxiety, but a step toward reassurance, timely care, and a healthy future.

Dileep should not have been let off so easily; it is a shame. I believe he played a conspiratorial role. While the court order must be respected, it is really sad that the investigative agencies failed in doing their job. In fact, they messed it up.

I stand with the survivor, and if she believes the verdict and the process that led to it were flawed, higher courts should take note.

Also, people in Kerala have better things to do than fight over this issue. Yes, the survivor deserves our support and all morally conscious people should stand with her in her fight for justice, but let us try not to be overly emotional on this issue.

**Anup C.,
On email.**

I believe Dileep was framed in the case. Personal issues should never reach a point where they spiral out of control and become matters of public spectacle. Dileep should consider meeting the survivor and assuring her that he was not involved, while also expressing his support in uncovering the truth. The onus lies on him to do so. His admirers cannot simply assert that he is innocent or question the survivor's credibility.

The real culprits, whoever that be, should pay a heavy price.

**Sahaj Keshav,
On email.**

Deeply moving

The story of Caroline Casey and her bond with Kanchi, the elephant, was deeply moving ('The road to freedom', December 21). Seeing Caroline and her friend Andy perform a small puja for Kanchi at the site of her cremation was truly touching.

Elephants are such loving creatures. They understand so much—often things that even humans fail to grasp—and when treated with care, they respond with remarkable compassion. Elephants support one another in times of adversity and mourn their loved ones, much like humans do. Rarely has any other animal shown traits so closely resembling our own.

**Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.**

The story of Caroline and Kanchi is truly special and deserves to be retold again and again. Kanchi was her true extension. Riding an elephant for nearly 1,000km is no easy feat.

With laws on the domestication and use of elephants becoming increasingly stringent in Kerala, it is hard to imagine whether someone like Caroline would be permitted to ride a domesticated elephant in that manner today.

**Surabhi G.P.,
On email.**

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PTI

[My] biggest regret is [my relationship] with alcohol. Had I not drowned my life in alcohol, and had I more control over it in the initial stage, I would have achieved bigger things in life. Intoxication kills creativity. Alcohol was a big mistake of my life and continues to be the biggest regret of my life.

Piyush Mishra,
singer, actor, writer

When the prime minister speaks, the media and everyone else have to pay attention, but the facts should also come to light—where he has spoken, and in 11 years, how many infiltrators have been identified, and how many have been expelled. He should provide some information on that, instead of always criticising the Congress without reason.

Kumari Selja,
Congress leader, on Narendra Modi's comment that the Congress allowed infiltrators free rein for electoral gains

I feel confusion is very good. I feel confusion is the space where you get ideas. The greatest fertility lies in times of confusion. Confusion is the liminal space where ideas reside. Finality kills creativity. Confusion has the potential.

Prasoon Joshi,
poet, writer, lyricist

The original objective of MGNREGA [act] was guarantee, livelihood and security. This [new law] kills all three of these, just like the three bullets fired by Nathuram Godse that killed the father of the nation in 1948.

Derek O' Brien,
Trinamool Congress leader, on the new rural employment law—VB-G RAM G



AFP

The greatest thing that I managed to do over my career is that I have never got stuck in any mould. I broke each and every mould which I created to the best of my abilities. There were other contemporaries of mine who were doing similar kinds of roles, wearing similar kind of clothes. I quickly moved on.

Urmila Matondkar,
actor

MILESTONES



CHILD PRODIGY

Ganta Jishnu Aryan, 8, created a Guinness World Record by reciting 216 decimal places of the Golden Ratio in just 60 seconds. Aryan hails from a prominent political family in Andhra Pradesh.



AP

NEW CHIEF

The UN General Assembly has elected former Iraqi president Barham Salih as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Salih served as Iraq's president from 2018 to 2022, and will succeed Filippo Grandi, who has led the agency since 2016.



GOLDEN BOY

Vir Gahrotra, 16, scripted history by winning India's first-ever gold at the Pole and Aerial Sports World Championship in Budapest. Gahrotra, from Mumbai, competed in the Junior B Amateur Men (15-17 years) aerial silk category. Aerial silk is aerial acrobatics performed on suspended fabric.

WORD PLAY

Have you been going through **quiet cracking**? It is a situation where a person keeps doing his job, but feels unhappy privately.



The Maria von Trapp in Rahul Gandhi

Remember the song of the Nonnberg Abbey nuns about the novice Maria in *The Sound of Music*? “Out of focus and bemused”, “unpredictable as weather”, “as flighty as a feather”... They had “many a thing to tell her, many a thing she ought to understand. But how do you make her stay, and listen to all you say?... How do you keep a wave upon the sand”? In short, “How do you solve a problem like Maria?”

Replace the she in the song with he, and her with his. Bingo! You get what every Congress leader is saying about Rahul Gandhi—“out of focus and bemused”, “unpredictable as weather”, and “as flighty as a feather”. They have many a thing to tell him, many a thing he ought to understand; but how do they make him stay, and listen to all they say?

In short, how do you solve a problem like Rahul?

Among the first to feel so was Himanta Sarma. After several pleas a decade ago, he made Rahul stay for him, but couldn’t make him listen to all he had to say. Sarma found the young Gandhi keener on feeding his dog than on listening to what crises were dogging the Congress in Assam. Disgusted, Sarma quit the party, joined the BJP, and rose to be the Congress’s nemesis in Assam.

Mohammed Moquim, the latest, didn’t reach that far. For three years the poor Odisha ex-MLA had been seeking an audience with Rahul. Frustrated, he wrote to his mother about the “emotional disconnect felt by workers across India, who feel unseen and unheard”. No sooner had he made the letter public, than he was kicked out of the party.

Every opposition MP might have felt much the same during the closing days of the winter session of Parliament. The Narendra Modi regime was moving to remove the name of the revered Father of the Nation from modern India’s kindest-ever poor wel-

fare scheme, introduced by a Congress-led government—one that had saved millions of Bapu’s *daridra narayanas* (God in the poor) from hunger, one that had been the closest to Rahul’s mother’s heart, and one that the leftists had hailed for its bleeding-heart welfarism and the rightists had applauded for putting money in the pockets of the poor who began buying shop goods.

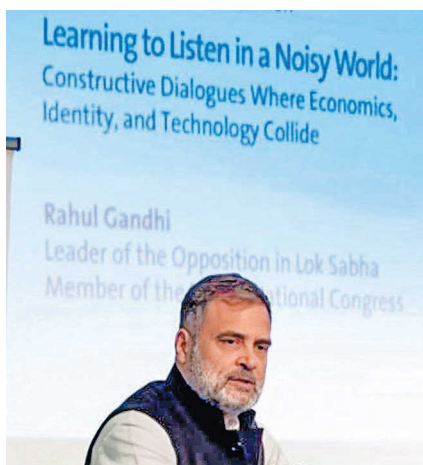
The outraged opposition MPs expected Rahul, as the hon’ble leader of the opposition, to come charging, lead the assault on the government, and defend the honour of the Mahatma. In vain. They couldn’t make him stay, or listen to all they say. Like Maria who was singing in the woods when she should have been praying in the chapel, he was riding a BMW bike in Munich instead of leading the charge in Parliament. When asked, partymen said sheepishly that he was discussing democracy and global climate responsibility with German think-tanks. Any better ideas?

There is more. Rahul had shaken the nation and the whole democratic world with his stellar show over the vote theft charge,

and had led a rally through Bihar. But when he found his allies had other campaign issues for the assembly polls, he simply scooted, only to surface towards the end of the poll campaign. By then most Congress voters had bolted.

Mend your ways, young man, like Maria did. The flighty-as-a-feather girl matured when she found the von Trapp kids needed love, care and attention, and she could provide them all those. Your mother had been providing all these to the Congress for the last quarter century and more. She is tired; she needs rest.

It’s time you stayed, and listened. Congressmen have many a thing to tell you, and many a thing you ought to understand. Give them your ear immediately. They have very little patience left.



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GRANDFATHERLY SPIRIT

Kerala's Education Minister V. Sivankutty has, over the past year and a half, consciously rebranded himself as a grandfatherly figure—'Manthri Appooppan' (literally, 'minister-grandfather'). In Malayalam, Santa Claus is known as 'Christmas Appooppan,' and Sivankutty appeared to channel that grandfatherly spirit with an impromptu act of generosity this season. Spotting a reporter curiously examining the sculpture of a cow on his desk, the minister promptly gifted it to her and posted the moment on social media, adding that the reporter would now have to build a cattle shed.



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Travel just 41 km from Hyderabad to Pochampally, the legendary town that found its genesis in the Bhoodan Movement. Today, it's globally renowned for its craft.

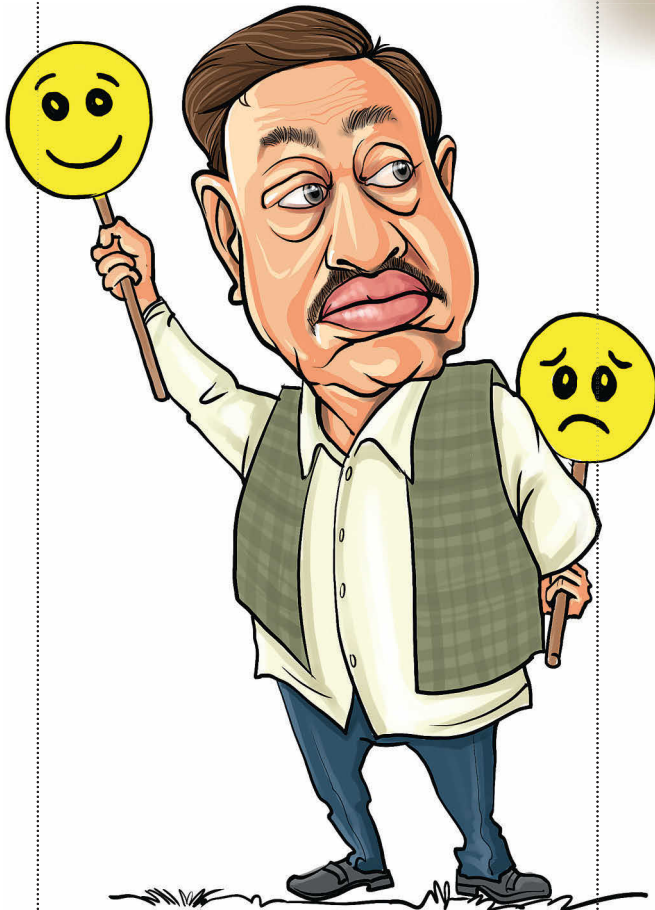
The Ikat Magic: Witness the celebrated Ikat weaving process, a GI-registered craft where bundled yarn is tie-dyed before weaving to create stunning, shimmering, multi-hued designs on silks and cottons.

Hands-on Culture: Learn the craft or simply acquire a piece of living history.



WIN-LOSE SITUATION

Former Union minister and senior BJP MP Narayan Rane is both happy and frustrated. His happiness comes from the fact that his elder son, Shiv Sena (Shinde faction) legislator Nilesh Rane, pocketed the Malvan and Kankavli municipal councils in the recent civic elections. The reason for his frustration is his younger son, Nitesh Rane—BJP leader and guardian minister of Sindhudurg district—who led the BJP campaign to capture the same councils. The brothers clashed frequently during the campaign, and the results have left Nilesh victorious and Nitesh defeated.

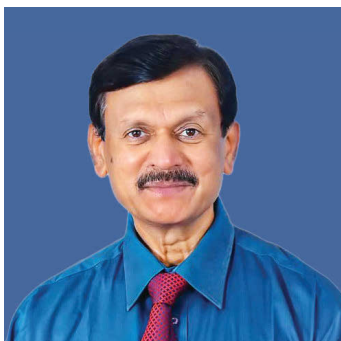


CALM IN THE COURT

The proceedings had barely started in the Supreme Court when a lawyer, breathless and flustered, launched into submissions. Justice Vikram Nath intervened, not with a rebuke, but a wellness prescription. “Pranayama. Deep breathing. Eleven times,” he advised. The lawyer, eager as ever, resumed too soon. “I said eleven,” Justice Nath reminded him gently. “We aren’t in a rush. Why are you?”

CHOICE WORDS

It is a battle of narratives in the Valley. Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah’s recent remarks—in English—praising the Modi government for allocating adequate funds to the Union territory have ruffled feathers back home. The PDP dubbed him a “good boy” on social media, while Jammu and Kashmir People’s Conference chief Sajad Gani Lone said that Omar praises the Centre in English, but switches to Kashmiri to criticise New Delhi.



Dr. Prakash K. Prabhu, M.B.B.S, MS Gen Surgery (Gen. Surg.) M.Ch., (Urology)
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KIDNEY STONE MANAGEMENT: Modern Strategies for a Growing Health Concern

Kidney stones are one of the most common disorders affecting the urinary tract, causing intense pain and significant discomfort. They occur when minerals and salts in the urine crystallize and form hard deposits inside the kidneys. Although they may vary in size from a grain of sand to several centimeters, even small stones can produce severe symptoms as they move through the urinary tract. With rising lifestyle risk factors such as dehydration, dietary changes, and obesity, the incidence of kidney stones has been increasing globally. Fortunately, modern advances in diagnosis and treatment have transformed the management strategy, providing safer and faster recovery options.¹

How Kidney Stones Form

Kidney stones develop when the balance of water, salts, and minerals in the urine is disturbed, causing excessive concentration of substances like calcium, oxalate, uric acid, or cystine. When these substances are not diluted enough, they crystallize and gradually grow into stones. The most common types are calcium oxalate stones, followed by uric acid, struvite, and cystine stones. Understanding stone composition is essential, as it influences treatment and long-term prevention.²

Risk Factors and Symptoms

Multiple factors increase the likelihood of stone formation, including inadequate fluid intake, hot climate leading to dehydration, high sodium or animal protein consumption, family history, metabolic disorders, recurrent urinary infections, and conditions such as obesity, gout, and diabetes. Certain medications, excessive supplements, and sedentary lifestyle also contribute.

The classic symptom is sudden, sharp pain in the back or side (flank pain), often radiating towards the lower abdomen or groin. The pain may come in waves and change intensity as the stone moves. Additional symptoms include:

- Blood in urine (pink or brown discoloration)
- Painful and frequent urination
- Nausea and vomiting
- Cloudy or foul-smelling urine
- Fever and chills when infection is present

Prompt evaluation is crucial, especially if fever accompanies symptoms, as it may indicate a life-threatening infection and requires urgent medical attention.³

Approaches to Management and Treatment

Management depends on the stone's size, location, composition, and severity of symptoms.

✓ Conservative / Medical Management

Most stones less than 5 mm pass spontaneously within a few days to weeks. Treatment includes:

- Increasing water intake to produce at least 2–2.5 liters of urine daily
- Pain relief medications such as NSAIDs
- Medical expulsive therapy using alpha-blockers to relax ureter muscles and ease passage of lower end ureteric stones only.
- Dietary changes and monitoring

✓ Extracorporeal Shock Wave Lithotripsy (ESWL)

ESWL is a non-invasive procedure that uses shock waves to break stones into tiny pieces that can pass naturally. It is suitable for stones less than 2 cm located in the kidney or upper ureter. Recovery is quick, and most patients return home the same day. It is useful if the stones are soft.

✓ Ureteroscopy (URS)

In ureteroscopy, a thin endoscope is passed through the urinary tract to locate the stone. A laser is used to fragment it, and pieces are removed with a basket if necessary. URS is ideal for mid or lower ureter stones or when ESWL fails.

In URS Treatment

RIRS Flexy Ureteroscopy with laser lithotripsy has taken a forefront in the management of renal pelvic and caliceal stones.

✓ Percutaneous Nephrolithotomy (PCNL)

For large, complex, or staghorn stones, PCNL remains the gold standard. A small incision is made on the back to directly access the kidney and remove the stone. Modern mini-PCNL techniques have reduced pain and hospital stay.²

✓ Open or Lap surgery in selective cases.

Prevention and Long-Term Care

Prevention plays a vital role because kidney stones tend to recur, with nearly half of patients developing another stone within five years. Effective preventive measures include:

- Drinking at least 8–10 glasses of water daily
- Limiting salt, red meat, and high-oxalate foods like spinach, nuts, and tea
- Consuming more citrus fruits to increase protective urinary citrate
- Maintaining healthy weight and regular physical activity
- Limiting alcohol and caffeine
- Following doctor-recommended diet based on stone type

A metabolic evaluation and periodic imaging can help monitor progress and prevent complications.⁴

Conclusion

Kidney stones can significantly impact quality of life, but early diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and preventive strategies can ensure excellent outcomes. With advances in minimally invasive surgery and heightened awareness about hydration and diet, managing kidney stones has become safer and more efficient than ever. By making simple lifestyle adjustments and seeking timely medical care, individuals can greatly reduce the risk of recurrence and protect their kidney health for the long term.



MEMORY & EMOTIONS

The temporal lobe is responsible for storing and retrieving memories and for processing emotions.

The temporal lobe

The temporal lobe is the part of the brain that stores music—not just the lyrics, but the emotional signatures glued to them. It is why you can forget a birthday but remember every word of an old Kishore Kumar classic. It is the lobe that hums even when you don't. It holds memory, language, rhythm, fear, nostalgia, and the entire soundtrack of your teenage years. If the frontal lobe is the editor and the parietal lobe the director, the temporal lobe is the DJ.

