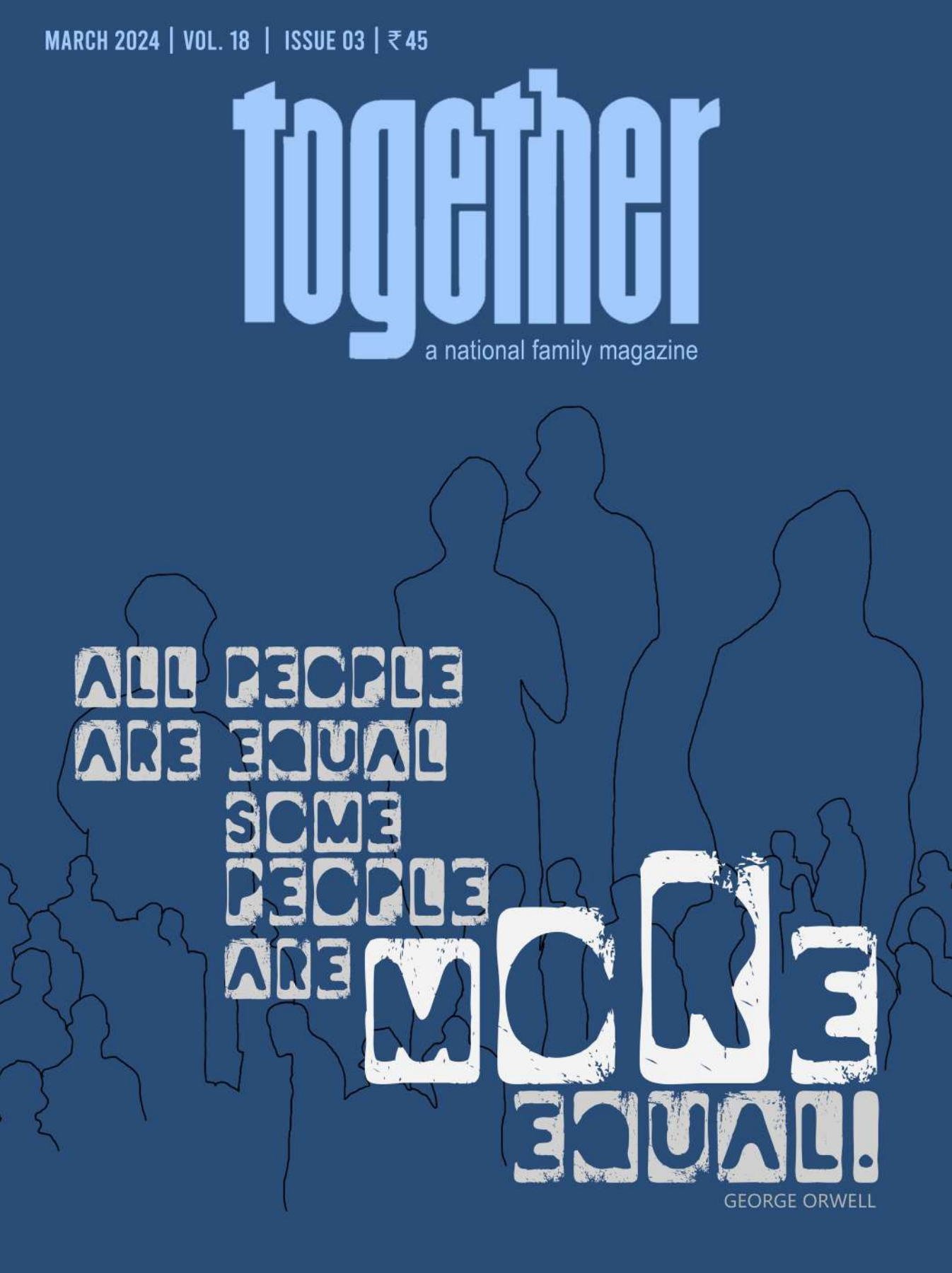


together

a national family magazine



ALL PEOPLE
ARE EQUAL
SOME
PEOPLE
ARE MORE
EQUAL!

GEORGE ORWELL

Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine **Together** is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. **Together** is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to

all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together. **Together** is an effort to uncover our shared humanity.

Your critical and relevant write-ups, that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity, are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to editor@togethermagazine.in before the 15th of every month.

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SUBSCRIPTION

To subscribe to the magazine or to contribute to the running of **Together** please log on to www.togethermagazine.in

Pay online (NEFT) Transaction:

Franciscan Publications – Together, South Indian Bank, Branch: Christ University, A/c. No. 0396053000005736, IFSC: SIBL0000396, MICR: 560059010

Pay by Cheque or Demand Draft in favour of 'Franciscan Publications – Together'

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Back cover	₹13,000
Inside back cover	₹8,000
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Inner half page	₹2,000
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SUBSCRIPTION RATES

	1 year	3 years
India	₹500	₹1,400
Other Countries	US \$75	US\$200

CONTENTS

March 2024 Volume 18 Issue 3



04 Editorial: It Is a Bumper Election Year...
Saji P Mathew ofm

06 Electronic Voting Machines and Trust Issues
Liya Thomas

10 Deciphering Delimitation
Sumit Dasgupta

12 Two Faces of India: From Ram Temple to Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra
Anmol Bara OFM

15 Dusty Streets and Cancer Hospitals as Worship Houses
Gerry Lobo OFM

18 Expert Mindset Vs the Cloud of Unknowing Mindset
A Francis OFM

20 The Narratives in One's Mind
Monica Fernandes

24 Colours Are Functional
Dr Akeela P

26 No Destination Travel
Amrutha Menon

30 Advertisements and the Idea of Indian Women
Dr Akeela P

32 Deities & Architecture: Temples of Tamil Nadu
Dr Susheela B

35 Remembering Netaji
Dr Parasuraman

41 Are We Ready?
Dr Marianne Furtado de Nazareth

8



DATA POINT
Bond, Electoral Bond
Kapil Arambam

22



IN PICTURES
Tree-living Crabs of Goa
Saji P Mathew OFM

29



IN STAMPS
International Women's Day
Tom John



CINEMA
A Spine-chilling Experience...
Romil Udayakumar TNV



BOOKS
The Island of Missing Trees
Sonu Fakiha



ART
Synopsis 77: An Art Exhibition by Fr Dr KM George Jamesmon PC OFM

It Is a Bumper Election Year; Democracy and Freedoms May Be Compromised

The focus on winning has shifted the narrative from serving the public to political opportunism, party switching, and outsmarting the opponents.

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

In 2024 democracy will be tested like never before. More than half the world's population is going into their national elections, which includes, India, the United States of America, European Union, and many other countries in Africa and Asia. The remaining half of the population of the world, like the people of China, Russia, and others, pretty much have no power to exercise free and fair elections.

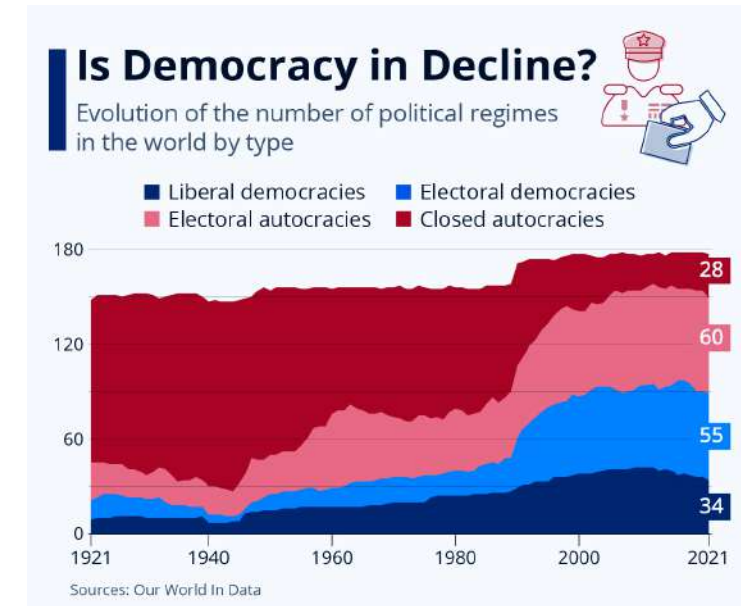
Going by the political commentaries that we hear so loud and clear, the far right is making progress and might claim victory in major elections, we would have national leaderships spanning from majoritarian populists to fascist dictatorships, and many of our freedoms and institutions would be compromised; the world as we know would change; it will not be the same post 2024. The order of the world as we know since the end of World War II, or in the case of India, from the time of our independence might take a dangerous turn.

Will democracy survive 2024 bumper elections? In spite of having free and

fair elections, people still choose candidates with dubious democratic credentials? Perhaps people have other priorities than the priorities laid down by the founding fathers of our nation and constitution.

India, world's most populous democracy, is electing its 18th Lok Sabha in April or in May. Election times are the most vulnerable times of Indian democracy. In the cutthroat unsparing practices of Indian politics, winning elections is often prioritised over everything else. The fierce competition and the high stakes involved have led politicians to adopt questionable campaign strategies and tactics. Parties resort to manipulation, misinformation, and sometimes even use force to secure victory. The focus on winning has shifted the narrative from serving the public to political opportunism, party switching, and outsmarting the opponents by wooing the voters with money, power, and communal and caste politics.

Disinformation and misinformation are used to polarise communities, sway public opinion, and affect voting patterns. Political polarisation and fueling of religious ideologies and popular emotions can cause division and undermine the inclusive and diverse spirit of the election process.



In the recent case of Chandigarh mayoral election presiding officer tampered with the ballot papers; made the BJP candidate 'first past the post', declared the BJP candidate as winner, and he, who is suppose to be neutral and unbiased, shamelessly joined the victory celebrations right there in the election hall with the winners. Thanks to the Supreme Court for doing the needful to restore the sanctity of the election.

'Politics of distraction' is the order of the day. In a country of mass illiteracy and unemployment, farmers' suicide, and farmers' protest, politicians and other key people divert public attention by discussing worship place destructions and temple constructions, cow protection and mythology, women's dressing and girls wearing hijab to college. Noam Chomsky, an American social commentator says, "The key element of social control is the strategy of distraction that is to divert public attention from important issues and changes decided by political and economic elites, through the technique of flood or flooding with continuous distractions and insignificant information."

Animal Farm is a short novel by George Orwell. It is an allegory of Russia in the early

20th century (the USSR), and the leaders on *Animal Farm* are the leaders of Russia in the beginning of twentieth century. The storyline is simple. The animals stage a rebellion against the farm owner. The animals win power. The pigs position themselves as more powerful than the rest of the animals. The most powerful pigs are Snowball and Napoleon. No one with power likes another having power. Napoleon sees to it that Snowball is taken off the farm by force, so by the time the farm needs to have an elected leader, the animals are left with only one choice.

