

EYE SECRETS

Spy in every blink

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DGP reviews police station reorganisation in four Commissionerates to strengthen urban policing



“Eye secrets Hyderabad, July 2: In a move aimed at modernising Telangana’s urban policing framework and improving administrative efficiency, Director General of Police (DGP) C.V. Anand on Thursday held a comprehensive review meeting on the proposed reorganisation of police station jurisdictions in the Hyderabad, Cyberabad, Malkajgiri and Future City Police Commissionerates. “The meeting focused on redrawing police station boundaries in line with the State government’s administrative reforms, rapid urban expansion and the growing policing requirements of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Region. “Senior officers from all four Commissionerates presented detailed proposals covering police station limits, redistribution of jurisdictions, creation of new administrative boundaries and operational requirements. The proposals were reviewed

to ensure that the restructuring would improve policing efficiency while remaining aligned with the State’s governance framework. “Addressing the officers, the DGP directed that the reorganisation be carried out strictly in accordance with the Government Orders (GOs) issued by the State government. He said police station jurisdictions must be scientifically aligned with municipal corporation limits, revenue divisions, mandals and court jurisdictions to eliminate administrative overlap and ensure seamless coordination among various government departments. “Emphasising the importance of long-term planning, Anand noted that Hyderabad and its surrounding urban centres are witnessing unprecedented population growth, large-scale infrastructure development and the emergence of new residential and commercial hubs. He said the reorganisation should not merely address

current requirements but should also accommodate future urban expansion, reducing the need for frequent jurisdictional revisions. “The DGP instructed officials to prepare a comprehensive and sustainable policing map capable of meeting the law enforcement needs of the rapidly expanding metropolitan region over the coming years. “He also stressed that the exercise should be undertaken in consultation with all stakeholders. Inputs from police officers, district administration, municipal authorities and other concerned departments should be considered before finalising the revised jurisdictions, he said. “Referring specifically to Hyderabad city, Anand directed officials to exercise utmost caution while altering police station boundaries so that the changes do not create confusion or inconvenience for citizens, government departments or the judiciary. The revised jurisdictions, he said, should facilitate better coordination in criminal investigations, emergency response, law and order management and public service delivery. “The DGP further instructed that police stations should be given names that accurately reflect the geographical and administrative identity of their respective localities. Such a system, he observed, would improve public recognition and

minimise confusion in identifying police jurisdictions. “Officials also discussed the administrative requirements arising out of the restructuring, including manpower deployment, infrastructure needs and operational coordination between neighbouring police stations. The objective is to ensure that every police station caters to an optimal population and geographical area, thereby improving response time and enhancing accessibility for citizens. “Anand said the proposed reorganisation is intended to build a more citizen-centric policing system by making police services easily accessible, improving operational efficiency and strengthening coordination across Commissionerates. He expressed confidence that the restructuring would help the police department respond more effectively to the demands of a fast-growing metropolitan region while ensuring better public service delivery. “The review meeting was attended by Hyderabad Police Commissioner V.C. Sajjanar, Cyberabad Police Commissioner Ramesh Reddy, Future City Police Commissioner Tarun Joshi, Malkajgiri Police Commissioner Sumathi, Joint Commissioners and other senior police officers, who participated in detailed discussions on the proposed jurisdictional changes and the roadmap for implementation.

Cabinet approves breakfast and lunch for teachers in government schools, colleges

“Hyderabad, July 2: In a major welfare initiative aimed at strengthening the public education system, the Telangana Cabinet on Thursday approved the extension of the State’s meal programme to teachers, lecturers and non-teaching staff in government schools and junior colleges, in addition to students. “The decision was taken at the Cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy at the Dr B.R. Ambedkar Telangana Secretariat. Under the expanded programme, nearly 1.5 lakh teachers, lecturers and support staff across the State will be provided both breakfast and lunch along with students. “The Cabinet said the move is intended to create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment while improving the overall functioning of government educational institutions. “State to move Supreme Court on VBG Ramji scheme” The Cabinet also held an extensive discussion on the Centre’s proposed VBG Ramji scheme, which is set to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Ministers said the State would approach the Supreme Court, arguing that the Centre had decided to continue with the scheme despite objections raised by several States. “They recalled that a Cabinet sub-committee headed by Irrigation Minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy had examined the issue in detail. Although the Telangana Assembly had unanimously opposed the proposed scheme, the Centre proceeded with its implementation without accommodating the concerns expressed by States. “The ministers stated that while the

State continues to oppose the scheme, it would implement it to ensure that rural workers do not lose employment opportunities or wage payments during the transition. “6,278 posts cleared for TIMS hospitals” In another significant decision, the Cabinet sanctioned 6,278 posts for newly established Telangana Institute of Medical Sciences (TIMS) super-specialty hospitals at Sanathnagar, LB Nagar, Alwal and Warangal. “The government plans to recruit doctors, nurses, paramedical and other healthcare personnel to operationalise the hospitals. The Cabinet also decided to develop the institutions on the lines of Nizam’s Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS) and allow eligible patients to receive treatment through the Chief Minister’s Relief Fund (CMRF) by issuing Letters of Credit (LOCs). “7,345 crore approved for Musi Riverfront Phase-I” The Cabinet granted administrative approval for Phase-I of the Musi Riverfront Development Project, covering a 21-km stretch up to Gandhi Sarovar in Hyderabad. “An allocation of 7,345 crore was approved for the first phase, and the government said the tendering process would begin shortly. The project is expected to focus on river rejuvenation, urban infrastructure, environmental improvement and the creation of public spaces along the Musi. “Ministers brief media” The Cabinet decisions were announced to the media by Ministers Ponguleti Srinivasa Reddy, Dansari Anasuya Seethakka and Adluri Laxman Kumar, who described the resolutions as part of the government’s broader agenda to strengthen education, healthcare, employment security and urban infrastructure across Telangana.

Telangana Government Approves Recruitment of 735 New Water Board Posts

“Eye secrets:” Hyderabad, July 2: The Telangana Government has issued orders to recruit “735 new posts” in the Telangana Water Board (Jalamandali) after approval by Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy. The an-

who described it as the union’s first major achievement. “Employees celebrated the announcement at the Jalamandali Head Office in Hyderabad and thanked the Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, Labour Minister G. Vivek Venkataswamy, Transport Minister Ponnamp Prabhakar, TPCC President B. Mahesh Kumar Goud, and Water Board Managing Director Ashok Reddy for supporting the recruitment process. “Speaking on the occasion, Mogulla Raji Reddy said the Water Board had not seen major recruitment for over “35 years”, resulting in increased workload and delayed promotions. He said the recruitment of 735 employees will strengthen the department and create promotion opportunities for senior employees and workers. “He also appreciated the Telangana Government’s recent employee-friendly decisions, including the implementation of the RTC PRC, revised minimum wages, and the release of pending retirement benefits, stating that these measures reflect the government’s commitment to employee welfare. “Several union leaders and employees participated in the celebrations.



announcement was welcomed by “INTUC Telangana State Senior Vice President and Telangana Jalamandali Employees’ Union (TJEU) President” Mogulla Raji Reddy,

Spiritual Traditions Foster Unity, Peace and Cultural Values: TPCC Chief Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud

“Hyderabad: Reaffirming the significance of spiritual traditions in strengthening the social fabric, Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) President and MLC Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud said that religious and cultural events serve as powerful platforms to promote unity, harmony, devotion, and the timeless values that bind communities together. He observed that temples are not merely places of worship but enduring symbols of faith, cultural heritage, and social cohesion. “Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud made these remarks while attending the Sri Sri Nallapochamma Temple Yantra, Idol, Simha Vahana and Temple Shikhara Consecration Mahotsavam at Shivaji Nagar, Borabanda, as the Chief Guest. He participated in the event at the invitation of Akkinaparam Laxman Goud, Congress leader and member of the Shivaji Nagar Welfare Association Temple Committee. “Accompanied by Dr. Satyam Srirangam, PCC Member and TPCC Official Spokesperson, Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud offered special prayers to Goddess Nallapochamma, invoking divine blessings for the peace, prosperity, and well-being of the people of Telangana. The dignitaries joined local leaders, temple committee members, and devotees in the sacred rituals, reflecting the spirit of collective faith and community participation. “Following the ceremonial worship, the

temple priests accorded traditional temple honours to the guests with Vedic blessings and presented them with sacred Theertha Prasadam. The Temple Committee later felicitated Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud and Dr. Satyam Srirangam with ceremonial shawls in appreciation of their gracious presence and continued encouragement for spiritual and cultural initiatives. “Addressing the gathering, Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud expressed his delight at being part of the consecration ceremony of Goddess Nallapochamma, describing it as a spiritually uplifting occasion that strengthens the moral and cultural foundations of society. He noted that such sacred celebrations inspire peace, instill positive values, and reinforce the bonds of brotherhood among people from all walks of life. “He prayed for the continued blessings of Goddess Nallapochamma upon every family and sought abundant rainfall, agricultural prosperity, and lasting happiness for the people of Telangana. He further reiterated the government’s commitment to supporting the preservation and development of temples, recognising their vital role in safeguarding the state’s rich spiritual and cultural heritage. “Highlighting the cultural importance

of the forthcoming Ashada Bonalu festivities, Bomma Mahesh Kumar Goud called upon devotees to participate wholeheartedly in the month-long celebrations across Hyderabad and uphold the vibrant traditions that define Telangana’s identity. “He also commended the members of the Temple Committee for their meticulous planning, unwavering devotion, and collective efforts in organising the consecration ceremony with grandeur and deep spiritual reverence, making it a memorable occasion for devotees and the local community alike. “The event witnessed the participation of B-Block President Thumu Venu; Division Presidents Moinuddin, Krishna Rajput, Vittal Reddy, Narasimha Yadav, Kanakaiah, Lakshminarayana, Sunkanna, and Mastan Reddy; Bharathamma, Kalikota Shankar, Rajesh Goud, Pallapu Venu, Chota Moiz, Ahmed Wajid Pasha, senior Congress leaders, temple committee members, and a large gathering of devotees and local residents.



EYE SECRETS

Editorial

Relief for Indian immigrants

The United States Supreme Court's landmark ruling upholding birthright citizenship comes as a major relief for millions of immigrant families...

Currently, nearly three out of every four H-1B visas approved by the US go to Indian nationals, making them the backbone of America's technology workforce...

Tribal MLAs urge CM to allocate 2,000 more Indiramma houses for Agency areas

"Eye secrets Hyderabad, July 2: Seeking greater focus on the development of tribal regions, a delegation of legislators representing Agency constituencies on Thursday urged Chief Minister Revanth Reddy to sanction an additional 2,000 Indiramma Houses for tribal Assembly segments across Telangana..."



Delegation comprised MLAs Jare Adinarayana (Aswaraopeta), Payam Venkateswarlu (Pinapaka), Koram Kanakaiah (Yellandu), Tellam Venkat Rao (Bhadrachalam) and Vedma Bojju (Khanapur)...

State government continues to expand its flagship welfare and infrastructure programmes, with tribal representatives pressing for region-specific interventions to address the unique socio-economic challenges of the Agency areas.

BJYM Delegation Submits Complaint to ACP Santosh Nagar Over Yesterday's Incident



"Eye secrets: Hyderabad, July 2: A Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) delegation submitted a formal complaint to the ACP of Santosh Nagar regarding yesterday's incident, seeking a fair investigation and immediate action..."

attended included Sri Niranjan Yadav, President of Bhagya Nagar Jilla; Pandarinath, General Secretary (BNZ); Sreekanth Reddy, Vice President; Pandam Laxman, Senior Leader; Mahender Reddy, Social Media In-charge; Swapna, Treasurer (BNZ); Madari Chandrashekar; Ravi Kumar; Swapna;

and Kiran and joint convener K. Mahesh. The delegation requested the police to conduct a transparent and impartial investigation into the incident and ensure that appropriate legal action is taken against those responsible...

Telangana Cabinet Approves VB G Ram G, To Move SC Against Act

From Our Staff Reporter Hyderabad, July 2

The state Cabinet on Thursday approved the implementation of the VB-G RAM G Act in the state with effect from July 1, while simultaneously deciding to challenge certain provisions of the legislation in the Supreme Court...

The Cabinet recalled that the Telangana Assembly had, in January this year, passed a resolution urging the Centre not to alter the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)...

The minister said the Cabinet also deliberated on the recommendations made by the Cabinet sub-committee headed by irrigation minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy...

During the meeting, the Cabinet sought details from officials on whether other states had accepted the new legislation. Officials informed the ministers that all other states had decided to implement the new Act.

In view of the prevailing situation and to ensure that employment opportunities for MGNREGS workers are not disrupted, the Cabinet decided that the state had no alternative but to implement the new law.



Accordingly, it approved the issuance of a notification to bring the VB-G RAM G Act into force in Telangana with retrospective effect from July 1, 2026. At the same time, the Cabinet resolved to pursue a legal battle against the contentious provisions of the Act by approaching the Supreme Court...

Tenders for 1 lakh Indiramma houses in CURE limits soon: Ponguleti

From Our Staff Reporter Hyderabad, July 2

The Telangana government is set to construct one lakh Indiramma houses in the Inner Ring Road area falling under the Core Urban Region Economy (CURE), covering Quthbullapur, Cyberabad and Hyderabad limits, state Revenue, Housing and Information & Public Relations Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy has said.

Land acquisition for the project will be completed in the next two to three days, following which tenders will be called for, the minister said, adding that the exercise is being carried out on the directions of Chief Minister Revanth Reddy.

Defence Acquisition Council to deliberate on Rs 1 lakh crore proposals today

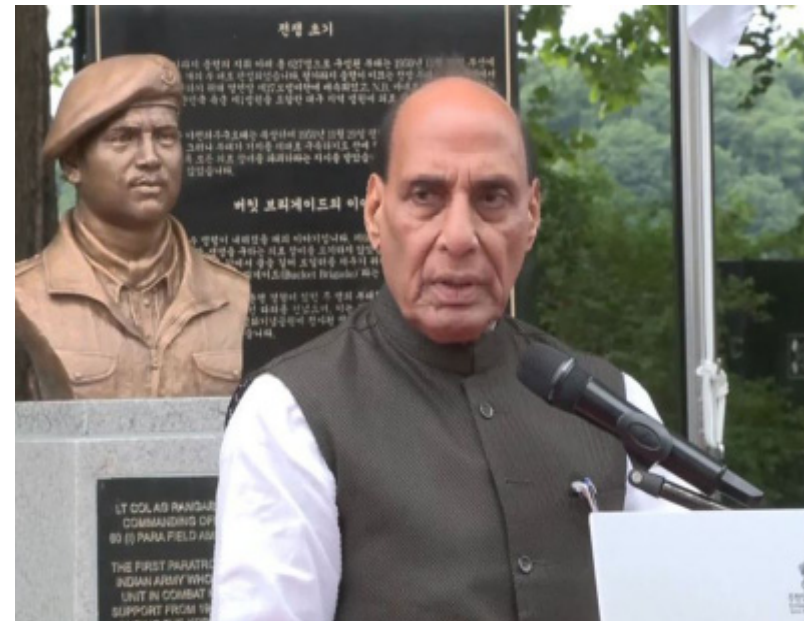
New Delhi, July 2

Will consider getting additional K-9 Vajra self-propelled artillery guns; Kamikaze (loitering) drones; Man-Portable Air Defence Systems and additional air defence guns

The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), the apex decision-making body of the Ministry of Defence, is expected to meet on Friday and deliberate upon proposals of defence procurement estimated to be over Rs 1 lakh crore.

Getting additional K-9 Vajra self-propelled artillery guns; Kamikaze (loitering) drones; Man-Portable Air Defence Systems and additional air defence guns are among the major proposals that are being deliberated upon.

For the Navy, the agenda is likely to include next generation heavyweight torpedoes, unmanned surface vessels; underwater autonomous vehicles; electronic warfare and sonar systems.



The DAC, which is chaired by the Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, will also consider stand-off precision long-range missiles for the IAF, air-to-air refuelling tankers and additional air defence radar systems.

