Vol 25/02

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ONE INDIA
ONE PEOPLE
Patriotism Redefined

Reforms, key to growth

CRITICAL REFORMS PUSH INDIA AHEAD

FOR A GREENER, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

THE NEED FOR POLICE REFORMS

Know India Better

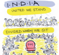
CHARMING COORG

DIAL UP ROMANCE IN A MINI 'PALACE' IN INDIA

Face to Face

PRAJAKTA KARAN BHARATI

Great Indians : Company Havaldar Major Piru Singh Shekhawat PVC | Sulochana Latkar | Nitin Desai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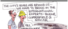
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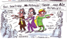
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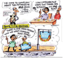
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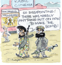
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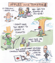
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SULOCHANA LATKAR

NITIN DESAI

Managing Editor
Mrs. Sucharita R. Hegde

Editor
Anuradha Dhareshwar

Design
Ananta Art Services

OIOP Clubs
Nagesh Bangera

Printed & Published by
Mrs. Sucharita R. Hegde for
One India One People Foundation,
Mahalaxmi Chambers, 4th floor,
22, Bhulabhai Desai Road,
Mumbai - 400 026
Tel: 022-2353 4400
Fax: 022-2351 7544
e-mail: oiopfoundation@gmail.com
oiopsub@fouressindia.com

visit us at:
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Critical reforms push India ahead

__Neeti Prakash__ takes a long look at key areas like economy, judiciary, agriculture, healthcare, technology et al and points out that transformational changes hold the master key, unlocking pathways to a future brimming with promise. She makes out a case for individuals to harness the collective potential of visionary thinkers, policymakers and agents of change, in the conviction that progress is both an art and a science.

India's progress and prosperity rests upon the foundation of strategic reforms in various sectors such as agriculture, economy, judiciary, technology, etc

During a nation's journey towards progress, pivotal reforms emerge as skilful hands intricately weaving together strands of metamorphosis and development. In the context of India, a land abundant with challenges and unprecedented opportunities, a profound juncture is encountered – a crossroads where strategic reforms hold the master key, unlocking pathways to a future brimming with promise.

Reforms possess an exceptional ability to reshape landscapes, recalibrate trajectories and redefine possibilities. This pivotal moment extends an invitation to embrace reforms not merely as policy adjustments, but as potent tools of transformation. It beckons individuals to harness the collective potential of visionary thinkers, policymakers and agents of change, all driven by the conviction that progress is both an art and a science.

The path that unfolds is one where reforms stand as beacons of hope, illuminating the way forward. They serve as bridges connecting the present to the promise of a brighter tomorrow – a tomorrow where the aspirations of millions find a canvas to unfurl upon, where the dreams of generations take root, and where the fabric of progress is intricately woven with threads of determination, resilience, and innovation.

Essential transformations

The Indian economy, renowned for its resilience, currently stands at a juncture where strategic reforms hold the key to unlocking its true potential and propelling its growth trajectory to unprecedented heights. In this intricate dance of progress, critical reforms emerge as choreographers, orchestrating moves that harmonise simplicity, innovation, and sustainable development.

The initial act on this transformative stage involves the implementation of simpler and more business-friendly tax policies. As the canvas of economic reform unfurls, the paramount importance of streamlining the tax landscape becomes evident.

Simplified tax structures not only bring clarity, but also bolster investor confidence, sparking renewed enthusiasm for economic engagement. This transformation resonates with progress, inviting both domestic and foreign investors to contribute their bit to the economic symphony.

Another significant component involves streamlining business regulations to facilitate unimpeded commerce. The streamlining of regulations creates an environment where entrepreneurial entities can flourish, propelling start-ups and small enterprises towards success. This change heralds an era where innovation is nurtured rather than stifled, allowing ideas to soar towards the horizon of economic prosperity.

Reforming the judiciary

In the expansive and diverse landscape of India, the judicial system stands as the cornerstone of justice, safeguarding rights and upholding the rule of law. As society evolves, it becomes imperative for the judicial system to adapt to changing needs and challenges.

At the core of a just judiciary lies the independence of its judges. The integrity of the judicial process hinges on ensuring that judges remain free from external influences. Reforms in this realm must focus on establishing robust safeguards to shield judges from undue pressures. This commitment to independence fosters an environment of fairness and trust within the judiciary.

Transparency in judicial appointments is paramount for fostering public trust. To enhance credibility, it is essential to implement transparent mechanisms for selecting and promoting judges. Embracing a more open and merit-based approach to appointments will reinforce the credibility of the entire process, ensuring that the most accomplished legal minds occupy the bench.

While judicial independence is crucial, accountability is equally vital. Addressing issues of judicial misconduct and corruption head-on is essential to maintain untainted and accessible justice for all. Strengthening accountability mechanisms reinforces the judiciary's commitment to the highest ethical standards.

These reforms ensure that transparency and accountability of the judiciary is maintained and so is the public trust in the institution which is of paramount importance in a vibrant democracy like India.

Revolutionising agriculture

Amidst the fertile fields that stretch across the Indian landscape lies the heartbeat of the nation's economy – the agricultural sector. It is within this realm that the seeds of transformative reforms are sown, promising prosperity for farmers and ensuring food security for the entire nation.