Animal Farm is an allegory for any society. The easiest people to control are those who think they are free. Napoleon, the leader, brings out several commandments for people of the republic to live by, like, "all are equal, and some are more equal than others." People live in the illusion of equality. Big democratic terms are used. People are served with the illusion of freedom. Leaders call them comrades and friends; the supreme leader lets them elect their president but gives only one choice. Napoleon (acting as a large-hearted democratic man) declares election; but also declares himself as the only choice (these were days before we had the NOTA option). Napoleon was elected 'unanimously'. Democracy is an asset only among people with free and informed minds. ■



ELECTRONIC VOTING MACHINES AND TRUST ISSUES

LIYA THOMAS

Recently, the Supreme Court of India ruled not to hear a petition asking for an audit of electronic voting machines (EVMs). The plea was not allowed to be heard by a three-judge bench led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud on the grounds that revealing the source code of EVMs would enable malevolent actors to get around the machines' security.

In India, EVMs were first used in the Paravur Assembly Constituency of Kerala in the year 1982. Since 1998, the Election Commission has increasingly used EVMs instead of ballot boxes. In 2003, all state elections and by-elections were held using EVMs; and encouraged by this, in 2004, the Election Commission took a historic decision to use only EVMs for the Lok Sabha elections.

Known as the "mother of democracies," Britain elects its Members of Parliament to the House of Commons using paper ballots. On the other hand, the US, sometimes known as the oldest democracy in the world, combines the use of electronic voting machines with paper ballots. Currently, beside India, UK and the US, electronic voting is used in Namibia, Nepal, Armenia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela.

EVM has been devised and designed by the Technical Experts Committee (of the Election Commission) in collaboration with two Public Sector undertakings: Bharat Electronics Ltd, Bangalore (under Ministry of Defence) and Electronic Corporation of India Ltd, Hyderabad (under Department of Atomic Energy). They do not require electricity. They run on an ordinary battery assembled by Bharat Electronics Limited/Electronic Corporation of India Limited.

An EVM has two parts: a Control Unit and a Balloting Unit connected by a cable. The Control Unit stays with the polling officer, while the Balloting Unit is in the voting booth. The voter has to simply press the blue button on the Ballot Unit against the candidate and symbol of his choice and the vote is recorded.

Benefits

Efficiency: EVMs streamline the voting process, making it faster and more efficient. They eliminate the need for manual counting, reducing the time required to declare election results.

Transparency: EVMs enhance transparency in the electoral process by providing a clear and verifiable record of votes cast. With features like VVPAT, voters can verify that their votes are recorded accurately. VVPAT is an independent verification printer machine and is attached to electronic voting machines. It allows voters to verify if their vote has gone to the intended candidate.

Cost-effectiveness: EVMs offer cost savings in terms of paper, printing, transportation, and storage, as they eliminate the need for millions of printed ballot papers for each election cycle.

Challenges

Lack of Transparency: Some critics argue that the inner workings of EVMs are not sufficiently transparent, leading to doubts about the accuracy and fairness of the voting process.

Reliability: Questions have been raised about the reliability of EVMs, including the possibility of technical malfunctions or errors that could affect the outcome of an election.

Trust Issues: Despite security measures, there is still a lack of trust among some political parties and voters regarding the reliability and authenticity of EVMs, leading to calls for additional safeguards or alternative voting methods.

Why EC says Indian EVMs cannot be hacked or manipulated

Political parties across the spectrum have expressed doubts about electronic voting machines (EVMs) being manipulated. Around the world, paper ballots are more popular with just 25 countries experimenting with EVMs.

- ▶ 275 safety protocols make EVMs tamper-proof
- ▶ No internet port so no means to receive WiFi/Bluetooth/wireless signal
- ▶ Produced and processed under sanitized conditions
- ▶ EVM chip writable only once; once written into and encrypted, chip cannot be read/overwritten
- ▶ Rigorous physical safeguards in place during transport/storage
- ▶ No candidate knows switch allotted to him/her till day of withdrawal of nomination
- ▶ Serial number of switch allotted to a party may vary from constituency to constituency
- ▶ Before start of election, EVM switch fidelity tested with VVPAT before political party agents
- ▶ EVM cannot be 'stuffed' as each vote takes 7 seconds to register
- ▶ Malfunction easily detected

With 1.4 billion people living in our nation, conducting elections with ballots for such a vast number of voters is difficult. Automation is the only practical solution, and electronic voting machines suit the bill. Many of the current issues are resolved by EVM, but it still requires regular R&D, timely bug fixes, security updates, and hardware upgrades much like any other electrical device or software component.

There have been significant debates regarding the reliability of EVMs, and it is okay to raise these issues since it shows a will to grow and adapt. Citizens have the constitutional right to vote. Voting in a democracy is a representation of the love and resentment of the people. Thus, voters need to take voting seriously, and the state has a duty to defend citizens' constitutional rights. Nevertheless, in the current digital era, giving up on EVMs and switching back to paper votes would not be a wise decision. However, certain nations—such as France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, England, and so on—have never adopted or abandoned EVMs because of a lack of transparency.

In a democracy, there is perhaps nothing more important than the credibility of the electoral process; therefore in a democracy, elections should not only be fair but should be seen to be fair. By shoring up its image and bringing in some more transparent reforms, the EC can restore faith in elections. ■

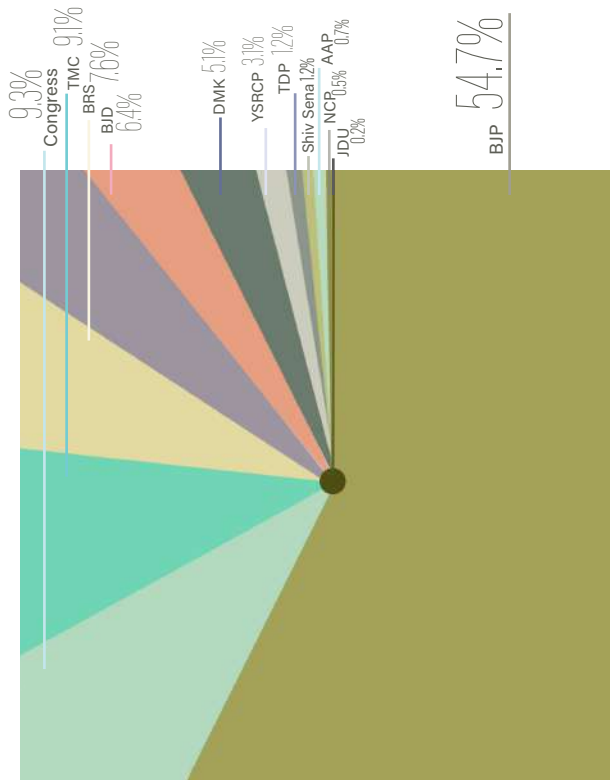
DATA POINT

Bond, Electoral Bond

Compiled by KAPIL ARAMBAM

Electoral bond is a bearer instrument, where the ownership of the bond will depend on the possession of the instrument and it is also an interest-free instrument.

State Bank of India is the only bank which provides Electoral bonds and the same can be issued in multiple denominations, ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹1,00,00,000 in specified branches of the State Bank of India (SBI). The scheme of Anonymous Electoral Bond was introduced in The Finance Bill, 2017 during Union Budget 2017–18. It was struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on 15 February 2024. The election funding system, which was in place for seven years, was stopped with immediate effect by a five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, who directed the SBI to stop issuing these bonds and called the scheme “violative of RTI”.



They might be called electoral bonds, but the rules don't say that the money must be used only for elections. So, whoever gets more money, the money can be used to buy up media space, boost advertising. Once you have the money, you can use it anywhere.

LOKESH BATRA, Indian Navy veteran



The BJP is the single biggest beneficiary of EB donations.

The Bond Broker

- Electoral bonds are a way for people to donate money to political parties without revealing who they are or who they're giving to
- This secrecy might compromise the right to know, which is part of the right to freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution
- If the government can see who's donating, they might use that information to influence elections, which wouldn't be fair
- Potential for unauthorised donations violating regulations



- Possibility of leading to unfair business practices and illegal money getting into politics
- Unclear rules about how much companies can donate and how transparent they have to be

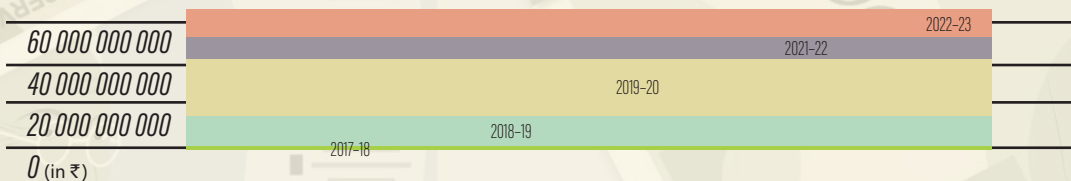
Who is challenging EBs in the Supreme Court?

In 2017, and later in 2018, two NGOs — Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and Common Cause — and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) filed two separate petitions in the Supreme Court, urging it to put an end to the EB system. Now, six years later, the court has finally pronounced its ruling in these cases, months after it announced that it had concluded hearings in the petitions challenging the bond system in November 2023. ■

Electoral bonds in numbers

Donations declared through Electoral Bonds by Political Parties: FY 2017-18 to FY 2022-23 (₹ in Cr)

POLITICAL PARTY	SOURCES OF INCOME	AUDIT REPORTS 2022-23	AUDIT REPORTS 2021-22	AUDIT REPORTS 2020-21	AUDIT REPORTS 2019-20	AUDIT REPORTS 2018-19	AUDIT REPORTS 2017-18	Total Electoral Bonds (by amount)	Party wise share
BJP	Contributions through Electoral Bonds	1294.15	1033.7	22.385	2555.00	1450.89	210.00	6566.13	54.78%
INC	Electoral Bond	171.02	236.09	10.075	317.861	383.26	5.00	1123.36	9.3714%
AITC	Donations- Electoral Bonds	325.10	528.14	42.00	100.46	97.28	-	1092.99	9.1184%
BRS	Electoral Bond	529.04	153.00	-	89.15	141.50	-	912.69	7.6142%
BJD	Donation through Electoral Bonds	152.00	291.00	67.00	50.50	213.50	-	774.00	6.4572%
DMK	Electoral Bond	185.00	306.00	80.00	45.50	-	-	616.50	5.1432%
YSR (C)	Electoral Bond	52.00	60.00	96.25	74.35	99.84	-	382.44	3.1905%
TDP	Electoral Bonds	34.00	3.50	-	81.60	27.50	-	146.60	1.2230%



EB donations declared by BJP

Info Sources

- Bar and Bench
- Hindustan Times
- Al Jazeera
- Live Law
- India Law Journal
- Association for Democratic Reforms

Deciphering *Delimitation*

Congruent democratic and federal imperatives in the delimitation process require a delicate balance, underpinned by equitable representation and decentralised governance structures.