TRS chief Kavitha arrested during protest in Hyderabad

From Our Staff Reporter Hyderabad, July 2

Hyderabad: Telangana Rakshana Sena (TRS) president K Kavitha was on Thursday, July 2, arrested during a protest against the Congress government's unfulfilled promises. Kavitha was leading a protest at Boduppal. A video shared on social media showed the TRS chief lying on the ground in resistance as security personnel detained her...



Meet the Anands: How chess icon Viswanathan Anand's son has taken to art



Art has taken over a bulk of the space at his luxurious residence in Chennai's Kotturpuram. If a painting of lord Hayagriva is located next to a fancy chess board that was gifted to him abroad, a sketch of a tiger is perched right near a chess board made of paper. Anand does not mind at all... because the brain behind these works is his son, Sai Akhil Anand, who is gearing up for his solo exhibition, Morphogenesis. "My house is now 50% art, 50% chess," beams Indian chess legend Viswanathan Anand. "Traditionally, it has always been full of my trophies and newspaper clippings about my achievements. Recently, it has started to fill up with Akhil's budding art journey. I'm happy to share what art means to the family." The Anands will do more of that in the first week of August when Morphogenesis opens in Chennai. "I do a lot of Indian art like Gond, madhubani, worli and cheriyal and connect it with math patterns," says 14-year-old Akhil about the elements of his show, which has been curated by his teacher, Diana Satish. Akhil, currently studying in Class IX at Chennai's Beyond 8, might be the son of a champion synonymous with chess, but it was art that appealed to him from a young age. "I once observed the stripes of a zebra and tiger and noticed its patterns. Ever since, I have been fascinated with patterns. His early works were about people — of popular personalities like Newton, Einstein and Gandhi. This fascination grew into a passion during the COVID lockdown a few years ago. Explains Anand, "With more time in his hands, he (Akhil) got deeper into art. He was deeply inspired by the programmes of David Attenborough that spoke about about patterns and colour in Nature." Morphogenesis will feature all that. If the series called the Bindu Bovine involves Akhil's artistic interpretation of a cow using elements of fractal geometry, the UnBinary series — inspired by the geometric works of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian — features subjects in binary colours. So, what's his personal favourite? Akhil states, "The series on animal superheroes, which talks about a few animals that are endangered and close to extinction." In that series, close to Akhil's heart, are sketches on animals like Moo Deng, the hippopotamus from Thailand Zoo that went on to become an Internet sensation, and Tajiri, the giraffe at New York's Animal Adventure Park, which has become a symbol for giraffe conservation. The Anands — both Viswanathan Anand and his wife, Aruna — are cheerleaders for their son's pursuit of art. Anand recalls, "When I was growing up, my father — who worked in the Railways — had a more conventional job, which meant strict working hours. He tried to keep up with my passion for chess, and was very supportive. I think it's the same for me; I try to keep up with Akhil's artistic pursuits." He points out that there are many similarities between chess and art. "In chess, you are forced to sit in front of a board and focus on the job at hand. It's quite similar in art; you have your tools in front of you, and you need to focus. While technology can help with research, you still need to get back to the job at hand and focus," he explains. When they are not discussing chess or art, the Anands dig a lot into music; English musician Sting and Irish rock band U2 are among their favourites. Anand explains, "For me, it was quite surprising that Akhil ended up liking a lot of music from my teenage days. He is well informed of that time. I have the habit of listening to my favourite song from an album and moving on, but he listens to all of them. But, he is also my gateway into modern music and singers." Even as Anand keeps up his duties as a mentor to the current crop of rising Indian chess talents, he still plays dotting dad at home. Akhil and Anand bond over not just art and music, but also enjoy playing a game of table tennis whenever they find time. And of course, they also play chess. Akhil is yet to win against Anand — but he is currently mastering the hyper accelerated dragon and London System to get one up against the Indian chess legend. He says, "I play a lot of chess, but my dream is to become an environmental lawyer and bring upon awareness about issues like climate change and global warming."

Is Labubu mania still going strong or has India moved on? And how do you snag one?

They are small, mischievous, and impossible to ignore. With their fang-toothed grins and pointy ears, Labubus — once just quirky vinyl toys — have unexpectedly become 2025's "it" accessory. No longer the preserve of toy collectors, these blind-box figurines are now dangling from luxury bags, trading hands across continents, and powering a global consumer craze. Labubu first sprang to life in 2015 as a character from The Monsters, a children's book series by Hong Kong-born, Belgium-based illustrator Kasing Lung, whose work draws heavily from Nordic mythology. Initially produced in Taiwan, it was not until Pop Mart — the Beijing-based toy giant founded by Wang Ning in 2010 — licensed the character in 2019 that things really took off. Using a signature blind-box model, where each sealed box contains a mystery figure, Pop Mart turned Labubu into a must-have collectible.



But the tipping point came in November 2024, when Lisa of South Korean girl group Blackpink clipped one to her Louis Vuitton bag and later revealed her "Labubu obsession" in a Vanity Fair interview. The Internet lost it. And just like that, labubu became a viral hit across Asia and beyond. It did not stop there. International stars like Dua Lipa, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian and even David Beckham have been spotted with Labubus — often attached to their bags, backpacks or keychains — catapulting the character into global fashion consciousness. By mid-2025, Pop Mart had released over 300 variants, with a mint green, 131 centimetre (4.3 feet) tall Labubu figure being sold at Yongle International Auction in Beijing in June 2025 for 1.08 million yuan (approximately ₹1.3 crore). As Labubu mania went global, Pop Mart CEO Wang Ning's personal stake in the company skyrocketed, placing him among China's 10 richest individuals. With an estimated net worth of ₹1.734 trillion, Wang is now one of the youngest billionaires in the country. In India, Labubu's rise has been just as wild. The Pop Mart outlet at Bangkok's Siam Centre has become a kind of pilgrimage site, as Mumbai-based filmmaker Faraz Arif Ansari discovered earlier this year. "So, I got my first one (labubu) end April, early May, from Bangkok's Pop Mart. It is the best stocked and priced," Faraz recalls. "Then I started hunting for limited editions. Got a few from resellers in Bangkok and others through friends travelling around Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore." While blind boxes cost around 550 THB (almost ₹1,500) in Thailand, resellers in India list the same figurines for ₹6,000–7,000. "It's mad," they (Faraz identifies as non-binary, their pronouns are they/them) laugh. "Even the Thai resellers are way cheaper — and they bargain too. I picked up a few limiteds for about 1,500 THB (₹4,035) each." Their collection now sits at around 20 figures — placing them somewhere between casual collector and hardcore enthusiast. Anchit Kapil, co-founder of CrepDog Crew (CDC), was quick to spot the trend brewing on Instagram. "Honestly, it was both demand and instinct," he says. "Collectors in India were already hooked, but there wasn't a reliable source to buy from — at least not without months of waiting or risking fakes. We've always curated what's culturally relevant, so bringing Labubu into the CDC world just made sense."

The reaction was instant. "We teased a drop in May, and it went off," he says. "It validated itself before we even launched." Unlike traditional retailers working off projections and data, CDC taps directly into the pulse of youth culture. "Sometimes the community tells you what's hot before the numbers do," he says with a shrug. What has been surprising, even to Anchit, is the diversity of Labubu fans. "You had sneakerheads who were like, 'Why would I buy a toy?' And now, some of them are our most die-hard collectors," he laughs. "It's not just lads in their 20s either. Labubu's gone beyond 'toys'. It's gender-neutral, age-neutral, everything-neutral. We've seen uni students and working professionals alike building collections." While CDC took the organic route, another player moved fast and commercial. Abbas Ali Zaveri, founder and CEO of HypeFly India (an online retailer of sneakers and streetwear), approached Labubu like he does all things viral — with a sharp eye and even sharper instincts. "We're always scanning global trends. If it's hot internationally, we want to be the first to bring it here," he says. "It's about aspiration. People see something trending in the US or Korea and don't realise they can get it locally." Abbas's team first clocked Labubu in May. "We did a test run. My team wasn't convinced, they were like, 'Who's paying ₹5,000 for a toy?' So I posted a few videos myself. First day, we sold 10. I knew we were onto something." A bold "buy one, get one" launch followed just as the buzz reached fever pitch. "In that first week of pre-orders. It wasn't just a toy anymore; it was a flex." Abbas believes Labubu's success is about access. "It's a gateway to the culture. Before, being part of the hype scene meant dropping 45,000 on Off-White or Jordans. Now with 5,000, you're in." Of course, success breeds counterfeits. "Fakes are everywhere," Abbas says bluntly. "We've got a zero-tolerance policy. If it doesn't come with a Pop Mart invoice, we won't stock it." He recalls spotting a fake barcode (the only way to tell if the Labubu is fake) that said "Top Marie" instead of Pop Mart. "The bootleggers are getting smarter. It's a full-time job keeping ahead." Labubu figures and dolls are seen on display at a Pop Mart store in Shanghai, China

That is where trusted platforms like HypeFly and CDC stand apart, offering guarantees in a sea of fakes. "Anyone can buy a ₹2,000 labubu online," he says. "But they've no idea what they're getting. There is no regulation." Interestingly, while demand in Mumbai and Delhi is beginning to plateau, interest is spreading elsewhere. "Now it's Dehradun, Sikkim, the Northeast," Abbas says. "Tier-2s and 3s are waking up to it. It's going national." From toy to trophy in the world of luxury resale, Labubu has taken on a new identity, that of an accessory enhancer. "Bag charms are very 'in' right now," says Anvita Mehra, founder and CEO of Confidential Couture. "We've always seen that desire to personalise classics like Birkins and Kellys. Now, Labubu fills that space." Hermès has long capitalised on this with its Rodeo charms, and Anvita believes Labubu works on the same principle. "It's about adding personality. We once gave out free Labubus to some of our customers from stock we picked up in Thailand. But in the resale market in India, they can fetch up to ₹20,000 because most people want Labubus almost immediately. But like all trends, it eventually cools." She believes Labubu landed at just the right moment. "It's access, availability, and the thrill of the hunt. People were asking friends to pick them up from Dubai or Singapore. Now they're everywhere. That might cool the hype slightly but the desire to personalise luxury is here to stay." A collector's tale still, few stories capture Labubu's magic quite like Ensito's (@ensito_20). Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, he has a collection of over 500 Labubus — figurines, pendants and plushies. "It all started when a friend asked me to pick some up during a trip to London," he says. "I queued for three hours. Sold out two people ahead of me. But I was instantly hooked." He was drawn in by the designs, the blind-box surprise, and the narrative behind each release.

Wagamama is here. What other new Mumbai restaurants should you try this weekend



Mumbai's dining scene never sits still. Just when you think you have found your favourite pasta joint or sushi bar, along comes a fresh opening, promising slow-fermented breads, house-cured meats, or cocktails made with foraged botanicals. From sleek chef-driven menus to playful pop-ups turned permanent, here is a guide to Mumbai's buzziest new restaurants. The arrival of Wagamama in Mumbai's Churchgate is, at the very least, a confident flex. Housed inside the restored Cambata Building — neighbours with Eros Cinema and Churchgate station — the global ramen chain has made its India debut with a splash of polished minimalism and fast-casual fun. The interiors play to type: neutral tones, soft industrial textures, communal benches, and open kitchens designed for flow. It is slick, unfussy, and designed to look great on your feed without being overtly curated. You can see the London blueprint in every inch and that is both its strength and limitation.

The menu is a calibrated "greatest hits" — katsu curry, bang bang cauliflower, kare burusu, gyozas and donburi bowls all present and accounted for. The ramen is warm and filling, though the broths do not quite achieve the layered complexity of other pan-Asian spots in the city. The chicken tantanmen hits the right spice notes, but the noodles can feel just a touch overcooked if you wait too long. That said, it is comforting in the way airport ramen rarely is. The star, surprisingly, might be the banana katsu — a golden-fried dessert that balances sweetness and crunch with more finesse than expected. Drinks include refreshing cold-pressed juices and zingy mocktails, although cocktails lean a bit too saccharine for their own good. Over 50% of the menu is vegetarian or vegan, which is admirable, but expect a very pan-global interpretation of Asia, not necessarily regionally accurate, nor pretending to be. Set across two levels in the West Zone of Phoenix Palladium, the newly launched Gourmet Village is less a food court and more a curated lifestyle destination for the city's discerning diners. Reimagining the traditional mall dining experience, this upscale zone brings together over 50 restaurants and cafés under one roof. Designed to feel like an eclectic village, the space is laced with greenery, warm lighting, and airy al fresco sections that invite you to linger a little longer than you had planned. There is much to explore: Burma Burma brings its vegetarian Asian fare. Their new dessert menu, called The Sweet Life, fuse timeless classics with Burmese flavours and modern textures. Created in collaboration with award-winning pastry chef Vinesh Johny, the seven-part menu is a punctuation mark to the meal, whether it's jaggery-and-coconut-laced reinterpretations or delicate international patisserie with a twist. Kuruaku offers an authentic izakaya experience (skewers, sake and all), and Delhi's cult favourite Andrea's makes its Mumbai debut with a menu of polished global comfort food. The presence of local staples like Kitchen Garden by Suzette, Foo, Le Pain Quotidien, and Cream Centre adds familiarity, while spots like Fountain Sizzlers and The Silver Train dial up the nostalgia. Sweet finishes come courtesy Harley's Fine Baking and Gold by Ice Cream Works, while the plush Game Palacio lounge throws in some leisure. Fireback is what happens when high-concept Thai cuisine meets good execution. With Chef David Thompson, the revered interpreter of Thai culinary history, at the helm as culinary director, the Fireback outpost in Mumbai gets a number of things right. The space inside Nilaya Anthology is predictably striking, but never sterile. Earthy tones, a glowing Jospier grill at centre-stage, and atmospheric lighting all give it a refined warmth. It feels upscale, but not intimidating. Food-wise, it is not all pad thai and green curry. Expect jungle curries that bite, salads that crunch with toasted rice and lime, and flame-grilled proteins rubbed with pastes made from scratch. Highlights include the smoky lamb chop grolae with crispy shallots, a well balanced scallop salad brightened with coconut and lemongrass, and the soft-shell crab red curry, which manages to be indulgent without overwhelming. The crab fried rice is unfussy but elevated. The vegetarian options are more than just filler, especially the grilled pumpkin and sweet potato in grolae sauce, but meat and seafood still lead the narrative. The cocktail menu, created by Varun Sharma, who also leads Comorin downstairs, is layered playful. The Tom Yum Highball has its

flaws but it does have bite, while the Galangal — with whisky and pickled galangal brine — is all depth and intrigue. Not every drink hits the mark (some teeter toward over-invention), but the overall bar experience feels well-matched to the food. Prices lean high, and it is not for the unadventurous. But if you are looking for one of the city's most assured openings this year, Fireback is your place. A meal for two, including drinks, will cost ₹4000; Entrance through Comorin at Nilaya Anthology, Peninsula Corporate Park, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai - 400013 Not new, but newly reimagined, Sahib Room & Kipling Bar at The St. Regis Mumbai returns after a renovation, and it will charm those with a taste for the slow and subtly theatrical. The re-launch brings a revitalised elegance to this jungle-re-treat-meets-regal-dining-room, without abandoning its old-world soul. Think tented ceilings, dark wood flooring, antique mirrors, and carved wooden accents. The updated space pays homage to Rudyard Kipling and the princely shikhar camps of yore, with richer textures, sleeker lighting, and a new Spectacle Kitchen that lets guests witness the finesse behind the flames.