A few months ago, I met a 48-year-old musician named Edwin. He walked into my clinic looking like someone who had stepped straight out of an '80s album cover: shoulder-length hair, faded denim jacket, sunglasses indoors, and the gentle confidence of a man who had once performed for an audience that paid in applause and *samosas*. He had the kind of voice that sounded like it had lived inside a recording studio and the kind of laugh that belonged backstage.

"Doctor," he said, "my family thinks I am behaving strangely." Musicians say this often, so I kept a straight face. "What kind of



Your senses, memory, language and emotions are connected through the temporal lobe.

SENSES & VISUAL RECOGNITION

The temporal lobe processes sensory signals, especially sight and sound. It helps you recognise familiar faces and identify known objects.

SOURCE CLEVELAND CLINIC

LANGUAGE

The temporal lobe helps you understand words and form meaningful sentences. It also gives you the ability to understand the purpose of objects.



GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
ILLUSTRATIONS AI

strange?" I asked. "My wife says I repeat myself," he said, "and my daughter says I keep hearing music that isn't playing." He paused. "But, to be fair, both of them say that even when nothing is wrong." His wife, seated next to him, rolled her eyes. "He's been forgetting conversations," she said. "And last week, he told a waiter 'Thank you!.. in E flat."

The MRI clarified the mystery. A sizeable cavernous malformation, a small cluster of fragile blood vessels, sat snugly in the left temporal lobe. If unattended, these vessels could leak and irritate the surrounding tissue. It wasn't dangerous yet, but it explained his symptoms. The temporal lobe doesn't like being disturbed. It reacts the way musicians do when someone touches their instruments without permission.

I explained the anatomy. The temporal lobe sits on the side of the brain, behind the ear, and is responsible for processing sound, language, memory, and emotion. A centimetre here can change how you speak. A millimetre there can change how you hear your favourite song. The hippocampus hides within it, storing life's scenes like an old videotape. The amygdala sits nearby, assigning meaning and emotion to all those scenes. It is a crowded neighbourhood, and one wrong move can shift the tone of who you are. As we discussed surgery, Edwin kept humming '80s songs under his breath, bits of 'Take on Me', 'Eye of the Tiger', and, at one point, what sounded suspiciously like 'Chura Liya Hai Tumne Jo Dil Ko.' The temporal lobe, I realised, had excellent taste.

During surgery, when you gently get into the temporal lobe, the fibres shimmer like stretched guitar strings. The cavernoma sat quietly in the middle, a dark purple berry nestled in a field of pale tissue. Removing it requires patience, steady hands, and the ability to resist humming along to whatever song your patient had stuck in your head the previous day. I removed it in one piece, placed it on the tray, and for a moment, it looked like the world's most unappetising blueberry.

Edwin woke up beautifully, his speech intact, his memory sharper, his internal jukebox finally silent. When he came for a follow-up two weeks later, he looked different: his hair was tied up, his sunglasses were off, and he looked a little more grounded, a little less like an '80s rock god. "Doctor," he said, "for the first time in months, my head is quiet." His wife added, "And he hasn't sung in the shower this week." He shrugged. "I didn't say I was completely cured!"

The temporal lobe is where memory meets melody, where emotion meets language, where past meets present. It's the lobe that separates your ex from your current. It is the lobe that reminds us of who we were and helps us make sense of who we are. When something grows there, even something small, life can slip off-key. Remove it, and the music returns.

As he left my clinic, he turned back and said, "Doctor, when can I start singing again?"

I smiled. "Immediately."

His wife whispered, "Please don't encourage him."

And that, I suppose, is the real miracle of the temporal lobe. You can fix the brain, but the marriage remains a song and dance.

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PHOTOS SAILIL BERA

RELIVING THAT SHOCKING DAY

Shambari Tantu Bai points to the spot where she remembers seeing the dropped weapons

Weapons of mass confusion

People in Purulia remember the night it rained arms and ammunition

BY PREMA RAJARAM/PURULIA

It has been 30 years since weapons fell from the sky in West Bengal's Purulia district, yet some answers still hang in the air. "This matter cannot remain hidden; they came in a plane. The questions you're asking me should be asked of the government," says Acarya Anirvanananda Avadhuta, rector master of the Ananda Marga

Pracaraka Samgha, a spiritual organization police claim was the intended recipient of the weapons. "How did this plane from outside India land here? There was security. Did Ananda Marga have the power to do all this? We are [easy] to blame; give us a bad name and finish us."

On December 17, 1995, an Antonov aircraft carrying Danish mas-

termind Kim Davy, British national Peter Bleach and a five-member Latvian crew flew low and dropped 500 rifles, including AK-47s, 2.5 lakh rounds of ammunition, a dozen rocket launchers, anti-tank grenades and night-vision equipment—altogether worth half a million dollars at the time—between two hillocks in Purulia.

Job done, they flew to Thailand, where they reportedly had a great time. On the way back, they stopped to refuel in Madras. When they took off again, the Indian Air Force intercepted them and forced them



“The communists were against religion. Before Ananda Marga came here, there was no school or college; people were being exploited.

— Acarya Anirvanananda Avadhuta, rector master, Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha

to land in Mumbai, where they were apprehended. All except Davy were arrested, jailed and released over the next decade.

Davy had given officials the slip in Mumbai. “He knew he was going to be arrested, so on the pretext of paying the landing charges, he escaped to Pune, then Nepal and then beyond,” says then superintendent of police in the CBI Loknath Behera, who investigated the case. “The Latvians and Bleach got stuck, got arrested, and the plane was seized.”

Bleach was lodged in Kolkata’s Presidency jail for eight years; he was pardoned in 2004, after the British government under prime minister Tony Blair intervened.

But the question is, why were the weapons dropped? One theory was that the Ananda Margis—having been targeted for their beliefs—wanted to overthrow the Jyoti Basu government in West Bengal. In 1982, a mob had torched alive 16 of its *sadhus* and one *sadhvi* on the Bijon bridge in Kolkata in broad daylight. No arrests were made. Perhaps to avenge their deaths, it was speculated, the Ananda Margis needed arms.

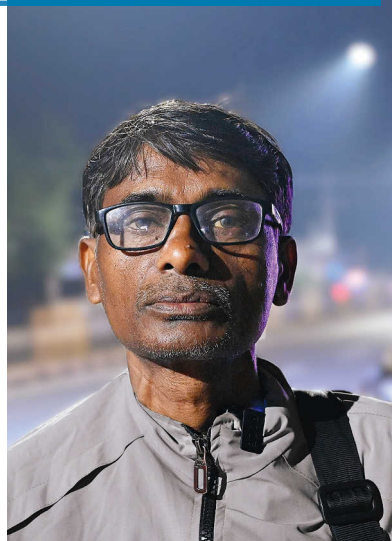
“Almost 50 *sadhus* have been killed. They (Marxist government) misunderstood Anand Marga and wanted to finish them,” says Acarya Anirvanananda. “The communists were against religion. Before Ananda Marga came here, there was no school or college; people were being exploited. If those people became enlightened, they would finish the exploiters. So, they thought they would boot out Ananda Marga.”

He adds that under prime minister Indira Gandhi, no one could publicly claim to be an Ananda Margi. “Ananda Marga property was demolished across the country. If *sadhus* were seen in traditional attire, they would be tortured,” he claims.

Notably, Ananda Margis distance themselves from prime suspect Davy, who police claim was a member of

“We did not open the boxes ourselves as we were scared; there was ‘explosives’ written on them. I told my family not to touch them.

— Subhash Tantu Bai, official eyewitness



“We informed the police about the arms at Khatanga because it was close to the Bihar border, and it would be harmful if [the weapons] fell into the wrong hands.

— Torit Banerjee, official eyewitness





DANGEROUS DROP

December 17, 1995



Karachi → Varanasi (refuelling) → Purulia (weapons drop) → Calcutta → Phuket, Thailand

December 21



Phuket → Madras (refuelling) → Mumbai (aircraft was intercepted and forced to land in Mumbai)

Weapons

Worth half a million dollars at the time

Total of

500 rifles

2.5 lakh rounds of ammunition



ARMS HAUL

AK-47/56 rifles

9mm pistols

9mm ammunition

Rocket launchers

Telescopic sight for rocket launchers

Dragunov 7.62 sniper rifles

Hand grenades

Anti-tank grenades

Parachutes

Night-vision equipment



GRAPHICS SUJESH K., SREEMANIKANDAN S.



Kim Davy

Escaped from Mumbai; found in Denmark in 2001.

Danish court rejected India's request for extradition citing risk of mistreatment



Peter Bleach

Given life sentence; spent eight years in Kolkata's Presidency jail

Granted presidential pardon in 2004 after intervention of UK government

Latvians

Given life sentence; spent around four years in jail

Granted remission in 2000



the organisation. "There is no confirmation and, even if he is, he could be a follower. Anyone could be a follower," says Acarya Anirvanananda. "Why hasn't he been caught till now? To hide the facts, the government did this."

Behera disagrees. "We proved Davy is an Ananda Margi," he says. "Another three people who were chargesheeted for conspiracy were Ananda Margis. Of course, Bleach was not an Ananda Margi, nor was the Latvian crew. But the question was, why were the [weapons] lying near their (Ananda Margi) headquarters? There were a lot of documents related to their involvement. We chargesheeted the accused on that basis. We proved that they were the people who wanted the arms."

Bleach's 1997 letter from jail to David Belgrove, the then second secretary in the British High Commission in Calcutta, mentioned a meeting in Bangkok. It was between Davy, a local financier of the arms deal named Mak, and Randy or Swami Suryananda Avadhuta of Ananda Marga. Randy absconded, but other suspects from Ananda Marga were rounded up.

The investigation spanned more than 40 countries, formally and informally. The CBI sent letters rogatory to 13 countries, including the UK, Bangladesh and Thailand. Based on the evidence gathered, witnesses from the UK deposed before the Calcutta court. The CBI took 90 days to chargesheet the accused, while investigation continued.

Davy was found in Copenhagen in 2001; his mother was unwell. The Danish government initially denied Davy's presence. When the CBI provided evidence, a Danish court rejected India's request to extradite Davy, saying he risked being mistreated in India.

And so it stands.

Back to that eventful night. Torit Banerjee was one of two official eyewitnesses who helped investigators, including Interpol, and the central and state police. "We found a parachute with weapons like AK-47, AK-56, 9mm pistols, hand grenades, and material to wash guns. There was also a rocket launcher, which people took home on their shoulders," says Banerjee. He adds that the Ananda Marga headquarters was about 5km from the spot where the arms were dropped. "Apart from us (he and the other eyewitness, Subhash Tantu Bai), no one informed the police. Many took [the weapons] home. We informed the police about the arms dropped at Khatanga [village] because it was close to the Bihar border, and it would be harmful if [the weapons] fell into the wrong hands."

Banerjee says that several villagers buried the weapons in their homes, hid them in wells and some even dismantled them. Despite police measures to recover the weapons, some were sold.

Tantu Bai, the other official eyewitness, saw the weapons after his mother told him about something strange. She was washing vessels at

Bleach was not an Ananda Margi, nor was the Latvian crew. But the question was, why were the [weapons] lying near their (Ananda Margi) headquarters? There were a lot of documents related to their involvement.

— Loknath Behera, then SP in the CBI

The world of Bleach

THE WEEK published the story of Peter Bleach in its October 27, 1996 issue. Written by journalist-author Jon Stock, the exclusive article recounted the dramatic events surrounding the Purulia arms drop of December 17, 1995.

At the centre of the story was Peter Bleach, a charismatic and controversial Englishman who was arrested and lodged in Calcutta's Presidency jail for eight years.

Bleach's life reads like a spy thriller. Raised in Yorkshire, he joined the British Army Intelligence Corps, but was discharged early because, as per his army report, "He was lazy and didn't turn up to work."

He then spent a decade in the army in Zimbabwe, rising to the rank of major while working in the prison service. During this time, he built close ties with former SAS (Special Air Service) members and intelligence operatives, building a network that would shape his later career.

After returning to Britain, Bleach set up a private detective agency, became active in Conservative Party politics, and earned a reputation as both charming and reckless.

But he still wasn't satisfied with life, and embarked on his own career as an arms dealer. In 1995, he was approached by a Danish intermediary, Kim Davy, with a proposal to supply a large quantity of arms to an unspecified destination in the Indian subcontinent.

Bleach later claimed that he quickly realised the deal was potentially linked to terrorism. He claimed to have informed Britain's Defence Export Sales Organisation and kept British authorities updated. He was allegedly told that his information was being passed on to appropriate agencies. However,

British officials said he had been clearly warned not to proceed.

Despite this, Bleach continued. He helped procure an Antonov-26 aircraft, recruited Latvian crew and arranged for weapons to be purchased in eastern Europe. On December 17, the aircraft flew from Karachi, refuelled in India, and dropped the arms over Purulia before continuing to Thailand.

Astonishingly, the aircraft passed through Indian airspace without interception. It was only when they returned on December 21—they refuelled in Madras and then took off for Karachi—

that the Indian Air Force intercepted and forced them to land in Mumbai.

Bleach and the Latvians were arrested, but Davy escaped and vanished. This fuelled speculation that he might have had intelligence backing.

Bleach said that the Indian authorities had been forewarned, but that bureaucratic failures and miscommunication allowed the drop to

proceed. A crucial warning letter from New Delhi to West Bengal reportedly arrived too late.

Critics, though, argue that Bleach was acting primarily out of financial desperation and naivety—he was trying to protect himself by partially informing authorities while pushing ahead with a lucrative deal. He had apparently celebrated in Phuket after the drop and had failed to alert authorities again. The CBI believed Davy was the mastermind and linked the weapons to the Ananda Marga sect, though these allegations were contested.

Bleach was awaiting trial when THE WEEK published the story. He believed he was being made a scapegoat to cover institutional failures. Whether he was an intelligence asset gone wrong or just an overconfident arms dealer, the mission he took on remains one of India's most baffling security breaches. **1**



AFP

a nearby pond at dawn when she saw a parachute on a tree and a box that she mistook for an elephant. They had heard a loud sound, like a bomb, the previous night. As Khatanga had dense tree cover and there was a fear of loitering tigers, the villagers did not step out. "The police came immediately and began recovery," he says. "We did not open the boxes ourselves as we were scared; there was 'explosives' written on them. I told my family not to touch them."

His sister-in-law Shambari also saw the boxes, but did not give a statement to the police. "We did not see anything as it was packed and we villagers didn't understand," she says. "We got scared. The police came and the villagers ran away."

The weapons were dropped in the villages of Jhalda, Khatanga, Belamu and Maramu. The main drop zone was apparently an Ananda Margi building called 'The White House,' which investigators believe Davy and his team got wrong.

One of the reasons for this could be the light outside Deepak Singh's house in a neighbouring village. A lot of people had gathered there after the funeral of his five-year-old



GETTY IMAGES

daughter. Singh was popular in the village and the turnout was large. Banerjee was there, too, and that is why he remembers the time of the weapons drop—11-11:30pm.

Says Singh: “It was a cold winter day and this took place in the middle of the night, when no one is usually found outside. But everyone could hear the noise at 11:30pm. There was a bright light outside my house as there were 500 to 700 people there. Also, labourers were working on a rail line, and that light was on, too. That could have been mistaken for a signal.”

Singh says that, even in that state, he helped recover several weapons from villagers. “We asked villagers to give arms and we kept them at Jhalda police station,” he says. “There were a

lot of police raids asking people to return arms.”

Like Singh, All India Forward Bloc leader Bindeshwar Mahato—a former MLA—went to several localities to convince villagers to return the weapons. “I went with the police and the district magistrate,” he says. “Some villagers had buried the guns and they were scared. We explained the situation and 15 to 20 guns were recovered. There were discussions that the place was an Ananda Marga locality and their White House was the target, but there is no proof.”

Like others who saw the guns, Mahato, too, wonders how the case did not reach its logical conclusion despite the involvement of global investigating agencies.

Some said the weapons came to Purulia to be sold, some said they were to finish off the CPI(M) and some said they were dropped to create tension in the area. Now, 30 years later, it is still a mystery.

—Avijit Chowdhury,
freelance journalist

UNSOLVED MYSTERY

Police with arms recovered from the drop sites; (left) Peter Bleach at the Calcutta High Court in 2003

Says Avijit Chowdhury, a freelance journalist: “We saw the weapons and even held them. There were so many theories and yet no truth. Some said the weapons came to Purulia to be sold, some said they were to finish off the CPI(M) and some said they were dropped to create tension in the area. Now, 30 years later, it is still a mystery.”

Banerjee and Tantu Bai, the two official eyewitnesses, were promised jobs for their help to the police. Instead, they were given a ₹10,000 cash reward each, which they refused. “The police, the CBI and even [prime minister] Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to the spot and spoke about jobs. I wrote exams and got a (government) job on merit,” says Banerjee. “We kept writing letters and we had thick files; nothing happened.”

For 10 years they ran from pillar to post, got recommendations from high-level officers at the Centre and the state, and gave the necessary entrance exams. But, no luck.

Perhaps that is another mystery that will never be solved. ❏

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

As Bangladesh enters another turbulent transition amid rising anti-India sentiment, New Delhi must revive its old playbook of substantive reengagement

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

Half a century ago, a plot to kidnap Indian high commissioner Samar Sen in Dhaka was foiled by the timely intervention of his security personnel. A leaked Wikileaks cable describes what happened on that fateful morning on November 26, 1975, when six young men, disguised as visitors, pulled out revolvers and moved towards Sen as he stepped out of his car in front of the Indian High Commission in Dhanmondi, an upscale neighbourhood. Security guards rushed in, exchanged fire and secured Sen, beating back the assailants.

Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, the first wave of anti-India sentiment began to emerge in Bangladesh. The coups and counter-coups that finally brought General Ziaur Rahman to power gave fresh ammunition to a section of the post-liberation leadership—consisting largely of leftist groups and radical freedom fighters—to vent against pro-India policies and the country's alleged influence on Bangladesh's foreign

policy and politics. This sentiment resulted in Zia's consolidation of power, opening space for all parties, including Islamist outfits such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and secular parties like the Bangladesh Awami League, while realigning Dhaka's foreign policy to improve diplomatic ties with the Islamic world as well as Islamabad.

For the ordinary Bangladeshi, resentment towards India continued to grow, driven by high prices of Indian goods, excessive use of water from rivers flowing into Bangladesh and a trade imbalance in India's favour. New Delhi, in turn, was upset with the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh and insurgent groups on its borders finding safe havens on Bangladeshi soil.

It took deft statecraft by prime minister Morarji Desai and Zia to turn hostility into constructive

BLIND RAGE

Dhaka has witnessed widespread anti-India protests after the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent activist





AP

engagement. Zia had barely shed his military uniform when he visited New Delhi in December 1977, setting the stage for a friendship that brought some cheer to people on both sides. A joint communiqué noted that the historic Farakka Treaty on the sharing of Ganga water, signed in November, was made possible “because of the spirit of mutual accommodation and understanding shown by the leaders of the two countries”. It also listed a string of efforts to improve relations, including the creation of a joint commission on irrigation water allocation, boundary disputes, proposals for the exchange of small enclaves and even the sale of cement, urea fertiliser and other products to India. Beyond business, Zia’s public gesture of visiting the *samadhi* of Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat and the Dargah-e-Sharif of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer struck a chord.

Equal warmth was displayed during Desai’s visit to Dhaka in 1979, when he underlined good neighbourly policies as the way forward for the two countries bound together by geography, tradition and culture. Interestingly, it was during this phase of de-escalation that India facilitated the return of Sheikh Hasina, living in exile after her father’s assassination, to Dhaka after she was elected president of the Bangladesh Awami League.

“Over time, successive regimes have used the anti-India sentiment for political gains, yet chose engagement over isolation,” says Asif Bin Ali, a doctoral fellow at the Georgia State University. “The lessons have been foundational. While Bangladesh’s internal politics can be adversarial towards India, its governance cannot be, because economic and regional stability are intertwined with functional ties with Delhi.”

In the last 50 years, Bangladesh’s relationship with India has suffered three distinct phases of animosity



LESSONS FROM THE PAST

President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh (left) being received by president Neelam Sanjiva Reddy in New Delhi on December 19, 1977, when he came to India for a two-day visit; (top right) Muhammad Yunus (in the middle), who heads the interim government, offers funeral prayers for Sharif Osman Hadi

running through regime changes: Zia’s takeover, Begum Khaleda Zia’s government and the incumbent interim government run by Muhammad Yunus. The outcomes of the first two ranged from pragmatic cooperation to deepening ties. The outcome of the third will stand the test of time and reflect the vision of its leaders as Bangladesh races towards parliamentary elections on February 12.

After Zia’s assassination in 1981, the Delhi–Dhaka relationship remained largely dormant until Sheikh Hasina signed the Ganga water treaty

in 1996 with prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda. A red carpet was rolled out for Gowda during his first visit to Dhaka, celebrating the “soft diplomacy” of his foreign minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, extending beyond



the Ganga. Hasina signed the peace treaty on the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1997 to curb insurgent activity and ease long-standing tensions.

The pragmatic relationship between the two countries continued into the 1990s, but India resisted the temptation to pick favourites. While it enjoyed close ties with Hasina, it continued engaging the opposition. “Our outreach was to every section of society. We remained friendly with whoever was in opposition,” says a former Indian official posted in Bangladesh.

Ironically, it was Hasina’s tilt towards India that triggered the second anti-India wave and brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to power in 2001. Yet, India’s pragmatic approach paid dividends. Despite tensions between the two countries, the first high-profile visit to Dhaka was by Brajesh Mishra, then national security adviser to prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who arrived

with an explicit message that New Delhi would engage Bangladesh regardless of who occupied power.

Bridging the distrust, however, was not easy. Anti-India elements argued that Delhi would always favour the Awami League. “Commerce was high on the agenda and negotiations began on export items,” says an official, “but the talks collapsed over rules of origin as Bangladesh sought to export goods not even manufactured locally, routing Chinese products into India.” The breakdown of trust between Dhaka and Delhi created a second opening for Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, say security experts, to expand its footprint. Bangladesh then entered a dark phase under the BNP-Jamaat coalition, further restricting Delhi’s room for manoeuvre.

Delhi’s options are again limited with the interim government holding power in Dhaka since August 2024. “Since it is an interim government,

there is no time for major initiatives,” says a senior diplomat. “At the same time, substantive engagement should begin with successive governments.”

The challenge, again, is the systematic rise of anti-India sentiment. While the exclusion of the Awami League and Hasina’s exile in India is seen as the primary reason for prolonged unease in the relationship, often bordering on suspicion and anger, there is more to it than meets the eye. Attacks on the Indian High Commission, media houses and cultural institutions ahead of the elections demonstrate New Delhi’s narrowing options.

“The direction of anger towards the Awami League and India has become a characteristic feature of post-2024 politics, often the two becoming synonymous, serving the purpose of both Islamists and their patrons,” says Smruti Pattanaik, research fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

“Such insinuations against India and the Awami League free the interim regime of responsibility and accountability for the large-scale arson that followed.”

Disengagement, meanwhile, has its own dangers. While there may be little substantive content in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, there is significant mischief potential. Historically, Pakistan has exploited anti-India sentiment through Islamist networks and insurgent proxies. That risk, Indian officials believe, has not disappeared.

Therefore, while the catalysts pushing the Delhi-Dhaka relationship to the edge may be different this time, the answer may still lie in revisiting Delhi’s old Bangladesh playbook. New Delhi needs to engage the Bangladeshi political spectrum for precisely the reasons it finds it difficult to do so. Students who led the 2024 protests are now organised under the National Citizen Party. The Jamaat’s street muscle and mass mobilisation capacity have been demonstrated repeatedly. Finally, the BNP’s primary seat in the opposition makes it a contender for the Awami League’s space when elections are held. “Given Bangladesh’s grim history of political transitions marked by violence, broad engagement will leave the door open for sharing common concerns,” says Ali.

Once a new government is elected in Dhaka and rapprochement becomes a priority, India has a range of instruments to build popular goodwill in Bangladesh. “India could lift



SALIL BERA

restrictions on visa issuance as well as transshipment rights through Indian seaports. Both countries could also revive negotiations towards a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement,” says Constantino Xavier, senior fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi. “To counter negative perceptions, India might also announce a new package of lines of credit and grants to support health and education projects. India can also announce a unilateral extension of all rights under the Ganga water treaty, set to expire in 2026.” Xavier believes the most symbolic measure would be India acceding to Bangladeshi demands on the Teesta water and renewing the 2011 package vetoed by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Members of the West Bengal Hindu Jagran Manch protest near the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata against the killing of a Hindu youth in Bangladesh

Internal politics has always influenced cross-border ties. With West Bengal holding assembly polls in 2026, the BJP’s performance could pave the way for new economic connectivity and bilateral water and energy initiatives. Politics aside, it is imperative for Delhi and Dhaka to engage on economic issues.

Each year, lakhs of people cross the India-Bangladesh border, including students, patients, traders, pilgrims, tourists and families living across the divide. Delhi and Dhaka cannot afford further delay. For nearly two years, the world’s first and eighth most populous countries have seen no significant dialogue between policy researchers, academics or industrialists. “Think tanks, universities and economic actors need to do a better job of sustaining track-two dialogues, not just when all is well but especially when the Indian government is facing difficulties with neighbouring countries,” says Xavier. “Dhaka, too, has been missing in action.”

While there may be little substantive content in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, there is significant mischief potential. Historically, Pakistan has exploited anti-India sentiment through Islamist networks and insurgent proxies.

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Mrs. Latha Kumari
Retd. Principal,
Consultant
Academician

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Uphaar to Goa: India's unlearned safety lessons

BY KANU SARDA

Twenty-eight years is a lifetime in public policy. It is long enough to build institutions, correct mistakes and ensure that a tragedy never repeats. But in India, the Uphaar Cinema fire of 1997, which took 59 lives, has aged only in memory, no lessons learned. From a packed cinema hall in South Delhi to a crowded nightclub in Goa, the script remains eerily similar—illegal structures, missing fire clearances, blocked exits, delayed emergency response and promises made after tragedy.

What sets Uphaar apart is not just the magnitude of the tragedy, but the doggedness of those who would not let the system forget. After years of litigation, the Supreme Court in 2015 imposed a ₹60 crore fine on the Ansal brothers—Sushil and Gopal—who owned the cinema. The court directed that the money be used to create a trauma centre in Delhi. The logic was simple—had emergency trauma care been swift and specialised, many lives could have been saved.

After a decade of what looked like inaction, the Association of Victims of Uphaar Tragedy (AVUT) approached the apex court again. But, the Delhi government informed the bench it had already fulfilled the spirit of the order by setting up three hospitals. Its affidavit said the money, meant for a trauma centre in Dwarka, was spent on facilities at the Sanjay Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Mangolpuri, the Satyawadi Raja Harish Chander Hospital in Narela and the Siraspur Hospital. However, none of these hospitals is operational today.

Moreover, AVUT argued, none of them was a trauma centre. AVUT representative Neelam Krishnamoorthy told THE WEEK that a trauma centre was a specialised and time-critical facility. “Trauma centres integrate emergency medicine, surgery, burn





KRITAJNA NAIK

We fought relentlessly, and the courts did lay down safety guidelines for cinema halls. But my plea has always been that safety cannot stop there. Unfortunately, despite all these years, I feel we have failed in that larger mission. The lessons of Uphaar should have applied to every public space, not just cinemas.

—Neelam Krishnamoorthy

Neelam and her husband, Shekhar, lost their children in the Uphaar fire

care, neurology and rapid transport protocols in a way regular hospitals do not,” she said. “And that’s precisely why AVUT had insisted upon a trauma centre, and not a general hospital.”

During the Uphaar fire, victims were shunted from one hospital to another, wasting precious minutes. The tragedy highlighted how India’s capital lacked an integrated trauma response system. Almost three decades later, it is beside the point for the state to argue that there are hospitals. As AVUT argued in court, availability is not the same as preparedness, and proximity is futile without speed and specialisation.

Neelam’s husband, Shekhar Krishnamoorthy, also highlighted another aspect of the 2015 court order. “Land was supposed to be given by the then Delhi Vidyt Board [for the trauma centre], but it isn’t clear whether the land was given or not,” he said.

Indeed, the way AVUT has been systematically sidelined is telling. While it may have provided the moral and legal impetus behind the case, it was not consulted on the use of funds, nor did it feature in any planning.

For Neelam and Shekhar, who lost their children Unnati and Ujjwal in the fire, the struggle has stretched across 28 years of courtrooms, appeals, diluted sentences and

administrative inertia. Justice came slow. Reform not at all.

That failure was laid bare in the Goa nightclub fire. The litany of violations revealed by the preliminary investigation—the lack of a valid fire NOC and working fire alarm or suppression system, inadequate emergency exits and escape routes—mark it as a textbook case of regulatory collapse.

To survivors and relatives of victims, the tragedy seems a result of negligence rather than an accident. “My brother worked there,” said Maria Fernandes—he died in the blaze. “He always said the place was overcrowded and unsafe. There were days when exits were blocked with furniture. We complained, but no one listened.” The owners of the club—Luthra brothers, Saurabh and Gaurav—have been arrested and cases registered for culpable negligence.

The Goa government has also ordered a statewide audit of nightclubs, bars and enclosed public venues, and sealed several establishments without valid fire clearances.

Safety activists point to how fire audits are conducted only after tragedies, as routine inspections remain sporadic. “The law is clear,” said a former fire safety official, who requested anonymity. “But enforcement is weak. Licences are renewed mechanically and violations overlooked until lives are lost.”

The relatives of the deceased said accountability should go beyond the venue owners. As the mourning continues in Goa, this fire has reopened an uncomfortable national conversation about public safety in places of entertainment. About the pattern: rules exist, warnings are ignored and compliance is enforced only after tragedy strikes.

To the families, justice will be more than arrests; it will mean a guarantee that no other evening of fun will result in death.



“Every time a tragedy of this nature occurs, I relive everything all over again,” said Neelam. “When we launched this fight, it was never only about justice for our children. It was to ensure no other parent loses a child simply because somebody decided to compromise on safety laws. No parent deserves to get their child’s body because they went out to watch a film or went out for an evening. I know the pain of living without your children.”

She added that they believed that if they could prevent even one such tragedy from occurring, it would be a true tribute to their children and a service to society. “We fought relentlessly, and the courts did lay down safety guidelines for cinema halls,” she said. “But my plea has always been that safety cannot stop there. Unfortunately, despite all these years, I feel we have failed in that larger mission. The lessons of Uphaar



should have applied to every public space, not just cinemas.”

Fires in hospitals, coaching centres, commercial complexes and residential buildings across India continue to reveal the same truth: fire safety exists largely as paperwork.

After Uphaar, India rewrote building codes, strengthened fire norms and promised stricter inspections.



THEN AND NOW

Uphaar after the fire in 1997; (below) the Goa nightclub which caught fire recently. The two cases had similar regulatory failures



Fire NOC

- ✓ **What it is:** A fire NOC is a mandatory clearance from the state fire department confirming compliance with fire-safety norms.
- ✓ **Who needs it:** Required for all public buildings—cinema halls, hospitals, malls, restaurants, coaching centres, clubs, and event venues—before operations begin.
- ✓ **What it certifies:** Unobstructed emergency exits, working alarms and detection systems, extinguishers, suppression mechanisms, marked evacuation routes, safe wiring and access for fire tenders.
- ✓ **Validity:** Issued for a limited period (typically 1-3 years) and must be renewed after fresh inspections; structural changes require re-approval.
- ✓ **Why it matters:** A fire NOC is a life-saving safeguard, not a formality—its absence often signals skipped inspections, ignored violations and compromised safety.



But enforcement was never institutionalised. Fire departments remain understaffed. Inspections are routine rituals. Penalties are negligible. Criminal liability is rare.

Most important, there is no national trauma response framework that integrates fire safety, emergency transport and specialised care.

The Uphaar case also brought into

sharp focus how the judicial system struggles to deal with mass negligence. While conviction was secured, sentences were softened progressively. Custodial punishment gave way to fines. Accountability thinned with each appeal. For future violators, the message was unmistakable: compliance is optional, consequences negotiable.

Uphaar should have been India's fire safety watershed. Instead, it turned out to be a memorial without

muscle. Meanwhile, new fires continue to add names to a list that should have frozen in 1997.

As long as trauma centres are substituted with general hospitals, inspections follow funerals and victims have to fight for decades to enforce court orders, tragedies like Goa will not be aberrations.

Twenty-eight years on, Uphaar's lesson remains painfully intact, waiting for a system willing to finally learn it. 🔴



Mr Sachidanand Upadhyay
Managing Director

Lord's Mark Industries Puts India on the Global MedTech Map

In India's fast-evolving healthcare landscape, few companies have mirrored the country's transformation as compellingly as Lord's Mark Industries Ltd. (LMIL). Over 27 years, LMIL has evolved from a promising venture into one of India's most future-ready business groups—one that stands at the intersection of healthcare innovation, technology, and sustainable growth.

At a time when global healthcare is being reshaped by the demand for affordability and accessibility, LMIL has aligned itself with India's national ambition—to emerge as a global MedTech and diagnostics powerhouse. With a growing presence across biotechnology, medical diagnostics, and advanced medical devices, the company has built an integrated ecosystem that brings together research, manufacturing, and digital health intelligence.

Aligning Vision with National Priorities

The company's trajectory reflects a rare clarity of purpose: to use technology to democratize healthcare. Over the last decade, LMIL has directed nearly all of its innovation and investment into healthcare, building a model that combines India's strengths in R&D, engineering, and cost efficiency with global standards of precision and compliance.

Its growth aligns closely with the country's Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) missions. LMIL's facilities comply with US FDA, ISO 13485:2016, WHO-GMP, and CDSCO standards—placing it among the select few Indian MedTech manufacturers trusted globally for quality, reliability, and scalability.

By securing US FDA registration in 2025 for its surgical consumables, orthopedic supports, and hygiene products, the company joined the elite club of Indian manufacturers catering to regulated markets such as the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. This milestone not only validates its technological depth but also reinforces India's growing influence in the global healthcare supply chain.

Healthcare Innovation as Core Strategy

While diversification remains a strategic strength, healthcare has become LMIL's defining identity. The company's innovations span diagnostics, genomics, MedTech, and preventive health, each contributing to a larger mission of transforming care delivery.

Its Renalys ecosystem represents one of India's most ambitious healthcare initiatives—an AI-powered kidney care platform that combines early disease detection, smart dialysis machines, and analytics-based patient monitoring. Designed for accessibility, it addresses the gap in chronic kidney disease treatment, especially in rural areas.

In the realm of genomics, One DNA has pioneered saliva-based genetic testing in India, offering individuals insights into predispositions for diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disorders, and diabetes. This shift from curative to predictive medicine reflects LMIL's long-term focus on personalized and preventive healthcare.