SUMIT DASGUPTA

What does delimitation mean and what are the constitutional provisions which deal with it? Why were the number of electoral constituencies frozen as per the 1971 Census? Will the fresh exercise of delimitation go against the federal principle, giving an advantage to certain States over others?

Delimitation entails the intricate process of determining the number of seats and territorial constituency boundaries for legislative bodies, including reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Articles 82 and 170 of the Constitution mandate periodic readjustments based on Census data, delegated to the Delimitation Commission established under parliamentary legislation. Historical instances of this exercise occurred following the 1951, 1961, and 1971 Censuses. The forthcoming delimitation of Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly constituencies, slated to coincide with the first census post-2026, has been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government delays, initially postponing the 2021 Census.

The democratic ethos, grounded in the principle of 'one citizen-one vote-one value,' necessitates periodic recalibration of parliamentary representation. However, since the 1971 Census, seat allocations have remained static, aimed at incentivising population control efforts. This freeze, initially enacted through the

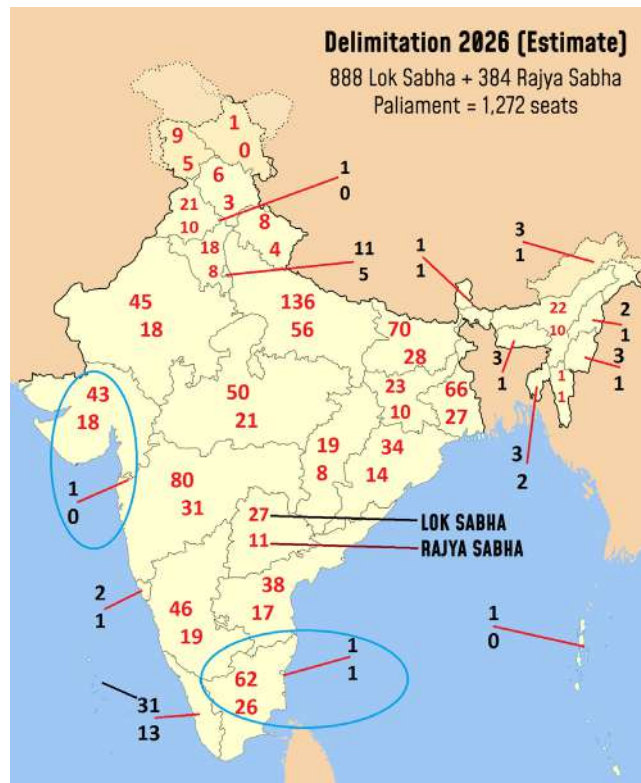


Table 1: If the number of seats is retained at 543 and reapportioned among States based on the projected population in 2026

State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net gain/loss
U.P.	80	91	11
Bihar	40	50	10
Rajasthan	25	31	6
M.P.	29	33	4
Tamil Nadu	39	31	-8
Andhra + Telangana	42	34	-8
Kerala	20	12	-8
Karnataka	28	26	-2
Punjab	13	12	-1
Himachal	4	3	-1
Uttarakhand	5	4	-1

Table 2: If the number of seats is increased to 848 based on the projected population in 2026

State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net gain
U.P.	80	143	63
Bihar	40	79	39
Rajasthan	25	50	25
M.P.	29	52	23
Tamil Nadu	39	49	10
Andhra + Telangana	42	54	12
Kerala	20	20	-
Karnataka	28	41	13
Punjab	13	18	5
Himachal	4	4	-
Uttarakhand	5	7	2

Courtesy: The Hindu and Vaishnav et al, Carnegie Endowment

42nd Amendment Act (1976) and extended by the 84th Amendment Act, is set to be revisited post-2026 Census, with territorial constituency boundaries adjusted accordingly. Meanwhile, reserved seats for SC and ST have been determined based on the 2001 Census data, slated for reassessment post-2026.

The freeze on seat allocations since 1971 has sparked debates surrounding the equitable distribution of representation, particularly given uneven population growth across states. This has prompted discussions regarding potential revisions to the delimitation exercise, reflecting projected population dynamics post-2026.

Internationally, diverse approaches to parliamentary representation exist. In the United States, the House of Representatives has maintained a capped seat count of 435 since 1913, with redistributions following each Census.

Conversely, the European Union Parliament operates under a 'degressive proportionality' principle, wherein seat allocation adjusts relative to population shifts among member countries.

Addressing the apparent tension between democratic and federal principles in the delimitation process necessitates a nuanced approach. While maintaining the current Lok Sabha seat count could uphold federalism, recalibrating State Legislative Assembly seats to reflect current population trends is proposed to ensure democratic representation. Furthermore, empowering local bodies such as panchayats and municipalities is deemed crucial for bolstering grassroots democracy. Congruent democratic and federal imperatives in the delimitation process require a delicate balance, underpinned by equitable representation and decentralised governance structures. ■

TWO FACES OF INDIA From Ram Temple to Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra

If we continue to dwell in the past, we will ultimately bruise the present.

ANMOL BARA OFM

Two recent events in India, that are still unfolding, will go down in history: the consecration of the Ram Temple holding in it the threads of 'struggles for identity and glory' of Hindus; the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra which brings to conversation a deep-rooted injustice, corruption and the series of violence taking place in the society and the country at large. These two historical events do convey something more than what it shows us at the periphery. One would very well see the contradicting implications of these two events.

The Ram temple is looked at as a triumph against injustice done in the past as it is considered that Babri mosque was built by Muslim emperor Babur on the site of a temple already existing in 1528. The journey of the temple began with the controversial demolition of the Babri Masjid. In December 6, 1992, a mob of Hindu nationalists broke into the mosque, chanting religious slogans, pulled down the mosque. It was the culmination of a decade old angry, and at times violent, campaign. Apoorvanand says that with the approval of the Supreme Court in 2019 to construct Ram temple on the location of the Babri mosque and allocating a mosque on the outskirts of Ayodhya as a replacement, we now have established a principle of creating an unbreakable divide between Hindus and Muslims that they cannot live side by side.

On the consecration of the temple, Vinay Sahasrabuddhe writes that the consecration of the Ram idol at Ayodhya is but the start of India's cultural renaissance where the temple is a symbol of the ability to protect the self-respect against the injustice and atrocities of the aggressors.

The construction of the temple can be credited largely to the political influence of the BJP led government. The building of the Ram temple was one of the BJP's foundational promises that has seen them grow from a fringe party winning only two seats in Lok Sabha in 1984 to a force that has won with majority in 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha Election. The Ram temple movement endorsed by the BJP has paid the party a rich political fortune. And precisely, this was why many of the opposition leaders refused



to participate in the consecration ceremony, claiming that consecration was for the political gain of the BJP in the upcoming election 2024. Furthermore, the Ex Civil Servants have recently expressed their deep disquiet over the government's involvement in Ram temple consecration saying that 'religion is a private matter and the public officials should be mindful to separate their religious belief from their official duties.' It is a serious concern when it comes to a person who holds the highest constitutional office of Prime Minister, a leader not of just one religious identity but of all people of diverse religious belief.

But the involvement of the BJP led government including the Prime Minister does not fit the constitutional way of holding a public office. Does the temple signify a political ideology? How much does this event has to do with the reality of every Indian Hindu? The celebration of the Ram temple should be a reality that is not merely political but should be the celebration of the values of love, respect and enrichment of the dignity of humanity together. The rising number of intolerances in the country under the BJP led government says it otherwise. For when it is only a political affair, it can be reduced to a structural celebration of the temple which consequently will end up in fanaticism.

Meanwhile, the ongoing Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra manifests some of the traits of such fanatical approach in our society. The Bharat Nyay Yatra comes as a response to the recent violence in Manipur between the Meithei and Kuki communities. We have series of religious conflicts these days including the recent communal violence which broke out in Haryana. These can be considered as the consequences of the such religious-political manipulation of the government. It also highlights the unemployment crisis and corruption done by rich class backed by some political leaders. The country today is divided between two types of people, the rich with political background who enjoys the support of the political leaders and the poor who are growing poorer day by day but still living in a political frenzy.

People today hardly question the government on price hike unlike before 2014 but accept the policies of the government unquestionably. And the reason for this could be that the present government has substituted the need of people by feeding them with religious sentiments in the country. Ironically, the government has done but nothing on the issue of ongoing Manipur violence where the Prime Minister has hardly addressed the issue. How much was it talked in the media channels is another question to be asked. For, when one is intoxicated by the religious sentiments, one does not care for the violence, price hike, corruption or unemployment. Karl Marx has rightly said that religion is the opium of people; it is the opium that creates a reality which has nothing to do with the existing problems of the country. And the result of this intoxication is that we are made to feel that we are a developing nation contrary to the reality, where our press freedom has ranked 161 out of 180 countries in the world, ranks eighth among 162 countries for highest risk of mass killing on religious issues, significant decrease in unemployment rate, an average growth in the per capita income and so on. The Ram temple and the ongoing Bharat Nyay Yatra



therefore can be said to portray a contradictory reality of our country.

The consecration ceremony of the Ram temple should not be a structural reality alone; but it should touch every heart of people. It is the celebration that should promote life, a peaceful coexistence and valuing of each other irrespective of caste, creed and religion. This celebration should question the conscience of every citizen of the country that Ram is a name which speaks of justice, equality and fraternity and not an ideology that is served by some political party. For, when we separate the values of justice, equality and fraternity with a structure, we are only celebrating the structural reality of the Ram temple and not its essence. And any structural worship can ultimately lead to fanaticism and that which is politically driven is dangerous.

After the consecration of the Ram temple, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh has demanded the temples to be built in other two places of Kashi and Mathura. He said that 'the

country is not ready to sing paeans for plunderers anymore.' The statement clearly conveys the animosity towards the Muslims not only of historical but the present as well. For how long can we dwell on the past with animosity towards other religion? After the consecration of the Ram temple there is a significant increase in the number of targets against Muslim mosques by some Hindu outfit. The Gyanvapi mosque in West Bengal is one of them where some Hindu devotee prayed in the seller of the Mosque. There is also violent-like situations all over the country. Obviously, it is not the kind of 'cultural renaissance' of a religion but a renaissance of hate and violence. If we continue to dwell in the past, we will ultimately bruise the present. Instead, it is a high time that the government should work towards a harmonious coexistence between different religions rather than to propagate a philosophy of US versus THEM for its own political gain. ■

HAVE A HUNCH



Dusty Streets and Cancer Hospitals as Worship Houses

Religion is compassionate kindness toward every human person, particularly those in need, and is pressed down.

