

Russia meddling in election to boost Trump, lawmakers told

AFP/PTI
Washington, 21 February

Russia is interfering in the 2020 campaign to try to get US President Donald Trump re-elected, US intelligence officials have warned lawmakers in a briefing that infuriated the president, who then replaced his intelligence chief, US media reported. Trump erupted in anger at acting director of national intelligence (DNI) Joseph Maguire when he learned of the February 13 session with the House Intelligence Committee, *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* said Thursday.

Maguire aide Shelby Pierson reportedly told lawmakers Russia was once again meddling in the US election on Trump's behalf. Trump complained that the Democrats would use the information against him, the reports said.

The president was also annoyed by the presence of Adam Schiff, the Democratic head of the investigation that led to Trump being impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, according to *The New York Times*. Maguire had been a favorite to be nominated for the permanent DNI post but Trump soured on the official, *The Washington Post* said, when he heard about the classified election security briefing. The president berated Maguire in an Oval Office showdown last week for the "disloyalty" of his staff, the *Post* reported, effectively thwarting his chances of becoming a permanent hire.

Trump announced on Wednesday he was replacing Maguire with Richard Grenell, 53, the ambassador to Germany and a Trump loyalist.

The president was impeached in December over accusations that he tried to coerce ally Ukraine into helping him



US President Donald Trump replaced his intelligence chief after learning about intelligence officials' briefing, according to US media reports

US, Taliban plan to sign deal on Feb 29

The US and the Taliban will sign an agreement on February 29 the end of a week-long period of violence reduction in Afghanistan, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Taliban said on Friday. The agreement could represent a chance for peace after 18 years of war and a US troop presence that dates back to 2001, as well as boosting US President Donald Trump's hopes of pulling US forces out of Afghanistan. However, past attempts at negotiating peace agreements have been scuttled by Taliban attacks on international forces. The reduced violence period, to be observed by Afghan, international and Taliban forces, will begin at midnight (1930 GMT), an Afghan official and Taliban leaders said.

REUTERS

win the 2020 election, withholding military aid considered vital to the former Soviet republic in its war with Russia.

Democratic congressman Bennie Thompson said that by firing Maguire over the briefing "the president is not only refusing to defend against foreign interference, he's inviting it." Schiff tweeted late Thursday that if Trump was interfering in the sharing of intelligence information with Congress, it appeared

that he was "again jeopardising our efforts to stop foreign meddling." US intelligence concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, especially through manipulation of social media, to support Trump.

The real estate tycoon-turned-president has however repeatedly called it a "Russia hoax" and has instead promoted a debunked conspiracy theory that Ukraine intervened instead.

Trump has been at odds with much of the national security establishment since he took office and claims, without providing evidence, that a "deep state" is working against him. Since he was acquitted by the Republican-led Senate, an emboldened Trump has been purging the Justice Department, National Security Council and Pentagon of staff he considers disloyal. Casualties have included NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Alex Vindman and EU ambassador Gordon Sondland — witnesses in the impeachment inquiry — Vindman's twin brother, an NSC lawyer who wasn't involved, and Pentagon policy chief John Rood.

Democrats have voiced outrage over the appointment of Grenell, who has no relevant background or top-level management experience for the post in which he will supervise 17 agencies, including the CIA. "He is committed to a non-political, non-partisan approach as head of the Intelligence Community, on which our safety and security depend," White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said in a statement Thursday.

Grenell said on Twitter he would not serve permanently and that Trump would "soon" select someone else.

Trump has declined to hire a permanent replacement for Dan Coats, who stepped down as DNI in August after standing firm on the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in 2016 to back Trump over Hillary Clinton. Grenell has cast doubt on the extent of Russia's efforts, saying that Moscow's activities were nothing new. Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat on the intelligence committee, accused Trump of prioritising "unquestioning obedience over the safety of the American people."

FATF warns Pakistan, keeps it on 'Grey List'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, 21 February

Global terror financing watchdog FATF on Friday decided continuation of Pakistan in the 'Grey List' and warned the country of stern action if it fails to check flow of money to terror groups like the LeT and the JeM, sources said.

The decision was taken at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) plenary in Paris. The FATF has also warned Pakistan that if it does not complete a full action plan by June, it could lead to consequences on its businesses, a source said.

The plenary noted that Pakistan addressed only a few of the 27 tasks given to it in controlling funding to terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and the Hizbul Mujahideen, which are responsible for a series of attacks in India.

The FATF said Pakistan has to swiftly complete its full action plan by June, the source said. With Pakistan's continuation in the Grey List, it will be difficult for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, the World Bank, the ADB and the European Union, thus further enhancing problems for the nation which is in a precarious financial situation.

If Pakistan fails to comply with the FATF directive, there is every possibility that the global body may put the country in the Black List along with North Korea and Iran.

India has been maintaining that Pakistan extends regular support to terror groups like the LeT, the JeM and the Hizbul Mujahideen, whose prime target is India, and has urged the FATF to take action against Islamabad.

Pakistan is believed to have received strong backing from Malaysia but failed to impress western nations due to India's consistent efforts by providing materials and evidence on Pakistan's inaction to check funding to terror groups operating from its soil. Pakistan needed 12 votes out of 39 to exit the Grey List and move to the White List. To avoid the Black List, it needs the support of three countries.

The Grey Listing of Pakistan came three days after a sub-group of the FATF recommended continuation of the country in it.

The FATF meeting, from February 16 to 21, was held a week after an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attack and founder of the



With Pakistan's continuation in the Grey List, it will be difficult for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, the World Bank, the ADB and the European Union

Watchdog places Iran on terror financing blacklist

A global dirty money watchdog on Friday placed Iran on its blacklist after the country failed to comply with international anti-terrorism financing norms. The decision comes after more than three years of warnings from the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) urging Tehran to enact terrorist financing conventions.

However, the FATF appeared to leave the door ajar for Iran saying "countries should also be able to apply countermeasures independently of any call by the FATF to do so."

US sanctions have crippled Iran's economy, slashing its oil exports and increasingly isolating it from the international financial system. Iran's leaders have been

divided over complying with the FATF. Supporters say it could ease foreign trade with Europe and Asia when the country's economy is targeted by US penalties aimed at its isolation.

Hardline opponents argue that passing legislation toward joining the FATF could hamper Iran's support for its allies, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Iran's action plan to meet with the FATF requirements, implemented in 2016, expired in January 2018.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif this week appeared resigned to the FATF blacklisting, accusing the US using its maximum pressure campaign to exert influence at the FATF.

AGENCIES

Aramco set to gain unconditional EU nod for SABIC deal

REUTERS
Brussels, 21 February

World No. 1 oil producer Saudi Aramco is set to gain unconditional EU antitrust approval for its \$69 billion buy of a 70 per cent stake in petrochemicals group Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC), people familiar with the matter said on Friday.

Aramco announced the deal to acquire the controlling stake from sovereign investor Public Investment Fund (PIF) in March last year, a move key to its diversification into refining and petrochemicals.

Riyadh-headquartered SABIC, the world's fourth

largest petrochemicals group, has operations in over 50 countries. The European Commission, which is scheduled to decide on the case by February 27, declined to comment.

Competition watchdogs in India and a number of other countries have already given the green light without demanding concessions. Aramco's downstream expansion strategy tracks rivals such as Exxon Mobil, BP, Total and Shell, which have over the years transformed themselves from merely oil companies to energy companies with extensive upstream and downstream operations.

SABIC, the world's fourth largest petrochemicals group, has operations in over 50 countries.

US lawmakers to introduce bill that threatens encryption

REUTERS
Washington, 21 February

US legislation will be introduced in the coming weeks that could hurt technology companies' ability to offer end-to-end encryption, two sources with knowledge of the matter said, and it aims to curb the distribution of child sexual abuse material on such platforms.

The bill, proposed by a bipartisan group of lawmakers, aims to fight the distribution of such material on online platforms like Facebook and Alphabet's Google by making them liable for state prosecution and civil lawsuits. It does so by threatening a key immunity the companies have under federal law called Section 230.

This law shields certain online platforms from being treated as the publisher or speaker of information they publish, and largely protects

them from liability involving content posted by users.

The bill threatens this key immunity unless companies comply with a set of "best practices," which will be determined by a 15-member commission led by the Attorney General.

The move is the latest example of how regulators and lawmakers in Washington are reconsidering the need for incentives that once helped online companies grow, but are increasingly viewed as impediments to curbing online crime, hate speech and extremism.

The sources said the U.S. tech industry fears these "best practices" will be used to condemn end-to-end encryption — a technology for privacy and security that scrambles messages so that they can be deciphered only by the sender and intended recipient. Federal law enforcement agencies

have complained that such encryption hinders their investigations.

Online platforms are exempted from letting law enforcement access their encrypted networks. The proposed legislation provides a workaround to bypass that, the sources said.

Titled "The Eliminating Abuse and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act of 2019," or the "EARN IT Act," the bill is sponsored by the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee Lindsey Graham and Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal.

On Wednesday, U.S. Attorney General William Barr questioned whether Facebook, Google and other major online platforms still need the immunity from legal liability that has prevented them from being sued over material their users post.

Women will be hit hard by UK's new immigration rules, warn experts

With its minimum salary requirements, the new system would affect female migrants

CEYLAN YEGINSU
21 February

The British government's plan for a post-Brexit immigration overhaul was designed to wean the economy off its reliance on cheap foreign labour. But in the process, women's groups have warned, women will suffer disproportionately.

The new points-based system will give precedence to occupations in which women are underrepresented, favor male migrants over female and deepen gender inequality, according to the Women's Budget Group, an independent network that promotes gender equality. "The new immigration system roundly fails to understand the lived experience of women, many of whom are prevented from accessing paid work by the weight of unpaid work - caring for children, older people and those with disabilities - that successive governments rely upon them to do," said Sophie Walker, the chief executive of the Young Women's Trust, a British feminist organization.

Under the new rules, which will be implemented next January, applicants will be required to receive a job offer with a salary of at least 25,600 pounds, about \$33,300. The salary threshold will be lower in special cases where there might be a shortage in skills, such as in nursing.

By and large, however, that

requirement will work against women, who are more likely to work in sectors like home and senior care that are relatively poorly compensated, even though the skill levels of such women are relatively high, women's advocates say.

"Care workers' average annual salaries stand at just £17,000, not because care work is 'low-skilled,' but because the work force is 80 per cent female and therefore undervalued and underpaid," says Mandu Reid, the leader of the Women's Equality Party.

Imposing the salary requirement would mean "shutting out care workers, piling pressure on women to take on yet more unpaid care, and widening the existing social care gap between need and provision," she said.

Women are also four times more likely than men to leave paid work to shoulder unpaid caring responsibilities for children and older relatives. This is one cause of the gender pay gap and gender inequality, the Women's Budget Group found. As a result of these inequities, major industries like food production, hospitality, health and social care that rely on female migrant workers are likely to see staff shortages after the new measures are put into place.

In the points-based system, the government gives top priority to scientists, engineers, academics and graduates in science,



Industries like food production, hospitality, health and social care that rely on female migrant workers are likely to see staff shortages after the new measures

technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) once again to the detriment of women because of the gender disparities in those professions.

"There is a great emphasis on wanting to attract scientists to the UK under the new system, but it is another well-known fact that women are underrepresented in the sciences," said Adrienne Yong, a lecturer in law at the City Law School in London. "That the UK will give a Ph.D. in STEM subjects 10 more

points than Ph.D.s in other subjects already puts women on a back foot," she said, "as there is already a problem with female students doing STEM subjects, much less continuing further education to a doctoral level with that specialism."

On Wednesday, the cabinet minister responsible for migration policy, Priti Patel, suggested that around eight million "economically inactive" people in Britain could be trained to fill such shortages. Experts say

many of those people are women who are already providing full-time care for children and families.

"It feels like they just want us to fill the badly paid jobs while the men and foreigners will get the higher-paying jobs," said Amy Pears, a mother of three who left her job as a professional caregiver and went on benefits in 2015 because she could not afford child care. "My mother is disabled, so between her and the three children I have my hands

full." The Women's Equality Party says that without substantial government investment in child and elder care, women are put into a position where they simply cannot work.

"These shortsighted plans are in fact more likely to exacerbate the shortages in formal care, leaving it to women to pick up unpaid and increase the number of 'economically inactive' full-time carers," Reid said.

Women's groups warned that shutting out foreign workers would put more pressure on women who are already in Britain, particularly caregivers. "Without extra colleagues from abroad, UK carers are going to have even less time to do the job they're employed to do and offer people the dignity they deserve," Walker said. "This policy makes it an inevitability that this exhausted system will come under further strain, while female family members will increasingly be expected to pick up the pieces as the system continues to erode."

Pears said that many of her European friends and former colleagues, who played important caregiving roles, would be locked out of the new system because they did not qualify for the salary threshold or education qualifications.

"These people are carrying a huge burden for our country, and the truth of the matter is we need them," she said. "Without them we are putting our services at risk."

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UK economy is picking up after Brexit

The UK economy extended a run of better-than-expected growth in February, more evidence of a rebound after fourth-quarter stagnation. While the expansion continued apace, there were also signs of a hit to supply chains from coronavirus, according to IHS Markit's flash purchasing managers index.

The virus's outbreak weighed on manufacturers' input stocks, which fell at the fastest pace in more than seven years. Some orders from clients in Asia were canceled and extended shutdowns in China proved a headwind. Nevertheless, manufacturing output grew the fastest in 10 months, offsetting a small downward move in services. Growth expectations in the private sector edged up slightly, the report showed. The pound held gains after the report and traded at \$1.2922 as of 9:31 am in London.

"The recent return to growth signaled by the manufacturing and services PMIs provides a clear indication that the UK economy is no longer flat on its back," said Tim Moore, an economist at IHS Markit. The expansion is running at a 0.2 per cent pace in the first quarter, he said. Firms noted that a reduction in political uncertainty since the December election translated into higher business activity and more spending by clients.

BLOOMBERG

Trai proposal puts liability burden on sellers in M&As

Experts are of the view that these reforms are too little, too late

MEGHA MANCHANDA
New Delhi, 21 February

In a bid to reform the merger norms for telecom licences, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) on Friday suggested that liabilities arising out of a deal would be the seller's responsibility, as opposed to the buyer's currently.

These recommendations are expected to streamline the merger & acquisition process and settle legal disputes in the telecom sector.

Though Trai may consider it a reformative step, experts are of the view that with only three private telecom players in the market, these reforms are too little, too late. Too few players mean barely any scope for mergers and acquisitions.

"These definitions and separation made sense when there were more players, but now such measures are of hardly any use as there are only three private players," said an independent expert said.

These measures are mainly to curb anti-competitive issues, which may arise out of mergers and acquisitions in the sector.

Trai also suggested that both revenue and subscriber base would determine the overall market share of mobile and internet service providers (ISPs). It also proposed that for services like national and international long-distance telephony, only revenue would be considered for the market share calculation of ISPs.

It said that both number of subscribers and adjusted gross revenue (AGR) be considered for determining the market share in the case of services like access, internet and VSAT (very small aperture terminal).