The company's collaboration with IIT Bombay has led to the development of advanced testing technologies—from sickle cell detection to oral cancer screening using optical spectroscopy—capable of delivering near-perfect accuracy at the point of care. These innovations exemplify India's growing capacity to develop homegrown solutions for complex healthcare challenges.

Building India's MedTech Manufacturing Powerhouse

At the operational core of LMIL lies a state-of-the-art manufacturing hub in Dadra & Nagar Haveli, integrating five divisions across surgical, rehabilitation, orthopedic, and hygiene products. Equipped with automated machinery, advanced QC systems, and real-time logistics tracking, the plant demonstrates the sophistication of modern Indian manufacturing.

Every process—from material weaving and adhesive coating to product validation—adheres to strict global norms. The result is a product portfolio that meets both clinical precision and cost-efficiency benchmarks demanded by international markets.

LMIL's forward momentum continues with plans to establish Asia's largest

biochemistry reagents facility by 2027, followed by the continent's largest medical device manufacturing plant in 2028. These facilities are designed to scale innovation—enabling India to not only meet domestic healthcare demands but also serve as an export hub for the world.

To support these expansions, LMIL is exploring a global capital raise and dual listing on NASDAQ and the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE). This international strategy underscores the company's confidence in India's ability to compete at par with established MedTech nations such as the US, Japan, and Germany.



Recognition on the Global Stage

LMIL's achievements have not gone unnoticed internationally. In 2025, the company received the 'Innovation in Diagnostic Devices' Award at the Indo-European Business Forum (IEBF) in London, held at the House of Lords. The recognition marked LMIL as the first Indian diagnostics company to receive the honour—a symbolic endorsement of India's rise as a source of innovation rather than imitation.

The event also reflected a broader shift in global perception: Indian companies like LMIL are no longer viewed as manufacturing outsourcers but as original innovators capable of developing, producing, and exporting high-precision MedTech solutions to the world.

LMIL has also achieved a defining milestone in India's med-tech landscape by receiving the license to manufacture Class C World's First AI-Based Smart

Hemodialysis Machines from the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), a critical step that significantly strengthens the country's self-reliance in life-saving healthcare technology.

Sustainability, Scale, and Social Purpose

What distinguishes LMIL is its ability to scale with conscience. Sustainability underpins its operations—from eco-efficient manufacturing practices and waste minimization to the use of predictive logistics systems that reduce carbon footprint through optimized routing and packaging.

Every step, from R&D to dispatch, is governed by a six-step Quality Excellence Framework, ensuring consistency, safety, and continuous improvement. This operational discipline has helped LMIL integrate speed with reliability, a balance critical in global supply chains.

But beyond infrastructure and innovation, LMIL's true strength lies in its purpose-driven culture—one that sees healthcare not just as a business but as a societal responsibility. By focusing on affordability and access, the company is aligning commercial success with human impact.

The Road Ahead

As LMIL expands its international operations through its U.S. subsidiary, Lords Mark Global LLC, and deepens its presence across South Asia, its role as a MedTech catalyst for emerging economies is becoming increasingly evident.

Its vision for the coming decade is clear—to make India not only a manufacturing base but a global center for medical innovation and technology exports.

By combining R&D excellence, regulatory rigor, and a deeply human approach to healthcare, Lords Mark Industries is proving that India's next global export won't just be technology—it will be trust.

INTERVIEW

Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, chief minister, Himachal Pradesh

Our politics is organisation-driven now

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA AND BADAR BASHIR

SUKHVINDER SINGH SUKHU used to run a milk counter in Chhota Shimla, a pine-covered suburb of Shimla, to finance his studies. He started at the lowest rungs of the Congress and rose through the ranks to become chief minister two decades later. With the Congress now re-wiring its organisation, he is betting on the party's revamped state machinery to retain power in the hill state. In an exclusive interview, Sukhu talks about his government's key challenges, the factionalism in the party, the friction with the Centre and the state's financials. Excerpts:

Q What are your government's achievements, and what remains your priority?

A From day one, our government had just one slogan: system change. Initially, many within the system said it was impossible. They believed governance had to continue the way it had for the last 40 years—slow, rigid and disconnected from people's realities. We challenged that thinking. System change means questioning outdated rules, changing laws that harm ordinary citizens and making governance responsive. Earlier, files would move endlessly between departments. We broke that inertia. Decision-making has become faster and more humane.

For instance, during the recent disaster, officials initially told me that under existing rules, only ₹1.5 lakh could be given to families whose houses were destroyed. I asked them a simple question: 'Can anyone build even one room with that amount?' We changed the rule.

We announced the largest disaster relief package in the country: ₹7 lakh for house construction and ₹1 lakh for essentials for each affected family. We also arranged rent support and food assistance. This is what system change looks like.

Q Factionalism is often cited as a major challenge within the Congress, including in Himachal Pradesh.

A I don't agree that factionalism currently exists in Himachal Pradesh. There can be differences of opinion; that is natural in any democratic party. But organised factions do not exist today. When I became chief minister, there was turbulence. Some leaders were over-ambitious, others were dissatisfied because everyone cannot be accommodated as ministers. That led to desertions. But that phase is over.

Today, there is stability. Compare this with the BJP, which is divided into multiple groups and requires frequent intervention from central leaders. In the Himachal Congress, disagreements exist, but factionalism does not define governance anymore.

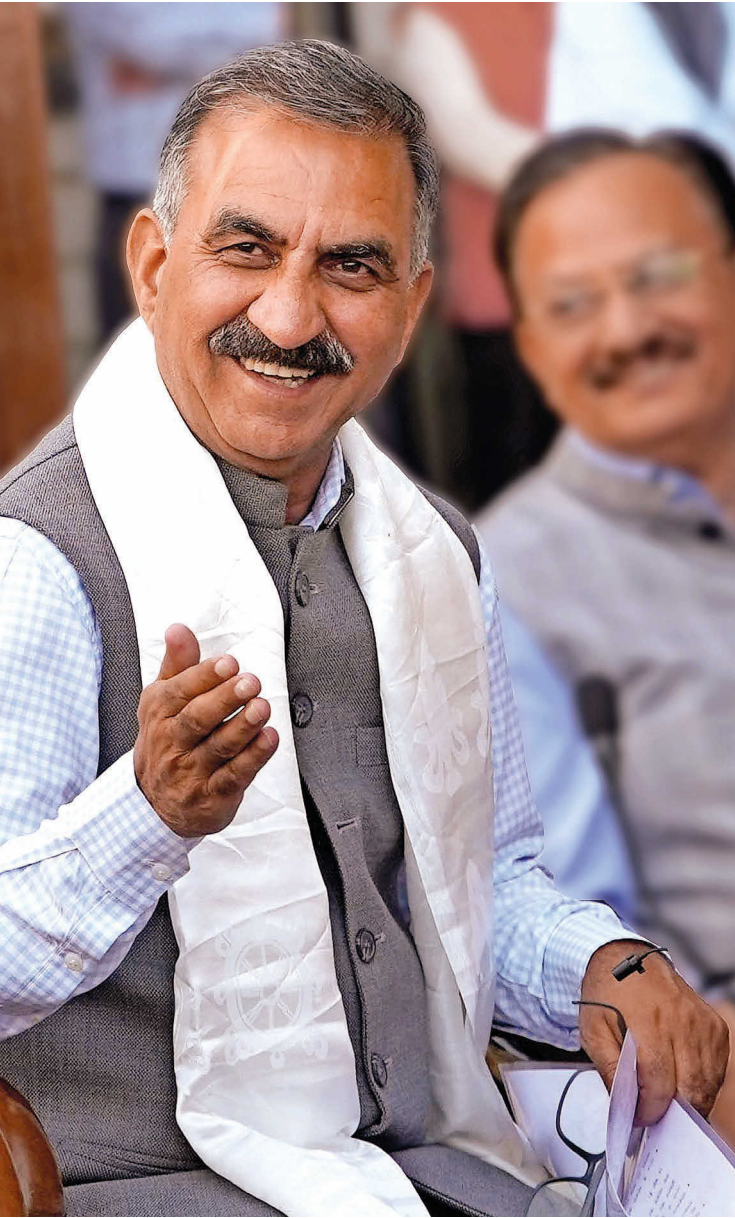
Q The Congress has introduced a new system for appointing district presidents. Some senior leaders seem unhappy about it.

A I strongly support it. I have led the organisation at different levels, and know how lobbies form. Earlier, state presidents would often build teams based on loyalty rather than merit, which damaged the cadre. The new system reduces local pressure, increases transparency, and provides multiple options for selection. Our politics is organisation-driven now. Observers from outside assess performance, which ensures fairness.

Q What challenges do you face from the Centre?

A There are three major challenges. First, bills passed by the assembly often remain stuck at Raj Bhavan for long periods. Even routine legislation faces unnecessary delays.





PTI

Second, financial dependence has increased. Many central schemes are conditional, and hill states face unique difficulties that flat-land policies do not address.

Third, policies for hill states need to be distinct. Building a kilometre of road or implementing water schemes costs three to four times more here. Yet allocations do not reflect that reality.

I raised these issues before the 16th

Finance Commission. Himachal's resources, water, forests and tourism benefit the entire country, yet we receive little compensation.

Q The BJP says that you have squandered central funds?

A No special relief package has been provided. The Centre announced a post-disaster needs assessment of ₹9,300 crore, but after delays and inflation, its actual value

has reduced significantly. We receive only partial assistance.

Climate change is accelerating in the Himalayas. What is happening here today will affect the plains tomorrow. This requires a national policy response, not political arguments.

The GST is consumer-based. Himachal's population is around 7.5 million and declining. Before GST, we earned nearly ₹4,000 crore a year through excise, especially from pharmaceuticals. Today, despite producing 35 per cent of Asia's pharmaceutical output, we receive only ₹150-200 crore. This has drained our treasury. Production states like Himachal have lost out, while consumption-heavy states benefit. This imbalance must be corrected.

Q Tourism and connectivity remain critical.

A Himachal did not get a proper airport even after 75 years. Consequently, we raised ₹3,000 crore ourselves. The Kangra-Dharamshala airport is being expanded. We are developing heliports and improving tourism infrastructure. The mindset that governed Himachal for 40 years has changed—first within the administration, then in political leadership—while ensuring environment protection.

Q Drug abuse has become a concern in northern India. How serious is the problem in Himachal?

A We take it very seriously. We launched a state-wide awareness campaign against *chitta* (heroin). Panchayats have been categorised as red, yellow and green zones. We identified school-age children as the most vulnerable group and focused our campaign accordingly. Awareness, rehabilitation and strict action against suppliers are our three pillars. We have implemented stringent laws, including preventive detention. 🗳️

Vulnerable in the Valley

As **Omar Abdullah** completes a year in power,
he faces multiple challenges

BY BADAR BASHIR



There is trouble brewing in Kashmir, and for once, it has got nothing to do with terrorism. Soon after the National Conference-led government completed its first year in office, it hit a grave crisis. In the Budgam assembly byelection held in November, it lost big time. It was a seat that had been historically considered 'safe' for the party and was vacated by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah after he won both the seats he contested.

Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, one of the party's two MPs in the Lok Sabha, refused to campaign in Budgam, which helped arch-rival PDP. National Conference workers allege that Mehdi was working against the party while Abdullah openly called out his absence as "political suicide".

While Abdullah secured over 50 per cent of the votes in the 2024 polls, the party's vote share dropped to just 27 per cent in the bypoll.

There is trouble on other fronts, too. There seems to be no end to the tiff between Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha and the elected government. And the Congress, Abdullah's ally, is figuring out ways to steer away from the alliance.

All these have forced the National Conference to go on damage control mode. It has listed over 10 initiatives of the government, including the resolution on special status in the assembly and the one on statehood passed by the cabinet, and enhanced marriage assistance and free bus service for women. The campaign has not resonated well with people.

What's making the situation worse is that the business rules, which define the division of powers between the lieutenant governor and the elected government, are yet to be put into effect. The absence of business rules has deepened confusion over authority and accountability.

For instance, the Kashmir Power

Distribution Corporation Limited recently proposed a 20 per cent surcharge on base electricity tariff during peak hours in the Valley.

Though the National Conference had opposed the move, people saw it as a policy of the Abdullah government and the backlash hit the party hard.

Statehood could have brought clarity and made the government more accountable, but the Centre is yet to make any moves. "The home minister made assurances that statehood would be restored. We are still waiting," says Imran Nabi Dar, spokesperson, National Conference. "People have expectations from the government but the bureaucracy has not been welcoming. For the first time, cabinet decisions are being undermined. For example, recently a cabinet decision was taken, the official document was sent to the lieutenant governor and when it returned, 25 per cent of the provisions had been altered."

In October, Sinha had targeted the Abdullah government over its claim that projects would be implemented

only after statehood was restored.

"Even without statehood, all powers rest with the government," he said. "I want to emphasise today that people should not be fooled, and the government should use its powers to work for the people of Jammu and Kashmir."

Sinha's remarks had stung Abdullah, who hit back by saying that the Pahalgam attack had happened on Sinha's watch as law and order and security fell under the LG's jurisdiction. "Twenty-six of our guests were killed, and he is advising us to do our work," he said. "We know our work, you do yours. I was CM for six years (earlier), show me one instance where a tourist was hurt?"

Dr Noor Ahmad Baba, a former professor of the University of Kashmir, said that Abdullah's initial appeasement of the BJP—he had praised the prime minister for holding elections—was because he wanted the statehood restored without any confrontation. "He carries larger responsibilities and has commitments to the people, commitments he must fulfil," he said.

Mehdi, meanwhile, has publicly targeted his party and government, highlighting unfulfilled promises. Moreover, he has declared that he will launch a protest after the winter session of Parliament against the Abdullah government's reservation policy that keeps aside majority posts for reserved quota candidates and leaves little for open merit candidates. "Hypothetically, [Mehdi] may be playing the game the Centre [wants him to play] because anything that undermines local parties in the region will suit the BJP," said Baba.

And then there is the Congress, which is proving to be another headache for Abdullah. Just before last year's elections, a section of senior leaders within the Congress, including state leaders, had advised

**THE HOME
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**People have
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—Imran Nabi Dar,
spokesperson, National Conference



SANJAY AHLAWAT



AFP

TWIN CHALLENGES

The Abdullah government has been in constant tiff with Lt Gov Manoj Sinha; (right) Lok Sabha member Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi of the National Conference has publicly targeted his party and government

the leadership to go solo to safeguard the party's future in the state. But the party high command eventually allied with the National Conference.

Congress leaders believe that in an attempt to win favour with the BJP, Abdullah has often been unkind to the party. For instance, the Abdullahs had assured the Congress high command of a 'safe' seat in the Rajya Sabha polls. Instead, the party was offered an 'unsafe' seat, which was vulnerable to BJP lobbying.

There is a growing demand within the state Congress to move away from the National Conference. According to sources, the state unit has already requested the high command to quit the alliance, but no decision has been taken yet.

"If the Congress is sure that the National Conference government will not fall in case it pulls out from the alliance, then it may take a decision to go separately," said political commentator Ahmad Ayaz. "Otherwise, such a decision will again give space to the BJP to somehow come back,

THERE IS A GROWING DEMAND WITHIN THE STATE CONGRESS TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE.

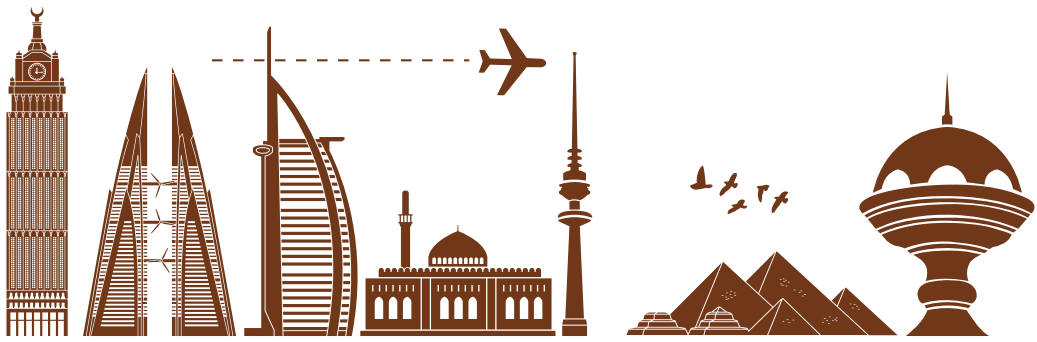
The state unit has already requested the high command to quit the alliance, but no decision has been taken yet.

which the Congress would not want."

This internal shift also stems from the rise of Tariq Hamid Karra within the J&K Congress. He has been trying to consolidate power and create an unofficial, non-factional hierarchy, sidelining figures from various groups. Many in the party have now aligned themselves with Karra, who is seen as the party's primary heavy-weight.

"Within the party, there are differing opinions: one view suggests it is beneficial to continue in the alliance, as we are natural allies with a common enemy and shared causes," said Nizamuddin Bhat, Congress chief whip in the assembly. "The other view holds that the Congress has a future of its own and can emerge as the premier party. Therefore, we should go solo. At the moment, there is no [coalition] coordination committee in place, so one could say there is practically no coordination at all."