GERRY LOBO OFM

Thousands in search of God visit Mosques, Temples, Churches or Gurudwars. Some others look for the Divine on the mountains, deserts, rivers or oceans. In a video clip which someone passed on to me, I could not believe my eyes, the commentator was indicating yet another place of worship from the usual one where Mosques do not matter, Mandirs are superfluous and Churches redundant, even though these magnificent structures definitely have a space in the human heart and sentiments. That very special place of worship is none other than the Tata Memorial Hospital dedicated exclusively to human beings afflicted with cancer, a fortress for fighting cancer. I was informed in that video that every year sixty thousand register themselves for treatment of the cancer and among them three thousand are children. This very sight can truly be held as a place of the Divine where worship could only be healing service that humans can offer.

While it is absolutely legitimate and proper to erect structures of worship to remind oneself of the intrinsic bond between the Divine Absolute and the human creature, can anyone reduce the presence of the Divine solely to a physical building or even to a cosmic phenomena or to a natural space such as a mountain as usually done? Have we an idea or a picture of God who is spirit and that the spirit must necessarily be restricted within a structured physical arena? Precisely



because of such an understanding formed into a belief system, religions build massive structures as places of worship and tend to compete with each other or even look down upon one another's practice. Is it possible, while maintaining one's beliefs as they stand, to move beyond our conception of worship and of the places of worship to human realities in order to encounter and experience the presence of God there and consider that as the very place of worship of a living Divinity?

"Religion is integrated to India," stated rightly by Karan Singh. However religion cannot be couched

in a set of norms, rituals, and worship practices for which necessarily there be churches, mosques or mandirs. A

narrowly framed definition of religion requires a larger parameter, in that, God is discerned and touched and experienced as the bountiful Goodness and gracious Power in other ways and situations. If religion is integral to India or whosoever be, then human beings are required to be open-hearted, generous and compassionate to human beings in the first place, and be able to empathize with the distressed sufferers in the society. Otherwise, the religion which is so integral to humans (Indians) will only be a badge one wears to feel comfortable within the narrow domestic walls! In fact, this is what religion has meant for Indians, whatever their respective religious fidelity be. This kind of religion which is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche closes a person in on oneself allowing pain, suffering, hunger, misery and loss of many to go on.

Religion which is integral to a person often remains locked within a church after sensational liturgy worship or within the Mandir for a devotee who worships devotedly.

Such worshippers leave their devoted hearts for gods and their worship they leave behind at the exit door! It is on account of this kind of religious practice the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah minced no words: "Behold you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such a fast that I choose a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?" (Isaiah 58: 4-5). In this

sense what is that religion which is integral to human beings? Is it only that which is exercised with rituals and incense in a temple or in a church,

or something that is extended to human predicament, to children suffering from cancer or beset with an unknown and undiagnosed rare type of diseases? Is religion merely a matter of obligation performed according to customs and traditions to appease the gods and to submit to the law meticulously with pious and emotional sentiments or which simultaneously disturbs one's conscience at the plight of fragile and vulnerable humans? If it is the latter concern, then religion is compassionate kindness toward every human person, particularly those in need physically, mentally, socially or economically and who are pressed down by a greedy society causing them undue suffering of one kind or the other. If then those thousands over thousands who knock at the entrance of a hospital queuing up for days on ends for admission are the real devotees of God the healer and the hospital is itself a place of worship because God suffers there in the sick, and in the doctors and nurses who serve them. Unfortunately this way of experiencing

Religion cannot be couched in a set of norms, rituals, and worship practices for which necessarily there be churches, mosques or mandirs.

The Prime Minister of India — the main devotee as well as the actor in the drama of the inauguration of Ram Mandir — was emotionally very "religious"...

Ram Temple in Ayodhya is certainly a masterpiece in architecture, beauty and art. It could be a "civilisational moment, a moment deeply inked to the cultural awakening of India," as someone has

rightly put. People need it since religion is integral to our human psyche. The enormous financial cost it is bearing may have a right place. However, today, does anyone, anywhere in the country, raising scandalously magnificent churches or temples, is ever aware of a Divinity hidden in the masses of the sick and suffering, unemployed and illiterate where worship could take place in the very service offered to these needy, not as if from on high pouring out favours, but as walking on the same level ground on which the sufferer daily trudges his or her feet? However one must recognise and acknowledge that India declines when people of any faith become fanatic with worship in the temple or in the church, seeing only in them their Divine Author and nowhere else. Moreover a religion soaked with religious disputes, drowned by political scoring of majoritarian strength and built on animosity, rancor and intolerance can never be "spiritual" as Mr Modi visualises, in a land of myriad religions, languages, cultures and customs.

Religion can only be religion when religion ceases to be temple stuck, and when humans expand their heart to the thousands of innocent children whether dying in wars as we find in the Palestinian territory today or at the hospitals and homes where the little faces of God simply look out for a bit of relief from the cancer killer. We know this is not the concern of the world leaders. Can the citizens of *Bharat Matha*, the so called "spiritual" nation, begin to worship God in bending down in humble service of the afflicted human souls and bodies as they worship and offer prayers and flowers at Mandirs, Temples, Churches and Mosques? Perhaps our dusty streets where the little ones lay are our worship houses! ■

and understanding religion, worship, Mandir or church is never thought of. This is a sure indication of a belief that the Divinity can be found only if a worship place is built and an idol or a statue is installed in it with solemn rituals. But is it so? Not to any sensible mind.

The Prime Minister of India, who being the main devotee as well as the actor in the drama of the inauguration of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22 of this year, was emotionally very "religious" whatever was his inner motive. He spoke convincingly about the need for a Bharat that is spiritual. This, he suggested, would be possible only through the new majestic temple of Ram *Lalla* that was just blessed. It is a worthy thought and a just hope, no doubt. However the question is where the "spiritual" be found? Where does it arise from? Is it from some out-of-the-way skies? Or is it from the dust of daily life itself? Does the spiritual flow forth from an idol, a statue, a *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple precincts or from the pain-filled, heavy laden human brothers and sisters? Perhaps the time and energy, sweat and money utilised for devotions and liturgies, worship and temple structures should also be done to lighten the pain and suffering of humans who we find at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai and at all other places in our country where people languish horrendously and long for a bit of solace and health. The governments of our country and their political clout use their largess in constructing worship places at very high costs but can never think of creating greater and easier space and facilities for millions who suffer ailments after ailments in this resourceful country. This is a great shame on politics, on economy and those who manage these shows from on high.

Expert Mindset Vs the Cloud of Unknowing Mindset

A FRANCIS OFM

I admit, I am not a fan of the so-called self-assumed pundits, the kind of folks who claim expertise on every subject matter under the sky! I could be wrong, but it seems to me that they have a deep-seated compulsion to interject their opinion on every topic, whether called for or not. From ice-fishing to ballroom dancing, from childbearing to family planning, from philosophy to rocket science and what not, they have an awful lot to kibitz. As supercilious as they consider themselves to be, their expertise is not only wordy and tautological, but also stereotypically pontifical, characterised by a pompous air of infallibility!

Certainly, they have their merits, such as, they could be folks with the dominant functioning of the left hemisphere of the brain, which renders them the personality traits of being analytical, logical and detail-oriented. Moreover, most of these individuals fall in the personality category of the 'type A,' which makes them ambitious, (rigidly) organised and highly conscious of time management. However, underneath their alpha qualities, they could be anxious, impatient, forceful, imposing, and condescending. Their inability to dislodge from their 'mental comfort zone' of processing information through the expert mindset, they could make those around them feel less valued and uncomfortable.

It is not that I am skeptical about their sky-scraping knowledge, (anyone's for that matter).

Actually, my mental distancing from them has to do with the type of mindset I cherish, which I like to call, the 'cloud-of-unknowing' mindset. The term 'cloud of unknowing' has been used in spiritual literature since 14th century with the writing of the anonymous work of Christian mysticism titled *The Cloude of Unknowyng* (Middle English).

What do I mean by the 'cloud of unknowing' mindset? Let me explain it. When faced with a question or a problem in life, there are folks around us who are not disposed to single-mindedly seek a satisfactory one-dimensional answer. Instead, they are geared toward understanding the question itself. They look at the question from the perspective of multiple dimensionality - top down, down up and sidewise, too. This might at times lead them to the plateau of a 'no conclusive outcome'. But they are fine with it, as long as they give room for the plurality of all possible answers! They are open to accept the fact that they don't have the answer, and probably they might not find any answer anytime soon or ever. But they are comfortable to hold the spirit of the question alive.

They focus on living the question in the here and now! They may not be the individuals who fall in the category of the 'type A personality' which our competitive job markets guided by a "dog-eat-dog" culture seek after. But they are certainly individuals who draw psychological strength from the right hemisphere of the brain, which is also called the meditative, the emotional or the relational brain. They may not be analytical, but they are intuitive, could easily feel with others (empathy), and needless to say, they have the capacity to read the nonverbal cues.

A question, you'll agree with me, can have more than one answer. An array of answers, perhaps! When we focus on finding an answer, we might end up finding the immediate one. Focused on that one answer, it is quite possible that our search may come to an end prematurely, leaving many possible answers to escape the radar of our attention. On the contrary, if we approach the question with its

entirety that takes into account all dimensionalities, there is a possibility that we will enter into dialoguing with many life-inspiring experiences that are waiting to be born, and found by us. We enter into a new world which we haven't explored or experienced yet!

Some questions in life have no direct answers, which is basic to the nature of human life. Life, with all its revealed and mysterious existences, cannot be lived in the straight-lined streaks of the bare blackness and whiteness. In the intersections of the black and the white trails of certainties, there could be a lot of shades of gray, too. These are the world of the half-known and the half-unknown! That said, when someone approaches a question with an attitude of "I am not quite sure, let me explore it," which carries a meditative or contemplative tone which is the basic characteristic of the cloud of unknowing mindset, the person is in fact giving way to find greater depths of all potential answers. These individuals show a remarkable level of comfort in exploring and struggling with their questions with a radical openness of the mind.

There lies the ground of my resistance towards pundits who, come across to me with a 'straightjacket approach'. The moment a question is raised, they jump at it quickly with an instantaneous answer, starting with words like, "This is because..." They give no room for a fresh exploration or a new perspective. So much so, there is little space for entertaining a dialogue that fosters an intersubjective sensibility, shared wisdom and mutual respect. It turns out to be a monologue, akin to a radio-like-broadcast. ■



The Narratives in One's Mind

MONICA FERNANDES

I recently watched an interesting video about the narratives we constantly make up in our minds about individuals and occurrences. These narratives or stories are coloured by our experiences and how we perceive these experiences. Our prejudices also have a part to play.

For instance, when Maya's daughter burns the food, Maya gives her a lot of leeway. She mentally excuses her, "These things do happen, even to the best chefs. Her bad day, after all." But when her daughter-in-law burns the food, Maya thinks, "Useless girl! Can't do a simple thing!" Maya's prejudice has attributed a different story to the hapless daughter-in-law's foray into the kitchen.