Only AGR should be considered for calculating the market share for other services, such as national and international long-distance calls, and resale of international private leased circuits, it suggested.

The authority recommended guidelines explicitly mention that consequent upon payment of the market-determined price for spectrum, such spectrum is treated as liberalised, or technology-neutral.

It reiterated its earlier suggestion that if a transferor company holds part of spectrum, which has been assigned against entry fee, the resultant entity is liable to pay differential amount for the spectrum assigned against the entry fee paid by the transferor company, from the date that the DoT (Department of Telecommunications) approves the transfer/merger.

The sector regulator also suggested the one-year timeline, which currently allows for transfer/merger of licences in different service areas after the National Company Law Tribunal nod, should exclude time spent by companies in pursuing any litigation on account of which the final approval to a merger is delayed.

It said the guidelines on transfer/merger of licences should not explicitly mention the spectrum caps and instead be linked to the relevant clause of the licence.

Govt approves merger of Bharti Infratel, Indus Towers

The Department of Telecom (DoT) on Friday approved the merger of the country's largest mobile tower company Indus Towers with Bharti Infratel, according to official sources. The combination of Bharti Infratel and Indus Towers will create a pan-India tower company with over 163,000 towers, operating across all 22 telecom service areas. The combined entity will be the largest tower company in the world outside China.

"DoT has approved merger of Indus Towers with Bharti Infratel," an official source told PTI.

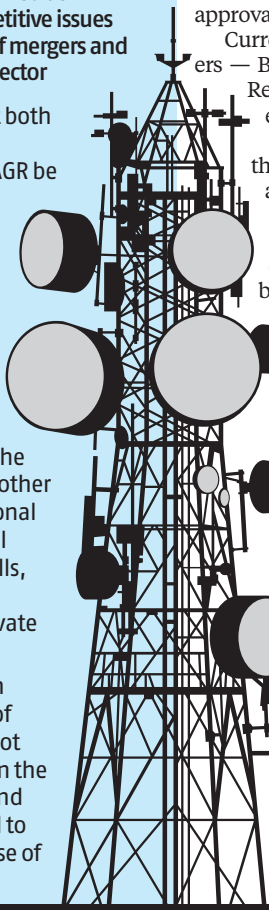
Bharti Infratel and Vodafone hold 42 per cent stake each in Indus. Vodafone Idea holds 11.15 per cent stake in the mobile tower firm.

As per the plans, the combined company, which would fully own the respective businesses of Bharti Infratel and Indus Towers, would change its name to Indus Towers Ltd and will continue to be listed on Indian stock exchanges. The timely completion of the tower deal is critical for the companies, as it would allow Bharti and Vodafone Idea in off-loading stake and raising funds. **PTI**

THE SUGGESTIONS

The proposals are aimed at curbing anti-competitive issues that may arise out of mergers and acquisitions in the sector

- Trai suggests that both the number of subscribers and AGR be considered for determining the market share in the case of services like access, internet and VSAT
- AGR shall only be considered for determining the market share for other services like national and international long-distance calls, and resale of international private leased circuits
- The guidelines on transfer/merger of licences should not explicitly mention the spectrum caps, and instead be linked to the relevant clause of the licence



Trai's recommendations on reforming the guidelines for transfer and merger of telecom licences came months after the telecom department in May 2019 sought its views on enabling simplification and fast-tracking of approvals. The suggestions range from market share mathematics to approval timelines, and other terms.

The regulator noted the guidelines must be seen in the backdrop of consoli-

ation in the market (from 12-14 service providers a decade ago to only four operators now), the National Digital Communication Policy's thrust on speedy approvals, and the delay in mergers.

Currently, there are three private players — Bharti Airtel, Vodafone Idea, and Reliance Jio — and one public sector entity, Bharat Sanchar Nigam.

"The authority recommends that for computing market share of an NSO (network service operators) in the relevant market, the market share of the VNO (virtual network operator) parented with it should be added to the market share of NSO, if the NSO is a promoter of the VNO," Trai stated.

Virtual network operators can provide telecom services like mobile landline and internet, but only as retailer for full-fledged telecom operators.

"For the calculation of one year, that is the time period allowed for transfer/merger of various licenses in different service areas subsequent to the approval of the tribunal/company judge, the time spent in pursuing any litigation on account of which the final approval of a merger is delayed should be excluded," the regulator said.

This would protect the rights of a telecom operator to pursue remedies in the court and also ensure that the period of one year does not become redundant for no fault of the company on account of pendency of an issue before a court, one of the stakeholders cited by Trai had submitted.

Another provision of the acquisition guidelines, which provide an exemption from substantial equity/cross-holding clause for one year or more, should be modified such that the said exemption is provided only for a period until transfer/merger of the licence is taken on record by the licensor (telecom department).

DGCA to go for surprise tests to check pilots' drug abuse

Tests will cover 10% employees of each airline in one year

ANEESH PHADNIS
Mumbai, 21 February

Pilots and air traffic controllers in India will be screened for consumption of drugs and psychoactive substances as part of a regulatory drive to improve safety.

Apart from random screening, the tests will also be carried out prior to hiring and after accidents.

Pilots and cabin crew undergo pre-flight breath analyser test for alcohol. Last year, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) extended the test to cover ground personnel, engineers and air traffic controllers as well.

To bring Indian regulations in line with global standards, the DGCA has proposed random testing of pilots and air traffic controllers for drugs and opioids. The DGCA released draft rules for testing procedure on Friday.

Random tests will be carried out under the supervision of DGCA officers by laboratories authorised by the regulator. These random tests will cover 10 per cent employees of each airline in one year. In the first phase, flight crew and air traffic controllers in Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad will be screened.

The tests would consist of a screening test and a confirmatory test. The screening test will be carried out at the



airport or the ATC complex and will be recorded on video.

An employee who tests positive will be removed from sensitive duties till a report of the confirmatory test is received. The employee would have to undergo rehabilitation if confirmatory test is positive and can return to active duties following clearance from a psychiatrist and chief medical officer of the organisation.

Second-time offenders will lose their licence. A medical review officer will be appointed to review the results before taking action on the person involved.

"We are trying to fill a gap, as currently, we do not regulate the use of psychoactive substances in the industry. With this, we are trying to align ourselves to the highest standards laid

down by the International Civil Aviation Organisation and other regulators. We are convinced that this will further improve our safety standards," said director general of civil aviation Arun Kumar.

Kumar said the proposed rules are similar to those prescribed by the US Federal Aviation Administration and the European Aviation Safety Agency. Europe introduced rules for screening pilots for psychoactive substances in 2018 following the Eurowings crash of 2015 which killed 150.

Accident investigators concluded that co pilot Andreas Lubitz locked the captain out of cockpit and deliberately flew the Airbus A320 aircraft into the Alps. Prosecutors concluded that Lubitz was suffering from mental disorder with psychotic symptoms that led to suicidal thoughts and he had concealed his illness from his employer.

With inputs from Reuters

The process will consist of a screening test and a confirmatory test. The screening test will be carried out at the airport or the ATC complex and will be recorded on video

US Air Force updates dress code to accommodate Sikhs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Washington, 21 February

The US Air Force has updated its dress code to accommodate the religious sentiments of various communities, including the Sikhs, making it easier for them to join the service.

Finalised on February 7, the new Air Force policy establishes clear grooming and uniform standards for enlisted and officer airmen who are granted accommodations based on their sincerely held religious beliefs.

The policy also clarifies that O-6 level commanders can approve an airman's request for such an accommodation in no more than 30 days (or 60 days if the accommodation is requested outside of the US), and that an accommodation, once granted, will gener-



ally follow the airman throughout his or her career.

While there are certain limited circumstances under which a religious accommodation may not be permissible due to safety considerations, the policy appears to be otherwise comprehensive, Sikh Coalition said in a statement.

"No Sikh-American should have to choose between their religious beliefs and their

career ambitions," said Giselle Klapper, Sikh Coalition staff attorney.

"Sikhs have served honourably and capably in the US Armed Forces and other militaries around the world, and while we are eager for a blanket proclamation that all observant Sikh-Americans can serve in every branch of the military without seeking accommodations, this policy

clarification is a great step forward towards ensuring equality of opportunity and religious freedom in the Air Force," Klapper said.

The Air Force's clarification closely resembles the US Army's landmark 2017 policy adjustment, which similarly clarified the terms and process for soldiers requesting religious accommodations.

"Both of these policy changes are the direct result of the years-long campaign, launched in 2009 by the Sikh Coalition and our pro bono co-counsel at McDermott Will and Emery, that has included extensive advocacy efforts and litigation to ensure that observant Sikhs and other religious minorities are able to serve without compromising their faith," the Sikh Coalition said in a statement.

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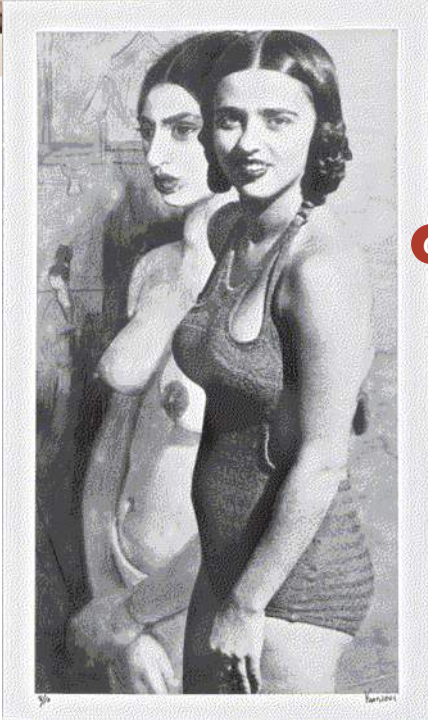
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BIDDING BIGGER

Art auctioneers are moving beyond the masters to sell everything from sports memorabilia to kitschy comics, write **Ranjita Ganesan** and **Nikita Puri**

Republic Day resembled a different holiday for the organisers of a recent book auction. Theirs was a “no reserve” sale of Independence-era nationalism titles, which meant there wasn’t a minimum price and bids started at merely ₹1,000. This encouraged more participants to compete for items such as a 1942 copy of Jawaharlal Nehru’s autobiography *Toward Freedom* or a 1946 first edition of Subhas Chandra Bose’s *Programme of Post-war Revolution*. The team watched for hours as volleys of yellow notifications filled up their big screens. “It was like a Christmas tree lighting up,” Indrajit Chatterjee, founder of the online auctioneer Prinseps, recalls with a chuckle in his Mumbai office.

While “Prinseps” comes from the Latin word for “the first in time or order”, the 2017-founded online auctioneer is among the youngest players to enter the space. It is part of a growing set of local auctioneers who are bullish about using technology and are selling newer, and often lower value, categories of items. This mimics more established Western rivals whose portfolios span costumes, musical instruments, and even minerals, apart from prized fine art. Indian auction houses are further compelled to look beyond the fine art masterpieces, particularly the sought-after Tyeb Mehtas and Souzas of the modern period, as their supply dries up. Such pieces were limited to begin with, and a sizeable number that have been acquired for institutional collections are unlikely to be back on the market anytime soon.

“Indian art is not necessarily restricted to the modern years, from 1950 to 1980, although the market was focused on that,” says Chatterjee, who used his research of the Bengal School to put works by a lesser-known Santiniketan name,

Rathindranath Tagore, on the block. A first-edition volume of Gaganendranath Tagore’s absurdist cartoons sold for a record ₹19.8 lakh.

The gallery DAG Modern had expressed similar intentions of creating a market for forgotten artists including S G Thakur Singh and Dhanraj Bhagat by hosting the occasional auction of their art. This reflects in buyers’ behaviour too. As Arvind Vijaymohan, CEO of Artery India, observes, there has been a correction in prices of typically high-value assets, and a bent towards accessible contemporary art in the last six months. “These are signs of the ecosystem widening and conversations going beyond the same 40-50 odd artists,” he says.

Where international auction heavyweight Christie’s dropped its annual India sale in 2017, rival Sotheby’s launched one in the region in 2018. The former continues to sell South Asian works elsewhere, including New York and online. Besides Prinseps, another homegrown auction house, Ashvita’s, launched in Chennai in 2018, whose portfolio ranges from fine art to comic books. Add to that the first online auctioneer Saffronart, established in 2000; the 2007-launched Bid & Hammer; AstaGuru, which began in 2008; and Pundole’s founded in 2011. As of 2019, according to London-based art analysts ArtTactic, Saffronart held 37 per cent market share for modern and contemporary South Asian art, ahead of Christie’s (25.4 per cent) and Sotheby’s (18.7 per cent). AstaGuru enjoys 18.9 per cent of the share.

With the number of local auctioneers growing, so has the need to differentiate and find niches. When Minal and Dinesh Vazirani started Saffronart two decades ago, it was rare for Indians to buy anything over dialup internet, leave alone works of art. They were driven by the dot-com

boom and “entrepreneurial doggedness”, the way Dinesh Vazirani puts it, but nearly shut down by 2003 as it struggled to take off. A sudden swell in interest from NRIs saved it. Since then, transacting online has become simpler and safer.

While a sale of Western art in India in 2012 had proved “too early”, Saffronart bounced back selling other categories like jewellery, furniture, and folk and tribal art. It holds a jewellery conference every two years to educate buyers on what makes a piece special. In 2019, a three-row pearl necklace went for ₹89 lakh and a Burmese ruby and diamond ring sold for ₹51 lakh.

“We have 5,000 years of history to pick from. All things of beauty have value and are essentially collectible,” says Dinesh Vazirani. An upcoming sale marks another aspect of its business, partnering with the government to liquidate seized assets of defaulting businessmen. Works by M F Husain and Amrita Sher-Gil, Swiss watches and designer handbags previously owned by fugitive diamondaire Nirav Modi will go under the hammer. Dinesh Vazirani eventually hopes to blur the line between auctions and gaming. A plug-and-play space is currently under construction at his Prabhadevi property in Mumbai, which will host sale previews and cultural events.

Towards the end of February, rival AstaGuru will auction a selection of rare books, stamps and maps. Among these is William Hodges’ *Select Views in India*, estimated at ₹18 lakh, which contains 47 plates with drawings Hodges made during his travels in India (1780-1783). Siddhant Shetty, vice president-Strategy at the Mumbai-based auction house, says it is currently working with international experts to go live with a science and natural history catalogue next year. Think fossils.

“There are hidden gems spread out across the country, but it’s a challenge to identify these and assess their worth correctly,” says Shetty. “You have to reach the right audience for it.” Apart from fine art, memorabilia, watches and jewellery make for AstaGuru’s offerings.

Bid & Hammer’s next auction, slotted for March 26, is a standalone auction of photographs dating back to the 1890s and early 1900s, including works by Lala Deen Dayal and images of Queen Elizabeth’s first visit to India, and of historical sites like the Ajanta and Ellora caves. The Bengaluru and New Delhi-based auction house’s director, Ankush Dadha, says he has noticed an increase in app downloads for this. “People’s fascination with nostalgia and inquisitiveness of how their cities once looked is what is generating enquiries.”