An important aspect here is the shift towards improving access to credit. As the roots of agriculture are nurtured, enabling farmers to secure timely and affordable credit becomes a vital step. With this financial support, farmers can invest in superior seeds, modern equipment and innovative farming practices that pave the way for bountiful yields.

The enhancement of irrigation facilities represents the second facet. By expanding and modernising irrigation systems, farmers are armed with the tools they need to nurture their crops and safeguard them from the capricious whims of weather.

However, it isn't solely about quantity; it's also about sustainability. The third realm involves the promotion of sustainable farming practices. This calls for harmonising tradition with innovation, embracing methodologies that optimise not only yields but also preserve the precious land for future generations. This can be achieved through the adoption of organic farming, efficient water usage and responsible land management.

There is a pressing need for healthcare reforms in India

Progressive advances

A robust healthcare system stands as a cornerstone of strength, safeguarding the health and prosperity of citizens. As the complex landscape of healthcare is navigated, the need for transformative reforms becomes imperative – reforms that elevate the quality of care while ensuring equitable access for all.

The first cornerstone of this transformative journey entails increased public spending on healthcare. A robust healthcare system is like a garden that flourishes when adequately watered or funded. By channelling resources into healthcare infrastructure, the foundations of well-being are fortified, ensuring that every citizen has access to quality medical services when needed.

The strengthening of primary healthcare centres constitutes the second cornerstone. These centres serve as the initial point of contact, guardians of preventive care and gatekeepers of community well-being. Reinforcing their capabilities empowers communities to proactively manage their health, preventing minor ailments from escalating into major crises.

Preventive measures form the next layer - the best cure is prevention and by promoting healthy lifestyles and early interventions, a shield of well-being is woven, protecting citizens from preventable diseases. This marks a shift from a treatment-centric paradigm to a proactive approach that empowers individuals to take charge of their health.

As progress continues, technology takes centre stage. Telemedicine and digitisation are now emerging as the fourth dimension of healthcare reform. By leveraging the power of connectivity, gaps between remote areas and advanced medical expertise are bridged. Telemedicine extends healing outreach to the farthest corners, ensuring that healthcare is not confined by geography, but rather a fundamental right of every citizen.

Another important reform domain is education. The educational system serves as the conduit through which the nation's youth acquire knowledge and skills. Comprehensive reforms are indispensable for overhauling curricula, fostering critical thinking and promoting vocational training. Bridging the urban-rural education divide and harnessing technology for e-learning can democratise education and empower the future workforce.

India's journey towards progress and prosperity rests upon the foundation of strategic reforms. The sectors discussed herein are not isolated entities, but rather interwoven threads that, when united, create a palette of transformation. As the nation aspires for a brighter future, embracing these reforms with determination and foresight will undoubtedly propel India towards its rightful place on the global stage.

Neeti Prakash is a media researcher affiliated with The History and Heritage Project – a DraftCraft International initiative dedicated to documenting details, analysing facts, and addressing gaps that may arise due to oversight or the advancement of national or foreign agendas within the realms of History and Heritage across India and beyond borders.

For a greener, sustainable future

In the past decade, India has strived to address challenges and bring in reforms in the areas of wildlife conservation, legislations, making commitments towards global climate change, etc. Today, India is focussing on an action-oriented approach and promoting sustainable lifestyle through the 'Mission Life' initiative under the aegis of a proactive government, observes **Anushka Singh**.

Embracing renewable energy has become an imperative for the nation's environmental reforms

In a world grappling with the dire consequences of climate change, pollution and the rapid depletion of natural resources, India finds itself standing at a pivotal crossroads. The urgency for comprehensive environmental reforms has never been more apparent, as the nation strives to secure a sustainable and prosperous future for both present and future generations.

At the forefront of India's journey towards a greener future lies the critical need to transition from conventional fossil fuels to cleaner and more sustainable energy sources. Embracing renewable energy has become an imperative for the nation's environmental reforms. With ambitious targets set to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, India is paving the way for a cleaner, more sustainable energy landscape.

By offering incentives such as subsidies, tax breaks, and favourable policies, India encourages the adoption of solar, wind and other renewable energy technologies. This seismic shift is not only helping in mitigating the adverse effects of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions but also bolstering the country's energy security. Moreover, this transition provides a fertile ground for the creation of new job opportunities, further invigorating the economy. For a sustainable future, it's important that the economic catalysts and environmental variables are both given equal importance.

In the past decade, India has strived to address challenges and bring in reforms in the areas of wildlife conservation, legislations, making commitments towards global climate change, etc. Today, India is focussing on an action-oriented approach and promoting sustainable lifestyle through the 'Mission Life' initiative under the aegis of a proactive government.

Reducing pollution and emissions

Air and water pollution loom large as grave threats to both the environment and public health. By addressing these challenges head-on, India's environmental reforms focus on stringent enforcement of emission standards and the implementation of sustainable production techniques.

One of the cornerstones of pollution reduction lies in promoting the adoption of electric vehicles and phasing out older, more pollutant-intensive automobiles. This concerted effort holds the potential to significantly enhance urban air quality and contribute to a marked reduction in carbon emissions.

The nation is committed to reducing industrial discharges into water bodies, ensuring that the lifeblood of ecosystems remains untainted. Reducing water pollution is one of the most challenging tasks when it comes to environment protection, owing to the sheer magnitude of the problem and the innumerable variables involved.

The Water Resources Information System (WRIS) has been providing good quality comprehensible data and is helping policymakers, water managers, etc., in a big way despite it being in a nascent stage.