The kitchen continues to serve its unapologetically traditional Indian menu, dialled up with refinement. The murgh rezala is well balanced, while the panch phoron ki sabzi and dahi ke gullar highlight how vegetarian dishes can be treated with as much reverence. The Rampur ki gosht dum biryani and sahib ki yakhni remain rich and comforting. The new drinks programme is an ambitious trail through Kipling's India. From The Bay (Mumbai) to A Sip from the Mahal (Bundi), each cocktail carries layers of local memory, finished with aromatic flourishes and sleek storytelling. The beverage list, featuring Indian spir-its, heritage liqueurs, and reinvented classics, is quietly sophisticated and contextual. A meal for two, including drinks, will cost ₹4000 plus taxes; 462, Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai - 400013 What began as a cheeky, sugar-dusted pop-culture café in Delhi has now evolved into a full-blown Japanese restaurant in Mumbai. At its newest address in Jio World Drive, Harajuku Tokyo Café & Bakehouse opens its most ambitious outpost yet with a multi-sensory restaurant-bar and a bright, pastel-soaked bakehouse.

Split across two zones, the 72-seater restaurant comes with a sushi conveyor belt by day and sake bombs and karaoke by night. Expect sushi boats, robot DJs, manga murals, and retro signage, all orchestrated around a menu co-curated with Japanese chefs Asami Indo and Higuchi Nariaki. The food is comfort-led but layered: from the spicy, buttery seafood shio ramen and coal-fired miso salmon of the robata to zany street-style plates like corn dogs, bubbling UFO chicken platters and the umami bomb Naruto's RUSH cocktail (yes, vodka, gochujang, and ramen broth in a drink). The sushi section is no after-thought either — the rainbow roll and spicy avocado cream cheese roll are fast favourites.

The cocktail menu, curated by Fay Antoine Barretto, comes with Japan-meets-nightlife references, where every drink tells a manga-worthy story. Think Call Me Kimchi, spiked with tequila and house-fermented heat, or the delicate Whisper of the Peach, a Kyoto-inspired blend of Japanese whisky and chamomile. Next door, the 12-seater Harajuku Bakehouse is all soft pinks and Japanese patisserie glow. With soufflé pancakes, cottony cheese-cakes, and a new pet-friendly dessert menu. After years of whispers, Nando's has finally fired up its grills in Mumbai with a flagship casa now open in Kamala Mills, Lower Parel. Known for its cult-favourite flame-grilled peri peri chicken, the brand's arrival is less of a soft launch and more of a full-blown entry for fans of their spicy, saucy poultry. The space itself is bright and expansive, blending Nando's signature Afro-Portuguese design cues with India-specific warmth. Think rustic textures, woven pendant lights, and enough red to match the sauce. The chicken is dependably good. The skin is crisp, the insides juicy, and the basting options range from the gentle lemon and herb to the masochistically fiery extra hot. It is the kind of food that does not pretend to be complex; it is about craveability, not craft. That said, if you're expecting gourmet, slow-cooked nuance, this is not your spot. It is loud, quick, and a bit brash but that is also its charm. Sides like peri-peri fries and spicy rice still hit the spot,

PCOS is now PMOS, but women remain sceptical: 'A name alone doesn't change struggle'

Polycystic ovary syndrome aka PCOS has a new name now. She goes by Polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome (PMOS). Quite a mouthful, huh? According to a recent article published in The Lancet journal, the term PCOS is inaccurate, "implying pathological ovarian cysts, obscuring diverse endocrine and metabolic features", and contributing to "delayed diagnosis, fragmented care, and stigma", while curtailing research and policy framing.

Building on an international mandate for change, the researchers outlined a rigorous, multistep global consensus process for the name change, wherein accuracy was improved by omitting cysts and by capturing endocrine, metabolic, and ovarian dysfunction. PCOS has long remained under-recognised in India, affecting one in eight and about 170 million women worldwide, as per Lancet.

Many normalise symptoms like irregular periods, fatigue, or weight fluctuations until they become severe. As the global shift toward PMOS gains attention, the conversation is slowly beginning to move beyond fertility and ovarian health, toward larger concerns around metabolism, lifestyle, stress, and preventive healthcare. For India, not only does this open up newer discussions around social media-led self-diagnosis, the growing "hormone wellness" economy, and urban lifestyles worsening hormonal conditions among young women — it also raises an important question: will PMOS help people perceive the condition as a long-term health issue rather than only a reproductive concern? Soumyashree Mishra, a PCOS ovarian cyst survivor, says that the term Polycystic Ovary Syndrome never fully explained what the condition truly does to the body.

Rituparna Sengupta on Sharmila Tagore: 'She helped me understand the mother-daughter dynamic better'



When Sharmila Tagore became a bona fide star, she had journeyed from Satyajit Ray's masterpieces to Bengali and Hindi films, balancing arthouse and commercial cinema. But she would return to her Bengali roots whenever she could, her last being 14 years ago. As she approached her 80th birthday, she decided to end her self-imposed exile and expressed a desire to work in Bengali cinema again to actor-producer Rituparna Sengupta. "Why don't you find a good script? We can do it together," she suggested. Sengupta, a Bengali superstar for over two decades, took this as a cue to find a fitting story. "I wanted to re-establish her connect with the Bengali audience who admire her Ray films," she says. Coincidentally, her friend and director Suman Ghosh had engaged Tagore in a discussion about Ray's films in the US. "This led us to explore an untapped mother-daughter dynamic rooted in differing perceptions of time and space," says Sengupta, who, unlike Tagore, did not have a Ray-backed debut and built her career through mainstream films with a brief Bollywood stint. However, she embraced offbeat roles in films by Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh. Winning the National Award for Ghosh's Dahan (1998) motivated her to produce woman-centric films like Alo, Potadar Kirtee (2016), a gangster-superstar romance, Ahaa Re (2019), a cross-border love story, and now Puratawn. The long pauses are because Sengupta is selective. "I am not a big producer but a passionate one. I love stories which inspire me or an issue which triggers me. I am not in the rat race of making money though it is important for survival. But I have seen that passion-driven scripts work. That's why I am producing short films too," she says. But she is a realist enough to stay away from direction. "That requires a different eye. I look at a script from an actor's lens and need a director to interpret and execute that vision," she says.

Puratwan has already been feted in the film festival circuit. Though Tagore dominates the screen, Sengupta insists the film shouldn't be seen from a woman's lens. "I am not an ultra-feminist. But I do believe in the power of the woman to make a difference in the script where other characters have equity too. I am not looking at messaging. I want the viewer to take back an emotion that can help them fill up spaces in human relationships," she says. Sharmila Tagore 1 Sharmila Tagore with Rituparna Sengupta. In the film, Sengupta plays a corporate professional struggling to balance work and relationships, while Tagore portrays her dementia-afflicted mother clinging to her past in her crumbling ancestral home. Despite her condition, she remains as concerned for her daughter as she was when packing her school tiffin. The daughter, seeking her mother's grounding presence, fails to realize that her mother tries to maintain relevance by repeating old rituals. She is also unaware of a long-held family secret that reveals the extent of a mother's protectiveness. "The daughter craves for her mother's re-

assurance although she too had not bothered to understand why her mother had clung to a lost world. We tend to invisibilise the elderly, expecting them to see the world through our prism, and take them for granted," says Sengupta. The film draws on reminiscence therapy, where dementia patients recall episodic memories from their past to maintain their sense of continuity and feel happy. "So, the mother is happy with her daughter, even though she sees her as a little child. Rather than alienating her, why not embrace her world," asks Sengupta. The film's layering required constant collaboration between Tagore and Sengupta. "Shooting on location wasn't easy but she co-operated. When we had trouble securing a mansion permit, she asked if we could switch locations. I insisted we couldn't, and she agreed to wait it out. Despite being an icon, Sharmiladi remained open to feedback, ensuring her performance was nuanced and authentic. She was emotionally invested," says Sengupta. "She reads a lot and is updated about the world around her but has old world grace. After every shot, she would take everybody's feedback. She was mentally agile but still had an actor's vulnerability. Without it, no performance can look real," adds Sengupta. The two women bonded on the sets. "She helped me understand the mother-daughter dynamic better. I lost my mother to kidney disease just after the film was screened at the MAMI fest in Mumbai. Sharmiladi comforted me when it mattered," says Sengupta. "She also shared behind-the-scenes moments of her films and that was a learning experience too," she adds. With two superstars from different eras sharing the screen space, did Sengupta ever feel intimidated? "No way. I am not an insecure actor.

The next tech challenge is to prove you are a human: Srikanth Nadhamuni, Founder CTO, Aadhaar



Srikanth Nadhamuni is the founder CTO of Aadhaar. He set up the technology centre for the development, design, and operations of the Aadhaar system. He is also the Managing Trustee of the eGovernments Foundation, which he co-founded with Nandan Nilekani in 2003, working on improving governance and public service delivery in Indian cities.

He is also the chairman of 10BedICU, a health tech initiative trying to change the face of critical care in remote and unreachable regions of the country, and co-founder and chairman of Trustt, a fintech initiative working to digitise banking operations and enhancing the same with conversational AI. Srikanth is an engineering graduate from the University of Mysore and has a masters in electrical and computer engineering from Louisiana State University. He spoke to indianexpress.com on challenges in building Aadhaar, his passion for changing the face of critical care and, ultimately, the health sector in India, his initiatives to take digital public infrastructure (DPI) to various developing countries, and his work on 'personhood credentials' as a way to fight misinformation. Edited excerpts: Srikanth Nadhamuni: There is one such anecdote that comes to mind. I was driving from Delhi to Dehradun, and we had done a lot of spade work on the biometric system design for Aadhaar. I had asked one of our volunteers, Raj Mashruwala, to meet with Professor Jim Wayman of San Jose State University — who was a leading expert in biometric systems — to validate our assumptions about our biometric-based ID system. Mashruwala called up to say that deduplication at an India level with 1.3 billion people was impossible. He said that we would need six football fields of servers to do the deduplication, and even then, the errors would be high. And this was when the project had not even started yet. We spoke to Nandan Nilekani, and we decided if the software does not solve the problem, we would need to build a chip for the same. I'm a chip designer myself. Later on, we somehow figured out how to solve the problem without building huge data centres. Aadhaar founder CTO interview "We revamped and digitised the Bengaluru city property tax system and ensured that people could pay taxes in any place near their office or their home," says Nadhamuni about the impact of the eGovernments Foundation. (Express photo/ Jithendra M) It was a new territory for us as techies, and the risks were high. There were questions like: Will Iris scans work at an India scale? Will the diversity of India make it very hard to enrol people? Will the error rate start mounting as we start adding more and more people? Some of these were not fully understood yet, though we had modelled it and had figured it out mathematically. We also ran a huge pilot. Things could have gone terribly wrong. Later, discussing our Aadhaar project in an article, a professor from the London School of Economics said India will drown in a sea of false positives because of the huge population. He said that as we add more and more people, the chances of people's fingerprints looking alike will increase. However, all of it got solved with a brilliant team of technologists and computer scientists.

Venkatesh Kannaiah: Tell us about your role in eGovernments Foundation and its impact. Where is it headed?

Srikanth Nadhamuni: Nandan Nilekani and I set up the eGovernments Foundation in 2003. Initially, our work was to create municipal ERP systems for improving urban governance and enhancing service delivery for citizens in urban local bodies. We revamped and digitised the Bengaluru city property tax system and ensured that people could pay taxes in any place near their office or their home. Earlier, it was all in leather-bound books and was error-prone. Property tax management is just one of the modules, and now our DIGIT platform encompasses aspects like public grievance redressal, ward works, building plan approval, and birth and death registration and certification. We are also working on the accounting side of things with fiscal discipline as the focus. Now, our eGovernment platforms and tools help city governments in a lot of ways from sewage disposal to water management to tracking healthcare systems like distribution of mosquito nets in Africa. We are working in about 14 countries across the world. As for international outreach, India has now become a global leader in digital public infrastructure (DPI). A lot of countries, especially in the Global South, like our model of open source, population scale, and equitable access. India's playbook for DPI is improving governance across the world. Many developing countries are looking for the kind of solutions that India has perfected to improve their economy, get payments going, improve tax collections, and provide frictionless services to citizens. It is replacing the expensive Western models with large companies charging them hundreds of millions of dollars. I think India is playing a wise and generous role in helping countries through its expertise and technology. There is Aadhaar, UPI, eSign, DigiLocker, ONDC, and so on.

Venkatesh Kannaiah: What is the 10BedICU? What does it do, and what has been its impact?

Srikanth Nadhamuni: 10BedICU is an initiative to change the face of critical care in remote and rural areas of the country using tech. We have 220 of these 10BedICU units across the country. The focus is on critical care. It is a fully digitised ICU with a digitised nursing station. It is a tele ICU with the centre being linked to a nearby medical college or hospital, which serves as a knowledge hub, and the patients can be monitored and serviced from the hub. The doctors and nurses serving in these 10BedICUs are rigorously trained in various critical care protocols and also in telemedicine to access specialists at the hubs and work on their advice during emergencies. Using conversational AI, nurses and doctors can talk to each other seamlessly in different languages. We are also using AI to generate discharge summaries. Nurses can ask questions in their own language, tell the status of the patient, and receive an answer in the language of their choice on the next steps to be followed. The government provides land, staff, electricity, Internet and supplies. We, from eGovernments Foundation, provide all the equipment, technology and training free of cost, with funds raised through donations and philanthropic contributions. We have built very exhaustive training protocols for critical care and basic life support for emergencies. The entire electronic medical records, video, and conversations are managed from the ICU hub. When we say 10BedICU, it means that there is one ICU and 10 beds for patients. It is run in collaboration with the government. MOUs have been signed with 10 states. In every state we have an

agreement with, we will have at least one hospital in every district of the state. In Karnataka, we have 43 10BedICUs. I also mentor a group called the Open Healthcare Network (OHC), which has created a healthcare platform called CARE. It has been recognised as a Digital Public Good. CARE powers all our 10BedICU hospitals. It is also India's most active open source project with 900 contributors. We are also looking to expand it from critical care to areas like oncology and other specialisations. We are working with Tata Memorial hospitals to train our doctors and nurses in oncology protocols, and using our tele-ICU facilities their patients could interact with their doctors sitting in Tata Memorial cancer centres.

Venkatesh Kannaiah: Can you explain what Trustt does and the kind of impact it is having?

Srikanth Nadhamuni: At Trustt, we are building a digital layer for banks, to help them in their lending and distribution of financial products across India. The product portfolio includes digital lending, digital distribution, digital identity, and multilingual conversations. Imagine that a bank was available on your phone in the village, and you can talk to it in Kannada, Tamil or Hindi and do all the banking. Open an account, do your KYC, apply for a loan, and figure out all the products that are available. I want to buy a buffalo. Will you give me a loan? How long will it take? What do you need from me? This is the problem we are trying to solve in a local language with the mere use of the phone. It is relevant not just for the rural customers. It will even help the urban customers of banks to do their transactions faster. It is replacing an older manual method of lending, which was slow, error-prone and not digitised. It is not modelled on any US system. Actually, the banks in the US have pretty old banking systems. They have much more paperwork than we do. There are a few banks in Europe which have done it better — going fully digital. Venkatesh Kannaiah: Can you tell us about the apex committee to create AI Centres of Excellence and the way forward for the same? Srikanth Nadhamuni: I am a member of the apex committee to create AI Centres of Excellence, an initiative of the Government of India. They want to create AI Centres of Excellence in healthcare, agriculture, sustainable cities, and education. The budget is around Rs 300 crore per sector and there would be one nodal AI Centre of Excellence for each of the focus areas. My interest in this is that we can build a Digital Public Infrastructure in each of the focus areas out of this initiative so that the impact from these research projects and initiatives is more widespread. For example, AIIMS and IIT Delhi are building good AI models to detect breast cancer. IISc is building models to detect oral cancer from smartphone photographs. Some of them are working on tuberculosis. Can you imagine something like this helping diagnosis at every government hospital? In agriculture, our researchers are looking at interesting themes. For example, pollination happens because of bees. Now, how do you make sure that the beehives are there in your fields? There is a sound with a certain frequency that the queen bee makes when it is around. We can track it and IIT Ropar is building devices using AI to ensure that the queen bee stays in the hive, and if it is not there, to let the farmer know that the queen bee has left. As for sustainable cities, we are looking at traffic congestion and traffic patterns and using AI to help reduce pollution in cities, rerouting traffic and alerting policemen whenever there is traffic congestion. Sridhar Nadhamuni "As the world marches towards AGI, it is hard to distinguish AI from humans," says Nadhamuni. (Express photo/ Jithendra M) The multiplier effect of such projects and initiatives will happen when this knowledge is digitised, put in a cloud, distributed and used across the country. That is the DPI approach. You have to run it on the cloud. It has to be a good product. So, I am trying to see if we can push this into a DPI approach. Venkatesh Kannaiah: How would AI be impacting identity platforms like Aadhaar or payment platforms like UPI? Srikanth Nadhamuni: I have written a paper co-authored with a bunch of researchers from OpenAI, Harvard, MIT, and UC Berkeley. This paper explores 'Personhood-Credentials,' a method of proving your humanness in this fast-changing digital landscape.