At starting prices of ₹2,000 for some pictures, he reckons it is a good entry point for first-time collectors. Sports memorabilia, such as a hockey stick used by Dhyan Chand or a cap worn by Yuvraj Singh during a significant match, will have a big market, predicts Dadha. “We also have a lot of people interested in bidding for wine, so we are likely to do something with fine wine in the near future if possible,” he says.

More collectors have begun to see art as a generational purchase, compared with the time before the 2008 slowdown when it was considered a short-term investment. “While the local numbers of auction buyers are increasing every year, we still have a long way to go,” observes Mallika Sagar, auctioneer and specialist at Pundole’s.

Pundole’s, which has the distinction of conducting three “white-glove” sales (in which every single lot gets bought), has sold silver, Chinese ceramics and glass among other things. It also attempted to create a market for overlooked names such as Gunwant Nagarkar and Homi Patel, “one a pre-Modernist painting Indian subjects in the European Academic Style, and the other very much a Modernist with ties to artists we know well”. Sagar says local auction houses must lead the way with pre-modern material and antiquities, as they are getting attention from Indian collectors, and typically these cannot be exported outside the country.

Smaller auction houses are betting on research and curation to make their objects seem more interesting. Prinseps spent nine months tracking a Japanese signature in a Jamini Roy and discovered it consisted of made-up characters inspired by Van Gogh’s Japanese phase. Fledgling auction house Ashvita’s is doing region-specific buyers with a past sale of Madras collectibles and another on Mumbai coming soon. “The bottom of the pyramid”, where items can be bought for as little as a few thousand rupees, is just as exciting for founder Ashvin Rajagopalan as its top. His firm sells everything from the masterworks to vintage tins and Indian comics.

While there is no shortage of such items, the

response can be uneven because these categories are underdeveloped. Rajagopalan notes with candour how a sale of rare 1970s’ Indrajal Comics failed even though a previous auction of early Amar Chitra Katha editions had strong results. “We realised later on that the fans of Indrajal are much older, but Amar Chitra Katha, having survived for longer, draws interest from younger buyers.” According to him, Indians of Generation X and Y, raised on shows like *Pawn Stars*, are at least aware of the monetary value of holding stuff.

Global auction powerhouses, which have centuries-long histories of holding sales in rooms, have been slowly expanding online in recent years. Indian auction houses, born in the internet age, have no struggles there. Besides, online is a component of live auctions now, as a medium for bidding and streaming. Purely online sales are convenient for well-heeled clients who may be located in other cities and geographies or who are too busy to show up at a specific venue at an appointed hour. At the recent India Art Fair, for instance, patrons were spotted sending in bids from their mobile phones for a Somnath Hore sculpture put under the hammer by Prinseps.

Online sales are also relatively less time-bound, often allowing from 24 hours up to multiple days of bidding. But the biggest draw for auctioneers is it does the job without the cost of printing catalogues and putting on a show. This too has encouraged the addition of relatively lower-value items as categories. Even so, most insiders agree that the drama of live bid-calling and paddle-raising is unmatched by the dull clicks of modern gadgets. Saffronart makes room for two adrenaline-filled offline auctions each year. Bid & Hammer too hosts a mix of floor and web-only sales.

The international auction powerhouses tend to attract more international buyers, whereas local counterparts are able to cater to local collectors without heavy transaction costs and import duties. Depending on the auction house, a flat 10 to 15 per cent commission is the norm. One challenge for the homegrown agents, says Sagar of Pundole’s, will be convincing younger and newer collectors that the price points at auction are not always high and prohibitive.

India and China are two markets where global auction giants face resistance. Yet, India is currently nowhere near China, whose homegrown auctioneers constitute six of the world’s top ten auction houses. The crucial difference is that those auctioneers are state-backed. Local auctioneers have a big wish list for the Indian government. Topping this list is the demand to ease duties so that artefacts including Indian antiquities can be brought into the country for less.

All told, the entry of new names in the auction market in recent years signals promise. “That number will increase,” says Dinesh Vazirani. “Especially once we start tapping into our 5,000 years of culture.”



WITH THE NUMBER OF LOCAL AUCTIONEERS GROWING, SO HAS THE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE AND FIND NICHES



(Far left) Dinesh Vazirani of Saffronart, an auction house that he started two decades ago; and Prinseps founder Indrajit Chatterjee with a rare Ram Kumar from the modern art auction in April 2019



VIEWFINDER



VEENU SANDHU

When death do us part

On a holiday a few years ago, my husband and I were driving around purposelessly with some friends, with their son and our daughter sitting in the rearmost seat, chatting away. We pricked up our ears when we heard the children talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. Their son, who was still short of 10 and about four years younger than our daughter, declared that he'd become an inventor. This is what he said he intended to invent: A machine that would allow a person to speak with loved ones who were dead and gone. What he had in mind was something rooted in science, and not some Ouija board kind of stuff.

"When we are older and our parents are dead, with that machine we will be able to create their image (like a hologram) and talk to them when we miss them," he said. It was an innocent, smart, sensitive — and incredibly sad — thought, one that also made us acutely aware of our mortality that beautiful spring afternoon.

Last week, something along the lines of what he'd thought of in fact played out in a South Korean documentary, *Meeting You*, which recreated a dead seven-year-old girl for a "meeting" with her mother. The child had died of leukaemia in 2016 and a digital avatar of hers had been created with the help of her photographs and her mother's memories of her. The reunion was made possible with the mother wearing virtual reality goggles. It is a heart-wrenching video of a woman, tears streaming down her face, reaching out to touch her little girl who she knows is but an illusion that has come running towards her. Though the video has triggered a debate about voyeurism and the exploitation of emotions, the mother has said that even though it was brief, she was really happy in that moment.



A South Korean documentary recreated a dead seven-year-old for a 'meeting' with her mother

It turns out that there's another technology out there that is attempting to "communicate" with the dead, and even immortalise them. A start-up called Eterni.me, for instance, is inviting people to become "virtually immortal" by sharing with it their thoughts, stories and memories so that it can create an intelligent digital avatar that thinks and communicates like them and lives forever. Another one, called Replika, was born out of the memory of a man who was killed in an accident while crossing a street in Moscow. After his death his friend collected thousands of his text messages to create a bot, which, besides being eerily like him, could not only remember past events but also have fresh conversations in the present, thanks to artificial intelligence. The technology that made this possible is now available in the form of a chatbot called Replika, which allows anyone to create digital versions of themselves. The more you tell this chatbot about yourself (or of the person you want replicated), the better it gets to know you and the more closely it is able to replicate you.

Though my first instinct was to recoil and reject as bizarre these AI-enabled apps and technologies that try to immortalise people or keep loved ones alive, there is no denying that these are incredible developments. Imagine being able to preserve someone's knowledge and deploy AI to have that very person's digital avatar build on it.

Mourning the loss of all that was gone with his father when he died, a former colleague once said, "His wisdom, knowledge, the answers he would have to so many questions, all went with him. If only there were a pen drive in which I could have saved all of that."

Well, there seems to be such a possibility now. But then with possibilities, there are also no limits — and, therefore, no telling where they might lead us. Some people you want to hold on to. Others you cannot help but be relieved that they are gone for good, and their ideas too. Dictators, radicals. Would we want them to have the power of immortality?

And then there is also a reason why human beings are wired to forget, to remember some things and not everything. We'd go mad if we didn't. So it is a mad idea to try and create a world that will not allow us to forget. A world where we no longer feel the need to look inwards to draw on our personal memories of someone who might have passed. Where technology does that for us.

How will these illusions affect us humans? I can't say. Perhaps some realms are best left unexplored. There is something to be said about letting go.

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Billie and Bond

LINDSAY ZOLADZ

Billie Eilish and her brother, Finneas O'Connell, famously recorded her megaselling, multi-Grammy-winning debut album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* by themselves in Finneas's childhood bedroom. The songs they made there conjure an even more tightly claustrophobic space: Eilish's music sounds like it's taking place within the quivering confines of a single anxious mind.

But midway through her latest single, "No Time to Die", the swell of a full orchestra and the smoke rings of a moody guitar riff open into something more panoramic — and familiar — than we've heard from her before. The orchestral part was composed by Hans Zimmer, and the riff is played by the former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr, who collaborated on the score for *No Time to Die*, the forthcoming 25th James Bond movie.

The track makes the 18-year-old Eilish the youngest artist ever to record a Bond theme, the latest in a string of achievements that has made the precocious Gen-Z-er a regular fixture on the Guinness World Records blog. But *No Time to Die* also comes during a monthlong stretch that has felt a bit like a

mainstream debutante ball for the young superstar, who until very recently was better known by her fellow teens than their parents. The Grammys changed that; Eilish's subsequent performance at the Oscars two weeks later cemented the feeling that she was suddenly everywhere.

Unlike her generational cohort of anarchic SoundCloud rappers and sartorially sex-positive pop stars, Eilish has the kind of talent that is easily understood and praised by the old guard: She writes her own songs, she redirects the gaze from the shape of her body with oversized silhouettes, she has a voice that, while whispery and strange, is still classically lovely. The 56-year-old Marr summed up this sentiment on the red carpet at the Brit Awards on Tuesday. "Billie's just the best new, I don't want to say pop act, but it's great when someone that cool is that popular, individual and a lot of people can relate to her," he said. "I know a great musician when I see one."

At the same time, the ever-expressive Eilish has a way of telegraphing a certain reluctance at becoming the next-gen poster girl of pop culture's most time-tested institutions. Just before clinching the Grammy for



Billie Eilish

album of the year — the win that completed her sweep of the big four categories, making her the first woman and youngest person ever to do so — she could be seen on-camera whispering, "Please don't be me, please."

She has also pushed back vehemently against those who commend her for covering up her body. "The positive comments about how I dress have this slut-shaming element," she said in a *V Magazine* interview last summer. "Like, 'I am so glad that you're dressing like a boy, so other girls can dress like boys, so that they aren't sluts.' That's basically what it sounds like to me. And I can't overstate how strongly I do not appreciate that, at all."

Eilish's Bond theme, though, might be the Boomer-approved role she's embraced with

the most straightforward enthusiasm. "We've been wanting to make a Bond song for years," she told the BBC this week.

Macabre and elegant, *No Time to Die* proves that — despite the fact that the franchise has existed for 39 more years than Eilish has — there is quite a bit of overlap between the aesthetics of Billie and Bond. Her vocal has her characteristic focused intensity, but as the strings swell toward the climactic ending, Eilish rises to belt a note that is showier than anything on her debut album. When she hit it during her transfixing performance alongside Finneas, Zimmer and Marr at the Brit Awards, the crowd went wild.

As more opportunities and accolades inevitably come her way, time will tell which pop-star traditions Eilish will wholeheartedly welcome, which she'll rework in her own style and which she'll reject with her signature side-eye. Given that the past two Bond themes — by Adele and Sam Smith — have earned their artists Oscars, it's quite possible that Eilish will be invited back among the movie stars next year. Maybe we'll get another "please don't be me" moment right before her name is called. Or maybe by then Eilish will have had a chance to make more sense of the surreal dream that has suddenly become her life.

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PTI



Leander Paes in Bengaluru last Sunday after making his last appearance at a tournament in India

All hail the legend

Leander Paes received a standing ovation in Bengaluru after the 46-year-old doubles great played his last tournament in India, writes **Rahul Jacob**

As a child growing up in Kolkata, Leander Paes had an unusual Sunday morning ritual. After returning home from church with his parents, he would polish the bronze medal his father, Vece, received as a member of the Indian hockey team at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Paes' greatness as a tennis player, especially when playing for India, perhaps owes something to this talismanic routine. His comment about buffing his father's medal was made at a special ceremony on Sunday at the ATP Challenger event in Bengaluru to commemorate his last appearance at a tournament in India. Surrounded by former Olympians, who were hockey players and athletes, Paes explained how the weekly routine made him understand that sports achievements take "years and years of dedication".

This seemed too commonplace an explanation for a career that has always had something of the mythological about it. Consider just his longevity; Paes is retiring this year at 46, three decades after winning the Wimbledon and US Open Boy's Singles titles in 1990. He has made his name as a doubles great by winning 18 Grand Slams titles, including a mixed doubles career Grand Slam with the Swiss star Martina Hingis. In a video shown at Sunday's ceremony, the legendary Martina Navratilova remarked that, as she chased Billie Jean King's record of 20 titles at Wimbledon in 2003, she decided early on that she would rather have Paes on her side of the net than play against him.

Paes has arguably been the greatest volleyer in doubles the world has ever seen. His signature vigorous shake of his playing hand from elbow down as he readied himself for a point to begin ought to be emulated because it helped him produce sublime volleys. Even last week, when he and partner Mathew

Ebden battled through a final set sudden death 10-point tiebreaker to reach the finals, one of his backhand volleys played a part in propelling the pair to victory. In tennis, a groundstroke slammed straight at the player at the net can be the hardest to volley. Counterintuitively, Paes, a ferociously aggressive poacher at the net, deliberately walked into such enemy fire, creating winners instead with the flick of his wrist. His trademark chipped backhand return of serve is a hybrid stroke that could be labelled a sort of half-volley, feeding off the pace of an opponent's serve and redirecting it to catch opponents off guard. Through his career and indeed last week, his service returns floated like a leaf on a breeze onto the tramlines of the doubles court.

Paes' mediocre record as a singles player, where he never broke into the top 50, is a mystery. He lacked a killer shot beyond his volley and perhaps the killer instinct in singles as well. His height, at 5'10", was short by tennis' standards. He did not have the huge serve that propelled serve and volley tennis' last exponents — Pete Sampras, Goran Ivanisevic and Pat Rafter — to wins. The rare exception was miraculously in the Davis Cup where Paes was often an overachiever on the singles court. He beat the likes of Henri Leconte (in France on clay in the 1990s) to take India into the semi finals in 1993 and, on other occasions, Wayne Ferreira and Ivanisevic. In each instance, the wide gap in rankings might have suggested the contests would be a walkover. Instead, as Ivanisevic remarked, Paes could sometimes seem like "two persons"; the tribute captured Paes' speed around the net, but also aptly described Paes' alter ego that showed up at singles matches when playing

for India. Playing with a wrist injury, he won a bronze of his own in singles at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, losing to Andre Agassi in the semis. Paes, like Vijay Amritraj before him, played the Davis Cup with a passion and tenacity that they did not bring often enough to their singles.

Paes' desire to stay on the Indian team in the past few years, when selectors looked past his ranking to include him, sparked controversy, but one can only look back with gratitude. Last Friday's sports pages carried a sense of déjà vu. As all the Indians playing singles in the Bengaluru Open crashed out in the round of 16, *The Hindu's* story was headlined: "Paes lights up an otherwise dark day for Indians". As the poetic sports writer Rohit Brijnath put it after Paes' heroics in a hard-fought tie against Pakistan back in 2006, "One day his worn out legs will

revolt, his lungs will mutiny, his shoulder will press charges, and then, finally, reluctantly, he'll drag himself off court... He'll go one day, but we won't forget, we can't, we shouldn't."