India has always brought in reforms through community participation and 'Mission Amrit Sarovar' is another example where more than 63,000 water bodies have been developed within a year. The 'Catch the Rain' campaign has led to the construction of numerous water harvesting structures.

Conserving natural resources

Safeguarding natural resources lies at the heart of India's environmental reforms, underscoring the importance of responsible resource management. A comprehensive approach is required to prevent the overexploitation of forests, water bodies, and mineral resources. Key strategies encompass sustainable waste management, judicious agricultural practices, and effective measures to curb deforestation.

These efforts are essential not only for preserving biodiversity but also for ensuring the availability of vital resources for the generations to come. By meticulously implementing resource conservation policies, India is forging a path towards a more sustainable and harmonious coexistence with nature.

The transportation sector is a significant contributor to pollution and carbon emissions. In recognition of this, India's environmental reforms are channelling resources towards the development of eco-friendly transportation solutions. Investments in robust public transportation systems take centre stage, coupled with a push for non-motorised transport options such as cycling and walking.

Furthermore, the promotion of electric vehicles emerges as a linchpin in the nation's drive towards a greener future. By creating an ecosystem conducive to electric vehicle adoption, India can alleviate traffic congestion, improve air quality, and cultivate a more sustainable urban environment.

Preserving the rich biodiversity

India's rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems face threats stemming from habitat loss and degradation. As a response, environmental reforms emphasise the creation of protected areas and the reinforcement of wildlife conservation initiatives. Fostering sustainable land-use practices is imperative to shield endangered species and preserve delicate ecosystems.

Local communities play a pivotal role in this endeavour, collaborating actively in conservation efforts. Through awareness campaigns and community involvement, India strives to safeguard its natural heritage for generations to come, securing a vibrant and biodiverse future.
India is making consistent efforts in restoring and enriching priority landscapes that have been affected by forest fires and mining. Also, the launch of the 'International Big Cat Alliance' which is aimed at protecting seven big cat species is another big step in the area of biodiversity and wildlife protection. The 'Project Tiger' conservation initiative was a great success and has resulted in India being home to 70 per cent of the world's tiger population today.

Resource efficiency

Embracing a circular economy model holds the key to reducing waste and optimising resource utilisation. Environmental reforms are steering towards the establishment of extended producer responsibility (EPR) programmes, incentivising recycling, upcycling, and encouraging eco-conscious product design. These measures collectively contribute to reducing landfill waste and nurturing a more resilient, resource-efficient economy.

The "Waste to Wealth Mission" that has been spearheaded by the Office of Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India (GOI) aims to strengthen the waste management system in the country by demonstrating innovative solutions and models to achieve a zero landfill and zero waste nation. The objective of this mission is to boost and augment the Swachh Bharat Mission and Smart Cities Project by making optimal use of science, technology, and innovation.

Among the government priorities is the 'Green Growth' initiative, under which 500 new Waste to Wealth plants will be established in order to promote circular economy, under the GOBARdhan scheme. These will include construction of 200 compressed biogas plants - 75 in urban areas and 300 community or cluster-based plants.

The relentless march of climate change underscores the need for adaptation and resilience. India's environmental reforms prioritise strategies that enhance climate resilience in vulnerable regions. These encompass the development of climate-resilient infrastructure, innovative water management practices, and the establishment of early warning systems for natural disasters.

A safer tomorrow

Empowering communities to navigate the challenges posed by a changing climate is fundamental to India's long-term sustainability goals. By forging ahead with these reforms, the nation strengthens its ability to withstand the impacts of a shifting climate and secure a safer future for all.

As India confronts the formidable challenges posed by climate change, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources, the imperative for comprehensive environmental reforms becomes undeniable.

Through an unwavering commitment to transitioning to clean energy, reducing pollution, conserving precious resources, developing sustainable transportation, preserving biodiversity, promoting circular economy practices, and enhancing climate adaptation, India is carving a path towards a brighter and more sustainable future for generations to come.

In this endeavour, India stands as a beacon of inspiration, leading by example and demonstrating its dedication to safeguarding the environment for the well-being of all its citizens. The journey towards a greener future is not without its challenges, but with steadfast determination and a collective spirit, India is poised to make a lasting impact on the global stage.

Anushka Singh works with DraftCraft International as a Media Researcher and writes mostly on issues affecting the Fourth Estate. She likes reading contrarian literature and analysing sources of news.

Economic reforms are imperative

*Stressing on a tax structure that leads to vibrant economy, **Mayank Taurani** asserts that reforms signify more than mere policy adjustments. They represent a transformative journey that has the potential to unlock new avenues of growth, attract coveted investments, and lay the groundwork for a sustainable and prosperous future for generations to come.*

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the bedrock of any thriving economy, fostering innovation and generating employment opportunities

In today's rapidly evolving global economy, nations must adapt and innovate to secure their positions on the world stage. The Indian economy, with its inherent potential and diverse sectors, stands as a testament to this principle.

As the nation strives to assert itself as a formidable global economic powerhouse, the implementation of comprehensive economic reforms emerges as a pressing imperative.

These reforms signify more than mere policy adjustments; they represent a transformative journey that has the potential to unlock new avenues of growth, attract coveted investments, and lay the groundwork for a sustainable and prosperous future for generations to come.