We tend to use a single narrative thought process. Lata, a former neighbour, would always invite us for lunch on the first day of Diwali. As she was also a working woman, preparations for Diwali would stress her out. In order to reduce the guests on the first day, her husband Sudhir



invited us on the second day, without informing her. So our family dressed up and went for lunch to another friend's place on the first day. When we landed at Lata's place the next day, she was very upset. Never one to mince words, she rebuked us. "I saw you going out all dressed up going out from my window yesterday. How could you when you always come for a meal on the first day of Diwali?" We calmed her down and told her that her husband had suggested that we come the next day.

We use this single narrative thought process even regarding

ourselves. I am absent minded and tend to misplace things. My daughter Minal has asked me to buy her a kurta and suggested I keep the bill in case she wanted to exchange it. After my purchase, I focussed and kept the bill in the carry bag. Minal wanted to exchange it and said it was not in the carry bag with the garment. Being aware of my absent mindedness, I emp-

It takes a conscious effort to break old habits of jumping to conclusions.

tyed my purse but there was no bill. I once again looked into the carry bag and found it.

Each of us has different talents and intelligence levels. But some parents shame the child they perceive to be a non-achiever and praise the kid with good results to the sky. This could have tragic consequences. Anup's son Deepak was academically brilliant and a well-qualified doctor. Anup's son Vineet did not share his brother's brilliance. But Anup was like a horse with blinkers. He expected Vineet to do brilliantly as well. Anup's relentless pushing tragically led to Vineet committing suicide.

Prejudice also affects our thinking. I am reminded to faulty deductive logic we learnt in college. All persons from X community cannot be trusted. Y belongs to the community. Therefore Y cannot be trusted. Here the original premise is wrong as one cannot negatively brand an entire community just because the members follow customs or practices different from ours.

To get over this major hurdle in our thinking, the speaker in the video I saw suggested that we roll over different narratives in our mind before jumping to conclusions. Lata could have thought, "The Fernandes' family always comes for lunch on the first day of Diwali. Perhaps they had a reason in not doing so." If she had, we would have been spared the tirade! I could have thought, "If I am absent minded 60 percent of the time, it doesn't follow that I

am not focussed this time." The same goes with our prejudices. In Maya's case, her animosity towards her hapless daughter-in-law and preference for her daughter would only cause needless tension.

It takes a conscious effort to break old habits of jumping to conclusions. The speaker had suggested the listeners try out six narratives in their minds. Perhaps this is difficult but we could definitely start with at least one story. We could even think of an imaginary occurrence and practice thinking of different stories about how we view the occurrence.

Situation 1: My best friend looked right through me. Negative interpretation of the occurrence: I am soooo hurt. What does she think of herself? Ignoring me, her closest friend. Positive approach: She must be preoccupied with some problem. I'll clarify with her.

Situation 2: Veena travels all over the world. Lucky woman. Negative thought : Look at me. I am stuck at home and so unhappy. Positive point of view : I am glad Veena is enjoying herself. After all, she has had a rough time post her divorce whereas I have a husband who dotes on me.

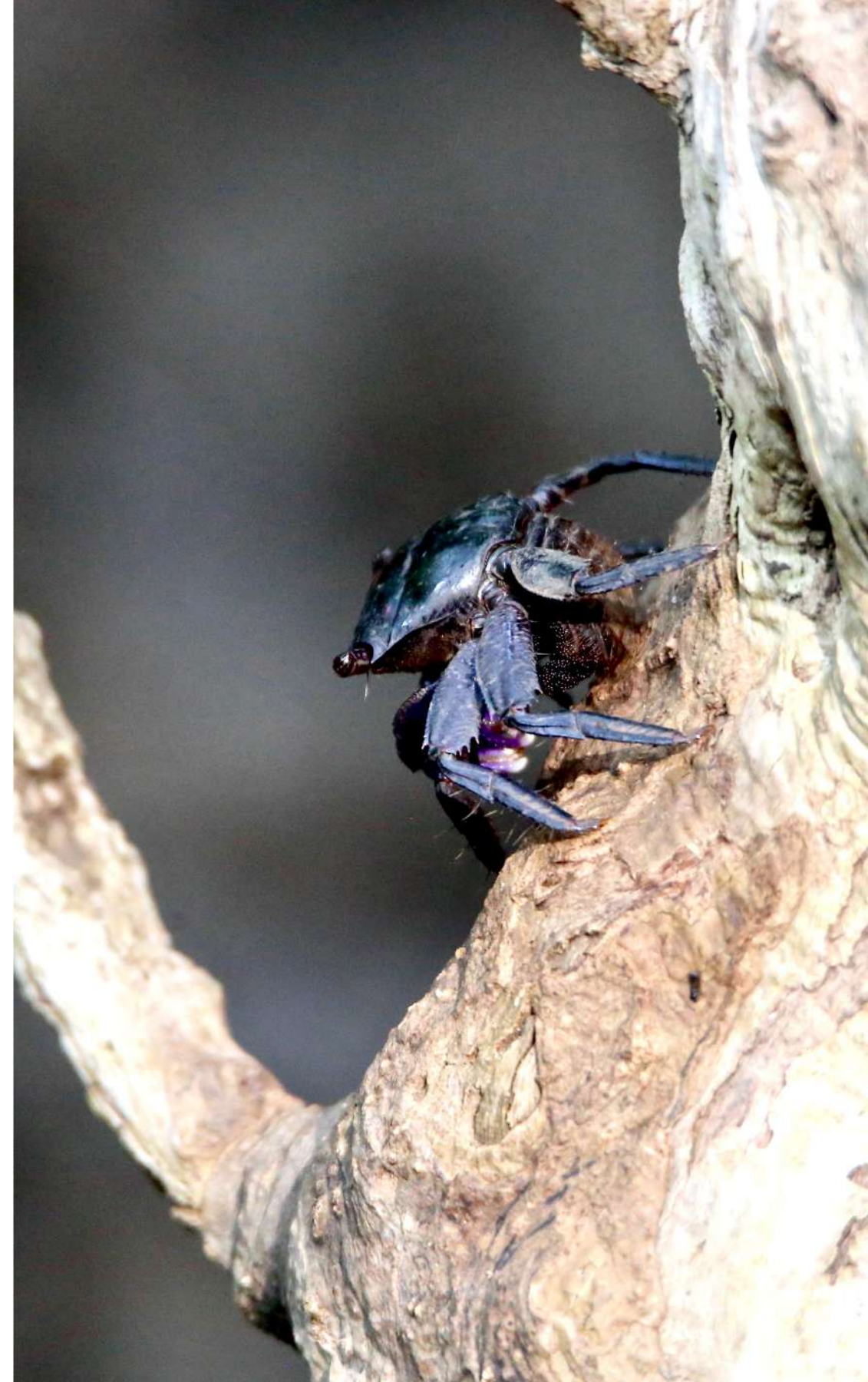
Thinking leads to action. Hence it is prudent to examine our thought processes. Out-of-the-box thinking of different alternatives avoids a lot unnecessary misunderstandings. It could save us from major blunders and fosters relationships. ■

Tree-living Crabs of Goa

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

Crossing the swollen Mandovi River on a ferry near Panjim, Goa, one is welcomed by Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary right on the shores of river Mandovi along the Western Ghats. It is one of the most protected bird sanctuaries of Goa. Though it is famous for birds it also is home to exotic wildlife in a wild mangrove setting. The diverse flora of this region comprises Teak, Red Sandalwood, Rosewood, Jungle Jack, and many more tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen trees.

It was low tide, I was walking through the marshy mangrove in search of birds, I noticed the fantastic fiddle crabs who help preserve our important coastal wetland ecosystems. Soon enough, I was taken aback by surprise, seeing a crab running up a tree. Though it looked very surreal, it created enough interest in me to go looking out for crabs on the thickly growing trees around me. I had to find enough of them to conclude, yes, they are tree-dwelling crabs; living in tree holes and beneath the barks. ■



COLOURS ARE FUNCTIONAL

Dr AKEELA P

What is the genesis of a colour? Where did it originate from? Well, we may never know the answer completely, we might just know it existed as long as human consciousness could record it.

Colour is part of us. The functionality of the colour is not only found in our ward robe, it defines of personality, influences our experience with food, elevates our mood, symbolises our intention, the palette and the texture become a crucial characteristic of a particular era in paintings. Overall, we cannot find a singular space where colour is not found.



Functionality of Colour Symbolism

The colour red is the essential colour worn by the brides in many South-east Asian culture predominantly found in India, China, Vietnam. The colour red is associated with passion, love, fertility, wealth, prosperity.

The concept of “White wedding” originated in Great Britain, by Anne of Brittany during her 1499 marriage to Louis XII of France. The colour white is symbolic of purity and virtue. This remarkable trend setter inspired the whole genre in wedding. Though it is commonly used in traditional Church weddings in Europe and American countries, this has also inspired other Southeast Countries like South Korea and Japan. However, the same colour is considered a taboo and is associated with death in India.

Colour is perfectly and strategically used by politicians; ranging from the colour of the political party, logo, flag, including their dressing. All the American contenders and presidents wear the colour Royal blue and Black to symbolise national hero, power, true honour, being majestic, etc. However, in Indian context you will find majority of the politicians wearing colour white to display truth, integrity, pure intention; mostly in Khadi material again symbolically meaning our victory over colonisation.

The colour red not only is pleasing in a plate this has a physiological reaction in our brain which stimulates hunger, therefore you will find the red colour in major food brands such as McDonalds, KFC, Burger King including in Indian major food chains such as The Empire, Haldiram’s, Café Coffee Day, Barbeque Nation. The interesting fact is that even the Menu cards and letters printed use shades of red to induce appetite and attention.

Red Love Energy Power Romance Passion	Orange Excitement Confidence Vitality Energy Fun	Yellow Cheerfulness Optimism Warmth Joy Wealth	Green Nature Prosperity Luck Balance Harmony	Blue Tranquility Calmness Serenity Harmony Freedom	Purple Luxury Mystery Royalty Spirituality Bravery	Pink Romance Compassion Delicacy Femininity Sweetness	B&W Luxury Dramatic Sophisticated Stylish Elegance
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Birds, animals and aquatic creatures are naturally gifted to match their environment.

Green is often associated with health, being organic and fresh. Many organic brands use the colour green to denote eco-friendly and true to nature with no preservatives. However, the same colour has a reverse effect in children, they feel repulsive to eat green veggies. Seeing this prevalence some evolutionists argue that green is passed as a generational memory to avoid as it reminds of poison, in contrast with red colour as many edible fruits are red in colour.

Colour in Animal Kingdom

Birds, animals & aquatic creatures are naturally gifted to match their environment, these are carefully camouflaged to protect them from predators, or hide in the bushes to prey on other smaller species. Particularly the male birds are found to have more colours in them and are naturally designed to look more beautiful to lure potential female mates. Bees can perceive more complex colour waves imminent from flowers.

Product Branding

Colour is fundamentally a powerful weapon the companies use to attract consumers. It is the influential force for any marketing segmentation.