Reams have been written about Paes' unlikely Davis Cup wins, but this notion of him being at his best as the sum of different parts was vividly illustrated in his mixed doubles wins with Martina Navratilova and Martina Hingis. Mixed doubles is an under-appreciated part of Grand Slam events but is like chess on a tennis court; the male partner seeks to blunt the raw power of his male opponent by poaching at the net while the woman player's canny ground strokes and volleys create opportunities. No pair in recent memory has excelled at this as Paes and Hingis did, that too late in their careers — indeed after the Swiss had returned from retirement. After Hingis-Paes' crushing 6-1, 6-

1 win at Wimbledon in the 2015 finals, the BBC commentator said that it was the best display of mixed doubles he had seen.

The joy that Paes brought to a tennis court was at its most infectious in mixed doubles. I was courtside at the Australian Open in 2016 watching him and Hingis as defending champions romp through an early round. They made a handsome couple from the Hollywood of yesteryear: There has always been something of Harry Belafonte in Paes' star quality and smile while Hingis in her thirties looked like Audrey Hepburn. There was so much laughter alongside audaciously stylish tennis that it seemed both a club match and a Grand Slam event.

Paes has been endearingly — and entertainingly — content to play second fiddle to his legendary women partners after the match. Playing team tennis for the Washington Kastles some years ago, he responded to winning the match by kneeling and placing Hingis' foot on his knee as if he was polishing her shoes. In the moments after he partnered Navratilova to help her win what had seemed for her a long elusive 20th Wimbledon title in 2003, the great champion, then 46, moved to hug him. Paes responded with a chivalrous, perfectly timed bow, theatrically raising his hands as if about to prostrate himself before that legendary queen of Centre Court. Minutes later, during the customary mixed doubles presentation in the Royal Box, Paes waved off congratulations from the assembled grandees while continuing to applaud Navratilova.

On Sunday in Bengaluru, it was undeniably his moment, but Paes' speech deflected the praise on to the Olympians on stage and to his parents. Paes received a standing ovation and a turban festooned in gold, but in retrospect we should all have bowed before the legend that is Leander.



A HAND IN REFORMS: Montek Singh Ahluwalia started in the finance ministry but soon emerged as a key adviser to Rajiv Gandhi and later to Dr Manmohan Singh, a role that he played with great discretion and diligence

PHOTOS: REUTERS

The craft of reform

Montek Singh Ahluwalia's book should be read by those who want to understand the past and those responsible for planning our future, says Nitin Desai

John Maynard Keynes said that "If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble competent people on a level with dentists that would be splendid."* Montek Singh Ahluwalia is one such dentist who quietly and steadily helped to repair the damaged ones and insert new ones to give Indian economic policy a sharp set of teeth to bite into, digest and absorb the opportunities offered by economic globalisation. In this book he has presented a detailed narrative of how this repair took place despite moans and groans from the patient.

This book "tells the story of how that change came about, and how policies that were once reviled came to be accepted". It is a detailed event-by-event account, but written in a manner that brings out a general message: "While the pace of change was slow, the direction was unmistakable. The approach to change was a combination of gradualism and what I have called 'reform by stealth'." (pg xiv) The narration elaborates this theme for each reform track.

The book begins with a very short narrative of his growing years and early professional work, which tells us a lot about why he is what he is. One very striking feature is the role of his wife, Isher Ahluwalia, herself an economist of note, in helping and encouraging him in his rise to the top. The other is his special relationship with Dr Manmohan Singh which became deeper and stronger particularly after 1991. The

intellectual influences that shaped his thinking came basically from what I would call the soft market fundamentalism of his Oxford teachers and his mentors in the World Bank where he started to work after graduation.

The main part of the book begins with the eighties when he joined the government and began the long exercise of repairing our policy teeth. He started in the finance ministry but soon emerged as a key adviser to Rajiv Gandhi and later to Dr Manmohan Singh, a role that he played with great discretion and diligence. But the narrative in the book is much more about the dynamics of policy-making than on his contribution. He does mention some of his initiatives including the influential M document which helped to shape the policy revolution of 1991.

The narrative is detailed and the understanding of general issues such as the absurdities of the licence raj, gradualism and reform by stealth come through very specific examples rather than as generalised descriptions. For instance, the idea of reform by stealth is illustrated with the specific example of how the exchange rate was changed without an explicit devaluation by recalibrating the basket which was the basis for setting the rate. (pg 65-66).

The reform process in the eighties was a product of steady advice from professional economists within and outside the government that change was needed, an acceptance of this by some in the political world like Rajiv Gandhi and Dr Manmohan Singh, but done slowly because the overall political climate was not ready for a dilution of public control on the economy.

The narrative after the 1991 crisis changed because of the manner in which Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh coped with the political push back and the solid support they got from the bureaucracy where the reformers ruled and the dissenters were marginalised. As Montek states: "India's transition to high growth, which is the story narrated in this book, was not a chance development. It was achieved by deliberate policy steps taken by those who had conviction and belief in the need for change." (pg 409)

The primary impact of the shift to a market-oriented economy was on the relationship of the

central government to the private corporate sector for that is where the departures from market orientation were greatest. The promotion of public private partnership in infrastructure, which was promoted by the Planning Commission when Montek headed it, was different. It opened the door to private investment but the operations of infrastructure entities remain subject to controls on input supplies and costs, tariffs for services provided and other regulatory restrictions. That and the lack of an effective financial market for long term debt is an important part of the reason for today's twin balance sheet problem, the resolution of which Montek correctly recognises as a critical short-term challenge.

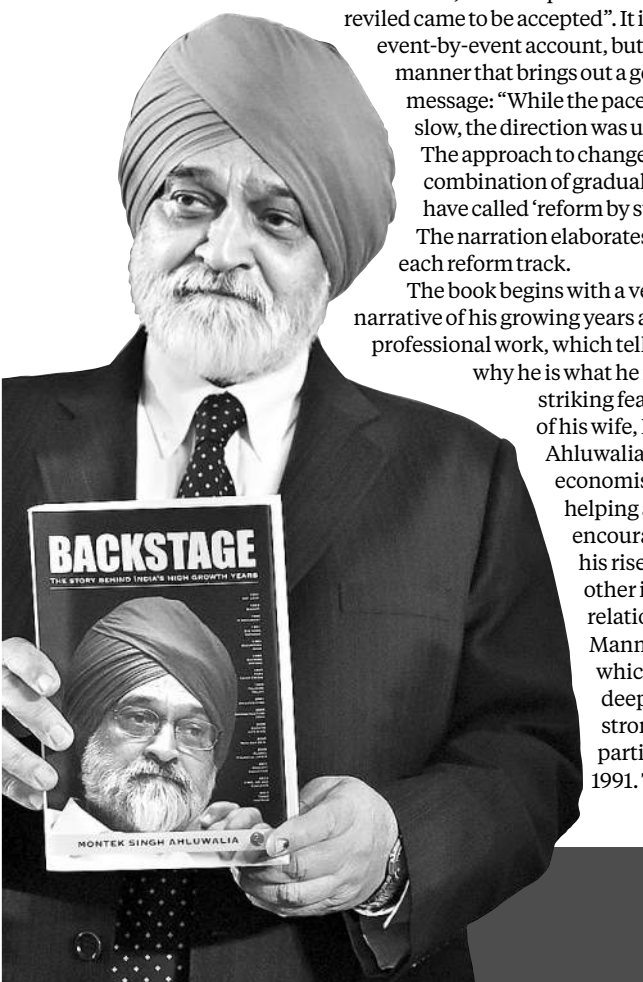
But reforms need to look beyond the organised sector and aim at deep policy changes in the regulations and manner of public support for agriculture, micro and small enterprises, education, health and urban development. The epilogue in this book recognises this as also the need for major reforms in the organisation of government and the interface with public enterprises. The key craftsman of past reforms also argues, "The time has also come for policy changes in the future to be put on a much faster track. Gradualism made sense at the start of the reform process because we were not sure how

the economy would respond to economic reforms. We now know that it can respond well." (pg 409) He also recognises that effective reforms now require cooperative federalism.

Unfortunately, our politics is making deep reform and Centre-state cooperation more difficult now than at any time in the past. Public policy and public spending in areas like agriculture, micro and small enterprises, education, health and urban development is being driven more by populism than by planning. An alphabet soup of schemes delivers immediate freebies but does little to resolve deep-seated systemic infirmities. What is missing today is what drove the liberalisation reforms — a body of well-informed advisers and implementers working in close coordination with political leaders who could mould public opinion. Montek Singh Ahluwalia is a prime example of what we had then and do not have now. His book should be read not just by those who want to understand the past but also those responsible for planning our future.

*Cited in In Service of the Republic: The Art and Science of Economic Policy, by Vijay Kelkar and Ajay Shah, Penguin Random House, 2019

THE UNDERSTANDING OF ISSUES SUCH AS THE ABSURDITIES OF THE LICENCE RAJ, GRADUALISM AND REFORM BY STEALTH COME THROUGH SPECIFIC EXAMPLES



BACKSTAGE THE STORY BEHIND INDIA'S HIGH GROWTH YEARS

Author: Montek Singh Ahluwalia

Publisher: Rupa, **Pages:** 464, **Price:** ₹595

Deconstructing Mughal eras

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

What is the role of professional historians when narratives about historical figures are being circulated through social media, pre-election speeches, and that unusual genre of primetime television, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and reportage? Publishing houses seem to be on a commissioning spree as far as books on the Mughal empire are concerned. While these tend to focus on the life of a single individual, they also broaden our understanding of who the Mughals were.

"The Mughal nobility did not hail from a single group or clan. It was an ethnically diverse aristocracy, claiming members with Indian Muslim, Rajput, Maratha, Afghan, Iranian, and Turani (i.e., Central Asian) backgrounds," writes Supriya Gandhi in her book *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India* (Harvard University Press, 2020). She is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Yale University. Would this scholar's research put to rest the divisive rhetoric of WhatsApp University?

According to Gandhi, Mughal royals such as Aurangzeb and Dara Shukoh have metamorphosed into myths in the popular imagination. They are depicted as polar opposites: Dara Shukoh emerges as the model of the "moderate Muslim" set against his brother Aurangzeb who is portrayed as the "extremist Muslim". The former is imagined as being in conversation with Sufis, naked ascetics and Hindu pandits; the latter with hardened Muslim clerics who are intolerant of religious diversity. Dara Shukoh is painted as a failed statesman, Aurangzeb as shrewd, astute and successful.

"Dara Shukoh was not a misfit in the Mughal court. He tapped ingredients of political authority — asceticism and piety — that sovereigns in the subcontinent had long used," writes Gandhi, showing that Dara Shukoh viewed his spiritual activities as an integral part of his role as a royal. She cautions against calling him a liberal or assuming that he promoted interfaith harmony in the modern senses of the term.



THE 'GOOD' MUSLIM: A portrait of Dara Shukoh

A few years ago, Audrey Truschke, an assistant professor of South Asian History at Rutgers University, wrote *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth* (Penguin, 2017). She is unhappy with Aurangzeb's detractors who hold him accountable for destroying certain temples but fail to acknowledge that he issued many orders protecting Hindu temples and gave stipends and land to Brahmmins. She thinks it is unreasonable to denounce Aurangzeb for restricting Holi celebrations without mentioning that he clamped down on Muharram and Eid festivities too.

Will all this information, sourced by a historian through rigorous methods, help to change Aurangzeb's image in a public discourse that views him as a tyrant? Truschke writes, "In reality, Aurangzeb pursued no overarching agenda vis a vis Hindus within his state. 'Hindus' of the day often did not even label themselves as such and rather prioritized a medley of regional, sectarian and caste identities (for example, Rajput, Maratha, Brahmin, Vaishnava). As many scholars have pointed out, the word 'Hindu' is Persian, not Sanskrit, and only became commonly used self-referentially during British colonialism."

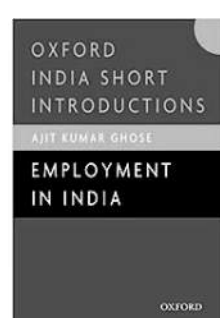
Should historians try to make sense of historical figures as products of their own time and place, or explain them in the context of contemporary political vocabulary? Ruby Lal, who teaches at Emory University, wrote *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* (Penguin, 2018) as part of her mandate to tell the stories of women and girls, which are largely missing from the pre-colonial history of South Asia. Her book is about "the favourite wife of Emperor Jahangir" who was well known for her shooting skills and for being his co-sovereign — "a position in the empire never before filled by a woman".

Lal finds that Nur Jahan was successful in "navigating the labyrinth of feudal courtly politics and the male-centered culture of the Mughal world". The signs of her sovereignty are gleaned from the imperial orders she issued, and the coins that bore her name along with her husband's. According to Lal, her male contemporaries could not stomach a woman's rising to power on account of her own talents, so they portrayed her as a conniving person who won "the indulgence of a love-blind emperor".

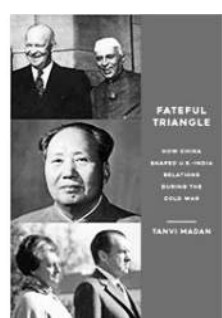
Lal deconstructs the world of the Mughal harem, which is framed through an orientalist gaze. She places Nur Jahan in a tradition of "strong and prominent elder women — assertive royal wives, influential mothers and aunts whose opinions were valued". Nur Jahan donated money to the poor, and helped organise marriages for destitute orphan girls. This generosity earned her goodwill and admiration from many.

Will this feminist recovery of Mughal history change contemporary ideas about women in Islamic societies? Let us wait and watch.

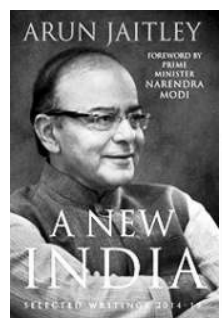
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SMART ART



KISHORE SINGH

Change in the air

The big buzz in the spring auctions of Indian art in New York this March is a single collector sale with 153 curated lots that measures the range and richness of modernism in the subcontinent. Based entirely on Jane and Kito de Boer's methodically built up collection that began in 1992 and continues till date — the couple was at India Art Fair in New Delhi earlier this year — the Christie's auction of their works includes a live sale on the morning of March 18, as well as an online one from March 13 to 20.

If Christie's has put its muscle behind the de Boers' collection, it is because they have been well regarded as collectors. A large part of their self-education in Indian modernism as well as collecting occurred during the seven years they were resident in New Delhi, but they continued to make frequent forays from Dubai and London, and collected Indian art overseas. Only a small percentage of their collection will be auctioned.

For potential bidders, the excitement comes from the selection process that has been built into the lots — from their keen eye to the curatorial process arrived between them and the auction house — implying a tight editing of works on offer. The quality is, therefore, assured and includes miniatures as well as instances of pre-modern art, besides, of course, representations of the Bengal School (of which they have been keen collectors), the Progressives (Souza, Gaitonde and Husain, in particular), as well as their own personal favourites that includes works by Rameshwar Broota. In fact, this is possibly the largest auction outing for Broota, and punters will be watching to see how well he performs. While record prices for Broota are on the anvil, fresh records for Indian art in general are expected.