Simplifying tax policies

Central to the flourishing of any vibrant economy is a tax structure that not only promotes investment but also acts as a catalyst for the expansion of businesses. However, the intricate labyrinth of tax policies and business regulations can often act as a deterrent for both local and foreign investors, impeding their active participation in economic endeavours.

The urgency to simplify and streamline these convoluted frameworks cannot be overstated. By forging a seamless and harmonised tax regime, India has the potential to augment investor confidence and invigorate the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This crucial simplification has the potential to alleviate the weight of compliance burdens and cultivate an environment conducive to entrepreneurial growth.

As the economic landscape evolves, the necessity to recalibrate the tax system and business regulations becomes increasingly evident. The current intricate network of rules and regulations act as a formidable barrier, dissuading potential investors from engaging in the economic tapestry of the nation.

The Indian government instituted one of the most significant reforms in its fiscal history - the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on July 1st, 2017. Regarded as a game-changing reform, GST transitioned India towards 'One Nation, One Tax.' The benefits have been manifold, extending across economic sectors and comprising reduced tax complexity, inflation moderation, and a boost to economic growth.

One immediate advantage of GST has been the reduction of 'tax on tax,' or the Cascading Effect. The previous regressive tax structure posed a burden on the consumers because each successive point in the supply chain taxed individuals on the cumulative cost until the product reached the end consumer. However, by replacing multiple indirect taxes, GST has ensured that tax is levied only on the amount of value added at each stage, cutting down on excess tax liabilities.

Supporting small businesses

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the bedrock of any thriving economy, fostering innovation, generating employment opportunities, and nurturing a spirit of entrepreneurship. However, the existing intricate tax structure and regulatory landscape often disproportionately affect SMEs, stifling their growth potential. By embarking on the journey of simplification, India has provided these enterprises with the much-needed impetus to flourish.

Imagine a scenario where the cumbersome process of deciphering intricate tax codes is replaced by a more straightforward and streamlined system. This transformation would empower SMEs to allocate their resources more efficiently, directing their focus towards innovation, expansion, and job creation.

The ramifications of such simplification extend beyond the realm of economics. A business-friendly environment has the potential to cultivate a culture of entrepreneurship. With these economic reforms, India is attracting more foreign direct investment that is further spurring economic growth.

Cultivating the seeds of progress

Innovation and entrepreneurship are integral to propelling an economy towards prosperity. Nurturing a culture that celebrates these pillars requires strategic reforms that provide the necessary support systems. Encouraging start-ups and innovators involves facilitating access to capital through venture funding, incentivising research and development through tax benefits, and establishing incubation centres that serve as bastions of mentorship and resources for aspiring entrepreneurs.

By doing so, India is laying the foundation for a vibrant ecosystem that drives economic growth through cutting-edge ideas and creative enterprises. The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana is a scheme providing loans up to 10 lakh to non-corporate, non-farm small / micro-enterprises.

The infrastructure of a nation serves as the backbone upon which economic activities thrive. A robust economy necessitates efficient transportation networks, reliable energy sources, and advanced communication systems.

Reforms in this realm have ensured increased investment, both public and private, in infrastructure projects. Embracing pioneering technologies to enhance operational efficiency and ensuring the timely execution of projects are pivotal steps in preventing bottlenecks that hinder progress.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy reforms are bringing more foreign funds into the country. Some of these are - raising the FDI cap in insurance and defence sectors, allowing 100 per cent FDI under automatic route for real estate broking service, etc.

Ease of doing business

India's position on the "Ease of Doing Business" index has garnered attention, and the imperative for improvement is clear. Reforms aimed at elevating this ranking involve the simplification of bureaucratic processes, reduction of red tape, and digitalisation of government services.

A transparent and efficient regulatory framework serves as a magnet for both domestic and foreign investors, spurring job creation and catalysing economic expansion.

The financial sector plays a pivotal role in greasing the wheels of economic progress. Comprehensive reforms within this sector encompass bolstering banking and financial institutions, expanding access to credit for individuals and businesses, and promoting financial literacy among the populace.

A well-regulated and transparent financial ecosystem is indispensable for effective capital allocation and prudent risk management, both of which are vital for sustainable economic growth.

Demonetisation, as executed by the Indian government in 2016 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule, was a significant economic policy aimed at combating the issues of black money, or unaccounted wealth. The central government decided to withdraw the legal tender status of INR 500 and INR 1,000 currency notes.

The primary objective of this move was to curb and eliminate the pervasiveness of illicit and counterfeit cash that was suspected of funding illegal activities, including terrorism. This strategy was designed to target the shadow economy by making the undisclosed income visible to regulatory authorities.

Global integration

In an increasingly interconnected world, trade is the cornerstone of growth. Strategic reforms aimed at trade liberalisation, the dismantling of trade barriers, and the negotiation of favourable trade agreements can invigorate exports and entice foreign investments.

Embracing global integration empowers Indian enterprises to tap into new markets and harness emerging technologies, fostering economic diversification and enhancing resilience in the face of challenges.

The diversity of India's economic landscape is woven with threads of opportunity and challenge across its diverse sectors. The execution of economic reforms, guided by meticulous planning and strategic foresight, has the power to infuse life into this domain.

Each reform, whether it entails simplifying tax structures or nurturing innovation, contributes to a grander narrative of progress. As India marches steadfastly towards its aspiration of becoming a global economic powerhouse, these reforms serve as the scaffolding upon which this vision is built.