Colour and Movie Posters

A research meta-analysis finding by Jyothika of Jyoti Nivas College, on movie poster and genre showed how movie posters are carefully designed to match the genre and the tone of the movie. For instance, the romantic movies used cherry red and mellow yellow palette. Psychological thriller movies used black to hide sinister, sense of darkness in the character. Action movies used shades of blue and black to depict aggression and balance. Sci-fi movies overtly used mint green colour to symbolise suffocation, unnatural disease, immortality, projection, and danger. Horror genre used darker shades of red, black, and grey to signify death, destruction, decay, immortality, the other side, and brutality. The coming-of-age genre used the colours yellow and plant green have been used that can imply growth. Yellow, which is very bright and attractive, grabs your attention. Red blended with brown shows wild, free, and coming across insecurities. ■

NO DESTINATION TRAVEL

AMRUTHA MENON completed a 15-day, 7,763-kilometre no destination road travel last month; starting from Bangalore, covering parts of Western and Central India, and escaping to Nepal and back to Bangalore again. She shares details of part one of her travel with the readers and what did it mean to her.



This wasn't just a road trip; but a chance to hit life's reset button, to embrace the beauty of freedom and self-discovery. With an ecstatic and nervous grin, I grabbed the steering wheel; the road ahead glittered like a silver string waiting to be explored. I knew this journey would neither be just about the beautiful sights I get to experience nor just about the miles on the odometer; it would be about the miles I travel within myself.

Bangalore faded out in the rearview mirror and I had no clue where I was heading to. All I wanted was to fulfill my childhood dream – to go for a No Destination Travel! Who knew where the road would lead, but my heart thumped for the adventure ahead. The traffic and honking were replaced by my road trip playlist. Sun-burnt, windblown and maybe getting lost a few times, I halted at Kolhapur, ready to explore every inch of this new place.

Kolhapur, with leather blookming in every room, pulsed with history. The Mahalakshmi Temple whispered stories while the markets were overflowing with unique antique structures and street foods. Imagine rows and rows of colorful sandals, bags, belts. Wander around the city, and you'll find tiny workshops where artisans tan leather, cut, stitch, and create amazing stuff. The aroma of spicy misal pav had my stomach grumbling and under the hot sun those chilled sugarcane juice with a hint

of lemon took me to heaven. But time to hit the road again. Bidding goodbye to Kolhapur, I set my sights on the wonders of Pune.

Pune has got forts (Shaniwar Wada was great), museums and enough stories to fill a lifetime. Pune and bun maska share an epic love story. Pillowly bun and a generous scoop of butter is all they need to brighten up their day. Yeah, good food is nice, but getting lost in a new city is where it's at for me. Just wandering around the buzzing streets, soaking in the vibrant culture and food; Pune is young, energetic and is always up for a good time. Amidst the sea of unknown faces, I found a quiet joy in my own company.

The uncertainty of overnight stops was a major concern. Despite the initial worry, each night brought its own unique adventure and memorable experience. Forget fancy hotels, my car became my castle; Trading comfort for adrenaline, I embraced the offbeat charm of sleeping at petrol bunks and toll booths. Sunrise, petrol bunk, coffee, and the road - just another day on the journey!

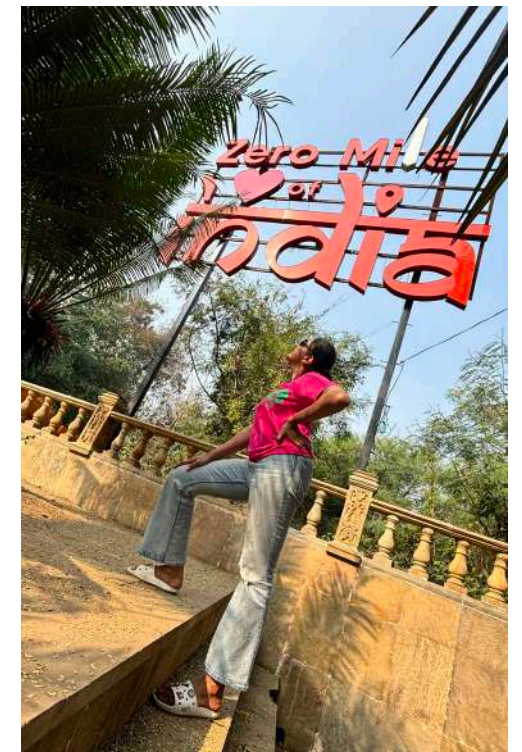
Aurangabad, the city where history, beauty, and culture collide in the coolest way possible. The Bibi Ka Maqbara (mini Taj Mahal); was stunning enough to make me double-check my history textbooks. Witnessing the great Ajanta - Ellora caves whispering the stories of buddhist monks and their intricate carvings. Chilling in a place where ancient forts like Daulatabad fort guard the hills. Or was it the food there? Aurangabad's food promises an unforgettable adventure for your palate; be it the aromatic mughalai biryanis or the creamy butter chicken or the delights of Maharashtrian cuisine.

"The Orange City" was not just about citrus but it has got a vibrant culture with influences of Marathis and even Mughals on all its aspects. The Zero Mile Stone, a pillar with four majestic-looking horses, marks the spot where the British thought the center of the country was. I found myself standing in awe of the world's biggest Buddhist stupa, Deekshabhoomi, which ain't just any stupa, It's where Dr B R Ambedkar embraced Buddhism with thousands of follow-

ers, making it a powerful symbol of equality. Fuelling up for the next stop, I found something that woke me up better than a cup of coffee; Imagine some fluffy flattened rice in a spicy-tangy gravy; and that's the Nagpur famous Tarri Poha which is not just food but an emotion.

Varanasi was all about soaking up the vibrant chaos, feeling the rhythm of life on the ghats, and savoring every unforgettable bite. From sunrise dips to evening aartis on the banks of Ganges, flowing forever young, you can watch life unfold by the water.

Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi is where the real drama unfolds. Here, death is a celebration, a raw and honest look at life's final act. Found myself floating on a rickety boat on the Ganges, the rhythmic chanting of priests and a thousand flickering diyas washed a wave of energy over me. Whether you're a devout or just a



curious traveler, the Ganga Aarti is an experience that stays with you long. It's not for the faint of heart, but if you're seeking an adventure for your senses and soul, Varanasi will grab you and never let go. And finally checked Malaiyo off my Varanasi bucket list, but it wasn't exactly my flavor fiesta.

Crossing Over to Nepal

It's crazy how life throws unexpected adventures on our way. Never in a million years did I think I'd be crossing India-Nepal border like a "Boss" blasting down the dusty roads. The journey was bumpy, (literally), but a steaming bowl of maggie, never ending chai breaks and the mountain vistas made every detour worth it. Never thought I'd be the person ringing in the New Year solo in a foreign country, but hey, life has a funny way of surprising you. A solo celebration in a different country sounds like the perfect way to shake things up. Kathmandu got crisp and cold as the sun went down. The streets are packed, like a giant international block party, every bar and restaurant has music blasting. Locals, tourists, everyone's out and ready to party. Nothing beats the cold like steamy momos, spicy meat skewers, and a sweet Yomari to warm you up. I would say the best way to explore Thamel solo is with delicious

food in hand! Let's just say my stomach was very happy after exploring Thamel. The best ever taro milk bubble tea, a spicy Korean hot pot, this crazy mutton ham burger, and some awesome Nepali eats. My tastebuds were in heaven. It was a bit chaotic, a whole lot of fun, and definitely a night to remember. Swayambhunatha temple aka the monkey Temple is a must visit. It was my leg workout kinda day. Three hundred and sixty-five steps to awesome views at the top! There are monkeys everywhere, tons of colorful prayer flags, and those cool prayer wheels to spin for good luck. And on the way down, I rewarded myself with some spicy masala chai - the perfect way to end your temple adventure.

Imagine a place that's like stepping back in time — that's Kathmandu Durbar Square. It's this crazy mix of ancient temples, palaces with intricately carved windows, and old courtyards. I was also lucky enough to catch a glimpse of KUMARI, a young girl worshiped as a living goddess, at the Kumari Ghar in Durbar square.

Saying goodbye to Nepal was bittersweet. It's been such an adventure — the mountains, the temples, the jhol momos! I'll miss the crazy energy of Kathmandu and all the awesome people I met along the way. Definitely I left a piece of my heart there, but I know I'll go back someday. ■



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8 March

International Women's Day

TOM JOHN

Imagine a gender-equal world. A world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. A world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated. Together we can forge women's equality. Collectively we can all inspire inclusion, urges, International Women's Day Community.

Spurred on by the universal female suffrage movement, IWD originated from labour movements in North America and Europe during the early 20th century. For 2024, UN Women's theme is *Invest in women: Accelerate progress*, focusing on the fifth sustainable development goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030. ■



Advertisements and the Idea of Indian Women

Advertisements are a perfect subliminal way to induce women, not men, towards what a perfect woman must be.

Dr AKEELA P

It is estimated that in 2024, the revenue in the Women's apparel market in India amounts to US\$51.05 bn. It is projected that the market will grow annually by 3.99% (CAGR 2024–2028). Women are not only the highest consumers, but also can dominate buying behaviour in a household, be trend setters in today's world of social media influencers; they can make any product viral in matter of days.

Advertisements have always aimed at women regardless of their age group. Neuroscientist determine that buying, particularly compulsive buying, increases dopamine levels and brings

some sort of pleasure or reward. Advertisements often mirror perception of the reality. Over the decades portrayal of ideal women is overtly visible in ad campaigns. Ranging from gender stereotyping of an ideal house wife to objectification of the sensuality of women.

In recent years, people have questioned the representation of women, especially towards the obsession over fair skin and how it impacts our confidence, with an swipe of a fairness cream we can become over night cricket commentator, successfully gain a job, and be a confident super attractive women.



Atlas Cycle ads show women in fully draped saree to wearing jeans, to toned body; and even the variation in the tag line is shown as though one having a good physique is empowering to conquer all the roads.



Prestige ads highlights the role of women in a family; and emphasis that an ideal woman is a married women.

The representation of women in ads shows how women are objectified in the ads of simple and basic day to day products. Ads are a perfect subliminal way to induce women, not men, towards what a perfect woman must be. It does its work even with strong, educated women with respectful jobs.

Atlas Cycle ads show women in fully draped saree to wearing jeans, to toned body; and even the variation in the tag line is shown as though one having a good physique is empowering to conquer all the roads.

A humble perishable soap is not only meant to clean the dead cells from the body but it can also add luxury in the washroom, with smells of aroma enough to make men feel attracted instantly. It is crucial for us to think that celebrities having an amazing skin is not duly from a soap but a series of expensive treatment to look young & beautiful, and we should not compare ourselves to an image that is carefully crafted.

Prestige ads highlights the role of women in a family; and emphasis that an ideal woman is a married women; and the only way to make a wife happy is to buy her a pressure cooker.