The Winner of Hippies by Rameshwar Broota

This is the largest single-owner sale of Indian modern art, but it is for reasons other than this historicity that it will be remembered. The auction comes at a time when interest in Indian art is once again perking, despite a sluggish economy. More Indian artists

have gone on view globally than at any time in recent years. Within India too, the India Art Fair was a breath of fresh air with reports of handsome sales and a growing positivity. A healthy interest could generate healthy sales.

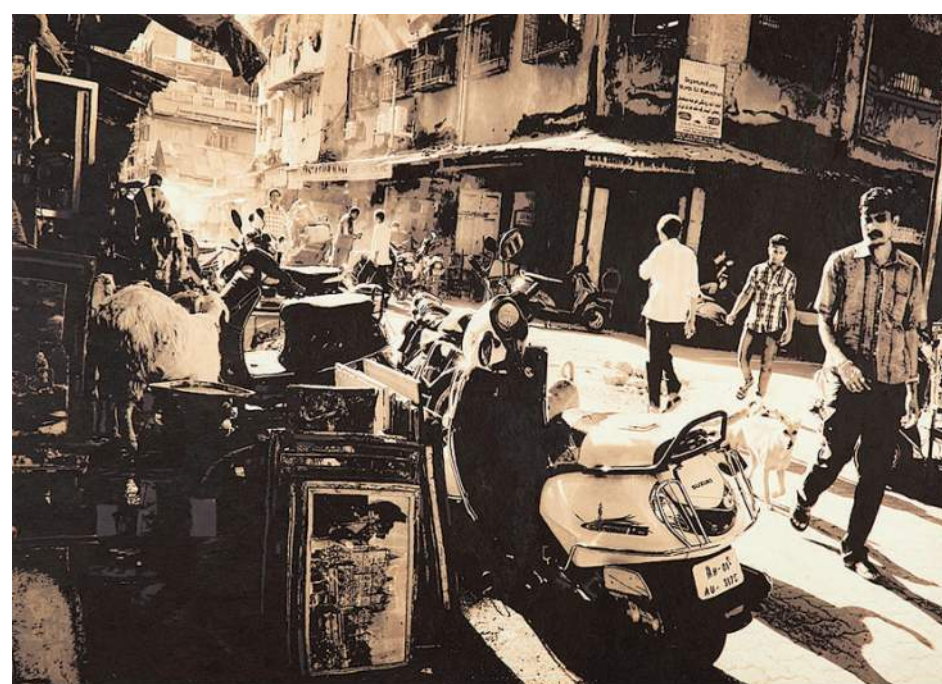
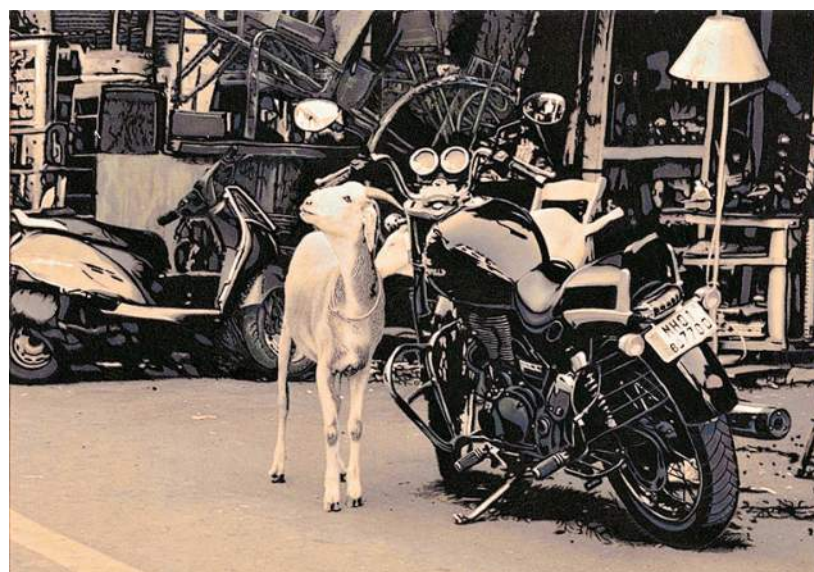
That healthy interest comes from the quality of works on offer. For some while, auctions dealing with Indian art have been struggling to find good properties in the absence of what was touted as a weak market sentiment. This led to the chicken-and-egg situation where weak prices/works did no favour to potential collectors. A sense of gloom had settled around the Indian art market despite an overall hardening of prices for quality works.

The de Boer sale then will help Indian art consolidate its position and prestige, and the proceeds could result in consigners improving the overall quality of works on offer in later editions. Apart from the de Boer sale, Christie's is also offering 63 works at its auction of South Asian modern and contemporary art on the same day. Sotheby's, meanwhile, has centred its March auction around artists whose works reflect their interest in tantric precepts ahead of the British Museum's April conference centred around tantra. Such focused attention from recognised institutions will go a long way in establishing the reputation of Indian art not only among a slowly swelling base in India, but also among an international community outside the country that has so far remained outside its periphery. The de Boers have been among a small handful of exceptions. That might well change.

Kishore Singh is a Delhi-based writer and art critic. These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated

Scenes off the street

Suhasini Kejriwal's art, born of the streets of working class Kolkata and Mumbai, evokes an almost old-fashioned aesthetic but hides layers of contemporary skill, writes Ritwik Sharma



PHOTOS: COURTESY NATURE MORTE



'THIS EXPERIENCE OF COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS HAS ALLOWED ME TO BE VULNERABLE TO THE SAME AUDIENCE THAT I AM PHOTOGRAPHING'

SUHASINI KEJRIWAL

A mechanic sitting on a tilted box, gesturing with one hand and holding a glass of tea in the other, is barely in the foreground. For, in a signature artwork of Suhasini Kejriwal, humans jostle for space with a multitude of objects.

Titled *Break* — a mix of acrylic paint, embroidery and digital print on canvas — the painting is part of a collection of 14 works that are on display at an exhibition in New Delhi.

In a composition like *Break*, a pile of vehicle parts, tyres etc and buildings surrounding them leave no empty spaces. And with a sepia-toned work, there is no break from shades of brown, black and grey as they fill the canvas with rich detail.

As the artist has blended disciplines such as photography, painting and embroidery on it, the visual effect on the viewer is layered. Yet it appeared like a

AS THE ARTIST HAS BLENDED DISCIPLINES SUCH AS PHOTOGRAPHY, PAINTING AND EMBROIDERY ON IT, THE VISUAL EFFECT IS LAYERED

collage and a seamlessly single piece at the same time. At least, this was apparent at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, helped perhaps by the daylight when I visited this week.

The solo show, *Everyday Extraordinary*, exhibits the Kolkata-based artist's new works that, in her words, resulted from a "journey" that expanded her "detached vision as flaneur and artist to a more empathetic role as witness and collaborator".

All the works have a relation to photographic images, she says. In some, such as *Break*, the photographic images are more directly present as digital prints which are

then painted, embroidered and collaged. Some of the works are entirely painted. Each work took the artist anything between three and nine months to make, she says. They are derived from her time spent in the North Kolkata neighbourhood of Chitpur and Chor Bazaar in Central Mumbai.

She picked the neighbourhoods after walking through many in Kolkata and Mumbai with friends, photographers, designers and artists who showed her the places that nourished their creativity. "I found myself going back to Chor Bazaar and Chitpur again and again and found many similarities between the two. Both are old, historic neighbourhoods that draw you in with their striking theatricality but reveal their layered beauty slowly every day."

Kejriwal, whose paintings often overflow with information and detail on a crowded

canvas, spent her childhood in Kolkata and has degrees in fine arts from colleges in New York and London. Returning from these sojourns abroad, her earlier works cast the familiar as strange.

Now, empathy in the role of witness has been enhanced in part by repeated visits over four years to Chitpur and Chor Bazaar and "seeing how they are transforming before my own eyes". Partly, it was also helped by becoming a collaborator in Chitpur as part of an artists' collective called Hamdasti.

The collaboration comes through in a few installations, such as that quintessential Kolkata artefact, a pulled rickshaw, a cart and a mirror each of which bears brass letters in Hindi and Bangla quoting Tagore and Kabir.

"This experience of collaborating with community partners has allowed me to be vulnerable to the same audience that I am photographing by putting my works back on the very streets that I usually photograph for my work. In that sense, I feel that I have engaged with the streets more completely and with more sincerity," says Kejriwal.

Everyday Extraordinary is on till March 14 at Nature Morte gallery, New Delhi

Sony likes a good mess. It wants you to abandon the idea that 5.1-channel surround sound can be delivered without getting tangled in wires (unless you spend a fortune on it).

Its most competitively priced soundbar yet, the HT-S20R for ₹14,990 is an ensemble of pieces and wires. It can emulate a home theatre experience on a modest budget — if you manage to find the space and set it up right. Here's how.

The package

The soundbar is about 30 inches wide, two inches high and is not heavy at 2 kg. It has three front-firing speakers that make your TV louder. The second piece is a hefty, 7 kg subwoofer that is capable of producing rumbling bass with a single 160 mm or six-inch driver (the visible round area on the speaker that makes the sound). It's not a big driver, but the lack of size is compensated by power. Along with the two six-inch high, half kg each rear speakers, the HT-S20R can generate a maximum output of 400W.

All would have been well if the package was not missing an HDMI cable to connect the unit to the TV. Now that's stingy.

The setup

First, pick your favourite listening spot in the room and create the drama around it. The placement of pieces can make all the difference. If your TV is mounted on a wall in the front, the soundbar is best mounted under it. If the TV is on a table, the soundbar placed in front of it will not block the remote control access to the TV.

You'll sometimes have to crank up the volume and reduce the bass to get the right mix



Wired for sound

Sony's hardwired belief in surround sound is right on the money, writes Veer Arjun Singh

The soundbar connects to the TV with an HDMI ARC, but also optical and analog cables.

It connects to the subwoofer via RCA — the famous red-green-white cables — which act as the main power unit.

The subwoofer will need some strategic thinking. Bass is essentially large sound waves that can go from powering it, depending on the quality of the subwoofer and the room acoustics. The unit will create unnerving vibrations if you place it

on a glass or metal surface. Find a corner for it on either side of the TV and place it on the floor. This will give the sound more volume.

The two little speakers with wires from the subwoofer must go behind you on both sides. These aren't standalone units but added to the mix to create a surround sound experience. So you'll need them at a height roughly above your ears.

The result

Those mumbling actors on TV will be more

intelligible if you keep the subwoofer bass low at level 3 or 4. It goes up till 12, and a sleek remote, which need not be pointed at the unit, or anywhere really, will help you control it. In *John Wick: Chapter 3 — Parabellum*, the sound followed the flying bullets and I could actually hear the recoil. The car chases had a nice surround sound feel to it. But frequencies are not very balanced. You'll sometimes have to crank up the volume and reduce the bass to get the right mix.

The set-up is also Bluetooth-enabled and has USB and AUX inputs, too. In Kanye West, Jay Z and Nicky Minaj's 2010 single "Monster", the bass drum was uplifted but it overpowered the snare. The mids, where the powerful lyrics lie, though, were clean. Foo Fighters' "The Pretender" was more balanced. At its loudest, it had the neighbours complaining. The Who's "I Don't Wanna Get Wise" did not sound great in the bass-heavy set-up.

Verdict 4/5

Sony's HT-S20R delivers a surround sound, theatre-like experience that is good enough for a large living room and even better for a 14 feet x 16 feet bedroom. It's a bass-heavy set-up and the subwoofer does most of the heavy lifting with the mids often overpowered. But the distortion at high frequencies is surprisingly kept in check. The maximum output of 400W that the unit generates is much higher than its competitors from Boat, Phillips and JBL in the price range.

This is a great value product and a roomful of surround sound that a single soundbar below ₹50,000 just can't deliver. To get great sound for ₹14,990, make your peace with clipping the wires.



Hall of note

PHOTOS: SAGGERE RADHAKRISHNA

One man's obsession with the history of India's currency has led to the creation of the fascinating Museum of Indian Paper Money in Bengaluru, writes **Nikita Puri**

A few years ago, Rezwan Razack, now joint managing director of the Bengaluru-based Prestige Group, found a currency note in his grandfather's iron safe. Razack stared at it long and hard because, though it was a Reserve Bank of India note, a rubber stamp on it read, curiously enough, "Pakistan note, Payment refused". The idea of an Indian currency note from Pakistan fuelled a journey that has led to the opening of Rezwan Razack's Museum of Indian Paper Money.

The note Razack found recalls a post-Partition period when currency notes for Pakistan were temporarily printed in India. This note has a place in his museum, as do the many that were printed in India and looked like Indian notes, but were meant to be legal tender in Burma (Myanmar), because that territory too was British-governed.

Located on the second floor of the stately Prestige Falcon Towers on Bengaluru's Bruntun Road, the temperature-controlled archive is a trove of stories. Some of these evoke loud reactions during guided tours of the museum, especially the exhibits that showcase large denominations of money that were deliberately, neatly, cut in half. "Why would anyone tear up money!" exclaims a young woman. The answer is intriguing: while one half of the note was sent by post to the bank, the other half was to be taken in person to the bankers. The serial numbers on both were compared before the person was given silver in exchange for the currency. "Those were hard days [the 19th century] and thieves were aplenty. The thief could not know which bank you had sent the money to, but they could get the other half of the note from you. If you lost one of these halves, it was the bank's discretion whether you would get half the money or no money

at all," the visitor is told.

Though there are museums around the country, such as the RBI Monetary Museum in Mumbai and the RBI Museum in Kolkata, which acknowledge India's monetary history, the exclusive focus on paper currency distinguishes Razack's enterprise from the others. It takes the audience from the time that India's first banks printed notes in the late 18th century, only for that to stop when governance passed to the British crown,



ALL THE EXHIBITS COME FROM RAZACK'S PERSONAL COLLECTION. ALONG HIS OBSSIVE JOURNEY, HE HAS ALSO MANAGED TO LEND HIS NAME TO TWO BOOKS ON INDIAN CURRENCY

starting a new age of uniface (single side-printed) notes when India's notes came from England, and finally to the establishment of a printing press in Nashik (in 1928) and the Reserve Bank of India (1935).

The tour of exhibits moves chronologically, detailing how notes were printed in England and were shipped across in inclement weather, even confronting German U-boats during war times. Razack's collection includes Indian currency notes from ill-fated vessels such as the ocean liner *SS Egypt* which collided with a cargo



10. NOTES		100. NOTES	
BURMA	C 96 to C 99	BURMA	C 1 to C 10
"	D 0 to D 71	"	C 79 to C 80
"	E 60 to E 99	"	D 56 to D 75
"	F 0 to F 61	"	G 31 to G 42
Burma Currency Board	K 27 to K 66	"	H 73 to H 82
"	Q 17 to Q 36	"	J 45 to J 58
PAKISTAN	R 07 to R 99	"	"
"	S 0 to S 99	PAKISTAN	H 83 to H 99
"	"	"	J 0 to J 42
"	"	"	H 45 to H 78
PAKISTAN	G 53 to G 67	"	J 61 to J 98
"	G 27 to G 36	INDIA	C 47, D 23, D 75, E 55,
BURMA	N 20 to N 31	(longed) F 96, G 85, C 88 (old design)	
"	N 25 to N 40	E 51 (ASOKA PILLAR) Missing	
"	P 11 to P 49		
Burma Currency Board	R 24 to R 41		
PAKISTAN	A 41 to A 82		
"	B 05 to B 88		

ship and went down in May 1922.