The journey towards economic prosperity is a multidimensional endeavour that demands a comprehensive approach. By championing reforms across taxation, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, business facilitation, finance, trade, and labour, India can forge a path that leads to sustained growth, increased competitiveness, and enhanced global relevance.

Mayank Taurani is a trainee with DraftCraft Media Network - an initiative of DraftCraft International – a platform for media students, experts, and professionals to quash populist trends and help create unbiased and independent news.

Media not out of reforms purview

While the digital age is characterized by rapid information dissemination, media integrity assumes significance and ***Nimisha Lakhia*** *feels that a well-defined regulatory framework can serve as a shield against unscrupulous practices, ensuring that the information disseminated is accurate, balanced, and accountable. Remodelling the media landscape is therefore paramount.*

The regulatory body's ability to address bias ensures that media outlets adhere to the core tenets of ethical journalism, promoting accuracy and impartiality

The Indian media landscape occupies a pivotal position in shaping public perception, disseminating crucial information, and upholding democratic principles. However, it faces a myriad of challenges, ranging from ethical concerns to issues of transparency and ownership structures.

In the ever-evolving realm of media, upholding integrity and accountability is of paramount importance. To achieve this, the establishment of a comprehensive regulatory framework becomes imperative. This framework should extend its purview across diverse media forms – encompassing print, broadcast, digital, and social media platforms.

A key facet of this enhancement lies in the establishment of an autonomous and transparent regulatory body vested with the authority to address critical issues, including fake news, sensationalism, and biased reporting.

Regulatory framework

In a digital age characterised by rapid information dissemination, maintaining the integrity of media content has taken on newfound significance. A well-defined regulatory framework serves as a shield against unscrupulous practices, ensuring that the information disseminated is accurate, balanced, and accountable.

By encompassing a broad spectrum of media, from traditional print and broadcast to the far-reaching realms of digital and social media, the regulatory framework acknowledges the interconnected nature of modern communication.

Central to the effectiveness of this framework is the autonomy and transparency of the regulatory body. Ensuring its independence from external influences and vested interests is pivotal to its credibility and ability to enforce the necessary standards. Transparency further bolsters public trust, allowing citizens to have confidence in the regulatory process.

The authority bestowed upon this regulatory body is instrumental in maintaining media integrity. The power to address concerns such as fake news, sensationalism, and biased reporting empowers the body to swiftly intervene when breaches occur.

Fake news - with its potential to mislead and manipulate public opinion – is a prime example of a challenge that necessitates immediate and decisive action.

Sensationalism, often employed to garner attention without regard for accuracy or context, can erode the credibility of media. By vesting the regulatory body with the authority to curb sensationalist practices, the framework ensures that media content remains a reliable source of information rather than a vehicle for sensationalist agendas.

Biased reporting, whether overt or subtle, can skew public perception and undermine the democratic principles of fair and balanced reporting. The regulatory body's ability to address bias ensures that media outlets adhere to the core tenets of ethical journalism, promoting accuracy and impartiality.

Diverse media landscape

The vitality of a vibrant media landscape rests upon the principles of diversity and pluralism. To foster a truly diverse and inclusive environment, it is imperative to tackle concerns related to media ownership concentration.

Robust regulations are warranted to avert the undue influence that specific entities may wield over public discourse, particularly through the practice of cross-owning multiple media outlets. Moreover, fostering the growth of independent and community-based media organisations stands as a potent strategy to fortify the fabric of diversity.

Promoting a media environment that reflects a mosaic of perspectives, voices, and narratives is at the core of democratic ideals. Addressing the challenge of media ownership concentration is crucial in this pursuit.

Regulations aimed at preventing the consolidation of media ownership into the hands of a few entities serve to prevent monopolistic control over information dissemination. This is vital to ensure that no singular viewpoint or agenda dominates public discourse to the detriment of diverse opinions.

Independent media organisations, free from the influence of conglomerates or vested interests, are better poised to provide unbiased and comprehensive coverage. They offer an alternative to mainstream narratives and can act as a vital check on the potential biases that can arise from concentrated media ownership.

Upholding ethical journalism

Mandatory disclosure of funding sources, affiliations, and potential conflicts of interest is pivotal for media outlets. This transparency empowers audiences to make informed judgments about the reliability and credibility of the information they consume. The establishment and enforcement of a standardised code of ethics are vital to ensure responsible journalism practices.

The proliferation of fake news and misinformation demands a robust response. Media reforms should hold platforms accountable for the content they host. Implementing fact-checking mechanisms, public awareness campaigns, and penalties for deliberate dissemination of false information can effectively combat this challenge.

As digital media continues to burgeon, regulating online news portals, blogs, and social media platforms becomes imperative. Striking a balance between safeguarding free expression and curbing the spread of harmful or false content is vital. Transparent algorithms, content moderation guidelines, and user data privacy protections must be integral components of these regulations.

Safeguarding journalists

The robustness of a democratic society rests upon the unfettered functioning of a free press. To uphold this fundamental principle, ensuring the welfare and protection of journalists becomes an imperative responsibility.

Prioritising fair wages, job security, and shielding journalists from harassment or threats are essential steps. Equally vital is the establishment of effective mechanisms for redressal in cases of violence against journalists, thereby safeguarding their interests and enabling uninterrupted reporting.