As the world marches towards AGI, it is hard to distinguish AI from humans. It's going to be difficult to figure out whether the video call you just had was with a real human or an AI bot. Let me tell you, you will not be able to find the difference. This is a great challenge that we are facing with AI-led bots. Imagine the impersonation, fraud and ransom attacks that would happen or are happening right now, and the impact they would have on trust and transactions online. I think we have to first register everybody in person through multiple ways.

Aadhaar biometrics is a good method. There is some process of verification, but when I get onto a Zoom call or a video call, can I be authenticated on the platform that I am on? That is the challenge — To prove that you are a human and not a bot. If trust erodes on the Internet, imagine the impact it would have on knowledge, communication, and transactions. So this is where the personhood credentials concept comes in. When do I see it becoming a product? Aadhaar can be used to build a personhood credentials product quite easily. It is already compatible because we have done this enrollment of the whole population face-to-face.

Why India's education system fails marginalised communities — and how to change it

The story I share is not mine alone. It belongs to millions of students from marginalised communities across India who face systemic barriers in their pursuit of education.

Born to illiterate farming parents in Buldhana district of Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, the idea of quality education seemed like a distant dream from my earliest memories. Our village school had broken benches, overworked teachers, and no electricity for days. Yet, it was the only gateway to a future beyond the fields. For students like me, cities like Pune and Mumbai represented the only hope for proper education, but they might as well have been foreign countries: unfamiliar, expensive, and often hostile to our presence. The journey from rural India to urban educational institutions is fraught with invisible barriers. The financial burden alone crushes countless dreams before they can take flight. Even for those who manage to secure admission, the cultural transition is brutal.

Our accents are mocked, our clothes scrutinised, and our food habits ridiculed. We are made to feel like outsiders in our own country. This constant othering creates a psychological burden that privileged students never have to carry. Many talented students from marginalised communities drop out, not because they lack ability, but because the system is designed to make them feel they don't belong.

A dubious concept The concept of merit in Indian education purports to be objective while ignoring the vast inequalities in preparation and opportunity. A student from an elite Delhi school who has access to the best coaching, books, and networks is judged by the same standards as a student from a village school with no library and intermittent electricity. The so-called merit that is sought to be evaluated by competitive exams is often just a measure of accumulated privilege. The numbers don't lie: in India's top educational institutions, the representation of SC, ST, and OBC students remains shockingly low, especially at higher levels of study and faculty positions. Competitive exams like JEE and NEET exemplify this systemic bias. Coaching centers in Kota and Delhi churn out toppers, but these expensive programmes are out of reach for most rural and poor students. The language of exams itself becomes a barrier. English-medium students have a clear advantage over those educated in regional languages. Even when reserved category students clear these exams, they face additional challenges. Many report being treated as "quota students" rather than equals, and their achievements are constantly questioned. India proudly proclaims its demographic dividend, and the potential of its young population to drive economic growth. But this promise seems hollow for marginalised communities. Oxfam's latest reports reveal that India's economic growth has been accompanied by widening inequality. The benefits of development are captured by a small elite, while Dalits, Adivasis, and OBCs, who together constitute the majority of India's population, are left behind.

At the five highest-ranked IITs, SC students constitute only about 10% of PhD enrollments, while ST students make up a mere 2%. In faculty representation, it's even lower. Data shows that over 90% of professors in these institutions come from upper-caste backgrounds. Some premier institutes have no SC/ST faculty members.

This lack of representation creates a vicious cycle



From rural India to urban institutions, the struggle for quality education for marginalised students in India is fraught with invisible barriers

for marginalised students who face additional barriers to success. The system effectively reproduces itself, generation after generation. The barriers begin early. Government schools in rural areas and urban slums lack basic infrastructure, qualified teachers, and proper learning materials. The mid-day meal might be the only reason some children attend school at all. Meanwhile, privileged children attend well-resourced private schools with trained teachers and abundant extracurricular activities. By the time both groups reach college, the gap in preparation is enormous. The discrimination continues in campus life. Marginalised students often face social exclusion, microaggressions, and sometimes outright casteism. Hostel rooms are segregated along caste lines in some institutions. Students from certain communities are barred from sharing tables in dining table. The mental toll of constantly navigating these hostile environments leads many talented students to drop out. Those who persevere often find the job market equally biased, with caste networks determining access to the best opportunities. Breaking the vicious cycle Breaking this cycle requires systemic change. First, we must redefine merit to account for the unequal playing field. A student who scores 80% in a village school with no proper facilities has demonstrated more potential than a student who scores 90% with every possible advantage. Second, we need to strengthen and expand reservation policies to ensure proper representation at all levels, including faculty positions. Third, elite institutions must implement robust support systems: mentorship programs, remedial classes, and mental health services — to help first-generation students succeed. The current system maintains caste and class hierarchies by presenting them as natural outcomes of merit. Real reform requires acknowledging this fundamental injustice. Education should be the great equaliser, but in India, it accentuates exclusion. In a knowledge-driven global economy, denying quality education to large sections of population isn't just unjust, it's national self-sabotage.

How much do dark matter particles weigh?

What is the status of the SpaceX Mars mission? | Explained



Dark matter is an enigmatic invisible substance comprising five-sixths of the matter of the universe. Unlike photons, the particles of light, the particles of dark matter need to have non-zero mass or else the dense and intricate structure of matter on cosmic scales will not form. How light can a dark particle then be? For decades scientists thought this minimum mass was about 10-31 times the mass of a proton. But in May this year, theoretical physicists revised the limit and pushed it up by an order of magnitude, to 2.3 x 10-30 proton masses. This is a significant update in the world of dark matter.

Uniformly or in lumps?

To understand these numbers and their importance, let us first build a mental picture of dark matter. Dark matter is said to be everywhere in the universe. Does that mean it is in your house? In 1922, Dutch astronomer Jacobus Kapteyn studied the motion of stars neighbouring the Sun and concluded the density of "dark matter" (using that term for one of the first times) must be 0.0003 solar masses per cubic light year. Since then, through a century of increasingly sophisticated measurements, the accuracy of Kapteyn's conclusion has held up remarkably well. This density of dark matter can be re-expressed as the heft of two protons per teaspoon, which means your house could contain dark matter with a mass equivalent of a trillion protons. But this would also be naïve: Kapteyn's and subsequent measurements are only valid when regarding the million-cubic-light-year volume and doesn't apply when we zoom in for a closer look. This is because stars, whose motion is used for the measurement, are themselves separated by a few light years. Whether or not dark matter is present on smaller length scales would depend on how it is distributed: either uniformly or in lumps.

An occasional visitor?

Let's assume it is spread around like fine flour, which the standard theories of cosmology also predict. If it comes in lumps, the spacing between them may be as large as many light years and there will perhaps be no dark matter under your roof. Now, since we know the local density of

dark matter, the value of the unknown mass of the dark particle will determine the separation between two neighbouring particles. If it is 100 proton masses, the inter-particle separation will be 7 cm. Then dark particles at any given moment will not only be in your house but also in your head. If dark matter is made of an elementary particle, the heaviest it can be is about 1019 times a proton's mass. In that case the interparticle separation would be 30 km. So dark matter won't be a resident of your house but will visit occasionally (since the particles travel randomly at around 300 km/s). Then again, a 1020 gram agglomerate of dark particles would be apart by more than the size of the solar system, reducing our chance of discovering them.

Fluid rather than a flock What about small masses? At 10-11 proton masses, every red blood cell in your body will contain a dark matter particle. But now quantum physics becomes important. Every object is also a wave, with its wavelength given by the inverse of its momentum. Thus the lighter a dark matter particle is, the larger its wavelength will be. For 10-11 proton masses, the wavelength will be about 2 cm, much larger than its micrometre inter-particle separation. So for small masses, we must picture a collection of dark particles as a fluid rather than as a flock of grains. If we now dial the mass of a dark particle all the way down to 10-31 proton masses, the wavelength is 200 light years, about the size of a dwarf galaxy. The substance of a dwarf galaxy is chiefly in the form of dark matter, with only about 1% contribution from stars. This simple fact translates to a restriction on the dark matter particle's mass: it must be greater than 10-31 proton masses. If it were lower, its spatial extent would exceed the dwarf galaxy and we can't form a macroscopic object smaller than its microscopic constituents. The time of computers This is where the paper from May matters. Its authors have shown that this lore is too simplistic and that researchers can do something sharper. First, using data on how stars move in Leo II, a dwarf galaxy orbiting the Milky Way, they inferred the dark matter density in it as a function of the distance from its centre. This density profile isn't unique due to measurement uncertainties, so they generate a set consistent with the stellar data. Next, they numerically solved the Schrödinger equation after modifying it to account for gravity and obtained an ensemble of density profiles. Finally, they carried out a statistical procedure to match the two sets of density profiles — the empirical one from observing Leo II and the theoretical one from solving the equation. Their key finding here was that the inner regions of Leo II contained more invisible mass and which dark particles of 10-31 proton mass couldn't account for. Thus they surmised heavier particles are needed to accommodate the inner crowding. It's not everyday that particle physics gets to redraw a fundamental goal post by an order of magnitude.



On March 15, Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX, announced on X that an uncrewed Mars landing mission will take place by the end of next year. The operation is expected to feature Optimus, a robot developed by Tesla — another company owned by Mr. Musk — as its passenger. "If those landings go well, then human landings may start as soon as 2029, although 2031 is more likely," Mr. Musk stated on X. The billionaire entrepreneur appears determined to achieve this milestone using SpaceX's reusable super heavy-lift launch vehicle, Starship.

Is it possible?

The project has faced multiple setbacks in recent months, including two critical Starship test flight failures, or as Mr. Musk refers to them, "rapid unscheduled disassemblies". Despite this, he has not postponed the planned date for SpaceX's Mars mission. Originally announced in September 2024, the plan faces technical and logistical challenges, leading experts to question its feasibility.

What are some of the challenges?

One of the main concerns is whether SpaceX will be able to develop and produce a fleet of auxiliary tanker spacecraft in time and successfully refuel Starship in orbit. To reach Mars, Starship's second stage must traverse approximately 5.5 crore kilometres in space. Timing is crucial, as every 26 months, Earth and Mars reach a "launch window" — a period when the two planets are closest, allowing for the most efficient space travel. If SpaceX fails to launch within this window, the mission could be delayed by more than two years. Currently, Starship has only demonstrated its ability to reach Low Earth Orbit (LEO). Its fuel storage capacity of 4,200 tonnes of propellant is insufficient for a Mars journey. To address this, SpaceX announced in April 2024 that it would use LEO tanker spacecraft to refuel Starship mid-flight. However, this plan has yet to be demonstrated, and there is no clear evidence that development is underway. With only 20 months until the next launch window, it is doubtful whether anyone can design, construct, test, and deploy these tankers in time, said Daniel Dumbacher, former

Deputy Associate Administrator of NASA's Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate, during a U.S. Congressional hearing in February. Beyond the issue of readiness, there is also uncertainty over whether SpaceX can manufacture and launch enough tanker spacecraft in a short time frame, given the complexity of in-orbit refuelling. This type of refuelling involves the transfer of super-cooled liquid oxygen and methane from a full tank to an empty one, operating under extreme pressure between machinery and the vacuum of space; a feat which has never been attempted before. SpaceX would need to launch and dock Starship's multiple tankers in quick succession to offset fuel evaporation, adding another layer of difficulty to the mission.

How has SpaceX fared so far?

SpaceX has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to accomplish seemingly impossible feats. The successful deployment of reusable Falcon 9 rocket boosters and the development of the Dragon capsule have proven its capacity to design spacecraft that can withstand the harsh conditions of space. SpaceX's Starbase facility in Texas gives it a competitive edge, with the company reportedly manufacturing one Raptor engine per day and assembling the second stage of Starship within weeks. These production capabilities could prove essential in developing the required tanker spacecraft.

How will SpaceX land on Mars?

Given that Mr. Musk envisions Starship as a vessel for human settlement, and that the 2026 mission will carry Tesla's Optimus robot, it appears likely that the spacecraft will attempt a surface landing. However, the current version of Starship lacks features necessary for landing, such as retractable landing gear similar to Falcon 9. While Starship has successfully landed on Earth, this was only possible with the "Chopsticks" vertical catching system, whereas no such infrastructure exists on Mars. Additionally, Starship's high failure rate in test flights suggests that further refinements are needed before it is considered reliable enough for such a critical mission.

What has NASA said?

The Guardian reports that senior NASA officials are worried about potential conflicts of interest between SpaceX and the Department of Governmental Efficiency (DOGE), an advisory body to U.S. President Donald Trump, which Mr. Musk heads. DOGE has been pushing for extensive federal budget cuts, leading to the shutdown of NASA's Office of Technology, Policy, and Strategy, as well as the Office of the Chief Scientist. With these cuts, speculation has grown that more funding could be directed towards SpaceX's contracts with NASA, raising concerns about Mr. Musk's dual role as a government adviser and private contractor.

The thing about regret...: Simran Mangharam writes on sacrifice and love



Any great love really does demand sacrifice. Some loves get by on small ones: routine annoyances, concessions made and taken for granted; fidelity itself. Some great loves demand a lot more. They demand one change one's chosen path, and give up one dream for another. These can be among the hardest decisions to make. Choose the love, and one loses a version of oneself. The version that could have had that career, or that family, or that freedom. Usually, the love is worth it in the end.

But what is one to do with the feelings of true loss one is left holding?

Asma, a 41-year-old client of mine, moved to Australia after marrying 45-year-old Richard. She was an independent management consultant with an enviable client list here at home. In their year-long courtship, Asma felt confident about her decision to give it all up and start over. She visited Richard three times, in what would be her new home, and loved the country. She made an assessment of the people and culture, and believed she could rebuild, to a reasonable degree, the social and professional networks she was set to lose. Six months in, she has yet to secure a single consultancy assignment. She is also lonely. Where she had expected to form at least a small circle of friends by now, she says she has been unable to make one friend whose support or even time

she can take for granted. Richard is an extremely supportive partner, but her angst has been directed at him over months, and is now acting as a strain on their relationship too. Asma admits that she begrudges him his well-settled life in his home country. She can't help but feel that he gained everything and lost nothing in this bargain, she says. She admits that the term doing the most damage — "I left it all behind for your sake" — is both unhelpful and unfair. Her logical brain occasionally tries to interrupt. "Perhaps what I misjudged," she tells me, "is how hard it would be, and how long it would take. But it could still happen." She can make peace with the wait. She has time, and hope, she tells me. But that is her rational mind. As we know, our most extreme feelings can often come not from recognising a rational danger, but from those deep, unconscious places that hold our earliest fears, rejections and sorrows. It helps to dethrone the panic and put logic in charge (easier said than done, of course; yet, possible to do). Asma recognises this too. She is now working to embrace the idea that she misjudged this. We are working together to help her accept her feelings of loss, and accept that it may take years to piece her new life together.

She has begun talking to Richard, honestly but non-accusingly, about how she feels. I believe they can emerge from this stronger, with a deeper understanding of what they can weather, and a better understanding of how. It helps immensely that he is empathetic, and can talk about her regrets without seeing them as an indictment of the relationship. The two are now working together to expand her social circle. They plan to strategise on how to get Asma's career back on track next. My advice for anyone currently tussling with regret would be the three vital steps Asma has taken: Acknowledge the feelings with honesty. Admit the error. And give it time. These are the only ways to take the reins, and keep the regret from eating away at one's peace of mind, and at other things in one's life (hope, motivation, the very road ahead). Because left untethered, regret will walk you backwards through your life, and that view is never pretty.