"Insurers had paid off the claim and given up on recovering anything from the ship. But bounty hunters kept trying because the ship was carrying gold bullion (and bars of silver). They finally succeeded in 1932 and thought they had hit double jackpot because of the currency they found," says Razack. But the notes weren't signed, since that was done after they reached India, and were therefore not valid currency. Whatever was not destroyed remains in the hands of

a few collectors.

There's also a collection of the yellow pamphlet-like notices which would be placed inside glucose tins and sold to help identify notes that were printed in India but meant for circulation outside. The paper had serial numbers listed for notes meant for Burma and, later, for Pakistan.

Other exhibits showcase cash coupons which replaced coins of small denominations that were issued in princely states during World War II, after metal turned into a precious commodity. There are also a few cash coupons meant exclusively for prisoners of wars brought to India from South Africa (Anglo-Boer Wars), Burma and Pakistan. "These people weren't criminals. They couldn't be forced to work so they were given cash coupons to motivate them to work. These could be exchanged for specific items in local canteens," says Razack.

All the exhibits come from Razack's personal collection. Along his obsessive journey, he has also managed to lend his name to two books on Indian currency — he co-authored *The Revised Standard Reference Guide to Indian Paper Money* in 2012 and wrote *One Rupee: One Hundred Years 1917-2017*.

The museum is so immersive that even its entry ticket (priced at ₹100) is designed along the lines of the train tickets that were issued during the opening of the printing press in Nashik (the site was selected for its proximity to the railway line). Cream tomato soup, prawn curry, chicken Maryland, turkey and ham, pressed ox tongue, peach melba, and cheese, fruit and coffee were served to special guests, reveals a copy of the menu for the special event. Razack now plans to recreate the day as another special event and mark it with the same menu.

A compelling storyteller in person, he hopes the museum will gain currency so that others too can participate in a somewhat obscure but nevertheless fascinating piece of India's history.

Conjugal misgivings

A brave mainstream Bollywood film takes on homophobia but ties itself up in unfunny knots, writes **Veer Arjun Singh**

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan is about two gay men but it's not a love story. Writer and debutant director, Hitesh Kewalya, hurriedly establishes the chemistry between its two leading men by recreating the nauseously romantic "take my hand and catch the train to happily ever after" scene from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. He then moves on to call out those who are physically repulsed at the sight of two male bodies colliding with their lips.

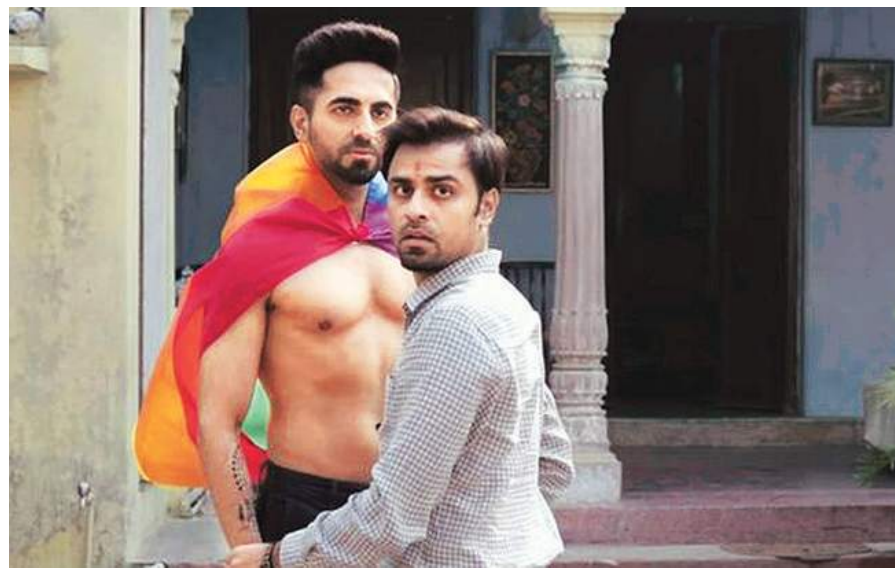
What follows is pungent irony. The "Vivaah Special Express" that Kartik Singh (Ayushmann Khurrana) and Aman Tripathi (Jitendra Kumar) have dramatically boarded is not an escape from but an invitation to the prejudiced family courtyard, where people are morally obliged to browbeat the flag-bearers of true love.

The film uses the time-tested instrument of comedy to drive an obvious message into thick skulls and meanders away from being a dumb person's guide to being homosexual in India. But what promises to be a blitzkrieg of light-hearted jibes about rampant homophobia becomes a stereotypical family drama in huge parts.

The film is set in culturally vibrant Allahabad before it became the pious city, Prayagraj. It's still a few days before the Supreme Court decriminalises homosexuality and the battle cries that issue from queer

parades are yet to reach regressive ears. An assertive Kartik had dealt with the derision that followed his coming out as a gay man in his teens. It's now time for timid Aman to face the music. He's unsure and feeds off the courage of his partner Kartik, who is willing to lead the charge. Thankfully, the two men are not forced into stereotypically "gendered" roles. Kartik's nose ring and pink *dupatta* speak for his confidence more than his identity. The young lovers are tastefully mushy and their chemistry is relatable. But once established it's not milked any further. The focus soon shifts away from them as soon as their secret is out of the closet.

Aman's stubborn father, Shankar Tripathi, and his crackpot antics soon take centre stage. Played by the masterful Gajraj Rao, Tripathi's act of throwing up at the sight of his son lip-locked with another man establishes his egregious hostility. The patriarch tries to school the grown men with sticks but also has subtle melt-downs in front of his wife. His desolate sense of humour, a belligerent dance off with Kartik and visible chagrin throughout do well to keep the laughs occurring naturally. It's his wife, Sunaina Tripathi, played by Neena Gupta, who holds his complicated intractability in check. She is poignantly funny at being a mother torn between her son and his father. She is the bal-



ancing character of the film.

Khurrana is a defiant lover but no cliché of the "gay man", which is the best part about his character. But he does little to separate Kartik from his own persona. His acting and his cinema is extremely likable, but it is becoming a bit of a formula.

What counters his soft heroics in the film is Kumar's small-town, coy act as Aman. His character is an acute deviation from his comic sketches in "The Viral Fever" that shot him to fame. Here, he is a fresh face, a refreshing act and thoroughly likable.

At two hours the film feels a bit of a stretch in the second half. Kewalya, though, refrains from over-dramatising a sensitive subject but is unable to quite finish the film smoothly. He

interjects it with sub plots, which take the attention away from the lead couple and their struggles. He rightly relies on his able side cast but also gives them contrived punchlines in the hope that the comic drama reaches its crescendo.

Bollywood is slowing building on it, but I hope the next film that takes on prejudices against gay people tones down the "main aadmi hun, aadmi se pyaar karta hun" shtick. Society needs to rid itself of terms that differentiate one love from another. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is a crackling comedy in parts and an eager but brave take on choice more than sexual preferences. It's a placebo that will give awkward, confused parents something to laugh about and ponder over.

Off target

MIKE HALE

Hunters, a new series on Amazon Prime Video, offers various ways in. A lot of people will be excited because Jordan Peele helped bring it about. (He's an executive producer.) That would have been me in 2015, post *Key and Peele*; not so much now, post *Twilight Zone* and *Us*.

Then there's the show's logline: A motley crew of talented but everyday folks in 1977 Son-of-Sam New York, assembled and led by a mysterious concentration-camp survivor, hunt Nazis and uncover a deep-state conspiracy to bring back the Reich. Catchy, but it could go either way.

But really, the show has us at Al Pacino. He plays the group's leader, Meyer Offerman, and it's his first regular starring role in a series, after portraying problematic males (Roy Cohn, Phil Spector, Joe Paterno) in a smattering of HBO movies and mini-series. At 79, he's having his peak-TV coming-out party.

Having gotten Pacino, though, *Hunters* doesn't do much with him, or with its premise or the rest of its stellar cast. He's fine — he adroitly underplays Meyer's compassionate vengefulness amid the noisier, more hyperbolic elements of a comic-book-style action fantasy. But there's something generic about Meyer, and about *Hunters*, even as the show tries very hard to be singular. Defending Pacino against the inevitable inauthentic-casting charges (an Italian-American playing a Jewish avenger), his co-star Logan Lerman said, "Come on, anybody can play the role." Exactly.

Hunters is the creation of David Weil, a young actor. His influences show. The obvious one, in the show's jokey tone, its not quite cartoonish violence, its winking evocation of the 1970s and its thematic affinity with *Inglourious Basterds*, is Quentin Tarantino.

But in the five (of 10) episodes available for review, there are others that are just as apt: the *Oceans* films (Weil apparently missed the "Rick and Morty" episode on the lameness of caper-crew stories) and Steven Spielberg in both his *Schindler's List* and *Munich* modes.

Al Pacino in a still from *Hunters*

Having gotten Pacino, though, *Hunters* doesn't do much with him, or with its premise or the rest of its stellar cast

Most noticeable — in the show's declamatory approach, in its toggling between naturalism and a highly metabolised stylization, even in the look

and deployment of its onscreen graphics — is a kinship with Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Sam Catlin's *Preacher*, another show that used religion as the underpinning of an exercise in genre indulgence and excess. Like *Preacher*, but less successfully, *Hunters* employs the currently popular strategy of pointedly jumping among times and places, wielding history and geography to give a greater sense of weight or import to what are essentially Saturday matinee adventures.

In *Hunters*, the primary focus of that attempted fusion is Jonah Heidelberg, the 19-year-old Brooklynite, petty drug dealer and comics-shop employee played by Lerman. Jonah is part Peter Parker, an incipient hero — he doesn't have superpowers, but he's a whiz at cracking codes — who's been raised by a female relative, his Auschwitz-survivor grandmother (Jeannie Berlin in the show's present, Annie Hägg in the World War II scenes). Her death, and his desire for revenge, bring him to the attention of Meyer and Meyer's seemingly ordinary crew.

But Jonah is also the embodiment, at least in the early episodes, of a moral debate about ends versus means and the righteousness of vigilante murder, even when the victims are former Nazis who have brought their schemes for world domination to the United States.

It's the kind of high-low narrative bridge that comic books pull off all the time, and there's nothing particularly inappropriate or tasteless about the way *Hunters* handles it. But there's nothing particularly interesting or exciting about it, either.

Jonah's situation feels synthesised, a computer mash-up of *Spider-Man* and *Marathon Man*. Weil's parallels of historical atrocities — murder by shower head, medical experimentation, looted Jewish treasures — with the present-day actions of his Nazis and their hunters don't register as either clever or offensive, they're just plot points.

An awful lot of talent has been assembled for *Hunters* — Pacino, Kane, Rubinek, Berlin, Lena Olin and Dylan Baker as high-ranking Nazis, Jerrika Hinton as an FBI agent tracking both the Nazis and the hunters. They all acquit themselves well, and the show exhibits a high degree of competence and polish in its production. (Frederick Elmes, the *Blue Velvet* cinematographer, shot the 90-minute opening episode.)

But it feels underwritten, and the actors underused (with the exception of Greg Austin as a coldblooded American Nazi hit man). It never quite gets the blend of dramatic intensity, comic-book embroidery and cathartic action that it seems to be going for. *Hunters*, like the hunters team itself, is less than the sum of its parts.

Notes from China

Beijing-based **Shruti Bajpai** writes about the humour, bonding and patience with which people are coping with the deadly virus attack



PHOTOS: REUTERS

The indefinite closure of schools means many children are now at home with their parents; (below) live-streaming of exercise sessions has gained popularity as people are forced to stay indoors

N *i hao*, how are you all doing?" shouts a young woman, in a short format video, leaning against the railing of her apartment balcony. "I haven't stepped out of my home in over two weeks! What is everyone up to?" Within seconds, there is a trail of funny rejoinders from apartment after apartment across the street.

"I am eating beef noodle soup for my home-office lunch break. What are all of you eating?" asks the same woman in another similar video, this time, with a steaming bowl in her hands. Pat comes a volley of replies, rattling off a variety of lunch menus.

While most of China is faced with yet another week of Covid-19 virus-induced reality — cordoned off public areas, closed offices, body temperature check points and a pervasive uneasy calm — the local internet is alive and buzzing with content that brings out the self-deprecating humour of living and working in a lockdown.

A large part of China's working population is currently working full-time from home. There are others who can only work sparingly, while there are still more people whose income has come to a standstill, with no hope in sight.

Connected in their online world

Most of China's technology companies have asked their employees to work from home till the first week of March. The country's well-entrenched digital infrastructure and advanced mobile phone ecosystems have made remote offices possible and online communication relatively smooth. Sunny is one such professional who works for a leading internet technology company based in Beijing.

Currently working remotely from her parent's home, Sunny is grateful for the generous workspace that the apartment offers. Some of her colleagues, she says, are stuck in cramped family homes and are struggling with a lack of privacy and space. "I do miss the energy of my work environment and social interaction," she rues. "Our community is connected in our concern and angst over reports of rising cases in Hubei province, but we feel even more connected in these candid moments of humour that serve as welcome distractions and help enliven our current mood," she adds.

Almost all of China is learning to cope with

this new normal by immersing themselves in their alternate reality, the online world of social media chat groups and discussions and an endless stream of funny short content videos. There are Douyin (known as Chinese TikTok to the outside world) videos of bizarre "working from home" situations, and some amusing ones of parents who mean well but constantly interrupt their children with home-cooked meals during work meetings and calls.

No wonder then that content companies are seeing high traffic when most other businesses are at an all-time low. Dennis, a young journalist currently working out of his parents' home in Hangzhou, is unable to return to Shanghai for work. Still, he is busy reporting on the epidemic and feels more overworked than before. "The nature of my job makes it easy for me to work remotely, and I have my phone to keep me connected with my co-workers and friends. It is not a big deal, we know that the situation is temporary," he shrugs.

Both Sunny and Dennis are grateful for the abundance of family time they suddenly have. China's policies have left generations of families smaller and smaller. If these extraordinary circumstances have an upside, it is the closer bonds that have developed over the past few weeks in these small families. The obviously

deeply cherished everyday moments you see online are a manifestation of this.

Movies, mahjong and the stresses of online teaching

William is a Mandarin teacher who would normally take up to 50 classes a week. But his classes have fallen to a trickle, to only a couple of sessions per day. He spends time catching up on movies on various streaming platforms. With theatres closed until further notice, these platforms have seen a spike in subscriptions.