Upholding the values of press freedom requires more than just the preservation of the right to express and disseminate information. It also encompasses a commitment to creating an environment where journalists can carry out their duties without fear or hindrance. This begins with ensuring that journalists receive adequate compensation for their vital role in shaping public discourse and informing the citizens.

Harassment and threats directed towards journalists not only jeopardise their personal safety but also undermine the very essence of press freedom. Creating an environment where journalists can report without fear of retribution or harm is essential for the health of a democratic society. Robust legal safeguards, stringent punitive measures against perpetrators, and support systems to assist journalists facing threats are necessary to ensure their protection.

Violence against journalists is a grave concern, and addressing it requires a multi-pronged approach. Establishing mechanisms for swift redressal is pivotal to ensuring accountability and deterring potential aggressors.

A legal framework that expedites investigations and trials related to violence against journalists can serve as a deterrent and provide justice to those who face threats or harm while performing their duties.

Fostering balanced discourse

Strengthening public broadcasting entities can contribute to a more balanced media landscape. Adequate funding, editorial independence, and a diverse array of programming can establish a credible alternative to commercial media outlets.

Promoting media literacy among citizens is essential for critical evaluation and discernment of media content. Integrating media literacy education into school curricula and launching public awareness campaigns can equip individuals with the tools to distinguish credible information from falsehoods.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. are facing new regulations and requirements under India's new rules for the intermediaries. Reduced timeline for checking the content, grievance appellate committees and proper communication of privacy policy and user agreement to Indian consumers in local languages are among the key changes made to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021.

There is a growing consensus on the need for bringing in stricter regulations in the media sector. With the advent and the prevalence of internet and digital media, the voices - to protect democracy, its pillar and its people - only grow stronger.

Nimisha Lakhia is a trainee with DraftCraft Media Network - an initiative of DraftCraft International – a platform for media students, experts, and professionals to quash populist trends and help create unbiased and independent news.

Electoral reforms for vibrant democracy

To address electoral, judicial, police, land, labour, gender, minority, environmental and federalism concerns what is required is comprehensive and collaborative effort. By embracing these reforms, India can fortify its democratic institutions, uphold the rule of law, and secure a just and prosperous future for its citizens, opines **Nandini Rao**.

Electoral reforms must ensure that the interests of the public supersede individual ambitions

As India continues to evolve and grapple with complex societal challenges, the need for comprehensive legislative reforms has become increasingly evident. The legislative framework serves as the backbone of the nation, shaping policies, safeguarding rights, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the democratic system.

At the core of a resilient democracy rests the integrity of its electoral system. The imperative to fortify this foundation calls for a thorough examination of various aspects, including campaign finance regulations and the pervasive issue of criminalisation in politics.

Transparent political funding and expediting trials against elected officials facing criminal charges are key facets of the electoral reforms needed to ensure the vibrancy and fairness of democratic processes.

Campaigning serves as a crucial artery of any democratic election, allowing candidates to convey their visions and connect with the electorate. However, the influence of money power has the potential to distort this process, tilting the playing field in favour of those with deep pockets. To counter this, a comprehensive overhaul of campaign finance regulations is essential.

The bedrock of these reforms lies in transparency. Rigorous disclosure requirements for political funding can illuminate the sources of financial support for candidates and parties. This transparency not only fosters accountability but also enables citizens to make informed decisions, knowing the origins of the funds that fuel electoral campaigns.

In addition, setting limits on individual and corporate donations can mitigate the disproportionate influence of wealthy contributors. Striking a balance between public and private funding sources can ensure that electoral outcomes are a true reflection of popular will rather than financial prowess.

Cleaning politics

The issue of criminalisation in politics casts a shadow on the democratic process. The presence of elected officials facing criminal charges can erode public trust and compromise the integrity of governance.

Expediting trials against elected officials facing criminal charges is imperative. Swift and fair legal proceedings can restore faith in the system, demonstrating that political office does not grant immunity from the consequences of unlawful actions. Mechanisms that prioritise time-bound trials can prevent undue delays, ensuring that justice is not only served but is seen to be served.

Moreover, bolstering the screening process for candidates can prevent individuals with serious criminal records from entering the political arena. Comprehensive background checks and stringent eligibility criteria can help maintain the credibility and reputation of the political sphere.

Anti-defection law

The anti-defection law, originally crafted with the intent of curbing political defections, stands as a pivotal element of India's democratic framework. However, the evolving political landscape warrants a critical re-evaluation of this law.

To safeguard the integrity of the democratic process and prevent opportunistic party-switching, there is a compelling need to institute stricter provisions that resonate with the spirit of representative governance. Such measures are essential to prevent the erosion of public trust in the political system and to uphold the sanctity of the people's mandate.

The new trend of party-switching has raised concerns about the credibility of elected representatives and the democratic process. When elected officials switch allegiances solely for personal gain or political expediency, it can lead to a distortion of the electoral mandate.

Stricter provisions within the anti-defection law not only serve a legal purpose but also contribute to the ethical foundation of politics. Political parties are vehicles through which citizens express their aspirations and elected representatives hold the responsibility to honour this trust. A reformed law can act as a deterrent against opportunism and reaffirm the principle that political allegiance is rooted in conviction rather than expediency.

Public trust is the bedrock upon which the political system stands. The erosion of this trust undermines the very essence of democracy. Appropriate electoral reforms must ensure that the interests of the public supersede individual ambitions.