Tamil Nadu sets a new high with 9.69% growth

Tamil Nadu's real economic growth rate of 9.69% for 2024-25 marks the highest for any State in the country, besides being the highest for the State in the past 10 years.

At constant prices (base year: 2011-12), the value of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Tamil Nadu, estimated at ₹15,71,368 crore for 2023-24, had risen to ₹17,23,698 crore for 2024-25, according to the latest data available on the website of the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (both for advance estimates for the States and the second advance estimates nationwide). The previous high was 8.59% during 2017-18. The lowest (0.07%) was recorded during 2020-21, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The silver lining there was that at least Tamil Nadu recorded a positive growth, whereas many States had posted a negative growth. The term, real growth rate, denotes the rate that is exclusive of inflation. The one that includes inflation is called nominal economic growth rate. For instance, Tamil Nadu's nominal growth rate for 2024-25 is 14.02%, also the highest among States. Gujarat, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh are among those 14 States and Union Territories whose

growth rate data for the year have not been uploaded on the Union Ministry's website. The figure of real economic growth rate, as released by the Union Ministry, aligns with the projection in the State's maiden Economic Survey launched in the second week of last month. The survey had forecasted a growth of over 8% and the working paper from the Madras School of Economics (MSE), authored by veteran economists C. Rangarajan and K.R. Shanmugam and published in July 2024, predicted 9.3%. Eventually, the growth accomplished was higher than the two estimates. The State's performance has been driven by a 12.7% growth in the tertiary (services) sector and 9% in the secondary. The primary sector's performance is abysmally poor, with 0.15%. The tertiary sector's contribution to the State's Gross State Value Added is around 53%, followed by the secondary with 37% and the primary with 10%. Among the segments under the tertiary and secondary sectors, real estate, which covers ownership of dwelling and professional services too, has done well with 13.6%, followed by communication (and services related to broadcasting) at 13%, and trade, repair, hotels, and restaurants at 11.7%.

A case for the Global South in securing Ukraine peace

As the devastating war in Ukraine edges toward a fragile ceasefire, recently reinforced by maritime and energy truces brokered in Riyadh, the question of a more enduring peace looms large, along with a related question: who will oversee its implementation?

Peace seems to be in prospect, as both sides appear weary of a long-drawn out attritional conflict. The recent Black Sea deal follows talks initiated by United States President Donald Trump, who has vowed to swiftly end the war that has now entered its fourth year. While western leaders, notably France's President Emmanuel Macron and Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer, have floated the idea of a European-led peacekeeping force, this proposition is rife with challenges and contradictions. Russia has made it clear that no troops from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-countries would be welcome, and most of Europe is already in NATO. A peacekeeping force whose very presence would be seen as a casus belli is evidently a non-starter. It is time for the Global South — a coalition of nations from Africa, Asia, and Latin America — to rise to the occasion and offer to lead a United Nations-backed peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. Doing so would not only ensure credibility and neutrality but also symbolise the emergence of the Global South as an indispensable force in shaping global stability. The perils of a European peacekeeping force Europe's enthusiasm for spearheading peacekeeping in Ukraine appears, at first glance, logical — its proximity to the conflict and its strategic stake in the region make it a natural candidate. While promoting a "coalition of the willing", Mr. Starmer has already promised to send British troops as part of any post-war peacekeeping operation. Yet, this logic crumbles under the weight of Russia's vehement opposition. Moscow views a European-led force as a NATO Trojan horse, a thinly veiled ploy to expand the alliance's reach into Ukraine. Such a deployment would not only exacerbate tensions but also risk transforming peacekeepers into catalysts for further conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared during a recent visit to Qatar that it would only "further fuel the conflict and stop any attempts to calm it down".

Moreover, European public opinion is far from aligned with the ambitions of its leaders. Polls reveal widespread resistance to deploying troops in what would undoubtedly be a perilous theatre of operations. When Mr. Macron first suggested French troops for such an endeavour earlier this year, opinion polls showed an overwhelming majority of French citizens opposing the idea. Even if political will is mustered, the logistical realities of sustaining such a mission without heavy reliance on U.S. support — which, in the Trump era, may or may not be available — would expose Europe's limitations. In a conflict fraught with delicate balances, the stakes are too high to gamble on an arrangement perceived as partial and provocative. The Global South has the credentials. The presence of NATO troops along the front line with Russian forces, even in a peacekeeping capacity, heightens the chances of a broader confrontation, a risk the international community can ill afford. In stark contrast, the Global South offers a compelling alternative. Unlike Europe, nations from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have largely maintained a principled neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This impartiality — symbolised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi hugging both Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, two weeks apart — grants them the moral high ground, making them uniquely positioned to maintain the trust of both Kyiv and Moscow. A peacekeeping mission led by the Global South would not only

de-escalate tensions but also inject a much-needed sense of fairness into the proceedings. The Global South's credentials are far from theoretical. The African Union (AU)'s record of peacekeeping, whether in Sudan, Somalia, or the Central African Republic, speaks volumes about its ability to navigate volatile environments. Similarly, BRICS member countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa and Indonesia have demonstrated their diplomatic acumen and operational expertise in UN peacekeeping missions. Even smaller nations such as Chile bring specialised skills, such as demining, which are crucial for Ukraine's reconstruction. Their track record in UN peacekeeping missions strengthens their credibility as potential leaders in Ukraine's stabilisation efforts. For a Global South-led peacekeeping mission to succeed, several conditions must be met. A robust and well-defined ceasefire agreement is, of course, a prerequisite. Equally critical is the demarcation of a clear front line, a task demanding meticulous negotiations. Financial and logistical support from western nations, particularly the European Union, would bolster the mission's capacity. All of these would be available if the operation was authorised by the United Nations Security Council and enjoyed the approval and cooperation of both parties to the conflict. Crucially, excluding NATO troops entirely would assuage Russian concerns and underscore the mission's neutrality. Finally, as India demonstrated in Liberia, the inclusion of female peacekeepers, whose presence has been shown to foster community trust and address gender-based violence, a persistent issue in conflict zones, would further enhance the initiative's legitimacy.

India, with its storied legacy in UN peacekeeping, is especially well-placed to take a leadership role. Having contributed over 2,90,000 peacekeepers to more than 50 UN missions, India's experience is unparalleled. Currently, more than 5,000 Indian peacekeepers are deployed in nine of the 11 active peace operations. In 2007, India became the first country to deploy an all-women police contingent to a peacekeeping mission, in war-torn Liberia. More than 160 Indian peacekeepers have paid the ultimate price serving under the UN flag so far — the highest number for any troop-contributing country. It was no accident that then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali turned to India to lead the UN peace-keeping operation in the former Yugoslavia in 1992. As in that situation, India's neutral stance in the Ukraine conflict and its balanced relationships with Russia, the West, and Ukraine make it a natural choice to spearhead this effort. There is a strong case for India to shed its reticence and step forward with the assertiveness the moment demands. Meanwhile, China has been far more proactive, positioning itself as a potential peacemaker despite its close ties to Moscow. Beijing has also appointed a seasoned diplomat as its special envoy for Ukraine, whereas India has yet to take comparable steps. A peacekeeping mission in Ukraine under the auspices of the United Nations offers more than just a pathway to stability in Eastern Europe. It is an opportunity for the Global South to assert its rightful place at the high table of international diplomacy. For decades, this grouping — still too inchoate to be termed a bloc — has been relegated to the margins of global decision-making, its voice often drowned out by the cacophony of western powers. Taking the lead in Ukraine would signal a shift, a bold declaration that the Global South is not merely a passive observer but an active shaper of the world order. As we stand at this historic juncture, the choice is clear. The task of securing peace in Ukraine cannot be left to actors whose partiality risks undermining the very truce they are meant to protect.

A retired NSG commando killed, a son's revenge: How 7-year feud destroyed two Gurgaon families

At first glance, nothing about Kasan village suggests it has been living through a bloody feud between two families that once shared a close bond. Yet, the signs are hidden just under the calm. It is quiet on a summer afternoon, as residents walk past houses painted in shades of blue and green. Near the local market stands the Moni Baba ka Chabutra, a raised concrete platform where villagers would regularly gather to chat. It is now largely deserted and only a man, standing alone, is smoking beedi. The shops in the market only begin opening by midday. It was on this chabutra that a bloody feud, which many believed had already been settled by the courts, erupted once again on the morning of April 30.

Sundar Pal Singh, a 55-year-old former National Security Guard (NSG) commando known in the village as Sundar Fauji, was shot dead in broad daylight. He was out on parole from a life sentence for murder. The man accused of pulling the trigger was 20-year-old Kartik Chauhan, the younger son of the man Fauji had been convicted of killing in 2018 — former village sarpanch Bahadur Singh Chauhan. The home is dotted with remnants of Fauji's former life: NSG insignia and trophies gathered over years of service. His Royal Enfield motorcycle is parked nearby. The home is dotted with remnants of Fauji's former life: NSG insignia and trophies gathered over years of service. His Royal Enfield motorcycle is parked nearby.

The physical distance between the homes of the two families is not more than 100 metres. The emotional distance has, however, widened significantly in these eight years. The Indian Express visited both households in the village in Haryana's Gurgaon district to understand how a friendship forged over the years unravelled into a cycle of bloodshed that has now claimed two lives and altered many more. Around the chabutra, hardly anyone is ready to give a clear picture of the shooting incident. They did not see it, many say, it happened early, before shops had opened for business. Police say the attack took place around 8.30 am. According to investigators, Fauji had been sitting at the platform, waiting for his wife. He had been released on parole on March 29 to attend a family wedding and was expected to return to prison soon. Police allege that Kartik and his friend Gulshan, alias Gullu, approached him and fired five rounds from close range. A video of the murder surfaced later. As the former commando collapsed, villagers rushed towards the scene. According to police, the two accused allegedly pointed their weapons at pursuing residents before abandoning their pistols and fleeing. Fauji was taken to a nearby private hospital, where he was declared dead.

In May, Gurgaon police arrested Kartik and Gulshan, describing the killing as a "planned act of revenge". Police claim that during questioning, Kartik admitted that he had orchestrated the attack to avenge his father's death. Investigators further allege that he had travelled to Uttar Pradesh to procure illegal firearms used in the shooting. But the story, according to both the families, began years earlier.

'Never used violence' A narrow lane leads to the Singh household, where Fauji's family is struggling to come to terms with his murder. Several houses owned by the family stand side by side. Some have been rented out to villagers. His home is a medium-sized two-storey building, with black and silver metal gates at the entrance. The walls were recently painted pink for a wedding in the family. Inside, the living room is plastered with floral wallpaper. The home is dotted with remnants of Fauji's former life: NSG insignia and trophies gathered over years of service. His Royal Enfield motorcycle is parked nearby. Fauji's wife, 53-year-old Manju Rani, speaks softly, often pausing midway through sentences. Currently, she lives with her mother in the house. Rani says Fauji joined the Army's Rajput Regiment in the early 1990s and later served as an NSG commando before retirement. She remembers her husband as a problem solver in the village. "He never used violence. Even on that day in 2018, we do not know exactly how the gun went off," she says. Bahadur Singh's home in Gurgaon. He was killed by Fauji in 2018. His wife, children and daughters-in-law live in the house now. Hazarika Bahadur Singh's home in Gurgaon. He was killed by Fauji in 2018. His wife, children and daughters-in-law live in the house now. Hazarika Her mother, 72-year-old Angoori Devi, remembers her son-in-law as a caring family man. "He looked after me better than a son," she says. "He paid for my medicines and my eye operation." A Gurgaon court convicted Fauji for the murder of Bahadur and sentenced him to life imprisonment. What happened that day remains central to the competing narratives both families tell. Her husband, she says, had lent substantial sums to Bahadur

Hunger, beatings and a pitbull: 12 men recount bonded labour horror in UP

For three months, 68-year-old Meharbaan Shah lived in uncertainty. He didn't know if his son, Dilshad Mohammad, his youngest, was alive. The 24-year-old had left home in Uttar Pradesh's Amroha district five months ago, hoping to find work and support his family. For the first few weeks, Dilshad regularly called his wife, Gulista Begum. Then, one day, the calls stopped. "We looked for him everywhere..." said Meharbaan. "After exhausting every possibility, I left it to God. Gulista, too, lost hope... she believed something terrible must have happened to Dilshad... she returned to her parents' home with their young son." Dilshad and 11 other men had been rescued on Monday by the Muzaffarnagar Police from a factory manufacturing disposable leaf plates in Titawi area, where they were allegedly held as bonded labourers. Police said the workers were confined for months, forced to work for up to 20 hours a day, subjected to repeated physical abuse.

'One meal, beaten with sticks, no phones': 12 men rescued from UP factory recall horror The weapons used to torture the men, seized by police. (Muzaffarnagar Police/@muzaffarnagarpol) "When I heard my son's voice, I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't speak for a few moments," recalled Meharbaan. "The first thing I asked was where he was. He said Muzaffarnagar. I immediately asked him to come home." For Dilshad, the three months at the factory were like living in hell.

"We were never allowed to leave the premises," he told over the phone. "If anyone asked to go home, questioned the conditions, or even slept for more than three or four hours, they were beaten and tortured. They also took away my mobile phone, so I had no way of telling my family or anyone outside what we were enduring." On Monday, a joint team of the police, district administration and labour department raided the manufacturing unit in

over the years because of their friendship.

"He had given him nearly Rs 65 lakh as far as we know, including money borrowed from my brothers and relatives," she says. "Most of it was in cash. He had gone to ask for the money back." The relationship began to sour, Fauji's family says, when he asked for the money back multiple times because the family needed to pay for children's education. The Chauhan family, however, disputes these claims, saying no money was borrowed from Fauji. The 2018 murder took place when Fauji purportedly went to ask for his money from Bahadur — on April 11 of that year. According to police and family members, Fauji went to Bahadur's dairy farm in the village at night, and was initially thrown out from there. Then, he allegedly went in and shot Bahadur. Police sources say eight shots were fired from a licensed revolver that Fauji had allegedly taken out of his bank locker a week earlier. Rani alleges that after the 2018 murder, members of the Chauhan family forcibly took control of a school she operated in the village and intimidated staff members. She says that the cases related to this intimidation remain pending before the courts. The Chauhans deny wrongdoing and maintain that the school property legally belongs to them. Rani's sister-in-law, Madhuri, also lives in the village. She insists Fauji had actively supported Bahadur's political career and even helped finance his election campaigns.

"He stood by him," she claims. "What happened in 2018 was wrong, yes. But now our children are facing questions about revenge and more revenge." The family says that they had celebrated the marriage ceremony of Fauji's elder daughter only 10 days before he was killed. "We want the bloodshed to stop now," Madhuri says. "The legal cases can continue. But enough people have suffered." Rani says she is now focused on rebuilding the family's life. "I am waiting for my pension paperwork," she says. "Our son is pursuing an MBA. We have to pay his fees." A short walk away from the Singhs' home is the Chauhan household. The two-storey house with green-tinted windows is painted olive green with floral motifs. Though eight years have passed, several among the Chauhan family are still angry. Satpal, Bahadur's elder brother, remains unapologetic. "What my nephew did was right," he says bluntly, regarding the murder of Fauji. However, Bahadur's other children take a more measured tone. Rohan Chauhan, 26, and his sister Sapna, 30, say they do not support their younger brother's actions, though they believe years of unresolved trauma and provocation contributed to them. According to the siblings, their father and Fauji had once shared a close friendship. "He used to eat at our house," they say. They knew each other from the time they served in the Army together in Kashmir in the 1990s. The families, however, did not interact much. "My father attended their family functions and Fauji did the same. We knew their kids, but we were not friends," Sapna says.