When the much-anticipated lunar New Year theatrical release of the Chinese blockbuster *Lost in Russia* was abruptly cancelled in the wake of the outbreak, Chinese viewers were in for a surprise — it was streamed for free on several online video platforms. "The makers of this film may have lost a lot of revenue, but they have gained so much respect and love from us by showing it for free," says William. On other evenings he and his family enjoy a game of mahjong, a traditional

Chinese game that has typically been popular with China's older population but is now gaining increasing acceptance among the younger generation as a cure to boredom.

Lynn, a Beijing-based English teacher who conducts classes out of her home, is struggling as most of her students are too young to be able to learn online. "I really miss not being able to engage with my students," she says, smiling nervously. Unable to focus on other activities, she obsesses over daily updates on the epidemic and ends up engaging in animated online discussions.

Losing income and rebuilding trust

Small business owners, particularly those in the service industry, have been hit the hardest. Their shops are shut or threatened with imminent closure, and they have no clients in sight.

Tina, the owner of a beauty spa in the suburbs of Beijing, is tense. Her spa is now closed till further notice. "I know that things will eventually get better. But I fear that people will stay away from the close human contact that my

line of work requires. I have my staff to look after and rent to pay. This is a huge loss. I need to win back the trust of my clients."

The only silver lining, she says — her eyes light up — is that her young daughter is with her. A significant part of the Chinese population works in cities, while their children live with their grandparents in villages and attend local schools, often able to meet with their parents only twice a year. The indefinite closure of schools means many children are now at home with their parents. This, too, though unintended, can be seen as a silver lining in an otherwise coal-black cloud.

When will this impasse end? When will things go back to normal? These are questions that all of China is asking every day. Questions that don't have answers, yet. Endearing moments of family time, impromptu singing sessions, ping-pong games on dinner tables and a constant stream of online humour provide a much-needed salve of hope and sanity in this time of distress.

All respondents preferred to be addressed by their English first names only



CHESS #1389

By DEVANGSHU DATTA

Humpy Koneru won the Cairns Cup, which is billed as the strongest ever women's tournament. She scored 6 points from 9 games to take home \$45,000. Reigning world champion, Ju Wenjun, came second with 5.5 to win \$35,000. Koneru managed a 2627 Elo performance with four wins and one loss (to Mariya Muzychuk) to overtake Ju in the rating list. If she maintains form, she should qualify easily for the Candidates, where she would be one of the favourites.

In the Open Candidates, which start in Yekaterinburg on March 15, the two Chinese representatives will have to arrive early. While both Wang Hao and Ding Liren say that it hasn't been too difficult to cope with the travel restrictions due to the coronavirus, their plans to hold training camps have had to be cancelled.

However, they will not have a problem getting visas for Russia, according to the Fide spokespersons. Wang is in Tokyo and doesn't intend to return to China, thus obviating quarantine requirements. But Ding is in his hometown of Wenzhou (800 km from Wuhan) where anybody who goes out on the street has to pass a "temperature test" to avoid quarantine.



The Madras High Court has set aside the election process to the All India Chess Federation, and asked AICF to hold a new Annual General Meeting to elect office-bearers. Only five candidates for 16 positions were deemed to have correctly submitted nomination papers and therefore, "elected" unopposed. The nominations of 23 others were rejected, as they did not file papers in person as required by Para 6.4 of the National Sports Development Code.

Vidit Gujrathi is leading the strong Prague Masters, going into the last round, despite a loss to David Navara in the second-last round. The GM from Nasik has scored 5 from 8 games in the 10-player Round Robin (Average Elo 2707). Second place is shared by Nikita Vitiugov, David Antón Guijarro and Alireza Firouzja (4.5 each).

The Diagram, White to Play, (White: Gujrathi Vs Black: Firouzja, Prague Masters 2020) is incredible. Alireza is a 2726 player. They were in a Slav Exchange, among the most drawish of openings. By move 13, black is lost!

White played 13. Qb3! [Now b7 can't be defended] **So black replies 13... b5 14. Rxc6 Qxa4 15. Qc3 e5** [Forced, to cover the threat of 16. Rc8+] **After 16. Nxe5 b4** [Again forced, to prevent 17. Re6+ followed by Qc6+].

White killed the position with 17. axb4 Ne4 18. Qa1! Qxa1 19. Rxa1 Bxb4 20. Rcx6 Rxa6 21. Rxa6 0-0 22. Nc6! [The Kt hits Bb4 and threatens Ne7xf5 if e7 is unguarded.] **Now Black tried the last ditch 22... Rc8 23. g4! Nc3 24. Bf1 (1-0). Material losses can't be stopped.**

Devangshu Datta is an internationally rated chess and correspondence chess player

Trump ready

Ahmedabad is preparing for the high-profile visit at breakneck speed. Some of these preparations are disturbing, writes Vinay Umarji

It doesn't get bigger than this for Ahmedabad. The mercantile city from the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which has hosted Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping in the past, is all set to roll out the red carpet for US President Donald Trump.

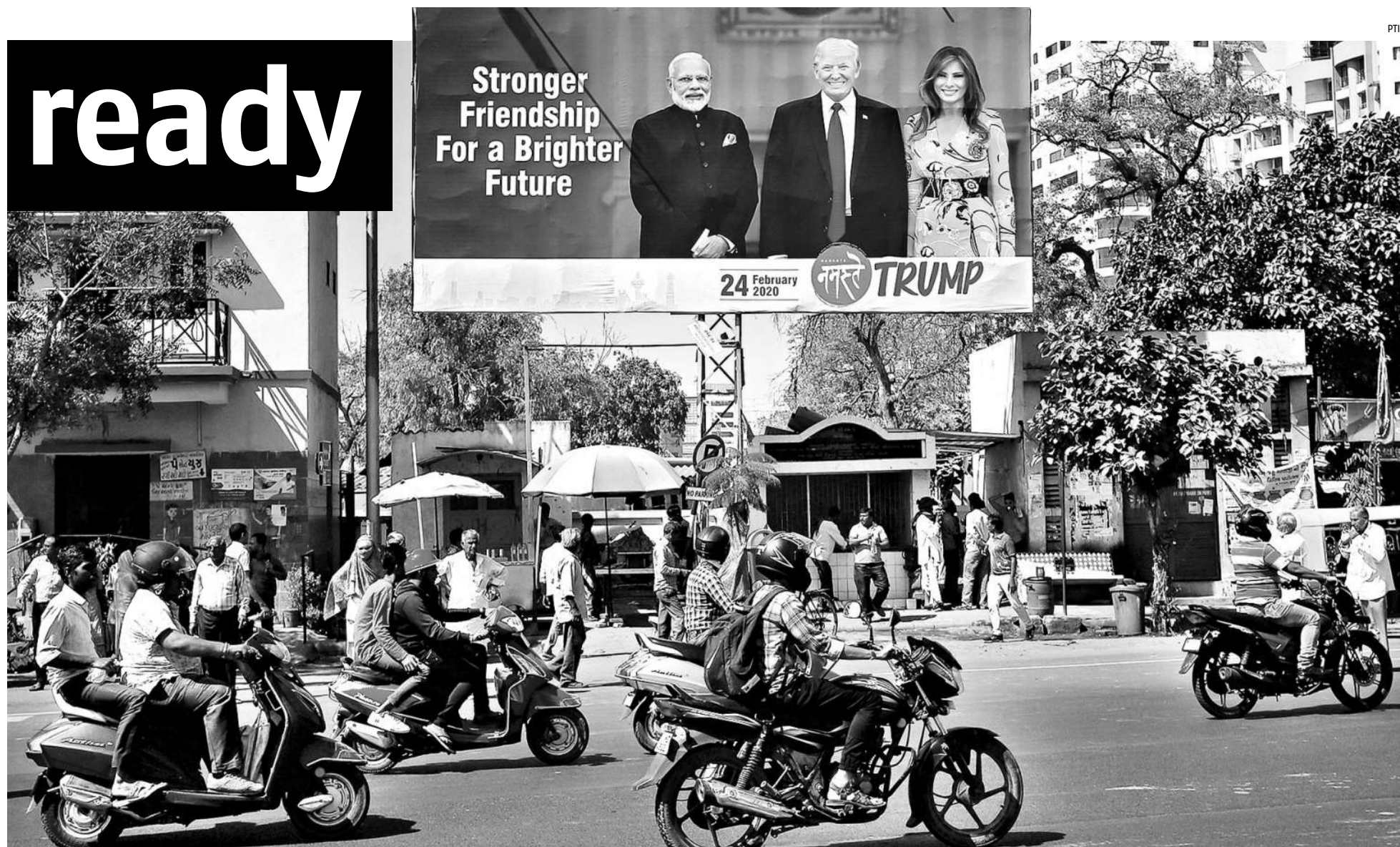
Come February 24, Trump and Modi's cavalcade will travel over a 22-km stretch from Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport to Sabarmati Ashram before proceeding to the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium, also called the Motera Stadium and touted as the world's largest cricketing facility with a capacity of 110,000. Here, the two will jointly chair a massive public gathering, Namaste Trump, on the lines of the Howdy Modi event in Houston last September.

This is Trump's first visit to India since he was elected president of the United States, and the Ahmedabad administration is leaving no stone unturned to make an impression. From widening, resurfacing and cleaning the roads and planting saplings to putting up massive Modi-Trump hoardings and readying the world's largest cricket stadium, there is every attempt to spruce up — and fortify — Ahmedabad.

It is speculated though that Trump might skip the visit to the Sabarmati Ashram, the place that saw the beginning of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha movement and his Dandi March against the salt tax charged by the British. While that might be, Gandhi's personal chamber has been readied for the visit and stages are being erected at the site for cultural performances.

Officials in the Gujarat government and Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) say roughly 28 stages are being erected along the cavalcade route to put on show Gandhi's life and India's cultural diversity. Over 100,000 people are expected to be lined up by this route holding Indian and American flags to cheer as the motorcade passes.

Full-grown palm trees and saplings for various flowering plants are being planted on the route and fancy lights are being installed on the road divider. AMC officials says over 50,000 trees and saplings worth ₹50 lakh have been procured for the purpose. "It is not that the saplings have been planted only for the event," clarifies Jignesh Patel, director of Parks & Gardens at AMC. "This was anyway part of our plan. It's just that these are being planted right before the February 24 event."



Residents of Motera, a northern suburb, are meanwhile elated. With the Metro rail construction work eating up much of the route, especially in front of the stadium, the residents had to take a detour. "But thanks to Modi and Trump, the same cramped road now looks like a four-lane highway. I hope it stays this way even after the event," says Vitthal Parmar, a resident.

The local hospitality industry is also enjoying the spike in bookings and enquiries ahead of the event. While luxury hotels such as the Hyatt and DoubleTree by Hilton have been booked for the visiting dignitaries and accompanying guests, others will see an unprecedented occupancy rate of 95 per cent between February 21 and 24. Tariffs, too, have shot up across the board by 25 to 30 per cent, says Narendra Somani, president, Hotel & Restaurant Association of Gujarat.

The government is understandably taking no chances with the security for the VVIP visit. Over 10,000 policemen, 25 Indian Police Service officers, 65 assistant commissioners of police, 200 inspectors and 800 sub-inspectors, along with two companies of the Rapid Action Force and 10 of the State Reserve Police, are being deployed. In addition to this, 4,500 policemen are being stationed inside Motera Stadium. The VVIP route and the venues will also see 120 doorframe metal detectors, 240 handheld metal detectors, 200 closed circuit cameras and 120 scanning machines, all monitored by 300 electronic surveillance experts.

Besides his official ride, Air Force One, Trump's



entourage will include another aircraft and six cargo planes. Already, a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III has arrived at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport, bringing in equipment and vehicles of the US President's motorcade.

Trump has claimed that seven million people will greet his cavalcade from the airport to the stadium. That's unlikely, given that Ahmedabad's overall population is roughly 7.5 million. The administration is now scrambling to ensure that at least 100,000 gather along the route. AMC officials say from the initial estimate of 50,000 people, the number has gradually — and thankfully — increased. It has asked small and medium

enterprises, real estate developers, non-government organisations and religious and educational institutions to ensure that their members and employees participate in the roadshow.

The construction at the stadium has also been going on at breakneck speed ever since it became known that Modi and Trump would come calling. It was only this week that the stadium, which is run by the Gujarat Cricket Association, got the building use certificate from the AMC after the local body inspected its structural components.

There is, however, a sordid side to the preparations. To make the city look plush, a 4-ft wall is being erected to hide a slum, Saraniya Vaas, that dots the cavalcade route. And to hide the wall,

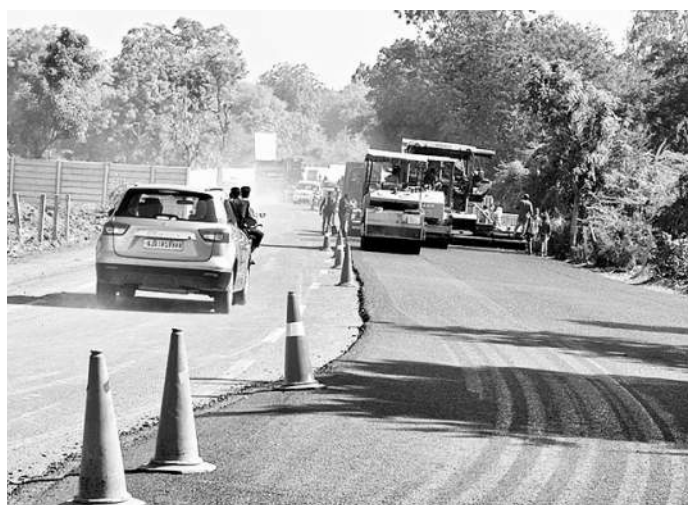
around 150 saplings are being planted along it. Saraniya Vaas residents say they are helpless. "The wall now leaves only one narrow route for us to enter and exit the area," says Govind Ravji, a 50-year-old daily wager who lives in the slum. "Extended roofs of some shacks were also demolished and the common water taps removed." The taps are now being built at lower levels so that they are not visible from the road.

Shops, establishments and vendors around Motera have been affected as business has been hit by all the digging, cleaning, polishing and painting. With the road to the stadium being widened, the front portions of some shops and houses, including toilets, have been demolished. "There are six women in my house. We had our own toilet at the entrance as well as a public pay-and-use toilet across the road, which were both demolished during the road widening work," says Rakesh Marwadi, a snacks vendor.

At a recent cabinet meeting, Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani is said to have admonished officials over reports of harassment to citizens ahead of the high-profile visit. Vadilal Dabhi, a 45-year-old vegetable vendor from Motera, says he and other vendors have been asked to shut shop for 10 days in the run up to the visit. As a result, he says he is incurring a loss of ₹600-800 a day.

There is a lot that the city is witnessing — all for the few hours that Trump will be in Ahmedabad.