This not only reaffirms the bond of trust between citizens and their elected representatives but also bolsters the credibility of the democratic process. Such measures safeguard the spirit of democracy and lay the groundwork for a more vibrant, responsible, and transparent political ecosystem.

Equitable growth

In a democracy the size of India, the significance of land and labour reforms cannot be overstated. These reforms serve as the cornerstones of a balanced and sustainable development trajectory which strengthen democracy.

Ensuring that land acquisition does not disproportionately affect vulnerable groups is crucial. Mechanisms to prevent displacement and to guarantee the inclusion of marginalised communities in decision-making processes are vital for social cohesion and sustainable development. India has undergone various land law reforms aimed at improving land ownership, distribution and usage across the country.

The Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR Act) replaced the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and aimed to provide fair compensation, rehabilitation, and resettlement to those whose land is acquired for public purposes. The LARR Act sought to strike a balance between development needs and protecting the rights of landowners.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, also known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, recognises and vests forest rights and occupation in forestland to forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. It aims to rectify historical injustices and safeguard the rights of marginalised communities. Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 (RERA), although primarily concerned with regulating the real estate sector, it indirectly impacts land transactions by ensuring transparency, accountability, and timely completion of real estate projects. This can have an impact on land development and transactions.

All-inclusive

Legislative reforms should focus on strengthening gender equality and minority rights. Comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, stringent measures against gender-based violence and policies to promote inclusivity and representation are imperative to create a just and equitable society.

At the same time, India's rapid development has taken a toll on the environment. Strengthening environmental laws and regulations to ensure sustainable development, combat climate change and protect natural resources is vital for the well-being of current and future generations.

Land and labour reforms are not mere policy adjustments; they are potent catalysts for equitable and sustainable growth. By streamlining land acquisition procedures, ensuring fair compensation, protecting marginalised communities, and balancing labour rights with business needs, India lays the foundation for an inclusive future.

Balancing power between the central and state governments is critical for effective governance. A thorough review of the distribution of powers, fiscal responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms is necessary to strengthen federalism and ensure equitable development across states.

Democratic vitality

India is a young nation still many laws in existence are old with colonial legacy. Colonial-era statutes such as the Police Act of 1861 exist and need to be repealed or amended depending on their relevance in modern India.

These archaic laws are not only inadequate in addressing challenges of the time today but some are not relevant in today's time at all. As per the Ramanujam Committee (2014) recommendations, there is a plan to repeal the more than 1,500 archaic laws.

The legislative reforms needed in India are not merely a matter of administrative adjustments; they are foundational to the country's progress and democratic vitality.

Addressing electoral, judicial, police, land, labour, gender, minority, environmental and federalism issues require a comprehensive and collaborative effort. By embracing these reforms, India can fortify its democratic institutions, uphold the rule of law, and secure a just and prosperous future for its citizens.

Nandini Rao is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

The need for Police Reforms

*Dwelling on the role of law enforcement agencies, **Kriti Kalra** observes that fostering a healthy police-people relationship is vital for rule of law and order. Community policing initiatives, where officers engage with local residents, understand their concerns, and work in collaboration to address issues, can help rebuild trust and bridge the gap between the police and the public.*

The archaic Police Act of 1861, still in force, is ill-equipped to address the multifaceted challenges of modern society

The role of law enforcement agencies in any society is pivotal, ensuring public safety, upholding the rule of law, and safeguarding citizens' rights. In India, the police force plays a critical role, but systemic issues have hindered its ability to fulfil its duties effectively.

The current centralised structure of police administration often results in bureaucratic delays and lack of accountability. Implementing measures to decentralise decision-making, empower local police stations and establish oversight mechanisms can enhance the responsiveness of the police force and hold officers accountable for their actions.

Upgrading training, mechanisms

Adequate training is crucial for law enforcement officers to handle modern challenges effectively. Continuous training programs on human rights, community policing, use of technology and ethical conduct can equip officers with the necessary skills to serve the public with integrity.

Nurturing a positive relationship between the police and the community is vital for effective law enforcement. Community policing initiatives, where officers engage with local residents, understand their concerns, and work in collaboration to address issues, can help rebuild trust and bridge the gap between the police and the public.

Embracing technology enhance the efficiency and accuracy of police work. Investment in modern equipment, digital records management and advanced forensics can expedite investigations and ensure that evidence is handled scientifically, contributing to fair and credible legal proceedings.

Establishing independent oversight bodies with the authority to investigate complaints against law enforcement officers is essential. These bodies can ensure transparency, impartiality, and fairness in addressing allegations of misconduct, abuse, or excessive use of force.

Collaborative efforts between the police, judiciary, and other stakeholders can expedite the criminal justice process. Implementing mechanisms to reduce case backlogs, improve coordination among agencies, and ensure timely trials can enhance public trust in the justice system.

The police force should reflect the diversity of the society it serves. Efforts to recruit and promote officers from diverse backgrounds, along with specialised training that sensitises personnel on the realities of present-day society can contribute to a more inclusive and effective police force.

The prison system

The prison system plays a critical role in a country's criminal justice system, serving not only as a place of punishment but also as a space for rehabilitation and reintegration. In India, the state of prisons has raised concerns about overcrowding, inadequate facilities and human rights violations.