The family rejects claims that Chauhan had borrowed money from Fauji. "There was no question of debt," Sapna says. "We had gotten close to Rs 3 crore when Maruti acquired our land." Sapna insists that her family owns the disputed school property. "The property belongs to us. It was only leased to the Singh family to run the school. After the 2018 incident, we took it back," she claims. The family says Kartik appeared increasingly withdrawn in the days leading up to last month's shooting. "We thought he was being shy after marriage," says Rohan. "He had only been married for three months." The siblings allege that Fauji occasionally approached Kartik and made remarks that disturbed him, though they say they never imagined matters would escalate into violence. "If we had known what was going on in his mind, we would never have left him alone," says Rohan. The family insists they had accepted the court's verdict in the 2018 murder case. "We got closure when the life sentence came," says Sapna. "But now Kartik has ruined his own life." The siblings describe a future that now appears permanently altered. Kartik was in his first year of a BA degree via distance learning. "He had ambitions to expand the family's water purification business into dairy and poultry ventures," Rohan says. Now, each family member gets only a few moments on the phone with Kartik every day. "He talks about food and routine things," says Sapna. "Not about what happened." Villagers say they were not surprised by the killing because they believed the conflict had never truly ended. A resident of Kasan village, who knew both the families, says she had even thought of moving out after the 2018 incident, fearing a cycle of violence would follow. "My son, who lives in the city, had asked if we wanted to move in with him [after the latest murder]."

Mandi village after receiving information from a man who had reportedly escaped from the factory. The men, aged between 16 and 44, from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Rajasthan, were rescued. Police have arrested two people: Pradeep Balyan (49), father of factory owner Ankit Balyan; and Ankit's associate, Shiva Tyagi (26). Ankit is on the run; police said multiple teams are conducting raids to arrest him. The accused have been booked under sections of the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986; the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015; and the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976. One meal, beaten with sticks, no phones: 12 men rescued from UP factory recall horror Outside the manufacturing unit in Mandi village, Muzaffarnagar. (PTI) Police said the workers alleged they had been lured from railway stations and other public places by Ankit and others with promises of steady jobs, decent wages, free accommodation and meals, only to find themselves trapped inside the factory. Inside, the accused allegedly kept the men under their control through violence, intimidation and verbal abuse, subjecting them to inhumane living and working conditions while preventing them from leaving the premises. Superintendent of Police, Muzaffarnagar, Sanjai Kumar said a Special Investigation Team (SIT), headed by Superintendent of Police Mahadik Akshay Sanjay, has been constituted to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the allegations. Phones taken away, pitbull to terrorise us? The workers recounted the abuse they faced — little food, daily beatings, and even a dog to terrorise them. Sonu Chauhan from Agra said he had been working at the factory for the last two months.

Balyan (49), father of factory owner Ankit Balyan; Ankit's associate, Shiva Tyagi (26) "

How an Aligarh surgery that removed the wrong kidney led to a 12-year legal battle

Ever since he took his mother to the Ashirwad Nursing Home in Aligarh 14 years ago, Veer Singh has measured his life in court cases. A "negligent" surgeon removed her healthy kidney, instead of the diseased one, triggering a medical board inquiry, proceedings before the Uttar Pradesh Medical Council, and a 12-year legal battle before the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission. In between, Veer's mother died and he grew older — but the court cases carried on. He spent years struggling to clear the medical debt while grieving the loss of his mother. That is, until last month, when the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission directed the doctor responsible for the surgery to pay two crore rupees. "These 14 years have felt like an eternity — first running around hospitals and doctors and then courts. I would travel from Aligarh to New Delhi for the commission hearings, then learn that opposing counsel wasn't present and that the case was adjourned," says Singh.

In its May 18 order, the commission directed Dr Rajeev Lochan of Ashirwad Nursing Home to pay two crore rupees to Shanti Devi's family for "the negligent surgery" and for depriving them of her "company, love and affection". "The loss is irreparable, in as much as, the loss of a mother to her sons, a spouse to her husband and a housewife to a family, all combined together cannot be diluted, meroeso with the nature of the negligence in the present case," the consumer commission's order says. For the family, this order came after years of trauma and suffering. "Even after the botched surgery, we were not counting money, we were solely focused on keeping her alive. It was my wish to get justice while she was alive, so that she gets some sense of closure," Veer Singh, who works as an LIC agent, says. The hospital no longer exists. Queries sent to Dr Lochan's lawyer went unanswered. It started with a dull, radiating pain in the abdomen. At first, 56-year-old Shanti Devi, who managed the family convenience store, ignored it, but the pain grew insistent. On April 17, 2012, Veer, the eldest of her three sons, took Shanti Devi to the clinic after work because it was close to home. "We didn't know him and had never consulted him before. But we knew the hospital was conveniently located," he recalls. It was meant to be a routine visit: they would meet the doctor, get her checked up, get some medicines and return home. Instead, it led to a series of tests and a worrying diagnosis: hydronephrosis, or enlargement of the right kidney because of blockages and urine build-up. Further tests confirmed that the surgery was necessary. "After the diagnosis, we even got second opinions from other places, including the hospital attached to Aligarh Muslim University, and a hospital in Agra. They all said that the surgery was necessary. So, in the end, we decided to go to Lochan."

At 11:30 am on May 6, Shanti Devi was wheeled into the operation theatre for kidney removal. The family had spent the previous day undergoing pre-operative tests and, though anxious, they were convinced that the procedure was necessary for her survival. But then it went downhill. Shanti Devi's health declined. She couldn't pass urine even 24 hours after the surgery, her body swelled and turned a pale blue. Yet there was no word from the doctor, even during his post-op rounds. A day later, Dr Lochan referred her for dialysis at another hospital and discharged her. There were no questions, no tests and no follow-ups, only a hospital bill of just under one lakh rupees. At the hospital she was sent to, she underwent dialysis. Blood tests also showed that her creatinine levels were normal. But Shanti Devi's family remained anxious. "We got scared. We thought, 'Why does she need dialysis when she has one healthy kidney?'" Despite the dialysis, Devi's health continued to slide. On June 3, 2012, Veer Singh consulted Dr Dinesh Khullar, a New Delhi-based nephrologist, who was visiting Aligarh. He ordered fresh tests. The results stunned them. Instead of the damaged kidney, the surgeon had removed the

A 'cheerful girl', a 'well-liked' boy and a 'sportsman': The 3 at heart of Pune's murder plot

As the investigation into the death of Pune-based Ketan Agarwal continues, police said Thursday that the two suspects — Ketan's fiancée Siya Goyal, and her friend Chetan Choudhary — were blaming each other for what had happened. Sources said Chetan has been saying during questioning that he wanted to elope with Siya, but she insisted they "get rid of" Ketan. Siya, on the other hand, is reportedly claiming that the murder was Chetan's idea, and that he broke down when a previous alleged plot failed. Coming from an affluent family, Siya, 20, is a Commerce student at a well-known Pune college. Her family, who lives in a large bungalow called Lila Kunj in Bibwewadi near Market Yard in Pune, is in the dry fruits business. Bibwewadi is known as a highly sought-after residential and commercial neighbourhood in southern Pune, located about an hour's drive from the Lodha Belmondo apartment block in Gahunje, where Ketan lived. Those who know Siya describe her as "cheerful", interested in fashion and, recently, active with her own baking business. However, little is known about this business. Shocked at the revelation that Siya may have had a hand in Ketan's death, from a fall at Lohagad Fort near Pune, Ketan's mother Rakhi Agarwal says: "Siya was well-behaved, like any regular girl. She was always smiling. She had come home several times — for a puja, for dinner, for a birthday. We went shopping and for meals." The families were distantly related. Searching for answers for the murder, months ahead of a luxurious wedding planned by them for Siya and Ketan later this year, Rakhi says they had put "only two" conditions to Siya before the wedding: that "we do not allow drinking in our house", and "I would not let her attend parties". Their engagement, on Valentine's Day this year, had been a grand affair, held in a Pune hotel. The wedding was planned at a palace in Udaipur, Rajasthan, with two aircraft chartered for the guests.

In photos and videos of the couple which have surfaced on social media since Ketan's killing, he and Siya can be seen dancing as a guitarist plays a song, and celebrating with a cake. In another, Ketan surprises Siya with a ride in a car whose sunroof is decked with flowers. A social media post put up by Siya after Ketan's death has also surfaced. "You left me on my birthday," she put up. "You left when we were so close to getting married. I still can't understand why you did this to me. I had dreams, questions I'll never get answers to. Why did you leave me when I loved you so much? Rest in peace." Siya has a brother, two years younger to her. He was with the couple when they travelled to Mumbai for their flight to Bali, Indonesia, for a pre-wedding shoot. Police have claimed Siya stole Ketan's passport, ensuring they had to cancel their

healthy one. Another round of second opinions followed, and the family confronted Dr Lochan. "He didn't admit to the mistake. We even pleaded with him. He said that the only thing that can be done now is to go for a kidney transplant and offered us Rs 50,000 to keep quiet," Veer Singh recalls. "He (Dr Lochan) suggested a kidney transplant, saying someone from her family should donate to her. But her blood group is different from ours, and what's the guarantee the donor won't become sick? We registered at AIIMS New Delhi for a kidney transplant, but the queue was long and our number never came." In the days that followed, an FIR invoking provisions relating to causing grievous hurt by weapon — later modified to the less serious charge of grievous hurt by rash and negligent act — under the Indian Penal Code was registered. This led to a medical board inquiry into the incident. On July 18, 2012, the board unequivocally found Dr Lochan "fully responsible and guilty of removing the left kidney of the patient whereas the right dysfunctional kidney was in its place in her body". Subsequently, the Uttar Pradesh Medical Council suspended Dr Lochan's licence for two years in March 2013. The suspension was upheld by the Medical Council of India in 2014. In October 2012, police filed a chargesheet, which remains pending before an Aligarh court. In 2013, the Allahabad High Court dismissed a plea by Dr Lochan to quash the chargesheet.

After the botched surgery, life had overnight taken a tragic turn for Shanti Devi. She was confined to her bed. Her outings were limited to hospital visits once every three days for dialysis. Her weight fell dramatically from 58 kg to 30 kg. Her condition was fast deteriorating and soon her family realised that the end was near. "Before, she was very active and was very close to my children. She would drop them off at school and pick them up, and manage the convenience store," Veer Singh remembers. "But after the surgery, my mother broke. She had accepted that she would die. She wanted the pain to end. Woh kehte the mujhe ichchhamrityu chahiye (She would say she wants to be euthanised)." For the family, too, life changed dramatically: medical trips and doctor's appointments began to dictate their lives, medical bills climbed, and savings dwindled. "We had to mortgage the house to meet the expenses. I wasn't working at that time, and dedicated my time to caring for her. When she was alive, we would travel to New Delhi for her dialysis and health check-ups. After her death, it was for the court cases," Veer Singh says. On February 20, 2014, Devi died of "shock and septicaemia". In August that year, Veer Singh moved the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission accusing Dr Lochan of medical negligence. The complaint stated the family had "reasonable and strong apprehension that the healthy kidney removed from the body of Late Shanti Devi has been illegally sold by (Dr Lochan) with an intention of enriching himself". The commission admitted the complaint in March 2015 — over a year after Devi's demise — and written statements were filed by 2017. But repeated adjournments and pandemic disruptions delayed hearings, with the complaint finally heard in May this year. In his arguments, Dr Lochan called it an accident, even theorising that "probably both the kidneys of the patient were on the same side and hence could be a congenital defect". He said that, after opening Shanti Devi's abdomen, "he could see the kidney and thus removed it". In their order, a Bench of Justice A P Sahi (president) and Bharat Kumar Pandya (member) rejected these arguments. "The removal of the left kidney was a medical disaster and negligence of the highest order. Had the left kidney remained intact, the patient would have survived longer," the commission said, noting that records showed Lochan could neither confirm which kidney he had removed nor firmly state its size. For the family, the order brings closure to a long court battle, but a Shanti Devi-sized void remains in their lives. What Veer Singh remembers most about his mother is her laughter: loud and uninhibited, the kind that fills up the room.

Plans. Those who knew both Agarwal and Goyal families have refused to talk about the incident. Siya's father Praveen Goyal was admitted to hospital on Thursday, and in first comments to the media, her parents said Ketan was "more of a son" to them than their own. "We want justice for Ketan... for the accused to pay the same way," Praveen told TV reporters. Asked if they would feel the same even if that meant Siya, he said: "Yes, ever Siya." The 22-year-old reportedly met Siya only around eight-nine months ago, at a party. Neighbours at the much-moaned Shree Parshwa Nagar Society, where the Chaudhary family has lived for many years, say they are shocked at the allegations against Chetan. I have known the family for several years. Chetan was well-known here, and mainly for his active participation in sports," says a neighbour who does not wish to be named. "Since he was very young, he played cricket, and he was good at it. He never showed any violent streak, and everyone had only good things to say about his behaviour." Chetan's uncle Udayram says they find it hard to believe the allegations against the 22-year-old. Reiterating that he was a sportsman, he adds that the Choudhary home is full of trophies won by Chetan, "over 150". Chetan's lawyer Ram Shahane says he is "pursuing BBA". Those who have seen the 22-year-old around the housing compound say Chetan would either be seen playing in the compound, or helping his father Babulal Chaudhary out with the family's business. The Chaudharys run a dry fruits business, along with that in spices, named Dhanashri Masala, at Market Yard, near where the Goyals stay. Chetan's family, including his father and uncle, say he "is being falsely implicated by Siya". Babulal, who says they had no idea the two were in a relationship, says: "Chetan told us he was standing a few feet away from Siya and Ketan (when the latter allegedly was killed)." Babulal also claims that Chetan is being threatened in police custody. Shahane underlines that his client is "Accused No. 2". Not denying that Chetan and Siya were in constant touch, he claims the calls were purely friendly and business-related. Police's reference to over 2,000 calls between them lacked any chronological context or supporting evidence, Shahane says. "No evidence has been placed before court so far." Neighbours of the 26-year-old, who was allegedly pushed off a cliff by Siya and Chetan, remember him as a friendly and well-liked young man. Lodha Belmondo in Gahunje, where Ketan lived with his family, is described on housing sites as "Pune's most-premium riverside township". Says Lalita Singh, who lives in another tower in the apartment block: "The Agarwal family has good relations with everyone here. Ketan was kind and cheerful."

Shree Charani keeps focus on World Cup as India gear up for must-win Australia clash

Hyderabad: India kept their ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2026 semi-final hopes alive with a crucial five-wicket victory over Bangladesh in Manchester. Speaking on JioHotstar's 'Adidas Match Centre Live', India spinner Shree Charani discussed her three-wicket haul, India's mindset heading into the virtual quarter-final against Australia.

"I just kept things simple; I didn't try to do anything extra and focused on what I had practiced. My line, length, and variations and I knew that if I kept hitting the right areas, the wickets would come. Against Bangladesh, I was clear about my plans. I wanted to bowl in the right channels and not give away easy runs. The pitch had a little bit of help, so I just stuck to my strengths and let the ball do the rest. Picking up two wickets feels good, but more importantly, I was happy that I could contribute to the team's win," Sree Charani said.

On the catches dropped off her bowling, Sree Charani said: "I didn't get frustrated by the catches dropped off my bowling. Dropped catches are part of the game. It happens to every bowler at some point. You can't control

what happens after the ball leaves your hand. All you can do is keep bowling in the right areas and trust your teammates. So, it's okay. I don't let it affect my focus. I believe that if you keep doing the right things, the rewards will come. At the end of the day, whatever is written for me, it will come."

On India's mindset going into the must-win game against Australia, the left arm spinner said: "Yes, the Australia game is going to be an important one. We want to win and finish on top of the group stage. But we are not going to treat it any differently. We are going to keep things simple. There's no need to overthink. We have played against them before, and we know what to expect. It's about executing our skills on the day. One game at a time. That has been our approach throughout this tournament, and we will continue with the same mindset." On not focusing much on her World No. 1 ranking in T20Is, Sree Charani said: "To be honest, right now my focus is completely on the World Cup. We are in the middle of the tournament, and that is all that matters to me. I'm not thinking about being the number one ranked T20I bowler or any individual rankings.