That is certainly not good news for Abdullah. ●



THE WEEK
JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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R.G. SASTHAA

PAST CONTINUES
Archaeological officer
Ajay Kumar Ramamoorthy
at the Keeladi museum



THE NEW HUB OF HISTORY

Young archaeologists uncover evidence that pushes the origins of Tamil civilisation further into antiquity, challenging assumptions

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

Last January, when Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin released a monograph placing the Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent as early as the first quarter of the fourth millennium BCE, excitement within the state archaeology department was unmistakable. It marked a key moment in efforts to revisit Indian history through the lens of the Tamil south. Earlier scholarship had dated the advent of iron in India to the first millennium BCE. Evidence from sites such as Keeladi, Adichanallur, Mayiladumparai and Sivagalai, how-

ever, suggested far earlier dates, ranging between 2953 BCE and 3345 BCE. As Stalin read the statement in the assembly, the young archaeological team responsible for unearthing and documenting the material was visibly elated.

Excavations at Keeladi, Sivagalai and Adichanallur have revealed traces of an ancient, urban and literate Tamil civilisation, challenging long-held assumptions that portrayed south India as peripheral in early historical narratives. Evidence of sophisticated iron-working, urban planning, Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and extensive trade networks points to a complex culture that was contemporary with, and connected to, the wider world, including the Indus Valley civilisation.

At the heart of this effort is a team of young archaeologists who have spent years working in the field. Among them are Ajay Kumar Ramamoorthy, Victor Gnanaraj, R. Kavya and Vasantha Kumar Kathirvelu, who have played a central role in demonstrating that the Iron Age existed in southern India alongside the Bronze Age of the Indus Valley and in strengthening Dravidian claims to antiquity in the subcontinent.

A short drive from the Madurai railway junction leads to a village in Sivaganga district, where the highway narrows into a muddy track flanked by coconut groves and farmland. Once an unremarkable settlement on the banks of the Vaigai river, Keeladi has become a prominent point on the global archaeological map. The Keeladi museum houses some of the most significant archaeological discoveries in India and offers new insight into the ancient past of Tamil civilisation.

Excavations at Keeladi revealed a thriving urban settlement dating back more than 2,000 years, broadly corresponding to the Sangam Age. Ajay Kumar Ramamoorthy, the archaeological officer at Keeladi, says his own journey into archaeology began far from the trenches. Raised in an urban neighbourhood of Chennai, he was a commerce student and his parents wanted him to become a chartered accountant. Instead, he found himself drawn to libraries and Tamil historical novels, which sparked an interest in history, temple architecture

and archaeology. He later pursued postgraduate studies in archaeology and epigraphy at the University of Madras.

“My parents did not want me to take up archaeology,” Ramamoorthy says. But he went on to complete an MPhil at the same university, which opened the door to excavation work. Though initially interested in archaeoastronomy, he credits his professor Jinu Koshy with steering him towards prehistoric studies. Ramamoorthy joined the Keeladi excavation as a site supervisor under archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna, later working at the Archaeological Survey of India in Delhi before returning to Keeladi after clearing the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission examination.

Since then, he has been involved in every phase of excavation and in establishing the Keeladi museum, designed in the Chettinad architectural style. “Keeladi always surprised me,” he says, pointing to inscriptions on potsherds recovered from the site. He recalls the discovery of a decorated ring well that initially appeared ordinary. Closer examination revealed motifs and a fish symbol that was later identified as a clan marker, indicating a socially organised and culturally sophisticated community.

Ramamoorthy’s background in commerce proved unexpectedly useful. His familiarity with statistics allowed him to create three-dimensional scatter plots to establish chronology, trace cultural change and reconstruct historical narratives. He takes particular pride in curating the museum. “We worked for a full year after the eighth phase of excavation in 2022,” he says. “Documentation went on day and night. There were days when we slept for barely two hours.”

Nearly 10,000 antiquities from Keeladi are now on display, including terracotta figurines, glass and carnelian beads, iron tools, a bronze



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tiger miniature, gold objects and punch-marked coins. These finds bring together literary and archaeological evidence, corroborating and, in some cases, pushing back dates associated with early Tamil history. Sangam literature is traditionally dated between the third century BCE and the third century CE, but Keeladi suggests a much earlier material culture associated with these texts.

Further south, along the Tirunelveli–Kanyakumari highway, another ambitious project has taken shape. Spread across 54,000 square feet, the Porunai Museum, located near the Reddiyarpatti hillock in Tirunelveli, houses artefacts recovered from Adichanallur, Korkai, Sivagalai, Thirumalapuram, Thulukkarpatti and Kilnamandi. The museum was inaugurated by Stalin on December 20. While inaugurating the museum, the chief minister criticised the BJP-led Union government for ignoring the scientific evidence unearthed at various archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu. “It is a 2,000-year-old struggle for the Tamils,” he said.

The site is teeming with archaeologists documenting material and

RECLAIMING HISTORY

Chief Minister M.K. Stalin with Lok Sabha member Kanimozhi after the inauguration of the Porunai museum on December 20; (right) R. Kavya, archaeological officer-cum-excavation director, Kongal nagaram

preparing displays. Among them is 30-year-old Victor Gnanaraj, leading a young team working on the museum project. While Keeladi revealed urban settlement patterns, Gnanaraj’s most significant contributions have come from Kilnamandi village in Tiruvannamalai district. He now serves as archaeological officer-cum-excavation director at Kilnamandi. The site yielded the first scientifically dated sarcophagus, or terracotta coffin, in Tamil Nadu, suggesting possible trade or cultural contact with northern India during the late Harappan period.

The findings emerged after months of excavation under harsh conditions. When Gnanaraj first arrived, the 55-acre government-owned site resembled an abandoned quarry. “It felt like just another excavation,” he says. As digging progressed, the site revealed dolerite flakes on cairn heaps and surface indicators of

stone-circle burials. “Tool-making must have been common here. We may be looking at as many as 50 burials.”

Gnanaraj’s entry into archaeology was unplanned. He had initially aspired to study aeronautical engineering, but circumstances led him elsewhere. With little interest in memorising historical dates, he enrolled for a bachelor’s degree in archaeology at Madras Christian College. He also trained under Jinu Koshy, completing a master’s degree at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda before working in Delhi and later joining the Tamil Nadu archaeology department.

Much of his fieldwork at Kilnamandi took place during the Covid-19 lockdown. The isolation helped him cope with the uncertainty of the period, though physical challenges were constant. “It was extremely hot, and rain often threatened to flood the trenches,” he recalls. “There were days when we had to dig the same trench repeatedly.”

The effort paid off. Analysis confirmed the site’s megalithic character. “All the sarcophagi contained black-and-red ware offering pots, which are key markers of the period,” Gnanaraj says. “Some also had capstones.” Together with discoveries from across Tamil Nadu, Kilnamandi adds another layer to an increasingly complex and ancient history of the region.

R. Kavya, 28, can still feel the ex-

citement of digging up the first burial urn at Konthagai, a burial site located barely a kilometre from the main Keeladi site. To her, the Konthagai burial cluster, with urns of varying sizes and carefully placed offering pots, appeared strikingly beautiful. This was where Keeladi’s ancient inhabitants buried their dead.

Her interest grew when she noticed a sharp contrast in soil layers. The top layer was red, while the layer beneath was white, concealing hundreds of burial urns containing the remains of both children and adults. The first urn startled her. When a second emerged soon after, Kavya immediately instructed the workers not to touch it. She insisted that no one should put their hands inside the urns, as they lacked the training to handle skeletal remains or recognise the significance of artefacts. Only someone with proper knowledge, she believed, should work inside an urn burial to prevent careless digging or loss of material.

Kavya herself spent hours carefully excavating each urn. Many contained offering pots. “When I see a white semicircle in the soil, I know for sure there is an urn inside,” she says. Her tireless work and willingness to stay late inspired many women from nearby villages to join her as labourers. The days she got sick, they cared for her like a daughter. “My parents were not very keen on me taking up a job like this. They thought I would eventually return home,” she says. “But when my mother visited me at Keeladi, she understood my passion.”

While most of her relatives chose engineering or other professional courses, Kavya opted to pursue a bachelor’s degree in history at Ethiraj College in Chennai. A science student in school, she initially aspired to join the civil services. Coming from a dominant community in western Tamil Nadu, where women are largely expected to remain homemakers, she faced opposition, especially



R.G. SASTHIA

as the only daughter in the family. She completed her degree, but at 20 was still too young to write the civil services examination.

During the gap year, Kavya enrolled for a master's degree in archaeology at the Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Insti-



WHILE KEELADI REVEALED URBAN SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VICTOR GNANARAJ (IN PIC), EXCAVATION DIRECTOR AT KILNAMANDI, HAVE COME FROM KILNAMANDI IN TIRUVANNAMALAI DISTRICT. THE SITE YIELDED THE FIRST SCIENTIFICALLY DATED SARCOPHAGUS IN TAMIL NADU, SUGGESTING CONTACT WITH NORTHERN INDIA DURING THE LATE HARAPPAN PERIOD.



tute in Pune. Her interest deepened rapidly. After returning to Tamil Nadu, she completed a postgraduate diploma in epigraphy and inscriptions offered by the state archaeology department, which enabled her to work as an archaeological officer. By then, her commitment to archaeology was firm.

Standing before the Adichanallur gallery at the Egmore Museum in Chennai, dressed in a simple black-and-white kurta, Kavya explains how she meticulously planned each day's work at Konthagai under the harsh summer sun. She had to decide which side of a trench should be opened to expose one-third of a burial urn, ensuring it remained intact while allowing further excavation. Her planning resulted in a remarkably organised site, with each conical urn clearly profiled within neatly cut square trenches.

During fieldwork, Kavya often spent hours lying beside skeletal remains inside trenches, armed with a brush, scraping tool and pickaxe. At times, work extended into the evening and the women labourers cautioned her against staying after sunset, reminding her that it was a burial ground. Once, when she fell ill, some villagers attributed it to spirits. She laughs as she recalls how women brought vibhuti and sacred threads to help her recover. "It was just the flu," she says. "They were wonderful."

Although the Tamil Nadu archaeology department began excavating Konthagai in 2020, it took nearly a month to clear the dry, thorny vegetation. "Being a burial site in the middle of a village meant it was left isolated because of fear," Kavya explains. "It continued to be used as a burial ground until about 500 years ago."

Her most vivid memory is of the first urn she opened. "It was trench C1, urn number three," she says. The burial was intact. "I interpreted it as a primary burial because we found



every phalange bone. There was also an iron implement inside." It was the first complete primary burial she had worked on. "That experience reaffirmed why I chose this profession."

Over 137 burial urns were unearthed at Konthagai. Archaeologists concluded that the people of ancient Keeladi followed a specific burial ritual, placing the dead in a seated position inside urns, accompanied by offering pots and grave goods such as iron knives, daggers, axes and beads. Kavya discovered that the carnelian beads were not locally available. Subsequent studies confirmed trade links with regions like Gujarat and Afghanistan.

Since joining the department, Kavya has presented five research papers on Keeladi and spoken at national and international seminars. She has presented her work at the World Archaeology Congress, discussing rustic coated painted pottery excavated at Kongalnagaram in Tiruppur district, where she now serves as archaeological officer-cum-excavation director. She is also one



KEEPING PAST ALIVE
(Clockwise from left)
A bull's skeletal remains unearthed at Keeladi; carnelian beads used by Keeladi people; pieces of potsherd with decoration

of the archaeological directors at a site in Coimbatore, studying menhir burials.

If Kavya's story from Konthagai is compelling, the journey of 36-year-old Vasantha Kumar Kathirvelu offers another perspective on the quiet satisfaction of field archaeology. Having worked at sites including Sivagalai, Adichanallur, Thulukkarpatti and Thirumalapuram, he believes fieldwork, rather than office-bound research, brings the deepest fulfilment.

"The Thirumalapuram excavations are not just about unearthing artefacts. They tell a story of cultural continuity and innovation," says Vasanth, as he is known. He is part of the team setting up the Porunai Museum in Tirunelveli.

Born in Saalur in Chengalpattu district, Vasanth's interest in archaeology began through temple visits with his farmer father. Drawn to sculpting and temple architecture, he chose fine arts over more lucrative careers pursued by his brothers. He later completed a postgraduate diploma

in epigraphy and archaeology.

His first excavation was as a student intern at Arpakkam, followed by work at Srirangam and a three-year stint at Keeladi. He later worked in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh documenting rock art before moving on to Thulukkarpatti, a site comparable in significance to Adichanallur. He now serves as archaeological officer at the Danish fort museum at Tharangambadi in Nagapattinam district.

At Thulukkarpatti, Vasanth and his team unearthed around 4,800 graffiti marks, the highest recorded at a single site in India. These symbols, etched on pottery, offer insights into social identity and cultural interaction. Comparative studies suggest that over 90 per cent have parallels at Indus Valley sites, indicating possible links during the Iron Age.

Thirumalapuram proved uniquely challenging for Vasanth and his team. They lived for over 90 days in makeshift shelters in the foothills of the Western Ghats, without electricity. "Elephants, tigers and snakes were regular visitors," Vasanth recalls. Excavation revealed cist and urn burials, ceramics and a rectangular stone slab chamber constructed using 35 slabs, the first discovery of its kind in Tamil Nadu.

When work began in June 2024, Vasanth felt little excitement. That changed as graves yielded rich assemblages of artefacts. Even without electricity, the team worked late using mobile phone torches and oil lamps to document findings. Vasanth believes archaeology has gained unprecedented visibility in Tamil Nadu in recent years due to political and institutional support. He remains modest about his future. "I want to remain in field archaeology," he says.

Wherever he is posted, he brings his family to the site to share the significance of the discoveries. He smiles when he talks about his one-year-old son's favourite toys. "He



PHOTOS R. G. SASTHAA

THE THIRUMALAPURAM EXCAVATIONS ARE NOT JUST ABOUT UNEARTHING ARTEFACTS. THEY TELL A STORY OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND INNOVATION.

—Vasantha Kumar Kathirvelu
archaeological officer, Danish fort museum at Tharangambadi



prefers shovels, trowels, brushes and buckets," he says. His wife, who works in IT, visits him on her days off. "The pandemic helped," he recalls. "She could stay with me while working from home."

Across Tamil Nadu, archaeology has become more than an academic pursuit. It has become a powerful means of reclaiming memory, identity and historical agency. Through painstaking fieldwork, young archaeologists are uncovering evidence that challenges long-held assumptions and recentres the Tamil landscape in early Indian history. 📍



MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE



The rise and rise of India-made alcoholic beverages on the world stage is a testament to its innovators and the new-found confidence of the Indian customer

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

DISTILLING DREAMS

John Distilleries in Goa. It makes Paul John single malt

SAIJAY AHLAWAT



It was Mahatma Gandhi who saved the new Indian liquor story from being stillborn.

Yes! When the Jagdales, who launched the first ‘Indian single malt whisky’, had a tough decision to make—the whisky, called Amrut, had not really taken off and the company was bleeding

money—Bapu’s spirit came to their rescue.

While the father, Neelakanta, wanted to give up and cut losses, son Rakshit wanted to give it another shot. Unable to reach a consensus, they took a walk from their hotel in London to the nearby Tavistock Square and sat down in front of the bronze statue of Gandhi.

“It came to me: our entire history would have been different if Gandhi, too, had gone back on what he had resolved to do,” Neelakanta had recounted later in an interview. “There I was thinking small, worried about losing a few crores, while there was this big opportunity to establish an Indian whisky brand abroad and make the country proud. What I learnt, looking at Gandhi *ji*, was about hope and inspiration.”

All that, and some skilful innovation and deft marketing, not only made Amrut a marquee brand but has also given Indian alcohol a leg up in the global alcoholic beverage industry (alcobev) space.

The success of the Indian single malts—with brands like Paul John, Rampur and Indri that followed Amrut—is only one part of the story. There is a whole lot of craft innovation, from gin to indigenous liquors, happening. And the world is taking note.

How’s the josh?

The *josh* is indeed high. On the one hand, premiumisation has seen more and more Indians going for better quality liquor. This has pushed India’s domestic alcohol market to a valuation of ₹3.25 lakh crore in 2025, as per a study by Technopak, with a yearly growth of about 10 per cent. Ten of the 30 fastest-growing liquor brands in the world are Indian. Diageo’s McDowell’s No.1 is the largest-selling whisky in the world. More excitingly, a plethora of Indian brands has gone global in recent years, spawning an export market that is growing at 20 to 26 per cent.

It is a dramatic shift from the stereotype of Indian liquor being cheap and low-quality. More and more craft ‘Indian’ brands are being launched, and are being lapped up by discerning urban Indians.

The world, too, can’t have enough of it. Indri, a single malt whisky distilled in the namesake village



UP FOR GRABS

Jeet Rana (left) and Chirag Pal, co-founders of Barbet & Pals bar in Delhi

in Haryana, was adjudged the ‘World’s Best Whisky’ twice. Gianchand, from Jammu’s DeVANS, won International Whisky of the Year and Grand Gold at Meininger’s International Spirits Award. Five Indian brands won top honours at the Whiskies of the World awards this year—something unimaginable a few years ago!

Take the case of Nikita, who lives in Delhi and used to look forward to picking up liquor from the duty-free on her way back from visiting her brother in Singapore. “He is now asking me to pick up the new Indian brands for him when I go visiting!” she said.