THE LOCAL HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IS ALSO ENJOYING THE SPIKE IN BOOKINGS AND ENQUIRIES AHEAD OF THE EVENT



(Clockwise from top) A Modi-Trump banner near the airport; police at Sabarmati ashram; final preparations for the revamped Motera Stadium; en route to the stadium from Koteswar Gam; and a 4-ft wall being erected to hide a slum, Saraniya Vaas

PHOTOS: YASIN D

A holiday to remember

Volunteering with 17000ft in Ladakh will be a vacation like none you've experienced before, writes Anjali Bhargava



SANDEEP AHUJA

Harsh" and "bleak" may be two of the most common adjectives used to describe the remote landscape of Ladakh. Altitudes range between 10,000 and 17,000 feet. Temperatures range from 30 degrees in summer in more inhabited areas to an appalling minus 50 degrees in farther corners. The terrain is rocky, steep and barren. Spotting another human can be a challenge. The availability of food is uncertain.

So, when Sujata Sahu, founder of 17000ft, an NGO that works with local schools, suggests that you venture into this less-than-indulgent terrain for a holiday — and pay for it — you might think she'd taken leave of her senses.

Add to this what she expects of you. To be surrounded for about eight hours a day by 20-25 wide-eyed children, all just as charming or annoying as a gaggle of city kids, all in the age group of 6-14, whose attention you'd need to hold, and read, play and dance if need be. Also expect plenty of staring.

After this, you trudge up a steep slope to a hut where you will be staying with a Ladakhi family. Homes are cute and as comfortable as possible (though toilets with running water are a rarity). Food, though tasty and nourishing, is restricted to local offerings, a blend of Tibetan, Nepali and Ladakhi: tingmo, skew, khambir, thupka and occasionally momos.

If this is your idea of an interesting holiday, 17000ft, which runs "Voluntourist" pro-

grammes, can make it happen.

Tempted? You are not alone. Over 400 students, working professionals and even families have opted for this "holiday" in the last three years. A 10-day programme is priced at ₹55,000 (all-inclusive barring travel) and ₹69,000 for 16 days. Sahu says she interviews every individual who expresses interest to make sure they can cope. Spirit, grit and reasonable physical fitness are essential ingredients for this unusual vacation.

The Voluntourist programme is one of the efforts to improve the quality of schools and learning outcomes in the remotest parts of Ladakh. In 2010, Sahu, at the time a teacher at Delhi's Shri Ram School, embarked on a three-week solo trek to Ladakh, fell ill and recuperated in a remote village for three weeks. During her time there, she began to appreciate how little the people of the region managed with. "Falling in love with Ladakh is easy but I couldn't get over the inequality I saw," she says. The gap between children at her Delhi school, and even her own, was too glaring for her to ignore.

After returning, Sahu resigned from her job and began to explore how to improve matters for the children in Ladakh. Initially, she thought she'd open a school but then realised the impact would be limited. After all, the government already had a system in place with over 1,000 schools.

Instead, she sought out several NGOs, including Pratham and the Aga Khan Trust, to

find out why the tiny region was not on their radar. The universal answer: the terrain was too challenging and they had their hands full already.

In 2012, Sahu registered 17000ft as an NGO. She began working with 1,034 government schools, starting with Leh and later expanding to Kargil district. Since then, the NGO has helped improve basic infrastructure in 135 schools and revamped 150 anganwadis. Playgrounds have been set up in 134 schools and libraries in 220 schools. Their data shows that children read three books a month on average. Around 2,100 teachers have been trained over 34,000 man-hours; 250 workshops have been held to involve the community; and 120 digital labs have been activated using local servers.

The local authorities have also woken up to the NGO's work and started working more actively with them. A technology platform called MapMySchool@17000ft is being rolled out, which allows the government's education department to keep a closer tab on schools under their jurisdiction.

Funding remains a challenge (Sahu's husband quit his job and joined full time) but the support of individuals like Luis Miranda (a former banker who chairs the trust and has done the Voluntourist programme with his own family) has kept the ship afloat.

Sahu is often asked why she picked the most difficult terrain to operate in. Her answer is that someone had to. So, dear readers, if you can deal with a bit of discomfort and want to add a unique experience to your next vacation, be a Voluntourist. Someone has to.

AND ANOTHER THING

Cutting close to the bone



AAKAR PATEL

I saw the movie *Parasite* this week and couldn't understand why such a big deal has been made of it. The film won four Oscars a few days ago, including Best Picture (the first foreign film to get the honour), Best Director and Best Screenplay. The Oscars are often like Nobel Peace prizes. Not given to Gandhi, given to Henry Kissinger and, therefore, perhaps not the best judge of quality.

But there would have been some strong appeal towards the movie from the film set, because it made a lot of money at the box office and also broke the language barrier for best film at the Academy.

I tried to figure out what that powerful appeal in the film could be. The story is fairly simple. A poor family in South Korea inveigles its way into a rich one's home. One of them, a young man, becomes a tutor, his sister the art teacher, the father the driver and the mother the housekeeper, all without the rich family knowing that they're related.

They do this to no particular end other than to keep the job (they aren't planning on stealing or murdering or anything) so perhaps such jobs are not easy to find in that society.

But the family approaches it with such intelligence and quick thinking that one wonders why they aren't employable, and why



A STILL FROM PARASITE: These people all have some talent, determination and drive. What stops them from doing well in their society?

they remain in poverty. The son is sharp and focused. The daughter is absolutely brilliant. She tames a wayward child and convinces an elite family that she understands and can teach art at a deep level.

The father is apparently a flawless driver, in the eyes of the man who has hired him and who is chauffeured around in a large Mercedes saloon, not an easy car to master. The point is that these people all have some talent, determination and drive. What stops them from doing well in their society? This we are not told by the plot or by the things that surround us in the movie. They live in a slum-like space (I use the awkward phrase because we Indians are

familiar with a certain type of slum, which this is not) and are able to effortlessly make the transition to a couple of rungs above. How?

Are they very well educated and exposed in a system that provides the basics of health and education but is unable to provide employment? What held them back from finding success or a middle-class existence? Are these things that held them back visible (meaning in terms of the way that they look or speak)? Or are they invisible? That is a question that those of us who come from deprived societies will think about.

I could not get the answers to any of these from the movie. And so for me the cause of the

primary conflict in this class war and the point of tension remained vague and undefined. After the movie, I told my wife I didn't think much of it. She said she liked it, and when I asked her why, she said: "It's a modern theme, about inequality, which is important to address. There are few deep-plot films these days. Most of what we get is war films, half the releases are Marvel and Wakanda and that kind of thing."

She said that the movie was also aesthetically pleasing: "The house, the food is stylised. It's not a perfect film but it's definitely a good film." She added that getting an Oscar is not the movie's high point. All films that have been winning of late have been pretty average.

To her, the more impressive award for the movie to have won was the Palme d'Or in Cannes where the competition is bigger.

I could understand her point of view, but to my mind this cast the movie only as interesting and watchable. I was still unable to figure out why it has received the sort of adulation that it has. The *Washington Post* review referred to something that I had not thought of. The reviewer wrote that "the Parks (the wealthy family) are also, in a way, leeches, using the hired help to fill the nurturing and emotional roles that they can't — or won't. It's a zero-sum game". This is interesting as an observation but the reviewer doesn't offer more, and I didn't think there was any more to it.

The Guardian theorised: "The servant is someone with an intimate knowledge of his or her employer, and yet this intimacy is so easily — and inevitably — poisoned with resentment. There is a licensed transgression in servitude, and this transgression is nightmarishly amplified when it is a question of an entire family seeking to get up close and personal. The poorer family see themselves in a distorting mirror that cruelly reveals to them how wretched they are by contrast and reveals the riches that could — and should — be theirs. It is almost a supernatural or sci-fi story; an invasion of the lifestyle snatchers. *Parasite* gets its tendrils into you."

I sort of understand this, but think it is an elementary observation of the first order. The opening line about servant and intimacy will surprise no middle-class Indian. The rest of it is what I am unable to pick apart.

That leaves me with a final, alarming thought about why I am not able to "get" *Parasite*. Are we too close as well-off Indians, all with servants and drivers and tuition teachers ourselves, to be able to understand why it is all so awful?

GEAR

Classy player

The Audi Q8 is a sporty sedan and a distinguished SUV rolled into one, writes Pavan Lall

Few manufacturers have the guts to keep pushing out cars that are larger than the earlier versions in today's quickly changing auto market that increasingly seems to prefer compact and mid-size crossovers, SUVs and sedans.

The Audi is one such rare manufacturer. The German carmaker recently launched the Q8 — the big brother (or sister) of the Q7, taking the technology and the dimensions of four-wheel-drive cars to the next level. Though the Q8 is broader than the Q7 by only a few millimetres, at 15 feet long and 6 feet wide, it is a very large SUV for Indian roads — although its air suspension and advanced electro-mechanics never let you feel it.

The Q8 is built to look much sleeker than the Q7. Its sharper, angular body lines give it a crossover feel as opposed to the rounded lines that define the other Q-category SUVs from Audi. This also means that the Q8 will be squarely targeting competitors that include the BMW X7, the Range Rover Sport, Volvo XC90 and the Mercedes-Benz GLC.

The new Audi SUV, which weighs over two tonnes, feels and behaves more like a sedan as it borrows technology and style heavily from the A-8 sedan. The twin-touch screen console, the use of leather and chrome, and the comfort all feel familiar and are reminiscent of Audi sedans, but not in



AUDI Q8

Engine: 3 L TFSI
Power: 340hp
Torque: 500Nm
Transmission: 8 speed Tiptronic (automatic)
Top speed: 250 km/h

No of cylinders: 6
Displacement CC: 2995 CC
Acceleration: 0-100 km/h in 5.9 seconds
Kerb weight: 2115 kg
Price: ₹ 1.33 crore (Ex-showroom)

a bad way. The steering, which is plush and leather wrapped, fits in nicely with the restrained but luxe interiors that are kitted out in leather and chrome accents. The sharp design cues hearken back to the A8 and don't feel SUV-like at all.

Fire up the engine and the Q8 is easy to manoeuvre despite its size. The car comes equipped with a variety of driving modes, of which the dynamic sportier one is the most fun to drive on. In front of the driver, the dominating element is the multimedia infotainment console that works through a touch response display system. Designed in black, the panel does everything from controlling air temperature to increasing fan speed, and it does more with the touch of a finger. It is also easy to get accustomed to as a replacement for the traditional knobs and buttons. Switch it off and it blends into the dashboard like a piece of dark burl

wood that you wouldn't look at twice.

Audi says it wants the Q8 to combine the pulse-pounding dynamics of a sporty coupé with the roominess of an SUV. And while this is no Lamborghini, it certainly is no sluggish van either. The car's permanent Quattro (all-wheel) drive is accompanied with self-locking centre differential, which gives the Q8 a surefooted nimbleness and traction that you don't expect from a rig this size. Even at a 30-degree slope, the Q8 will stay stable and firmly planted on the tarmac as though its wheels were held by Spidey's spiderweb.

Taken along a highway, its 340hp petrol engine is sufficient to get the Q8 going. However, if you're expecting pure exhilaration, you would have to switch to the dynamic mode. The output delivers for everyday driving conditions as also for intercity travelling.

The backseat is spacious and comfortable and the trunk voluminous enough to accommodate two golf sets or a family's travel luggage.

Not so long ago, large SUVs were seen as the preferred choice of outdoorsy people who frequently went on mountain, hiking or fishing trips. Today, that's come full circle and is best exemplified with the range of Qs that Audi has been selling in India over the last decade.

As large, premium German rides, which could house an actor, their bodyguard and social media manager, these SUVs that included the Q5 and the Q7 have been the primary choice of Bollywood stars across the pecking order. With the arrival of the Q8 there's a new target audience waiting to be tapped. Think of that category as including not just movie stars but also the ones that reside in boardrooms, sports arenas or Parliament. The Q8 is, after all, sporty and distinguished. It's a step into the future.

Samsung Note10 Lite ₹38,999

Creative edge

The Note10 Lite is for doodlers, not gamers, writes Veer Arjun Singh

Samsung is testing a new turf. The South Korean company has come up with trimmed-down versions of its two flagship phones — the S10+ and the Note10+ — to ward off competition from the Chinese.

While the S10 Lite (₹39,999) is simply a powerful mid-range phone, like the OnePlus 7T (₹34,999) and the Realme X2 Pro (₹31,999), the Note10 Lite (₹38,999) has the creative edge with the S-Pen stylus. Here's how it competes and differs.

Design 4/5

The Note10 Lite has a slightly smaller 6.7-inch screen compared to the 6.8-inch screen on the Note 10+, but both phones have a full-screen display with a punch-hole camera and look almost the same. However, Samsung has replaced the Note10's glass back with a "glassic" — glass, but mostly plastic — back on the Note10 Lite.

Irrespective of the cost cutting, the Note10 Lite is audaciously flashy in its "Aura Glow" colour variant. The silver back reflects light to create an RGB effect, which is unique, ostentatious, yet classy.

The screen packs Samsung's proprietary Super AMOLED display with a medium-sharp resolution of 1080 x 2400 — the same as the OnePlus 7T. But Samsung has cleverly retained the 3.5mm headphones jack and thrown in a pair of wired headphones — which is a score on the OnePlus 7T.

Performance 3.5/5

The Note10 Lite's Exynos 9810 processor is not future-proof and certainly not as stellar as OnePlus 7T's Snapdragon 855 in terms of peak performance. Despite this, the Note10 Lite with 6GB RAM and 128 GB storage is smooth in day-to-day performance. It can also handle heavy mobile games such as *PUBG* on best graphics settings. But the Note10 Lite's low screen refresh rate of 60Hz is a noticeable bummer while gaming — an area where the OnePlus 7T outperforms with its 90Hz refresh rate.

In terms of battery power, however, the Note10 Lite outdoes the OnePlus 7T despite having a bigger screen, its 4,500mAh battery easily lasting 24 hours.

The S-Pen is where the Note10 Lite tips the balance in its favour. This Bluetooth-enabled stylus acts as a camera trigger (in its most



primitive use) and as a tool to write, sketch, doodle and create delightful GIFs and multimedia messages. In the Android market where phones tend to clone each other far too often, the S-Pen is a key differentiator.

The OnePlus 7T and the Realme X2 Pro are better multi-tasking and gaming devices. The Note10 Lite's strength lies in its creativity

Camera 4/5

After the design and the S-Pen, the Note10 Lite's rear camera is its next strong suit. It's a trio of 12MP lenses, one each for wide, ultra-wide and telephoto photography. The primary wide lens of f/1.7 aperture ensures accurate colour reproduction and good saturation levels. And the quality is exceptional in night mode. The shots are well-lit and sharp, and match the results of the formidable Google Pixel 3a.

The ultra-wide lens of f/2.4 aperture is handy but far from perfect. It does a comparable job in natural light but not so much after the sun goes down. The telephoto lens with a 2x optical zoom brings faraway subjects close, while retaining most of the details. As a package, the Note10 Lite's rear camera is perhaps the best in the price range.

The 32MP selfie camera is barely average. It does a decent job outdoors but indoor shots are over-exposed even after you disable the default "beauty" filter.

Verdict 4/5

The OnePlus 7T and the Realme X2 Pro are better multi-tasking and gaming devices. The Note10 Lite's strength lies in its creativity. Buy the phone for its beautiful design, quirky S-Pen functions, a good rear camera, a smooth Samsung One UI 2 interface and excellent battery.