Sooryavanshi's mantra is 'I don't give a damn about any bowler': Jurel

Vaibhav Sooryavanshi may have caught the imagination of the cricketing world with his exploits this season in the 2026 IPL but the secret to his success lies in the simplicity of his approach, according to his Rajasthan Royals teammate Dhruv Jurel. Jurel had himself played an impressive knock against Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Eliminator on Wednesday – a 21-ball 50, but he and almost every player who took the field was overshadowed by Sooryavanshi's record-breaking knock. The 15-year-old smashed 97 in 29 balls and over the course of the innings, he broke Chris Gayle's record for most sixes in an IPL season. He also fell just three runs short of Gayle's record for fastest IPL century. "The best thing about Vaibhav that I have noticed is that he doesn't plan anything," Dhruv Jurel said at the post-match press conference. "Because he practices a lot and he always backs himself. That's what he does every time he goes out and plays. The best thing about him is that he backs himself. He doesn't even have a shadow of doubt that 'I am not able to do it,' he added. "When we go to an academy, (we are told) 'Don't watch the bowler, watch the ball,'" said Jurel. "As 17-year-olds, we always watch the bowler (and think) he's a big name. But really, he just watches the ball. That's all." "His mantra is 'I don't want give a damn



about any bowler." Having already scored 175 in the Under-19 World Cup final, Sooryavanshi showed no signs of pressure in the Eliminator. Put to bat first by Sunrisers Hyderabad, he raced to his fifty off 16 deliveries and maintained the tempo throughout his whirlwind knock. Sooryavanshi blasted a barrage of sixes with every SRH bowler, including captain Pat Cummins, bearing the brunt. Overall, the teenager hit as many as 12 sixes and five fours on the night. This took his tally of sixes for the season to a whopping 65. Gayle held the previous record of 59 which he had set in the 2012 season of the IPL.

Tanisha-Dhruv get the serve to sing, beat Watanabe-Taguchi 8-21, 21-17, 21-16



On Thursday, at the Super 750, Tanisha and Dhruv lost the opening set, before sensationally bouncing back to beat Watanabe and Maya Taguchi 8-21, 21-17, 21-16 and reach the quarterfinals. (Badminton Photo) On Thursday, at the Super 750, Tanisha and Dhruv lost the opening set, before sensationally bouncing back to beat Watanabe and Maya Taguchi 8-21, 21-17, 21-16 and reach the quarterfinals. Jwala Gutta had once said she picked Ashwini Ponappa as a partner – not because of her smashes, which were excellent of course. But due to her serves. Now, Tanisha Crasto hoping to reach Jwala's heights in mixed doubles (she reached World No 6 with V Diju), is proving why a swell serving game can literally win you matches.

To get to match point at the Singapore Open, Tanisha sent forth a bamboozler that confounded none less than Yuta Watanabe – a seemingly benign backhand wobble serve that left the Japanese skill-master confounded. Watanabe is a twice Olympic medalist and four-time World Championships podium finisher, including two silvers at mixed doubles. The Japanese 28-year-old isn't easily frazzled. The two hooting serves at the end, were just the finishing touches of a firecracker game. Her lari (garland) style of explosive bursts, as she strikes a whisk-like rotating pattern with Dhruv Kapila and goes about creating chances while never giving up, has been one of Indian badminton's most underrated progressions.

On Thursday, at the Super 750, Tanisha and Dhruv lost the opening set, before sensationally bouncing back to beat Watanabe and Maya Taguchi 8-21, 21-17, 21-16 and reach the quarterfinals. Tanisha is very different from India's OG mixed doubles star Gutta whose game relied on her game smarts and big leftie attack with V Diju. Tanisha's game is more like popping up at different parts of her own court with swift movements, and finding gaps

on the opponent's court before lasering in her ping shots with great energy and useful unpredictability which makes her resemble the Diwali mala cracker that travels and explodes. The decibel levels carry value of their own, like they used to for Carolina Marin.

Already an Olympian in women's doubles and of versatile utility in team events, she's not had the easiest times, given her reactive-reflexive high-risk game, which can cop a fair amount of errors. But she thrives in the chaos that mixed doubles tends to be, doesn't get afraid of front court confrontations, and can surprise opponents when she actually gets into textbook patterns. Dhruv is more methodical, the muscle from the back, who creates openings for Tanisha, but has a good understanding of forecourt exchanges too. His accuracy varies and injury concerns bog him down, but together they have the potential to pierce the thoroughly difficult top tier of mixed doubles someday. Losing the opener 21-8 to Watanabe-Taguchi, the Indians ensured an early lead in the second. Tanisha would send one over the Japanese heads to reach 11-8, but it was in breaking the 14-14 deadlock that Tanisha showed first signs of her audacity. She went after Watanabe with her angled smashes smacking one into his ribcage. She would pop up the shuttle at the net making a Watanabe kill difficult, because it was an arch, not a tumble at scything height to go up 18-14. A Taguchi service error gave Indians the set point to level. But it was Tanisha who once again made the shuttle pop up like a champagne cork, using her racquet frame, that gave them the 21-17 second set.

It is a testament to Tanisha's ability to play clutch, because even the highlights package had more of the Japanese winners through the game. The Indians, not technically the most refined, were merely staying afloat till 9-11 in the decider. In some rallies – like the one to get to 12-11 – Tanisha's only job was to scream panicked prods to Dhruv to take the shuttle, as he did all the work. There is no unspoken understanding or some poetic connection between these two that makes them a good pairing – just clear (and loud) communication where a 'Dhruv' or 'Me!' is yelled out by Tanisha, when going for the shuttle. But the ruckus brings decisiveness. At 16-12 to pull away for a crucial lead in the decider, the perfect game came together. Dhruv managed to use his power to push both Watanabe and Taguchi to the back court, and Tanisha smartly turned her racquethead for a cross drop to the forecourt empty space. Still the Japanese came to within one points at 17-16. It's when Tanisha attacked Taguchi's serve savagely with an upright backhand return to create a melee.

AFI condoles the demise of former shooter and veteran sports administrator Randhir Singh

New Delhi: The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) on Thursday extended its condolences on the passing of legendary shooter and veteran sports administrator Raja Randhir Singh, who passed away at 79 on Wednesday at his residence following prolonged illness. Randhir Singh competed in as many as five Olympic Games and was the first Indian shooter to win gold at the Asian Games when he won the men's Trap gold at the 1978 Bangkok Asiad. In 1979, Randhir Singh was conferred with the prestigious Arjuna Award, and also with the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Award for a historic sporting career. "The AFI is deeply saddened by the passing of former AFI Vice

President, Raja Randhir Singh ji. AFI extends its heartfelt condolences to his family & friends during this difficult time. "He served as Secretary General of the IOA and the OCA and was also a member of the IOC. He was elected president of the Olympic Council of Asia, leaving behind a lasting legacy in the Olympic movement and Asian sports administration. May his soul rest in peace," AFI post on X. His foray into sports administration began during his sporting career when he was appointed as the honorary secretary general of the Indian Olympic Association in 1987, a position he held till 2012.

Why Roland Garros groundskeepers are turning to salt to save clay from heatwave



For decades, clay courts have been associated with long rallies, high bounces and physically draining tennis. But at this year's French Open, players have repeatedly said Roland Garros is playing faster than usual. The reason is not a change in balls or court construction alone – it is the weather. Paris is currently experiencing an unusually intense early-summer heatwave, with temperatures crossing 35°C during the opening week of the tournament. Groundskeepers say the conditions are unlike anything they have dealt with in late May. "What we're experiencing is unprecedented," Philippe Vaillant, head of court maintenance at Roland Garros, told the Associated Press. "Even the weather services say it themselves: it's unprecedented to have temperatures this high for such a long period at this time of year. The heat is fundamentally altering how clay behaves. Why hot weather changes clay courts

Clay courts are moisture-dependent surfaces. Unlike hard courts, their playing characteristics are directly tied to how much water is retained beneath the top layer of crushed brick. When temperatures rise sharply, moisture evaporates faster. The surface becomes drier and harder, which changes the speed and bounce of the ball. Players at Roland Garros have already noticed the difference. World No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka said the conditions were "boiling hot" and that "balls are flying, everything is much faster." Traditionally, clay slows the ball down because moisture creates more friction between the surface and the ball. But dry clay reduces that resistance. The bounce becomes quicker and lower, favouring aggressive baseline hitting over attritional rallying. The shift is significant because Roland Garros has historically been the slowest Grand Slam surface. This year, players are increasingly comparing conditions to hard courts during afternoon sessions. The science beneath

the red clay what appears to spectators as a simple layer of red dirt is actually a complex five-layer structure nearly 80 centimetres deep. At Roland Garros, the courts are built using large foundation stones, gravel, volcanic rock residue, compacted limestone, and finally a thin layer of crushed red brick. According to Vaillant, the limestone layer is the most critical component because it retains moisture and provides structural stability. The red brick layer is mainly cosmetic and helps players slide. If the limestone dries out excessively, the court can crack. More importantly, the surface becomes dangerously slippery. Vaillant compared overly dry courts to an ice rink, warning that players could lose footing while sliding into shots. "The crushed brick layer is 3 to 5 millimetres thick," Vaillant explained. "The most important part is the limestone layer underneath. That's the actual playing foundation. This limestone layer must remain moist at all times. It's compacted crushed stone maintained through water supply. If we let it dry out too much, the courts could crack."

"The crushed brick is mainly there for colour and as a material that provides some sliding ability and an important visual contrast, since the limestone is almost white," Vaillant said. How Roland Garros is keeping the courts alive to combat the heat, tournament staff have dramatically altered maintenance routines. "We're forced to water the courts a little more, of course," Vaillant said. Normally, clay courts are watered at fixed intervals. This year, groundskeepers are soaking the courts every evening to replenish moisture deep beneath the surface. During matches, courts are also being lightly watered between sets – something rarely required under standard French Open conditions. Another key tool is calcium chloride, a salt compound spread across the courts in flake form each morning. "Which is basically just salt," Vaillant said. "We spread it over the courts in flake form in the morning. It melts on contact with water and helps retain surface moisture." The compound slows evaporation and helps the courts retain consistency through long matches played in direct sun. Groundskeepers say the substance effectively "reactivates" moisture in the crushed brick layer during the day. The maintenance operation is massive. Around 200 groundskeepers are working across 18 competition courts and 15 practice courts during the tournament. Why the courts have not deteriorated further ironically, heavy rainfall earlier in May may have prevented a larger problem. "We were able to let the rain do its job," Vaillant said. "It recharged all our water-retaining layers."

Over 80 surfers from six states set for Indian Open of Surfing 2026 in Mangalore

Mangalore: Indian surfing reaches a historic milestone this week with the upcoming seventh edition of the Indian Open of Surfing 2026. As a major event on the national surfing circuit, it will showcase many of the country's top surfers at Blue Bay Tannirbhavi Eco Beach in Mangalore from May 29 to 31. As surfing prepares for its debut at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games later this year, the championship takes on greater importance beyond just winning domestic titles.

It includes competitions across categories such as Men's Open, Women's Open, Under-18 Boys, Under-18 Girls, Under-14 Boys, and Under-14 Girls. The event is expected to draw over 80 athletes from Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa, making it a potentially landmark week for many of India's leading surfers.

The Indian Open, organised by the Mantra Surf Club and Surfing Swami Foundation under the Surfing Federation of India (SFI), has gradually become a key event on the national sports calendar. The Karnataka Government has maintained its support for the event for the seventh year in a row. This year's championship is likely to be the last major domestic evaluation before India chooses its squad for the Asian Games, making performances over the three-day event especially important. With limited spots in the national team, the competition has become much fiercer in recent months. This has turned the Indian Open into one of the country's most significant domestic surfing events to date.

Each heat in Mangalore is expected to have wider implications as selectors keep assessing athletes in preparation for India's debut in continental surfing. The event will also serve as the second stop in the National Championship Series, following the inaugural Little Andaman Pro 2026 held earlier this season, enhancing its significance in the domestic rankings. Much of the focus in Mangalore is expected to be on a group of surfers who have consistently led Indian competitions for the past few seasons. Ramesh Budihal is among the top contenders, renowned for achieving a major milestone in Indian surfing. He made history at the Asian Surfing Championships in Mahabalipuram by becoming the first Indian to reach the Open Men's final, ultimately winning a bronze medal.

This accomplishment was a significant breakthrough for Indian surfing on the international stage and established him as one of the nation's leading competitive surfers. His skill in handling pressure and his consistent performance in critical heats make him a formidable competitor in the Indian Open. Shivaraj Babu enters the championship with strong momentum after winning the Men's Open at the inaugural Little Andaman Pro earlier this year. Hailing from Tamil Nadu's competitive surfing scene, Shivaraj is known for smart wave selection, consistent performance in different conditions, and strategic discipline during contests. As the race for Asian Games qualification reaches its crucial stage, another impressive showing could greatly improve his standing.

Kishore Kumar remains one of India's most promising young surfers. In recent national competitions, he has gained recognition for his technical skill, calmness, and consistency in high-pressure situations. His previous performances at the Indian Open and several impressive results domestically in recent seasons have solidified his status as one of the country's top surfers, setting the stage for what could be a career-defining year. Srikanth D remains a strong competitor, increasingly recognized on India's surfing scene for his technically refined style. Instead of just aggressive maneuvers, he excels in rhythm, precise execution, and tactical awareness in close heats. His consistent performance at national championships has significantly boosted his reputation, especially as debates about Asian Games selection grow more intense. The women's competition is also anticipated to draw considerable attention, as several of India's top



surfers are scheduled to compete in Mangalore. Kamali P enters the championship as a key figure in Indian women's surfing. Hailing from the Mahabalipuram surfing scene in Tamil Nadu, she has represented India on international stages while consistently being among the top performers domestically. Her accomplishments have significantly contributed to boosting the visibility and profile of women's surfing across the country. With fluid wave riding and sharp tactical skills, she continues to be a strong contender for the event. Goa's Sugar Shanti Banarse has built a reputation as one of the country's top female surfers through her remarkable performances at national championships. Known for her fearless style and ability to adapt to varying surf conditions, Sugar has enhanced her standing both locally and internationally in recent years. Her participation adds to the anticipation of a highly competitive women's field at Tannirbhavi. Beyond the water contests, the Indian Open of Surfing has become a key showcase of the sport's quick growth along India's coastlines. Recently, Tamil Nadu surfers have excelled in various national events, while surfers from Karnataka aim to leverage their local knowledge and the conditions at Tannirbhavi for this year's competition. The championship has played a key role in establishing Dakshina Kannada and Blue Bay Tannirbhavi Eco Beach as emerging hubs for surfing and ocean sports in India, greatly enhancing the region's sporting reputation and coastal tourism appeal. As Indian surfing approaches a historic debut at the Asian Games, the significance of this year's Indian Open goes well beyond medals, rankings, or national titles. Over three days on Karnataka's coast, top surfers from the country will compete not just for national bragging rights, but possibly for the chance to represent India at one of Asia's premier sporting events.

Vaibhav Sooryavanshi powers Rajasthan Royals into Qualifier 2

Mullanpur: The cricketing world once again bowed down to the generational talent of Vaibhav Sooryavanshi following his six-laden 97 off 29 balls before Jofra Archer broke the backbone of Sunrisers Hyderabad's muscular batting to set up a 47-run win for Rajasthan Royals in the IPL Eliminator here on Wednesday. The 15-year-old Sooryavanshi smashed as many as 12 sixes in his breath-taking knock and missed the IPL's fastest hundred by just a few runs. Rajasthan Royals slipped to 243 for eight after an ordinary last five overs, but the runs proved more than enough against a power-packed Sunrisers side that was all out for 196 in 19.2 overs. Archer removed the destructive trio of Abhishek Sharma, Travis Head and Ishan Kishan in the powerplay to effectively seal the Royals will face Gujarat Titans in Qualifier 2 here on Friday, with the winner meeting Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the final. The night belonged to two X-factor players – first Sooryavanshi, who toyed with the likes of Pat Cummins, and Archer, who ran through the Sunrisers'

The Testaments review: Chase Infiniti struggles with limited material in Handmaid's Tale sequel



invisible, but apart from their plum uniforms, these girls have nothing in common. They are privileged in the world of Gilead, for there are many others who have it much worse than them (We already met them in the prequel). Agnes is asked to guide the new 'pearl girl' Daisy (Lucy Halliday), a teenager who has been brought in from the 'sinful world' of Canada, and this is when the plot triggers. Their dynamics are straight out of a teen drama but unlike any teen show set in the regular world, the basic rules of engagement for these girls are Gilead-approved.