The ‘Distilled and Bottled in India’ tag is finding takers all over the world. Radico Khaitan exports brands like Rampur, its single malt, and craft gin Jaisalmer to more than 100 countries. Grover’s wines are now being served even in Paris restaurants. “Because of its unique terroir and climate India offers a very different malt experience. Vast



SANJAY AHLAWAT

temperature variation, especially in north India, not only ensures that malt matures at an aggressive pace, but also imparts unique flavours, without compromising on complexity or balance,” said Sanjeev Banga, president (international business), Radico Khaitan. Rampur single malt is named after the town in Uttar Pradesh the company started distilling in 1943.

“Indian single malts are now meeting and exceeding the global benchmarks of quality,” said Diego Bianchi, vice president, global hubs, Sazerac. “Over the past decade, the category has evolved remarkably to become the fastest-growing spirits segment in the world.”

It isn't just whisky. Jin Jiji Indian dry gin, distilled in Uttarakhand, received a gold medal at the London Spirits Competition this year, while Cherrapunji gin—which uses purified monsoon water from Cherrapunji and Mawsynram in Meghalaya—won a double gold

at the SIP Awards 2025. Bandarful, a cold brew coffee liqueur crafted from Chikmagalur coffee and Himalayan spring water, was crowned the world's 'best liqueur' at the 2025 USA Spirits Ratings.

What was once a trickle—an Amrut here or a Paul John there—has now become a torrent. Indian liquor exports crossed ₹3,000 crore last year. Estimates are that they will cross \$1 billion (around ₹9,000 crore) a year before this decade is through.

The churning of the ocean

When the Jagdales decided to make Amrut, the liquor scene in India was very different. Stifling laws and regulations had stunted the industry, not to mention a few entrenched players with political patronage who did not make the entry of a startup easy. This meant that the industry remained shackled, with unremarkable

TIMELINE OF TRIUMPH

Milestones in Indian alcohol's rise on the world stage

2004

Amrut launches single malt in Glasgow, the heart of Scotch territory

2010

Amrut Fusion wins Whisky Bible's Liquid Gold (97/100); third among 4,000

2012

Paul John Single Cask 161 launches in London, wins Liquid Gold (94.5)

2013

Paul John's flagship range launches, including Edited and Bold (96.5 and 95.5)

2017

Hapusa gin launches. Rampur (launched 2016) wins double gold in San Francisco

2018

Paul John Kanya named Asian whisky of the year (96)

2020

Stranger & Sons Gin wins gold (98) at International Wine and Spirit Competition

2021

Paul John Mithuna ranked third finest whisky (97). Hapusa wins IWSC gold

2022

Godawan single malt launches in Rajasthan

2023

Indri-Trini wins best in show at Whiskies of the World Awards

2024

Indri fastest-growing single malt. Godawan wins single malt of the year (96)

Indri Dru wins whisky of the year and Amrut four golds at International Spirits Challenge

2025

Jin Jiji wins gold (98) at London Spirits Competition

Bandarful named world's best liqueur

Indri Diwali 2025 wins 'best world whisky' (99.1)

Amrut, Paul John and Rampur continue India's winning streak

TOP 20 WHISKY BRANDS

(GLOBAL VOLUME, CRORE CASES)

MCDOWELL'S	3.22		INDIA
ROYAL STAG	3.10		INDIA
IMPERIAL BLUE	2.29		INDIA
JOHNNIE WALKER	2.16		SCOTLAND
OFFICER'S CHOICE	2.13		INDIA
JIM BEAM	1.75		USA
JACK DANIEL'S	1.41		USA
HAYWARDS	1.18		INDIA
JAMESON	1.08		IRELAND
BLENDERS PRIDE	1.01		INDIA
8PM	0.96		INDIA
BALLANTINE'S	0.93		SCOTLAND
ROYAL CHALLENGE	0.91		INDIA
CROWN ROYAL	0.80		CANADA
CANADIAN CLUB	0.53		CANADA
BAGPIPER	0.50		INDIA
CHIVAS REGAL	0.48		SCOTLAND
ICONIQ WHITE WHISKY	0.45		INDIA
KAKUBIN	0.40		JAPAN
BLACK NIKKA	0.40		JAPAN

Note: Values for 9-litre cases
SOURCE FORBES

TOP 20 SINGLE MALTS

(GLOBAL VOLUME, LAKH CASES)

SCOTLAND		17.8	GLENFIDDICH
SCOTLAND		15.6	THE GLENLIVET
SCOTLAND		11.2	THE MACALLAN
SCOTLAND		5.8	THE SINGLETON
SCOTLAND		5.4	GLENMORANGIE
SCOTLAND		4.5	THE BALVENIE
SCOTLAND		3.8	LAPHROAIG
SCOTLAND		3.5	ABERLOUR
SCOTLAND		3.2	TALISKER
SCOTLAND		2.9	LAGAVULIN
SCOTLAND		2.7	GLEN GRANT
SCOTLAND		2.4	CARDHU
SCOTLAND		2.1	HIGHLAND PARK
INDIA		1.8	INDRI
SCOTLAND		1.7	AULTMORE
SCOTLAND		1.6	THE DALMORE
SCOTLAND		1.5	BOWMORE
SCOTLAND		1.4	JURA
SCOTLAND		1.2	ARBEG
INDIA		1.0	AMRUT

Note: Values for 9-litre cases; estimates vary
Paul John and Rampur are typically ranked
in the 22-26 range

HOME ADVANTAGE

Indian single malts have captured just over 50% of the single malt market share domestically, ending decades of Scotch dominance.

INTERVIEW

PAUL JOHN
founder & chairman, John Distilleries



Q What are the factors that made Indian single malt whiskies work?

My interest has always been to strive for the best. We conducted many experiments with casks, finishes, and maturation. I think the Scots were bluffing everyone into thinking that only Scotland can make it. Once the world started tasting “New World” whiskies, they realised that there is better stuff out there.

They have been mass-producing and overcharging, but ours is all driven by human intervention—determining the right time to move to distillation, managing maturation, and selecting the casks. We inspect every cask we buy. We left no stone unturned to ensure we met the highest standards in making single malts.

And it's not just us. You have Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand. Of course, Japan joined the movement many years ago. There are so many countries today producing excellent quality single malts.

I would say the weather in India is a big advantage; I can produce excellent quality whisky in six years, whereas it would take 20 years in Scotland. Of course, we lose 10 per cent to evaporation every year, compared to Scotland's 2 per cent.

Scots were bluffing that only Scotland could make good whisky

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Q What was the response in India compared to foreign markets?

Initially, when I went on marketing tours, everyone would ask, “Is it molasses-based?” or “Are you really making single malts?” But over time, people started tasting and appreciating the quality we produce. Most countries that drink single malts now know that India is producing excellent quality.

Having said that, India is still the biggest whisky market. We've just started penetrating the domestic market. People have the means and don't mind spending on quality. Because we have won 300-odd international awards, people have started recognising that excellence. Once they taste it, they identify the difference between Scotch and our whisky. We've arrived, and it's just a matter of time before we take the world by storm.

Q Capturing the international market will still be a challenge.

It's not easy to penetrate international markets, especially the big ones like the US and France. But Indian single malts have created a niche and a name for themselves; it's just a matter of time. My challenge is simply getting people to taste the liquid. We need to show people that it's a completely different world.

Q What is the next step in this journey?

The founders of Indian single malt whiskies have come together to form an association. We are working to ensure that no one dilutes the recognition Indian single malts have earned. We do not want rogue elements to spoil the reputation we have built.

The FSSAI has introduced regulatory controls regarding what can be labeled a “single malt.” We are now operating on similar lines to the Scotch Whisky Association. There is a regulatory authority with the power to take action against rogue elements in the industry. Beyond that, if the government could bring alcohol under the GST regime, there would be nothing like it. 📌



IN HIGH SPIRITS

Whisky casks at John Distilleries in Goa

products aimed at the mass market. With alcohol governed as a state subject, manufacturers had to navigate a maze of laws as they moved from state to state.

Even the products were questionable. A European trade official once wondered how India could ask for more market access for whisky in trade negotiations when Indian whiskies should actually be classified as ‘rum’ because they use molasses (a byproduct of sugarcane refining) instead of grains.

Into that quagmire entered the Jagdales, closely followed by Paul John with his eponymous single malt. In both cases, curiosity and aspiration paved the way.

John, son of a Karnataka politician and a fan of the single malt scotch Glenmorangie, made many trips to Scotland to figure out why the best whisky could only be made in Scotland. “In fact, I brought water back from there and got it tested over here. And I realised that there’s no rocket science in it. India has pretty much everything that we need to make good quality single malts,” he said. “It took me three years. I had no experience. We were just shooting in the dark.”

But John, just like the Jagdales, realised early on that creating quality alcohol was one thing, and making it break through the clutter was another.

Amrut and Paul John, as well as the likes of Indri, hit upon a two-pronged marketing strategy. One: launch internationally first. Second: craft a marketing strategy that highlights the product’s ‘exotic’ Indianness.

Amrut was launched in the UK in 2004. But even after three years, when the Jagdales took their walk to the Gandhi statue, it had failed to make a dent in the market. But with a renewed marketing strategy—which went to town talking about being made out of grains grown at the foothills of the Himalayas to being aged in unique tropical conditions—it started getting attention.

The turning point, not just for Amrut but for the whole industry, came in 2009 when Amrut was recognised by Malt Maniacs and then by the prestigious Whisky Bible of Jim Murray, which adjudged Amrut Fusion as the third best in the world.

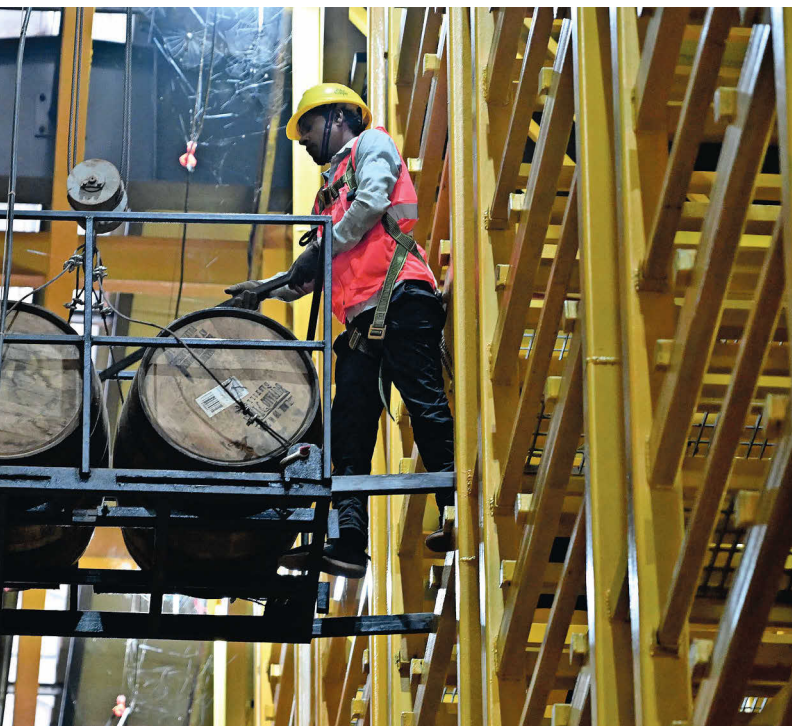
While John now has about 300 international awards on his mantelpiece, Indri, created by the Sharmas of Piccadilly Agro, has scored ‘World’s Best Whisky’ more than once for its ‘Diwali Edition’. Piccadilly has long been a wholesale manufacturer and distributor for many liquor brands before it launched its own single malt from the banks of the Yamuna canal in a small village in Haryana.

“The award is what really blew things open for them,” said Vikram Achanta, founder & CEO of Tulleeho, an alcobev consultancy. “They were able to make that viral messaging so strong about the award that it worked brilliantly from a social media, PR and news media perspective. Everybody started saying ‘I want to drink Indri’, and since the award-winning Diwali Edition was a limited edition, the demand percolated down to the rest of the product portfolio.”

Storied success

The sudden transformation of India’s alcobev industry is not just the case of a few brands winning awards. Along with the manufacturers’ efforts, there has been a sea change in society.

“Indians all over the world are waking up. And we don’t have the colonial hangover the last generation had,” said Praveen Kumar Malviya, CEO of Piccadilly Agro, the parent company of Indri. “It starts with not looking



SANJAY AHLAWAT



The alchemy of drinking

Why the world's biggest liquor company is betting big on India

BY VIKRAM DAMODARAN

WHEN DIAGEO acquired United Spirits, the investment was fundamentally built on the promise of India's future consumption. At that point, the economy was rapidly bifurcating into two distinct cohorts: the young and

the old. And that's exactly how it has played out.

I often joke that India produces an 'Australia' every year in terms of consumption; roughly 20 million new consumers turn 21, reaching the legal

age to purchase alcoholic beverages. This represents a massive 25 per cent of the world's emerging consumption spectrum added annually.

Furthermore, India is 'ageing down'. While much of the world gets older, our average age is approximately 28 and is set to fall to 26.5 over the next two decades. Consequently, the market will be driven by young people

down upon yourself."

Add to that the growth in disposable income, exposure to the world, and the desire for new experiences, and the stage was set.

The 'new age' brands not only ensured that they were making a world-class product, but also got the right background story in place. That is why, for each of these brands, you will find reference to their unique 'Indianness', from Himalayan spring water, botanicals, monsoon rainwater from Cherrapunji, or even the aridness of Rajasthan that adds flavour. Cazulo feni from Goa, for instance, is aged in casks made of local Miri hardwood underwater, and it uses clay condensers, not copper.

"You need that powerful original story, and while

everybody has got a story, the India story, particularly of its indigenous spirits, is powerful. No one else has it," said Hansel Vaz, who founded Cazulo craft feni and was part of the move to get the feni-making process certified so as to qualify for the heritage tag.

Many feel that India's indigenous brews are just waiting to be rediscovered. Some are even going beyond. Restaurateur Rakshit Dhariwal hit upon the idea of launching Asia's first agave-based drink, called Maya Pistola Agavepura, when he realised during the lockdown that the fastest-moving categories after beer and wine were agave spirits.

"I started thinking, agave has been growing in India for 300 years. Why is it that we don't have a premium agave spirit offering in India? And that's how I started working on it," said Dhariwal. Last year, Diageo came knocking and took a stake in the startup.

The powers-that-be take note

It has helped that the government, too, has taken note of the good press Indian alcohol has been getting. FSSAI has come out with standards a whisky has to meet to be called an 'Indian single malt', while the Madhya Pradesh government took the initiative to decriminalise

INDIAN SINGLE MALTS, OVER THE PAST DECADE, HAVE EVOLVED REMARKABLY TO BECOME THE FASTEST-GROWING SPIRITS SEGMENT IN THE WORLD.

—Diego Bianchi, vice president, global hubs, Sazerac

with rising disposable incomes seeking distinct, premium experiences.

Consumer behaviour is also evolving. The days of aspiring to drink what one's father or grandfather drank are fading. Instead, we see a shift towards specific occasions—from brunches and 'third spaces' to Netflix marathons or solo moments of calm. Each environment demands a different choice. With disposable incomes far higher than they were a decade ago, young people are increasingly willing to dabble in new categories.

Simultaneously, older consumers have reached a new level of affluence. They are well-travelled, culturally exposed and well-heeled. They are no longer satisfied with standard offerings; they seek bespoke, personalised and highly differentiated experiences.

Historically, India was a laggard in

premium beverage experiences, despite having one of the world's oldest distilling traditions. Ancient scriptures mention *soma rasa*, and spirits were once integral to every lifecycle event, from births to deaths. However, the commercialisation of the last 80 years prioritised mass consumption, severing our connection to native processes and regional spirits.

We are now witnessing a rediscovery of roots. Increased self-confidence means consumers are looking inward rather than outward. This sentiment has birthed a vibrant craft movement. We have seen waves of craft gin, a surge in world-class Indian single malts, and a renewed interest in native drinks like mahua, feni, and toddy. The future lies in this marriage between the traditional and the progressive.

The old notion that imported is inherently better is dissolving. Whether in the automotive, apparel or spirits industry, Indian companies have stepped up their proposition. Consumers are open to Indian brands, but they will only return if the quality remains consistent.

As India exports more spirits, our products are facing the scrutiny of discerning international drinkers. And to stand up to that, Indian companies must maintain authenticity and quality at the highest possible level. In doing so, we are not just serving a domestic market; we are defining a new global standard for Indian excellence.

Damodaran is chief innovation officer, Diageo.

—As told to K. Sunil Thomas

the making of mahua. Made from a local wild flower, it was banned by the British back in the 19th century.

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal expressed his pleasant surprise at the rise of Indian spirits when he told Parliament in February that a Swiss minister told him there was an Indian whisky which was world-famous and almost impossible to get on the shelves in Europe. He said the Swiss leader told him that it was "tastier" than the whiskies made by other countries.

The ecosystem, too, has taken shape, with the club/pub culture of nights-out giving way to cocktail bars, lounges and speakeasies. Whisky clubs, wine societies and cocktail weeks have mushroomed in all big cities. The focus everywhere, as lifestyle influencer Pallavi 'Moda Ninja' Singh put it, was "literally about the cocktail, tasting and experiencing them, and no longer about clubbing and getting drunk."

Jeet Rana, who recently co-founded a cocktail bar in the national capital called Barbet & Pals, concurs, "We are proud that we have some spirits that are as great as some of the best international brands and we are able to use them to make cocktails. Consumers coming in are actually asking for these particular Indian brands."

The world is not enough

Even global alcohol biggies like Diageo and Pernod Ricard are launching premium Indian whiskies for the international market. Pernod's Longitude 77, named after the east meridian that passes through India, is manufactured in Nashik, Maharashtra. Diageo's single malt Godawan is made in Rajasthan.