The 80s and 90s kids will remember how we would pester our parents to buy mango



juice; and the outcome was simple; if parents are in good mood they would treat us and we were happy kids. I am no longer able to see the simple mango juice of the yester years, the same idea is emblemized as an exotic experience.

Indians are the highest tea consumers; as a custom, every guest is served tea. The humble tea is found in almost all households over the counter tops. The depiction of tea along side modern young women, and them enjoying a cup of tea at the Taj Mahal, or at the back waters of Kerala, or in a kitty party, is gratifying.

It is true that we are in a world where women are questioning the traditional notions of being a woman, we are asking for equal rights and pay, and fighting for the eradication of glass-ceiling. Changes are duly made in education policy, organisational structures, parliament seats, banning of fairness ads, etc. But do we really look at an ad, probe into how women are depicted? what is the covert message we have implicitly idealised into as our normal life. We see that not much has changed expect for the length of clothing, but the same representation; the tagline is carefully worded to look empowering; and worse still that the women acting in these ads often claim to be a feminist. ■

Deities & Architecture Temples of Tamil Nadu

Dr SUSHEELA B



Airavatesvara Temple, Kumbakonam

Temples in India are not only of religious importance but they also represent our ancient history, culture, and tradition. Archaeological evidence unearthed from our ancient temples indicates not only the period of the construction of those temples but also provides information about the kings and patrons of those temples and, the traditions followed in those temples apart from showcasing the Hindu mythology through the beautiful sculptural carvings. If one dwells deep into this rich treasure, one would be able to get some glimpses into the ocean of spirituality and discover one's path to navigate to understand the eternal truth.

Recently during my visit to Tamil Nadu, I was awe-struck by the beauty of Thanjavur temples situated in Tamil Nadu and its Dravidian

style of Architecture. Most of the Great Living Chola Temples which are UNESCO World Heritage Monuments, are located in and around Thanjavur. The foremost among these is the Brihadeeswara temple also called Peruvudaiyar Kovil or Rajarajeswaram. It is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva located on the south bank of the Kaveri River in Thanjavur. It is one of the largest South Indian temples and a symbol of Chola architecture. It is called Dakshina Meru (Meru of the South).

Built by Tamil king Raja Raja Chola I between 1003 and 1010CE, the temple is a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site known as the 'Great Living Chola Temples' along with the Chola temple at Darasuram. The temple is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Tamil Nadu.



Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

Brihadeeswara is a Sanskrit composite word wherein 'Brihat' means 'big, lofty, great, vast', and 'Ishwara' means 'Bhagwan 'Shiva, supreme being, supreme atman (soul)'. The name means the 'great Bhagwan, big Shiva temple'. Several styles of temple architecture continued to develop from the 5th to the 9th century over the Chalukya era rule as evidenced in Badami and other places, and then with the Pallava era witnessed at Mamallapuram and other monuments. Thereafter, between 850 and 1280CE, Cholas emerged as the dominant dynasty. This South Indian style evolved gradually and led to beautiful architectural marvels. One such iconic piece is the Brihadeshwara temple built between 1003 and 1010CE by the Chola king Rajaraja I.

Thanjavur temple was a major charity institution in its history, providing free meals for pilgrims, devotees, and wayfarers daily. Rajaraja Chola patronised dance and music and made it a Tamil cultural capital.

The magnificent temples and architecture of Kumbakonam demonstrate the splendour of Tamil Nadu. Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva are the subjects of many of the religious buildings in Kumbakonam. The town is famous for its prestigious schools, carved Panchaloha idols, silk products, brass and metal wares, and other items. Additionally, the temples here are well-known for their magnificent pillars, imaginative wall drawings, and mythological tales. Between the 7th and 9th centuries, Kumbakonam rose to prominence. During the British Raj, the town



Brihadishvara Temple, Thanjavur

was at its most prosperous times, and it was dubbed “Cambridge of South” because it was a major centre for European education and Hindu culture.

The majority of the temples are dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva. Twelve Shiva temples are connected with the Mahamaham festival which happens once in 12 years in Kumbakonam. The temple has beautiful architectural pieces and was built by the Thanjavur Nayak kings during the 16th century.

Embark on a captivating journey through the timeless city of Madurai, where heritage, spirituality, and vibrant culture converge. From the majestic temples that stand as testaments to centuries of devotion to the bustling streets teeming with life, Madurai beckons you to immerse yourself in its enchanting embrace. Let the echoes of ancient tales and the vibrant colors of traditions guide you as you traverse the

vibrant markets, indulge in mouthwatering delicacies, and witness the grandeur of architectural wonders.

In the early 14th century, the armies of Delhi Sultanate led by Commander Malik Kafur plundered the temple, looted most of its valuables and destroyed the Madurai temple town along with the other temples. The current temple structure is the result of rebuilding efforts started by rulers of the Vijayanagar Empire.

In the 16th century, the temple complex was further expanded by Vishwanatha Nayakar and restored 14 *gopurams* or gateway towers ranging from 50 to 51 metres. The temple attracts over a million pilgrims and visitors during the annual ten-day Meenakshi Thirukalyanam festival celebrated with pomp, gaiety and procession. The Nayaka rulers followed the Hindu texts on architecture called the Shilpa Shastras. The iconic pillared hall known as thousand pillared hall built in 1569CE contains 985 carved pillars with two shrines occupying the space of the remaining 15 pillars.

Whether you are a believer, an agnostic or an atheist, you can't deny how your spirits and senses feel elevated when you visit the holy places. Our response to the situation changes. Negative thoughts are shattered. It brings solace and peace and I felt absolute calm & emotions of stillness washed over me. I was fortunate to visit these temples and returned with rich memories to be treasured. ■

Remembering Netaji

Dr PARASURAMAN

When I was in BA final year, I was living at the Students' Christian Movement (SCM) Centre hostel at Pattom. It consisted of both students and working men. There was this person who was pursuing IAS coaching at the Institute of Management in Government. His name was Sen Joseph Maanthaanam. He had dedicated himself to a rare cause: promoting the glory of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

Sen (actually I called him Maanthu) liked me because I was one of those rare people who believed that the contribution of Netaji had been neglected in histories of the freedom struggle. And the role of Gandhi, Nehru and the Congress was overrated. We became very

close friends. He was working for an organisation called Netaji Smaraka Nidhi, based in Kadakkavur, a little town on the border of the Trivandrum and Kollam districts, that had contributed 20–30 officers to Netaji's INA. There even used to be an ex-INA Association, visible from passing trains. Sen had been disinherited by his parents because he was not at all ambitious in the worldly sense. He was given over to this cause.



23 January 1997 was the birth centenary of Netaji. Sen asked me if I could take leave and hit the streets with him to sell copies of a ₹15 book called *Netajiyudey Rashtrasevanangal (Netaji's Services to the Nation)* by Capt AR Nair of the INA, Secretary of the Smaraka Nidhi. I would get a commission of ₹5 on every copy I sold. I was glad to agree. I proved to be a very good salesman, although, when I met people

(mostly students) who wanted the book but couldn't afford ₹15 easily; I gave it for ₹10, giving up my commission. Remember, one large peg of rum in those days was ₹40 only, so I was giving up one for every eight copies sold for ₹10!

By afternoon I had sold out everything. Maanthu and I attended a programme of INA veterans and listened to them making speeches and singing “*Kadam Kadam Badhaye Ja.*” One 80-something veteran looked and walked like a man in his 50s. I complimented him and he gave me a strong military handshake and patted my back cheerfully. That was my only encounter with a freedom fighter.

In the evening we attended a Netaji memorial function at a hall in Puthenchantha (attached to the Canara Bank) and there, an SUCI worker sang *Chutta Muthal Chudala Varey (From the Cradle to the Grave)*, a revolutionary song from the movie, *Pazhassiraja* by left-leaning songwriter and poet Vayalar Rama Varma. I fell in love with the song instantly, especially the crescendo line, *Swarggatheykkaal valuthaane janmabhoomi! (This homeland of mine is dearer to me than heaven!)*

In June 1997, I got admission in Hyderabad University. Just before I left my home in Palakkad, I got a letter from Sen. He ended by saying, “Will you give me a place in your gypsy-like existence? Love, Maanthu.” I felt very sad, but somehow, I didn't take the pains to reply. . . ■

SYNAPSE 77

An Art Exhibition by Fr Dr KM George

JAMESMON PC OFM

“There is more to life than meets the eye!” This is what you feel when you look at Fr Dr KM George’s (KMG) solo art exhibition named ‘Synapse 77’, which was held from 17 to 22 February at The Kanayi Kunhiraman’s art gallery at Kottayam Public Library in Kerala. Notably, the premises of this public library is home to one of the finest sculptural creations of Kanayi, known as ‘Akshara Mata’ or Mother of Letters, a tribute to Kottayam known as the City of Letters.

The Fish-body (acrylic on canvas)



KMG is a walking encyclopedia, as his knowledge goes beyond philosophy and theology and he is blessed with a wisdom that comes with experience on vast fields of subjects and travel world over. He has aged like vintage wine as he takes keen interest in a variety of subjects and abreast with all that is happening around, whether it be science, humanoids, humanities or artificial intelligence, besides being a philosopher and acclaimed theologian and the list goes on. He is the former chairperson of Dr Paulos Mar Gregorian Chair at MG University, Kottayam and also the director of Sopana Orthodox Academy for studies in theology and culture. He did his higher studies in Louvain and Paris universities. He has guest-lectured in several universities internationally. KMG takes an extraordinary interest in art, which he loves, though he could not pursue it from his early age due to other ministries. But still, he managed to get some initial training at Ecole des Beaux Arts (Paris School of Fine Arts). Now he is an active member of CARP (Company of Artists for Radiance of Peace), his newfound love.



KMG is the former chairperson of Dr Paulos Mar Gregorian Chair at MG University, Kottayam and also the director of Sopana Orthodox Academy for studies in theology and culture.

NEURAL PATHWAYS The leaflet that was placed at the exhibition defined the theme ‘Synapse 77’ in the following way: synapses are connections between neurons or brain cells for communication to the whole body and in our context here, the word stands for openness to new learning and creative communication through the medium of art. KMG’s exhibition was an invitation to explore the unexplored, to delve into what is often taken for granted. You feel KMG is blessed with an uncanny sense of seeing beyond what the eye can meet or what is apparent. In this context we see how neural pathways are formed in our brain and how we create new ones.

Neural pathways are the connections that form between the neurons in our brain. And we can think of them as a pattern that represents any thought about anything we’ve ever had – as simple as an apple, as complicated as love and integrity, every thought is a neural pathway.