Despite the limited material that Chase Infiniti has here (after her brilliant outing in *One Battle After Another*), she plays Agnes like a doe who has the potential to be a cheetah. She is the 'it girl' who has (mostly) everything going for her. Her adoptive father (Nate Corddry) actually cares for her, but her vamp-ish stepmother Paula (Amy Seimetz) wants to get rid of her as soon as Gilead allows. The grooming she has had under Aunt Lydia is her biggest baggage, but she is yet to learn that this is weighing her down. She is vulnerable enough that you want to protect her, but she strongly carries the rebellious spark of her on-screen birth mother. Girls like Agnes are taught to prepare for their Prince Charming and are groomed to believe that even if he is a man in his 50s, it's 'God's will'. Daisy, who has come in as a spy from Mayday, pushes Agnes enough to look beyond her cocoon, and you see a sliver of hope as the season comes to an end. By then, it's too little too late, especially since the audience already knows what Gilead is all about.

Daisy is the very definition of that young soldier who has nothing to lose, and as she screams, "it's my choice" to June and follows it up with her willingness to die for the cause, you realise why it's only the young ones who are brainwashed into actually fighting the battles their previous generation started. She acts poised in public but it's only a matter of time before Aunt Lydia catches up to her. The testaments review *The Testaments* is a teen drama set in the dystopian world of Gilead. The grown-ups get to do very little here. We finally get to see the pre-Gilead life of Aunt Lydia, and how she grabbed a seemingly authoritative spot in a world run by men. The rest of the Aunts here are like the guards at gas chambers who have their blinders on. With all the talk about God that happens on this show, you are often reminded that even as a concept, 'God's will' is a tool to fool those who don't know any better.

It would be impossible to get into the world of *The Testaments* without knowing anything about the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, so you wonder why creator Bruce Miller (who was also the creator of the prequel) treats many plot points as revelations.

The horrors of Gilead aren't unknown to the viewers. It is, of course, macabre to watch teenage girls killing a man, but if you have witnessed Gilead in all its gory glory, it isn't shocking. You also wonder why Agnes' identity is treated like some sort of a secret when you already know who she is from the very start. It is quite odd that the show does not recognise Agnes' race while they keep bringing up her "lineage". A world as whitewashed as this cannot be blind to one's race.

Months after controversy, Samay Raina shares glimpse from India's Got Latent sets

Samay Raina has hinted at the return of his controversial show *India's Got Latent* by sharing a picture from its shoot on Thursday — nearly a year after the show landed in massive controversy over alleged vulgar remarks made during one of its episodes. The comedian first took to Instagram Stories to announce the revival of his COB chess tournament for longtime fans. Sharing the update, he wrote, "Organising my favourite chess tournament for old times' sake! I still love you chat." He also revealed the players' list, featuring names including Anirban Dasgupta, Vaibhav Sethia, Joel Dsouza, Tracy Alison, Prakhar Gupta, Vivek Desai, and Balraj Ghai.

Samay announces the return of *India's Got Latent* in another story, Samay Raina cheekily referenced his fanbase by posting a clip from his stand-up special *Samay Raina: Still Alive*. Sharing the video, he wrote, "Latent fans in my dms," while the clip played his comic line, "Yeh chess khel raha hai yaha pe?" However, it was his next story that truly grabbed attention. Samay Raina's *Samay Raina's Instagram Story* screenshot.

Samay surprised fans by sharing a behind-the-scenes picture from the shoot of *India's Got Latent*. Though he blurred the faces of the guests to keep their identities a secret, he captioned the image, "Uski bhi shooting chal rahi hai dostoo." The photo featured Samay holding a microphone while comedian Balraj Ghai stood behind him, seemingly confirming that the show is back in production. The update comes nearly a month after an alleged picture from the sets of *India's Got Latent* Season 2 surfaced online. The viral image reportedly featured actors Alia Bhatt and Sharvari on the panel. However, neither the makers nor the celebrities commented on the speculation. Coincidentally, YouTuber AARY's latest vlog also added fuel to the buzz around the show's return. In the vlog, his fiancée Yogita revealed that his mother had once been invited to appear on *India's Got Latent* but couldn't attend because the family was travelling to Goa.

"Did you know Auntie had received a call to appear on *Samay Raina's India's Got Latent*, but she couldn't go because we were in Goa? If she had gone, we would



have sat in the audience. However, whenever she is called next, we will all go," Yogita shared. Earlier this year, Samay had already hinted that he planned to return with the second season of *India's Got Latent* despite the controversy surrounding it.

What was the controversy around *India's Got Latent*?

Samay Raina's *India's Got Latent* had landed in major trouble after remarks made by guest podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia during one of the episodes sparked widespread outrage online. Ranveer had asked a contestant an explicit question involving their parents, leading to severe backlash against the creators and panelists. The controversy triggered multiple FIRs, police investigations, and intense public criticism, eventually forcing Samay to delete all episodes of the subscriber-only show. The incident also reignited national debates around freedom of speech, obscenity in comedy, and creator accountability on digital platforms. Following the backlash, Samay took a break from public appearances before making a comeback in 2026 with his stand-up special *Still Alive*. In the show, he candidly spoke about the emotional trauma and mental struggles he and his family endured during the controversy.

Sai Pallavi shares heartwarming family moments, calls spring 'beautiful'

Southern star Sai Pallavi shared a heartwarming glimpse into her springtime family moments and calling the season "beautiful" because of their presence in her life. Pallavi shared a reel video featuring all the fun time she spent with her parents, grandparents, and her sister. For the caption, she wrote: "My Delilah! Spring is when you're here. Thank you for making our lives beautiful." Pallavi also added the song Plain White T's iconic 2005 track *Hey There Delilah*, which was nominated at the 50th Grammy Awards in 2008 for Song of the

Year, as the background score for her video montage. Pallavi started her acting journey with uncredited roles and dance show appearances. However, she gained the spotlight with the 2015 Malayalam film *Premam*. Pallavi has starred in the films *Kali*, *Middle Class Abbayi*, *Maari 2*, *Paava Kadhaigal*, *Love Story*, *Shyam Singha Roy*, *Gargi*, *Amaran* and *Thandel*. Her song "Rowdy Baby" is the first South Indian video song to reach one billion views on YouTube. She was last seen in the Hindi film *Ek Din*, a romantic drama film directed by Sunil Pandey.

Kartavya 'child star' Harpal is actually 33; more popular than Aishwarya, Shah Rukh Khan



Yuvvir Ahlawat, who played the role of Harpal in Netflix's *Kartavya*, is actually 33 years old. Yuvvir Ahlawat, who played the role of Harpal in Netflix's *Kartavya*, is actually 33 years old. Netflix's latest film *Kartavya* has been in the headlines since its release recently. The movie's leading star Saif Ali Khan impressed fans once again, with his cop portrayal. However, there's one question that has gotten everyone thinking — who is the Haryana boy Harpal, for whom Saif takes on the entire system? The actor's name is Yuvvir Ahlawat and unlike what people have been assuming, he isn't a child artist but a 33-year-old man. He is currently trending and has already beat Vijay, Aishwarya Rai, Jr NTR, and Shah Rukh Khan, to emerge as the most popular star on IMDb right now.

Who is Yuvvir Ahlawat?

In *Kartavya*, Yuvvir Ahlawat plays Harpal, a child who is being mentally and physically abused and is pushed to commit murder. Many may believe he is a new face but the actor has been doing theater for nearly a

decade. He has also been associated with director Feroz Abbas Khan's grand play *Mughal-e-Azam: The Musical*. He has performed on both national and international stages. He marked his big screen debut with Taapsee Pannu and Bhumi Pednekar's *Saand Ki Aankh*, where he played Chandro Tomar's son. He also featured in Ranbir Kapoor's *Shamshera*. He has appeared in Bobby Deol and Vikrant Massey-starrer *Love Hostel*. The actor belongs to Sheriya, a village in Jhajjar, Haryana. His father, Gyan Singh Ahlawat, served in the Border Security Force. While discipline was ingrained in the family, Yuvvir was shorter than his six-foot-something elder brothers and had innocent face of a child. This also led to his casting in *Kartavya*. However, the actor is in his 30s. In 2019, when his first film *Saand Ki Aankh* hit the theatres, he had revealed in an interview that people thought he was a child, even when he was 28 years old at the time. Because of his childish look, audiences assumed he was a child artist, and hence, he is able to essay roles of very young boys on screen. Every week, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) compiles a list of the most popular Indian celebrities, based on the number of visits on their profiles. While actors who have theatrical releases are mostly on top of the list, but this week, Yuvvir Ahlawat aka Harpal was at the top of IMDb India's top 30 list. He beat many superstars like Aishwarya Rai, Vijay, and Mohanlal. The number of visits on his IMDb profile increased a lot since *Kartavya's* release on Netflix on May 15. Yuvvir defeated Aishwarya Rai (at rank 3 after her Cannes visit), Vijay (at number 4 after becoming Tamil Nadu CM), Jr NTR (at number 24) and Shah Rukh Khan (out of the top 30) in the list. As per IMDb, the list features Indian stars trending worldwide: actors, directors, cinematographers, and writers.

MasterChef India winner Pankaj Bhadouria shares breast cancer diagnosis: 'Need prayers'



Celebrity chef and MasterChef India winner Pankaj Bhadouria has revealed being diagnosed with breast cancer. On May 28, she shared the news with her loved

ones on social media. She requested everyone to keep her in their prayers and gave a glimpse of her ongoing treatment. Taking to her Instagram handle, Pankaj posted a Story of herself talking about the diagnosis and her condition. In the video, she shared, "I just wanted to share with you all that I have been diagnosed with breast cancer. Since all of you are like an extended family to me, I wanted to share this with you personally. Right now, I truly need your prayers and support. As they say, prayers work miracles. So please keep me in your prayers." The celebrity chef also shared a photo of herself from the hospital bed. Along with the post, she wrote in the caption, "I have been diagnosed with Breast Cancer. Need your prayers and support." In another story on Instagram, Pankaj shared a video of herself from the hospital while undergoing various medical tests. In the clip, she was seen in a hospital robe with a cannula on her hand. The text read, "Going for tests and more tests... not a happy place to be." About Pankaj Bhadouria, Pankaj Bhadouria gained a lot of popularity after winning the debut season of *MasterChef India* in 2010, becoming the nation's first-ever *MasterChef* winner. Earlier, she had worked as an English teacher and reportedly quit her 16-year-long teaching career to participate in the cooking reality show. After winning the show, she also became a television host of many cooking shows, such as *Chef Pankaj Ka Zayka*, *Kifayati Kitchen*, *3 Course with Pankaj*, and *Rasoi Se* — Pankaj Bhadouria Ke Saath. She is also widely known on social media, through her YouTube channel and short videos of cooking tips and food recipes.

Kattalan review: Antony Varghese's actioner feels like a series of reels disguised as a film

Kattalan Movie Review & Rating: About 10-15 minutes into *Kattalan*, a feeling of puzzlement began to creep in. Suddenly, it felt like I had accidentally fast-forwarded through much of the movie and landed significantly ahead in the runtime, missing key points in the story. But then it hit me: I was in a movie theatre, and our technology hasn't advanced enough for each person to control the projection in a cinema hall without affecting others' experiences. After questioning my senses for a few more minutes, I slowly realised the issue lay with *Kattalan* itself, as the makers seemingly forgot to cover the massive pits they had carved out to trap the wild elephants in the story, rendering the whole movie incoherent.

Don't Miss | *Drishyam 3* movie review: A close shave for Mohanlal, Jeethu Joseph as Georgekutty battles himself Aanakolli, a hamlet located in the woods adjoining the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, is known for its wild elephant population. As the tuskers start posing a threat to the villagers' lives, they seek the help of notorious hunter, Maari (Sunil). Pretending to offer a helping hand, he enters the territory and slowly takes control of Aanakolli, and eventually becomes the head of a cartel involved in ivory trafficking. Years later, Maari faces a new challenge in his business after the cartel's fallout with Eddy (Kabir Singh Duhann). In his effort to fight back, he ropes in Antony Varghese (Antony Varghese Pepe), a smart, courageous, and strong ruffian. However, as time passes, it becomes evident that Antony has his own agenda for joining Maari's gang. Watch *Kattalan* trailer here: While there are scores of movies with poor, shoddy writing, *Kattalan* might be the first Malayalam film that gives the feeling that no writing went into it. My point is not that its script is bad or that the setup, conflict, and payoff are underwhelming, but rather that there's hardly any writing in it. Instead of adding action sequences at regular intervals in the narrative, director Paul George and his team have essentially added some story as filler between the numerous action sequences. Even before establishing the world or the characters, *Kattalan* quickly jumps into the conflicts. Although we see Maari's flashback (played here with sharp menace by Raj Tiradasu) and how he took over Aanakolli and the cartel, even his character remains on the surface. Pretty much every time we see Maari, he is engaged in some massive illegal activity or planning one, with the focus solely on the crime and never on him. The only time we see him otherwise is in a lamely choreographed item song. In no time, we are picked up and dropped off in the middle of the battle between Maari and Eddy, where pretty much nothing happens other than fights and shooting. Although Action Sandhosh and Kecha Khamphakdee's stunt choreogra-

phy is sleek and the action set pieces are stylish overall, they just aren't enough to uplift the movie beyond a certain point.

Even after Antony's entry, there's essentially no change in the way the story progresses. While one could argue that omitting his backstory and not sharing more details about him are a means to keep his character a mystery, this is pretty much the case with everyone else, and none of the characters possesses any real substance. Hence, one can only dub this lack of depth a major shortcoming in the script by Paul, Joby Varghese, and Jero Jacob. Either the writers thought a skeleton of a story was enough to make a feature film, believing the rest would be handled by action choreographers, or the movie has been injudiciously butchered at the editing table, resulting in key portions of the narrative being lost. Whatever the reason, it has only ravaged *Kattalan*. Belonging to a shared film universe that includes director Haneef Adeni's *Nivin Pauly*-starrer *Mikhael* (2019) and the *Unni Mukundan*-led *Marco* (2024), *Kattalan* had the potential to be what its predecessors weren't: a decent movie. While *Mikhael* was plagued by silly writing, *Marco* was hollow to its very core, making it seem as if it was created solely for the title of "most violent Indian film ever." Both films centred around the feud between a few characters and offered little space or scope for further exploration.

In contrast, *Kattalan* revolves around a populace, their oppression, and the exploitation of forest resources. However, the makers never delve into any of this and focus solely on the stunt sequences, which, unfortunately, don't provide an adrenaline rush. *Kattalan* serves as definitive proof that no amount of electrifying background score and slow motion can create mass appeal that isn't already present in the script. Worse still, most moments in the movie feel as though they were designed solely with the intention of being cut into short reels for social media after *Kattalan's* OTT release. What further detracts from the experience is author-screenwriter Unni R's dialogues, which sound better suited for a literary work than a movie. Also, the film's blatant normalisation of the radicalisation and weaponisation of children is disturbing.

Although *Kattalan* features many characters, not even Antony's role is meaty. When unveiling character posters earlier, the movie's makers had revealed that *Kattalan* would feature two characters, Malik (Hanah Shaah) and Mano (Shon Joy). While they both make frequent appearances as Antony's henchmen, we don't even hear their names properly in the movie, let alone see them having any identity. Similarly disappointing is Dushara Vijayan's Lucy and Hipzster's (from *Aavesham* fame)