"Think good whisky, you think of Scotland, Japan; you think pristine air and clean water and great temperature. Rajasthan is everything but that—very arid, dry air, and temperatures that go as high as 50 degrees on one end and as low as six to eight degrees on the other. A harsh land from which nobody would imagine a great whisky could come," said Diageo's chief innovation officer Vikram Damodaran, encapsulating the entire new-age Indian whisky journey into one unique enterprise—craftsmanship.

Diageo has gone further, launching a platform called The Good Crafts Company, which is an 'R&D lab for alcobev'. It is also investing in startups. One of the companies it acquired was Nao Spirits, a startup which launched Indian gins Greater Than and Hapusa.

Other investors, too, hope to get a high in this sunrise sector. Shah Rukh Khan and son Aryan recently partnered with Radico Khaitan and

Backyard bonanza

India is finally giving due recognition to its indigenous brews and spirits

BY VIKRAM ACHANTA



INDIA HAS A rich history of alcohol. The vedas frequently mention *soma rasa*, the nectar of the gods. Thanks to India's cultural and religious diversity, it hosts a tremendous range of native brews. Most of them are crafted from local grains or starches—such as coconut sap—yet many have not transitioned beyond backyard stills, as they often turn sour within hours.

Two breakthrough spirits, feni and mahua, are currently competing for the title of India's true native spirit. In a country this vast, there is ample room for both to flourish, and perhaps others also like arrack, if legalised.

Mahua is perhaps India's oldest known spirit. The mahua tree holds a connection to the land's inhabitants. The spirit is derived from the tree's flowers which, once dried, undergo fermentation and distillation. As no

other flower remains so sugar-rich when dried, mahua is regarded as the world's only spirit originating from a flower.

In 1892, to protect the economic interests of British alcohol imports, the British passed the Bombay Abkari Act and the Mhowra Act, which banned the production and collection of the flower. This severely impacted South Seas Distilleries, a company with a century-old heritage. South Seas recently launched Six Brothers Mahura, a premium product retailing in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa and shortly to be available in Haryana, Chandigarh as also Gujarat.

Feni's journey is equally storied. Following the liberation of Goa in 1961, feni remained under older legal frameworks. It did not fit the Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) classification applied to British-style spirits like whisky or rum. Instead, it was classified as country liquor. While this kept taxes low and the spirit accessible, it restricted exports to other Indian states and somewhat diminished its status.

There are two primary types of feni: One made from the cashew fruit, and the other distilled from coconut tree sap. There

are believed to be 19 variations of coconut feni, each defined by a single flavouring agent. Unlike gin, which uses multiple botanicals, feni uses a *potli* (sack) tied to the still's mouth, allowing flavours to pass into the liquid via vapour infusion. Historically, these were used medicinally: *jeera* (cumin) for upset stomach, *aale* (ginger) for sore throat, and *kodu* (bitter) for diabetes.

The tide is turning. Entrepreneurs are raising the bar for quality and branding. Both cashew and coconut feni have received geographical indication (GI) status. Furthermore, states like Madhya Pradesh are reclassifying mahua as a 'heritage spirit', moving it



away from the 'country liquor' label.

Tourism is also playing a role. The Fazenda Cazulo in Goa has become a destination for its 'Floating Feni' experience. Meanwhile, sophisticated cocktail bars in Mumbai, Bhopal and Panjim are integrating these spirits into evolved beverage programmes. Recently, at the prestigious Spirits Selection by CMB in Mexico, Six Brothers Mahura and Cazulo's Dukhshiri Feni won silver medals, marking a global coming-of-age for India's native spirits.

—The writer is founder & CEO of Tulleeho, one of India's leading alcobev consultancies and also co-founder of 30BestBars India and the India Bartender Show.

LOCAL FLAVOUR

The popular floating feni experience hosted by Fazenda Cazulo in Goa

Zerodha's Nikhil Kamath to launch a luxury tequila. Others include Ajay Devgn (the GlenJourneys single malt), Sanjay Dutt (the Glenwalk blended scotch), Vivek Oberoi (stake in a Scottish company that makes tea-infused gin) and Rana Daggubati with Anirudh Ravichander (Loca Loka tequila).

Work in progress

With all the action, the Indian alcobev industry faces two big challenges. One is over-regulation, with rules varying from state to state adding to the complexity. India's dated notions of culture and puritanism mean most state governments find simplifying liquor laws a hot potato better left untouched.

The other is the tough task of establishing Indian alcobev on the global stage as a force. While the recent awards and export spurt are a good start, the road ahead is long and arduous. Take, for instance, Japan. Its spirits had to really work at it for several decades before getting international acceptance as a category at par with Scotch whiskies.

India has its task cut out. "It is a matter of time, but it is also a matter of concentrated brand building," said Damodaran of Diageo. "Building something like this of value requires time."

Perception is another wall to be surmounted, sip by sip. Pramod Mohandas, who works in a luxury resort in the UAE, says Indian premium spirits have already reached a point of dominance in places like Dubai. "It's not just NRIs who are lapping it up. I see colleagues at work and friends on social media chatting about the rise of Indian alcobev all the time. My Irish friends love them, and I have seen Russian tourists trying them out and then buying them as presents when they go back. It's only the Brits and Scots who have a problem in accepting the rise of Indian spirits," he said.

It doesn't fluster Himanshu Ashar much. The global brand ambassador of Paul John keeps pitching the next symbolic move for Indian alcobev to everyone he meets at tasting sessions. "The English say 'cheers', while the Spanish say 'salud,'" he said. "Here in India, I think it's time we came up with our own custom. It's time we started saying 'Jai Ho!' instead of cheers." 🍷



EXCISE EXCESS

India's laws regulating the alcobev sector vary from state to state, and can confound both distillers and drinkers

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

ANASUYA RAY WAS understandably confused during her induction at AB InBev India, the brewers of Budweiser beer. Coming from the FMCG sector, the 'alcobev' space was entirely new to her. However, the source of her confusion wasn't the brewing process, but a supply chain colleague who kept briefing her on "exporting from here and importing there".

"I was wondering, 'What is he talking about?' We are just sending goods from Bengaluru to Hyderabad. Where is the export and import happening?" Ray recounted. She eventually learned that alcohol consignments require "export and import passes" just to cross state borders.

"To top it all off, when goods are transferred from one 'country' to another, there is actually an excise official sitting inside that truck to ensure the inter-border transfer happens," she said. "In this day and age, when we track food through Zomato, we are still dependent on a person rather than GPS tagging? Things need to change!"

Rules do change in India, but rarely in the way manufacturers hope. Every year, on April 1, state

excise policies are overhauled. "What happens then? Every label you see on our bottles has to change," said Ray. "Everything must go for renewal. And every renewal means vast amounts of money, energy and resources being poured into it."

Navigating the laws governing India's alcohol sector is like entering a maze filled with paperwork in triplicate and random inspections. Because alcohol is a 'state subject' under the 7th Schedule of the Constitution, each state is free to legislate as it pleases. This has resulted in a patchwork of regulations that can be diametrically opposite once you cross a state line.

"Every year, what the state government does determines our future," said Anant S. Iyer, director-general of the Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies (CIABC). "One day the sun can be shining, and suddenly it sets without warning. It depends entirely on the whims and fancies of whoever wants to change policy."

This legislative freedom has led to total prohibition in states like Gujarat and Bihar. Even in 'wet' states, the complexity is staggering. Tax struc-

tures vary so wildly that the price of the same bottle can double from one state to the next.

Historical quirks also persist. Until the 2000s, a provision in the Punjab Excise Act (which then governed Delhi) prohibited bars from displaying bottles, fearing they would provide "unwise temptation" to



patrons who were, ironically, already inside the bar.

These restrictions aren't merely a post-1947 phenomenon. The British introduced several restrictive laws, such as the Bombay Abkari Act of 1878, to suppress India's indigenous alcohol cultures—like toddy, arrack, and mahua—in favour of revenue-generating foreign-made liquor. Post-independence, Gandhian sentiments led to Article 47 of the Constitution, which recommends that the state “endeavour” to bring about prohibition, even as the power to tax remained firmly with the states.

Today, alcohol is the ‘golden goose’ of state revenue; many state economies would crumble without it. Yet, this dependency creates an intricate trap for distillers, bar owners and tourists alike.

The legal drinking age is a prime example of the lack of uniformity. It

ranges from 18 in Goa and Sikkim to 25 in Delhi. Maharashtra employs a curious ‘permit system’—a legacy of the 1949 Bombay Prohibition Act—where a drinker technically needs a permit to consume alcohol. The state also sets the age limit for beer and wine at 21, but raises it to 25 for spirits.

Distribution is equally varied. In Tamil Nadu, the state body TASMAL is the sole distributor. ‘Dry days’ fluctuate wildly. In Kerala, the first of every month is dry, though this has recently been relaxed for star hotels

TOUGH LAWS

A liquor shop attendant in Delhi pulls down the shutter as police forcibly closed the shop

to serve liquor during pre-approved events. Meanwhile, states like West Bengal and Odisha have embraced modernity by allowing alcohol delivery via apps.

Further complications often come from the courts. In the mid-2010s, a Supreme Court order banned liquor sales on national highways to curb drink-driving. However, because national highways double as the main thoroughfares in most Indian towns, the ban threatened to shut down a massive portion of the industry. In response, several states reclassified their national highways as ‘state roads’ to circumvent the ruling.

Price discrepancies also fuel ‘booze tourism’ and smuggling. Because Goa and Puducherry have much lower taxes than neighbouring Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu, excise officers constantly patrol state borders. In dry Gujarat, it is a common weekend sight to see tourists flocking across the border to Mount Abu in Rajasthan, primarily to partake in the potions forbidden at home.

When India moved to a unified Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017, two sectors were excluded at the states’ instance: fuel and liquor. This remains a point of contention for manufacturers.

“Alcohol is not under GST, but please remember all our inputs are,” Ray explained. “The beer industry uses barley and malt, and all these things are charged GST.” This creates a ‘broken’ tax chain where manufacturers pay GST on raw materials but cannot claim credits against the excise duty paid on the final product.

While uniform alcohol laws may be a distant dream given the current political climate, the industry continues to push for modernisation. “Tweak these laws and look ahead,” said Ray. “Get some benchmarks from across the world and implement them. India’s time is here and now, and every change is a step forward in the journey.”



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DEATH BY INK

Fifty years after her passing, we solve the mystery of how Agatha Christie's life played into her books

BY ANJULY MATHAI

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Not many people would know Margaret Frary Miller; she is one of those people who tip-toed incognito through the hallways of history. Still, if it was not for her, the world might never have gotten its most beloved crime writer—Agatha Christie. Agatha—and the world at large—has two things to thank Margaret for. First, for challenging her to write a crime novel. It happened after both read Gaston Leroux’s *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* and Margaret made a bet with Agatha: that she would never be able to pull off a book like Gaston’s. Agatha, of course, took up the challenge and the rest, as they say, is a legacy in crime.

Second, Margaret gave her a setting for many of her novels—Abney Hall in Cheadle, which was Margaret’s married home, where Agatha spent many happy days as a young girl. Later, its “quantities of rooms, passages, unexpected steps, back staircases, front staircases, alcoves, niches” would become the site of

many bloody murders, served Agatha style. They made an appearance in her books like *4.50 from Paddington* (in which it was described as a “proper old mausoleum”), *They Do It With Mirrors* and, of course, her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

In the last, it had to compete for attention with perhaps Agatha’s greatest literary offering—the flamboyant Belgian whiz Hercule Poirot, whose head was “exactly the shape of an egg”, whose moustache was “very stiff and military”, and for whom a speck of dust on his suit would have caused more pain than a bullet wound. He became so popular that when his creator killed him off, *The New York Times* published an obituary. Together, Agatha and her master detective trudded the corners and crevices of the English countryside, snooping in vicarages, coastal resorts and English girls’ boarding schools for clues, interviewing passengers in trains and ships, and using their “little grey cells” to solve the unsolvable. Agatha’s quintessential Englishness provided the backdrop for a little-ap-

preciated facet of her writing—her humour. Often, she was at her sassiest while taking a potshot at her own people. In her short story *Triangle at Rhodes*, for example, she wrote of an Englishwoman: “Unlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week elapse before making the first cautious advance as is the customary British habit.”

In fact, if you solved the mystery of Agatha’s life, you got an insight into the machinery of her mind. For example, her favourite murder weapon of choice—poison—was developed during her years working at a Torquay dispensary during World War I, when she was married to her first husband Archibald Christie and living with her widowed mother. History has lost count of the unsuspecting men and women who have been bumped off with Agatha’s strychnine-laced cocoa and thallium-spiked tea.

But some of her best books—like *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*—were a result of her travels to Egypt, Iraq and Syria with her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan. In fact, it was recently revealed that the couple also visited India in January 1960 for an archaeological lecture tour. The next year, she visited Kashmir on a leisure trip. “Lake and mountains

IF YOU SOLVED
THE MYSTERY
OF AGATHA’S
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MACHINERY OF
HER MIND.



rather lovely," she wrote her daughter Rosalind from Srinagar's Oberoi Palace. "This is a hotel rather like at Jaipur—converted rajah's palace—miles and miles of corridors, enormous rooms and we are in a kind of super suite looking over the lake." Pity her imagination did not poison the walls of the hotel with arsenic fumes; unfortunately, the queen of crime did not set any of her novels in India.

So how was this maverick writer—whose 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections have made her the best-selling novelist of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare—in real life? "She was incredibly loving," says her great grandson, James Prichard, CEO at Agatha Christie Ltd. "She shared extraordinary experiences with my father—her grandson—taking him around the world, to the theatre, the opera and all sorts of experiences.



MURDER & MAYHEM

Still from a 2022 adaptation of *Death on the Nile*; (below) Kenneth Branagh as Hercule Poirot in a 2017 adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*

I tease my father that he was the most spoiled grandchild of the 20th century."

According to James, she was also a great listener. "My father says she was the best listener he ever met," he says. "She was very shy, and was happier listening to people and asking them questions than regaling them with stories or anecdotes about herself. There is a piece of advice she gave aspiring writers. She told them that if they wanted to learn about people, just ride around on the bus and listen to their conversations."

It is difficult to reconcile this shy and gentle grandmother with the ace crime writer who plotted countless gruesome murders. But perhaps one can get a clue to the mystery of Agatha from what she herself once said: "I had an idea that writing books was only the natural successor to embroidering sofa-cushions." To think that if it was not for Margaret, the world might have gotten a seamstress instead of a crime writer. Thank God for the bet that gave us corpses and not cushions. 🕒



INTERVIEW

JAMES PRICHARD

CEO at Agatha Christie Ltd



Agatha Christie is bigger now than she has ever been

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Q/ How was it growing up as the great grandson of Agatha Christie?

A/ I did not know anything different because that is the way I grew up. And to me it feels perfectly natural, although, obviously, I understand that it was not. What is interesting from my perspective is how, when I was growing up, Agatha Christie was not cool. She certainly was not as popular as she is now. I think about how different my own children's experience is than mine was. My kids have the advantage of a time when she is bigger now than she ever has been. And that includes when she was alive. Film and TV are just bigger media than books and stage, which were the pools she played in.

The other thing is that I have always thought of Agatha Christie as two people. There is the world-famous icon, the author, the genius, and then there is the private person, who I

think of as my father's grandmother. I was five or six when she died. But my grandmother, her daughter, lived until 2004. My father is still alive. So, obviously, I have a lot of reflected knowledge and experience of her. I do feel as if I have a personal insight into her. I teased my father about how I thought she was the most extraordinary grandmother and how he was the most spoiled grandchild of the 20th century. And I don't mean that purely in financial terms, although there was an element of that. She was incredibly loving. She shared extraordinary experiences with him, took him around the world, took him to the theatre, opera, and just all sorts of experiences.

Q/ Do you have any memory of her?

A/ I do have vague memories. She was obviously very old when I was a child and I remember being asked

to behave and not run around too wildly by my mother, in case I knocked her over or something. I also have a very vivid memory of the day she died. I remember coming back from school and my father was sitting in this room with the curtains drawn, and was obviously very upset. I remember watching the six o'clock news and she was the lead item. Even then I realised that was not normal, and not what happened to everyone else's great grandmothers. But obviously, I never got to sit down and discuss her work or her feelings on life, the universe or anything else. So I miss that a bit.

Q/ What is her first novel that you read?

A/ The first book I read was *Death on the Nile*. I think I was around nine. And bizarrely, I seem to remember that I read it surreptitiously. There was a paperback on the passage or something. I took it to my room and read it under the bed cover, because I was not sure that my parents would be happy with me reading it. I guess I just thought they would think it was too adult and I was too young, but it has always stuck with me as one of my favourite stories.

Q/ What are some memories or anecdotes that your father or grandmother might have told you about her?

A/ One of the most interesting things my father always says about her is that she was the best listener he ever met. She was a very shy person, and I think she was probably happier listening to people and asking them questions than she was regaling them with stories about herself. Her books are at heart about human nature. They are about people.

Q/ Could you describe the work that you do as chairman and CEO of Agatha Christie Ltd?

A/ I do think of her books as being



GOOD TIMES

Agatha Christie with second husband, Max Mallowan

is no point in trying to understand.

Q/ According to you, what is the essence of her enduring appeal?