Now, we’re often taught to think of our brains as computers, a storeroom with boxes or ROM that your brain can fetch (recall) when we need it. But that’s not fully accurate. Our thoughts are more like patterns than boxes. Neural pathways are the connections between neurons that light up when we think of something for the first time, and the connections form a pattern in our brain. Our brain has now attached meaning to that specific pattern. When we think a new thought, in fact we are forming a new neural pathway and the more we return to it, the stronger the path becomes, like a super highway. When you

The Selfie (acrylic on canvas)



The Ghost City (rotten tree bark on plastic)



stand before the works of KMG, this is what happens! Your brains begin to create new neural pathways, because what you encounter there is something that you had seen umpteenth times but now the way it is presented pushes you to think out of the box. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and it creates a whole set of new meanings and ideas.

Among the paintings what attracted me most are *The Fish Body* and *The Snail O' Clock* and his sculptures are created from found objects. What makes KMG's artworks and sculpture interesting is, he has explored a certain line of art practice that has strong roots in art history known as "found object art" or "junk art". In Dadaism and other surrealist and Pop artists and by later artists such as Carl Andre, Tony

Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Michel Landy and many others, we find this practice. From Michael Duchamp, who placed a urinal, probably picked up from a sanitary warehouse, and named it *Fountain* with "R. Mutt 1917" painted on its side, here we have *Synapse 77* that explore art from found objects through the subversive and humorous insights and ideas of KMG. What stands out is the spontaneous, childlike simplicity that KMG inhabits in his person and which has overflowed into his works as well. When you visit the gallery, you are, or more aptly, your brain is invited to create new neural pathways and you will begin to see much more than a rabbit on the full moon. Ever wondered why *Synapse 77*? That is the biological age of KMG! ■

The Island of Missing Trees

SONU FAKIHA

Humans, not superior to nature but are part of the ecosystem. We are not the center of the ecosystem, as most of us assume. Nature can outwit humans any day. *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak puts forth the ideology of ecocentrism and is an ecofeminist novel.

The concept of nationalism and borders are very petty but have great significance in modern nations. It is nothing but a colonial hangover from which every country or community unintentionally or intentionally suffers. The story is about two people; Kostas Kazantzakis and Defne. A Greek and a Turkish Cypriot. The narrative is carved brilliantly as there are many issues, and themes to unravel in the book.

The Cyprus conflict — a dispute, which took place in 1974 between Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Cyprus became a republic in 1960, soon the Island faced tension between the Greek and Turkish communities. A Turkish invasion following a military coup by the Greek Cypriot who wanted to unite the island with Greece led to the division of the Island into Turkish Northern Cyprus and Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus.

The book narrates the political tension or conflict through Defne, Kostas, Yiorgos, and Yusuf. These four characters engage in what was forbidden according to the political scenario. Yusuf and Defne being Turkish Cypriots loved Kostas and Yiorgos respectively who were Greek Cypriots. They maintained their relationship in secrecy. The book also highlights a gay relationship during a political tension through Yiorgos

and Yusuf. They shared a business partnership superficially, but were lovers in private. One of the many symbols the Fig tree represents is Cyprus Island before the division. It becomes an eye witness to a transcending eternal love, which cannot be subdued by worldly concepts. This subversion depicts the hollowness of such concepts.

The book is a perfect example of ecofeminism. The fig tree not only is a representative of Cyprus Island but also becomes parallel to Defne and Ada — daughter of Kostas and Defne.

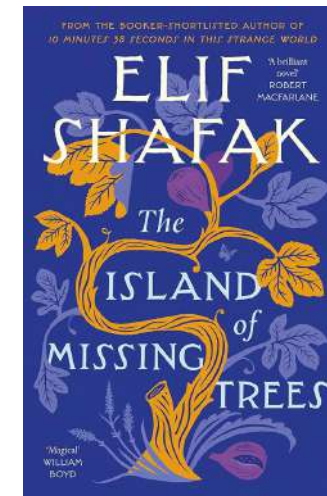
The significance of the ecosystem is highlighted throughout the novel. Conflicts caused by men not only affect Humans but the ecosystems equally become part of the collateral damage. Elif Shafak makes the fig tree the narrator of the book, which gives voice to the voiceless.

The diaspora element is quite evident in the book with the character of Ada. As a second-generation diaspora, she is unaware of her roots as she is kept away from the past. She also becomes a victim of generational trauma, which becomes a focal point or a window to the theme of trauma

in the book. Trauma is always the definite consequence of conflict. It is always difficult for conflict survivors to heal from the trauma. This is very well depicted in the character of Defne.

Kostas's relation with the trees symbolises his affiliation with his homeland (Cyprus) and roots. The theme of trauma is not explicit but subtle and is felt throughout the novel.

Yet another interesting read written by Elif Shafak. ■



A Spine-chilling Experience in a Harrowing Real-life Tale

ROMIL UDAYAKUMAR TNV

Director JA Bayona's penchant for horror often takes centre stage, irrespective of whether he's helming a poignant drama or a blockbuster extravaganza. Fresh from the acclaim of his Spanish-language thriller *The Orphanage*, Bayona couldn't resist heightening the tension in *The Impossible*, a heartfelt portrayal of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Even in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, he couldn't help but infuse a scene reminiscent of gothic horror into an otherwise forgettable narrative. However, the true terror lies in his latest endeavour, *Society of the Snow*, Spain's official submission to this year's Oscars, which promises to deliver a spine-chilling experience rooted in a harrowing real-life tale.

The tale of the 1972 Uruguayan air crash in the desolate Andes, alongside the harrowing saga of the survivors who resorted to cannibalism, receives a poignant retelling in the film JA Bayona. Drawing from the narrative crafted by Uruguayan journalist Pablo Vierci in his book of the same title, the movie provides a gripping account, diverging from, albeit indirectly, the pioneering work of Piers Paul Read in his 1974 classic, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*. Read's exploration of the survivors' ordeal popularised the notion that their acts of cannibalism took on a profound significance, akin to a secular Eucharist — a desperate communion where consuming the flesh and blood of their fellow

humans became a means of defying death, driven by an intense spirit of camaraderie and affection.

The sheer horror of the events is chilling. The majority of the passengers were killed instantly as the plane was gruesomely torn in half by the unforgiving mountain. Days passed with no sign of rescue, prompting the search to be called off. Faced with starvation, the surviving passengers resorted to the unthinkable act of cannibalism. Tragically, they were even buried under an avalanche at one point. Then, as the weather gradually shifted, two inexperienced young members of the rugby team aboard decided to brave the perilous journey westward in an attempt to reach Chile, despite lacking proper gear or climbing expertise. Against all

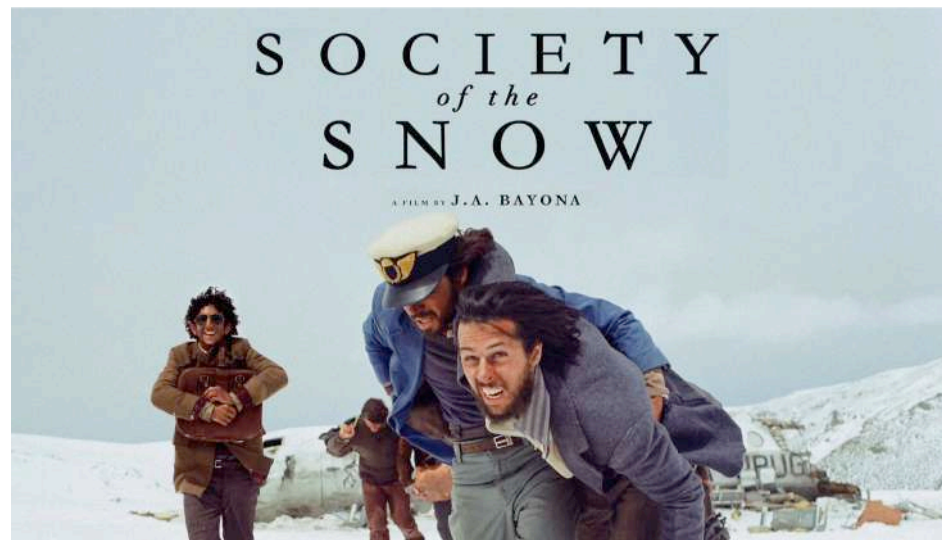
odds, they miraculously reached civilisation and guided rescue helicopters back to the crash site. Sixteen passengers were miraculously rescued alive, capturing global attention with the story making headlines worldwide. However, the aspect of cannibalism immediately sensationalised the narrative, casting a shadow of shame upon many of the survivors who were forced to break such a taboo in their desperate struggle for survival.

Bayona's film doesn't dwell extensively on character devel-

opment. We're introduced to a group of enthusiastic rugby players gearing up for a match in Chile, many of whom are venturing beyond their hometowns for the first time. The narrative is guided by Numa Turcatti (Enzo Vogrincic), a young man persuaded by a friend to join the journey, though he isn't the central figure. Instead, the focus is on the collective experiences of the group. It's initially challenging to differentiate between the characters, and it's only when disaster strikes that individual personalities begin to surface — a portrayal that reflects how calamity often reveals true identities rather than fundamentally altering them. Bayona masterfully reconstructs the crash scene, evoking a nightmarish spectacle where the mountain wall ominously looms outside the plane's windows, almost personified in its hostility. Pedro Luque's cinematography is breathtaking, capturing the grandeur of the landscape in its most traditional sense. The towering mountains and endless stretches of white snowfields create a sense of awe, with tiny figures struggling through the drifts, barely visible to the naked eye. While similar to last year's visually stunning *The Eight Mountains*, the cinematography in Bayona's film is imbued with a pervasive sense of death looming over every frame. Luque approaches the landscape with a profound reverence for its foreboding nature, emphasizing its inhospitable terrain where survival seems improbable for any living being.

The enduring allure of the story of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 lies in the resilience of individuals like Roberto and Nando. Despite being starved and surrounded by the corpses of their loved ones — some of whom perished in their arms, some of whom they were compelled to consume — they remained mentally unbroken. Their decision to embark on a perilous journey for help, traversing a hostile landscape despite the looming threat of death, epitomises their unwavering determination to survive, even if it meant risking their lives in the process.

Yet, when all of this is perceived as eavesdropping from across the television screen, I admired the cinema and was disgusted by the story, while it also managed to tickle the ethical and moral perceptions that I carry. Truly an amazing watch *Society of the Snow*. ■





Are We Ready?

Dr MARIANNE FURTADO de NAZARETH

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps (Matthew 25: 1-13).

Being wise means being prepared for the unexpected with an extra measure of faith. The five virgins who were ready and wise signified that. The Parable is our reminder to be prepared for the unexpected. The wise are prepared and ready with extra oil, while the foolish don't prepare themselves and will find themselves shut out of God's plan.

When the groom's arrival was later than expected, the prepared women with the extra oil carried them through and they were rewarded splendidly at the wedding feast. Meanwhile, the unprepared five found themselves scrambling for more oil and ran out of time before they could be fully prepared for the groom's arrival. The doors to the wedding banquet were closed without them, shutting them out into the darkness. ■



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