A/ I think it is a very simple thing—the stories. She had a genius for plot. And the thing about great stories is that they don't age. They stand the test of time. They thrive across boundaries, across borders, across languages. You can translate a great story into any language in the world. And it is no accident that she is the most translated author of all time. But I also think that her understanding of human nature is completely underestimated. Bizarrely, I think she is criticised occasionally for not having enough characterisation in her books. What people underestimate is how she managed to pack everything in 70,000 words; her books are relatively short. That is part of her ability to sketch a character. We know who these people are. We still know people like them. You don't need another 10,000 words to understand them. And I think that is part of her skill. She is criticised for something which actually was at the heart of her talent.

Q/ She wrote her first book in the aftermath of World War I. If she was writing her novels today, how different would they have been?

A/ The first part of that question to me is always fascinating, which is that essentially the murder mystery genre came out of a time of horrible bloodshed and killing. Why people came out of World War I and wanted to read about murder, I don't know. But I think one of the things about these books is that, despite the horrible things that happen, at the end, things are all sorted and the world is put back together again. And I think that was a reassuring concept for readers at the time. 🕒

the heart of the business. We certainly make as much money now as has ever been made from publishing. It is extraordinary how many books we still sell. As a child, I was told that books and reading were going to come to an end. People have always been prophesying that the book is dead; it really isn't. And then you get new versions of the book, like the e-book. The growth of audio over the last five years in the UK and the US is unbelievable, and is now a very significant part of our business. We have done some really interesting multi-voice audio projects.

I have been probably doing this job properly for 10 years or so, and have had to learn the worlds of TV, film,

adaptation and stage. But the main thing is that it is still a fascinating business. It is extraordinary to see how many people still love Agatha Christie. Last week I was in China and went to see a play in Beijing—an English version of *Murder on the Orient Express*. There was a packed audience of about a thousand people. And then on Saturday night, I went to see a Chinese version of *Murder on the Orient Express* in Shanghai and it was a packed hall of 1,200 people, all having a good time. That kind of blows my mind. Her work still has an extraordinary impact on people all over the world. That is just an aspect of her genius that perhaps we will never understand, and perhaps there

Bear necessities

Achala Moulik's *The Thousand Years War: Russia and the West* helps understand the raging conflict in Ukraine

BY SANJIB KR BARUAH

Nothing exists in isolation, more so in history. A case in point is the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict—it has its roots not only in recent developments but also in the past.

Pushkin Medal recipient Achala Moulik puts the Russian perspective in focus, placing contemporary events in the backdrop of a west-Russia conflict over 10 centuries. Hence the title of her book—*The Thousand Years War: Russia and the West*. If anything, the book helps understand the raging conflict in Ukraine.

Russians have had a unique and troubled relationship with the west. They are Europeans and Eurasians at the same time, which has led to a civilisational conflict. Parallely, there was the clash between the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, as also the political-economic contradictions between capitalism and communism.

Tsarist Russia had recurring conflicts with other imperialist powers—Britain, France, Ottoman Turkiye and Austria-Germany. The invasions by the Vikings, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler and later on the power play by the US and NATO only continued the thread.

Moulik writes in her prelude: “Unable to defeat Russia in a direct armed confrontation, the west waged proxy wars against nations friendly to Russia, which would draw Russia into conflicts. This inflicted irre-

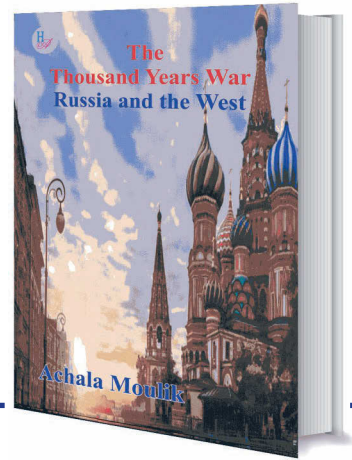
deemable damage on the hapless pawns in the game—Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and now Ukraine.”

There were economic reasons, too. Russia was home to 28 per cent of the world's natural and mineral resources. So it has been a conflict not just for power and influence but also natural riches and territories.

The book, which can be blamed for its overwhelming Russian point of view and for being over-simplistic, is also a commentary on Russian resilience, underlining the victories against the invading Swedes, French and Germans.

Nine of the book's 38 chapters are articles by other writers. Moulik's final chapter expresses hope of a multipolar world, “where the weak are defended, the poor are aided, the hu-

Pushkin Medal recipient Achala Moulik puts the Russian perspective in focus, placing contemporary events in the backdrop of a west-Russia conflict over 10 centuries.



**THE THOUSAND YEARS WAR:
RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

By Achala Moulik

Published by Har-Anand
Publications Pvt Ltd,
pages 296, price ₹999

miliated are respected, where might is not right and where justice and equality for all are not empty pledges, and where powerful states cannot destroy those who oppose them”.

The book also has mentions on the elephant in the room, China, and the rising giant, India. “Now we can assume that the massive emancipation of mankind from western control is of central importance, the most important factor of which is the growth of China's economic and political power,” writes Moulik. “If China itself, as well as India and other major states outside the west, cope with the task entrusted to them by history, in the coming decades the international system will acquire features that were completely uncharacteristic before.” Given their growing importance, India and China deserved a little more space in the book.

Nonetheless, *The Thousand Years War: Russia and the West* will go down as an important view of an outsider, with the Russia-Ukraine conflict providing the perfect setting. ❶

THE SLABHEAD SAGA

My ‘arranged marriage’ with **Harry Maguire**

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

W

hat a specimen, I thought, as I watched Matthijs de Ligt. It was May 2019; the Dutch centre-back had just captained Ajax to a domestic double. The Amsterdam club had

also reached the Champions League semifinals after 22 years. Mic in one hand, champion’s shield held casually in the other, the strapping 19-year-old listed the European giants Ajax had beaten—Bayern Munich, Real Madrid, Juventus. “We have shown the real Ajax,” he thundered, as 1,00,000 delirious fans cheered. I had been enthralled by his physicality, tactical awareness and on-the-ball ability for well over a year. But, it was at that moment that my heart said: “I do.”

I wanted him at my club—a big-spending, mid-table team called Manchester United. But, it wasn’t to be. Matthijs chose the Old Lady of Turin. I was shattered. To pick up the pieces, my club brought in Harry Maguire. We even one-upped Matthijs’s new club by spending a world-record (for a defender) £80 million on Harry—they spent only €75 million on Matthijs.

It started well. Harry, 26, towered over opponents, read the game well and was good on the ball. Within six months, he was named skipper. Meanwhile, in Italy, Matthijs was struggling to meet expectations.

However, despite a solid first season, Harry was soon overwhelmed by United. The new captain sank with his ship. His highlight reels show gems like pulling down a teammate to clear a path for an opponent to score, dawdling to kill counter-attacks, missing simple passes, and sundry assaults on teammates—Paul Pogba got a scorpion-kick; Cristiano Ronaldo, a headbutt.

United fans cried, laughed and despaired

(some dregs of society even made a bomb threat against Harry). For many fans, the only hope was that Harry might go to jail. Back in 2020, at a Greek night club, two men allegedly injected his sister with a rape-drug. Unlike on the field in years to come, Harry spotted danger and stepped in. By the sound of it, he sent bodies flying. Every sinew in me wanted to support the gallant brother; yet, I also wanted him out of my club. However, nothing came of the case.

Notably, in November 2022, a Ghanaian MP mocked Harry, calling the Ghana vice president an “economic Maguire”—a liability. And in 2023, Harry was stripped of captaincy.

It was a big blow and rumours swirled he’d leave. A London team made a good offer, but Harry, aka ‘Slabhead’, refused a wage cut. Now, I was furious. I had been supportive (except for briefly wishing him incarceration), but, he had stayed for money; this was too much. Mil-

lions of United fans, myself included, sharpened our knives. The next mistake would not be forgiven.

Infuriatingly, relieved of captaincy, he improved drastically (at times, he has been the team’s best defender and its most potent attacking threat). The Ghanaian MP said sorry; Slabhead’s response was gracious and warm. In that warmth, we melted; the knives were gone. He was ours, to deride, yes, but, also to cherish. A rare modern footballer who tackled mind-numbing, often deserved, criticism head-on and came out on top. He has athletic limitations. In character, he is not lacking.

Now Matthijs is here, 26 and battle-hardened by stints in Turin and Munich, to take over as the big man in United’s defence. Yet there are no complaints when Harry plays—he has earned it. ●



AFP



Auld Lang Syne

It was the last week of December. The missus and I sat before the television, huddled around our rusty electric heater which fools the truly desperate into believing they are enjoying the warmth of an open fire. The music from our condominium clubhouse sounded discordant. Quite wisely, the missus and I had decided to give the New Year's Eve party a miss. We find the forced laughter and faux gaiety quite frustrating. The awkward chit-chat with barely familiar neighbours is always tiresome.

The missus nursed her cup of jasmine tea, while I gave my generous Remy Martin a thoughtful swirl in its balloon glass. Gazing into the middle distance, I observed in a pensive manner that another year was coming to an end.

"Darling," I said ruminatively, "another year is slipping away. Much too quickly. And what have I got to show for it? Zilch. Nothing. A big fat zero. Not a single feather in my cap. I have done nothing. I have achieved nothing!"

For emphasis, I added rhetorically, "What do I have to show for an entire twelvemonth that's gone all too soon?"

I fell silent. Suddenly, I was afraid of looking back beyond last January. There was the lurking fear that the nothing of yesterday and the nothing of last week and all the nothings of the past year might just extend further back. Much further back.

My ever-loving wife consoled me. "What does it matter? You've done your bit, and more. There's a season for everything, including glorious idleness. Beyond a point, every person must rest. The world won't come to an end because you didn't climb Mt Everest this year. Doing nothing isn't a crime. It's the ultimate retirement blessing!"

"That's easy for you to say," I grumbled. "You have your daily triumphs—battling with the menials; making Bassa Ram, the driver, come in time and ensuring that the cook doesn't spoil the broth."

"Well," said the missus with a wicked glint, "you could take over these burdens and have the profound satisfaction of ensuring that Phulwanti sweeps every corner of the room."

I realised that my grumbling and complaining had put me on the edge of a precipice. Suddenly, the New Year Eve despondency had taken a dangerous turn, and I saw before me a fate worse than death. To keep Bassa Ram and Phulwanti in line is a full-time job and my wife was recommending I do just that to satisfy my ego!

Before the missus came out with some ghastlier prescription, I said, "My dear, you know my nature. I demand fanfares, parades, trumpets! Medals! And here you are—suggesting disciplining the domestics as the epic feat of the year? No! My achievements must be monumental. I must slay a few dragons! I must fly a spaceship! I must win the Booker! I must conquer the world!"

"You are indeed an old fool," said the missus. "Count your blessings instead of chasing fantasies! Sometimes the greatest triumph is the thing you prudently avoid doing. True wisdom is knowing when to leave some mountain unclimbed. Inaction can be a greater victory than frantic activity. After a certain vintage, success isn't about what you did, but gloriously about what you didn't! So, shun the depression! Rejoice in the things that you never did!"

"How absurd!" I declared.

"But think about it—you're already a master of masterly inaction. You did not even once advise me where to invest money. You didn't bat an eyelid when our daughter dyed her hair that alarming shade of blue. You refrained from telling Bassa Ram the 'proper' way to park. You are blessed. You've run your marathon. You've broken a few things. You have fixed a few others. You've brought up two children who still answer your phone calls. Those are great achievements—more than many others can boast of."

We lapsed into a companionable silence, mulling over undone deeds and unhit targets and other non-achievements. The missus sighed. I yawned. Down at the clubhouse, the music had cranked up to eardrum-shattering levels. The New Year party was obviously gathering momentum.

"Perhaps we should pop down to the party after



TO DO LIST

1. Slay dragons
2. Fly spaceship
3. Win Booker

all,” the missus mused aloud.

Before I could summon my most horrified look, she giggled and answered herself: “Thank goodness we’re spared that nonsense.”

The clock struck ten. Outside, some overeager soul let off a premature cracker—bang!—prompting the neighbour’s dog to bark furiously at the invisible intruder. And just like that, the old year prepared to limp out without ceremony.

“This time, shall we stay awake till midnight to greet the New Year properly?” asked the missus.

“What’s the fuss? It’ll just be another Thursday, disguised as January,” I grumbled.

So, we stayed put, the television muttering away like a disgruntled uncle. As I nursed the last of my Remy, a gentle melancholy settled in—nostalgia for the half-forgotten blaze of youth, a tender regret for the roads not taken, and the quiet acceptance that not every mountain is to be climbed. A warm glow of understanding slowly seeped into my heart—I realised that no year ever ends in a bang. It just whispers goodbye and departs, leaving you wondering where the time went.

ILLUSTRATION | JOB P.K.

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MOTHER OF COMEBACKS

Post her maternity break, **Kiara Advani** is taking baby steps back into the limelight. Her first look from her upcoming film *Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups* was unveiled recently. Her goth look in the poster sure grabbed eyeballs. Headlined by Yash, the film is directed by Geetu Mohandas and is due for a March release. Advani plays Nadia in the movie. "A role that demanded more from me—physically, mentally, emotionally and felt nothing short of transformative. My toughest one yet. Months of hard work. One fearless leap," she wrote on her Instagram story.

PINK WRAP

Badshah and Barbie—one would have never thought of taking the two names in the same breath. But here we are. The rapper recently flaunted an ultra-exclusive Rolex Daytona 'Barbie', becoming the first Indian to own one of only 10 such timepieces in the world. The 'Barbie' nickname comes from the 40 pink-cut sapphires on the bezel and 12 more on the dial. The 18-carat yellow gold watch is estimated to be around \$1 million. Time is money, they say!





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OONA FINDS HER OWN FIRE

Oona Chaplin is on fire. She nailed it as the villain Varang in the recently released *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. But fame comes with baggage, and she is aware, being Charlie Chaplin's granddaughter. She even considered changing her name before starting her acting career. "It has been a journey to feel deserving, because I know that doors have opened for me that potentially wouldn't have opened if I wasn't associated with this brilliant man," she said. "It's definitely tricky to feel undeserving of the place you are in."

JUST MARRIED

Theirs is a love story that would beat any popular K-drama hands down. South Korean actors **Kim Woo-bin** and **Shin Min-ah** got hitched after 10 years of courtship. The couple first met while shooting for a commercial in 2015. While they were dating, Kim was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal cancer, and Shin stood by him through his treatment and recovery. Over the years, the couple has kept their relationship private, and so the news of their wedding created quite a buzz. At the wedding ceremony at Dynasty Hall of The Shilla Hotel in Seoul, with many A-list celebs in attendance, Shin stunned in an Elie Saab gown and Kim looked dapper in a Ralph Lauren Purple Label suit. A wedding to remember, indeed!

COMPILED BY **SUSAMMA JOY KURIAN**



Parliament beyond the spotlight

As an unusually eventful year draws to a close, a development offers quiet reassurance about the health of our parliamentary processes. Amid frequent commentary on legislative disruption and partisan gridlock, I had the privilege of participating in a rare bipartisan exercise that has, thankfully, defied the prevailing circumstances.

Last week, the Select Committee on the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) unanimously submitted its report to the Lok Sabha after completing its scrutiny of the government's proposed overhaul of the 2016 law. There was recognition that the IBC has helped turn around banks' non-performing assets (NPAs) with recoveries in recent years of ₹50,000-₹60,000 crore per annum. There was also broad consensus that a major reboot is required to tighten resolution timelines and incorporate several important suggestions from stakeholders.

I had the honour of chairing this cross-party committee, and what made the exercise particularly satisfying was the spirit in which MPs, from both the governing and opposition parties, worked—in a cordial, cooperative and professional atmosphere. Crucially, this work unfolded away from the glare of cameras.

That absence is not incidental. While the proceedings of both houses of Parliament are broadcast live, boosting transparency, parliamentary committees remain outside this ambit. Decades ago, then speaker Somnath Chatterjee resisted calls to allow live coverage of committee hearings. His judgment, with the benefit of hindsight, appears prescient. Cameras, while valuable for public accountability, can also distort systemic incentives.

For elected representatives, the presence of cameras often triggers a performative instinct—the temptation to speak over colleagues, and, instead, address an external audience. In Parliament, this has often translated into grandstanding and disruption by the

opposition, even when it compromises their ability to exert pressure on the government through questions, debates, amendments and other procedural tools. Committees, insulated from this dynamic, have therefore retained their character as spaces for genuine deliberation.

What TV cameras did to legislators, social media has now done to society at large. Social media platforms, through algorithm-driven amplification, increasingly shape how citizens encounter information. By flooding users with content aligned to their initial clicks, these platforms create echo chambers that crowd out alternative viewpoints and narrow discourse—conditions hardly conducive for reasoned discussions or inferences.

This amplification of selective perspectives runs counter to rational inquiry. Human progress has rested on questioning assumptions, weighing evidence and engaging with competing ideas. When debate gives way to emotional reinforcement,

whether through political theatre or algorithmic feeds, the quality of collective decision-making suffers severely.

Against this backdrop, the work of the IBC Select Committee offers a modest but meaningful counter-example. It demonstrates what can be achieved when systemic incentives favour cooperation over confrontation, and when policy is examined through a pragmatic, problem-solving lens rather than partisan reflex.

The existing IBC has helped make India's banking sector stand on a far firmer footing, even by international standards. This major reboot will further dramatically improve the situation. There are many parliamentary committees that have had similar outcomes. That is reason enough for optimists to hope for—and contribute to—a more effective democracy.



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