The time has come for swift and decisive measures to address this pressing issue, safeguarding the dignity of inmates and restoring the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. Urgent actions, including expanding prison capacity, enhancing infrastructure, and exploring alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenders, stand as the path forward to relieve the strain on the system.

Adequate sanitation facilities, proper ventilation and access to clean water are indispensable elements that contribute to the well-being of inmates and help create an atmosphere conducive to rehabilitation.

Efficiency in legal proceedings can play a pivotal role in reducing overcrowding. Fast-tracking trials and ensuring timely access to legal representation can help prevent prolonged pre-trial detention and expedite the resolution of cases.

Many prisoners especially those from marginalised backgrounds lack access to legal representation, leading to prolonged periods of pre-trial detention. Strengthening legal aid services, expediting trials and addressing issues of justice delay can uphold the principles of fairness and justice.

The absence of robust mechanisms to hold law enforcement accountable for their actions engenders scepticism and apprehension among citizens. This trust deficit further exacerbates the gap between the police and the community they are sworn to protect

Independent oversight mechanisms are crucial to prevent human rights abuses and ensure accountability within the prison system. Regular inspections, monitoring, and reporting on prison conditions can deter misconduct and promote transparency.

The challenges

Implementing comprehensive and impactful police reforms in India presents a formidable challenge, primarily stemming from a confluence of factors that obstruct progress.

The intertwining of the police force with political agendas constitutes another substantial barrier to reform. The undesirable phenomenon of political interference undermines the autonomy and efficacy of law enforcement. Political actors, at times, exploit the police force for their personal gains, precipitating a corrosive atmosphere of corruption and ineffectiveness.

The Indian police force grapples with scarcity of personnel and equipment to forensic tools, communication infrastructure and transportation facilities. Inadequate resources can hamper investigations, compromise public safety and thwart the delivery of justice.

A pervasive lack of accountability within the police force erodes public trust and fosters an environment ripe for misconduct. The absence of robust mechanisms to hold law enforcement accountable for their actions engenders scepticism and apprehension among citizens. This trust deficit further exacerbates the gap between the police and the community they are sworn to protect.

The outdated legal framework governing the police force remains a pressing concern. The archaic Police Act of 1861, still in force, is ill-equipped to address the multifaceted challenges of modern society. A comprehensive overhaul is imperative to align policing practices with the dynamic needs and complexities of contemporary India.

Political interference

Instances of political interference in the Indian police force are conspicuously evident. In several regions, the police force has regrettably succumbed to politicisation, wherein considerations such as caste, community affiliations, or religious leanings permeate the decision-making processes.

This blurring of professional lines can breed prejudiced judgments and partiality, compromising the fundamental tenets of impartial law enforcement.

The year 1975 witnessed a grave illustration of political manipulation within the police force when the then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi invoked a state of emergency. The police were instrumentalised to curtail civil liberties and suppress political dissent.

A reminiscent colonial legacy persists wherein chief ministers wield considerable authority over the police force, echoing the erstwhile power held by British governors. This dominion facilitates political control over policing activities, potentially obstructing unbiased execution of duties and impeding the establishment of a robust system of accountability.

Despite the presence of police reform agendas, tangible progress remains elusive. A pattern emerges where politicians may pay lip service to reform efforts while concurrently retaining their grip on police prerogatives. This dual stance perpetuates a cycle of stagnation and superficiality, precluding genuine transformation.

The consequences of such interference and activities are far-reaching, as these erode foundation of democracy and the principles of law enforcement. Effecting substantive police reforms in India hinges on resolutely addressing and mitigating the adverse effects of political interference, thereby rejuvenating the institution's capacity to serve the populace impartially and uphold the rule of law.

Internal resistance to reforms

Police resistance to reforms in India can be attributed to being comfortable with the existing system. The police force may fear losing power and control if reforms are implemented.

Political interference can lead to a lack of trust between the police and the public, which can hamper the functioning of the police force. The police force may lack awareness of the need for reforms and their benefits.

Sometimes, the lack of resources also makes the police feel they do not have the necessary resources to implement the reforms. Addressing these reasons is crucial to bringing about meaningful police reforms in India.

Embarking on a journey of police reform in India is replete with multifarious challenges. The formidable nature of these obstacles to police reforms - encompassing internal resistance, political interference, resource inadequacy, accountability deficits and antiquated laws - necessitates a concerted effort to surmount them.

Kriti Kalra is an activist and field researcher with www.thewomansurvivor.com – an initiative of DraftCraft International to protect and empower women by bringing on one platform the latest on rights and issues, strategic case studies, state initiatives and informed legal opinions.

The architects of change

__Ruchi Verma__ highlights the revolutionary role played by visionary reformers – across social, cultural and political spheres – in kindling social consciousness, advocating human rights and sowing the seeds of a just and equitable India. She also perceives that collective action at the local level by mobilising communities and masses has been an effective tool of social changes.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

B.R. Ambedkar

Swami Vivekanand

Indira Gandhi

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy

The colonial era in India was marked not only by the struggle for independence but also by the emergence of visionary social reformers who challenged deep-rooted The colonial era in India was marked not only by the struggle for independence but also by the emergence of visionary social reformers who challenged deep-rooted norms and injustices prevalent in society.

These reformers, driven by a fervent desire for change, played a crucial role in igniting social consciousness, advocating for human rights, and sowing the seeds of a more just and equitable India.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, often regarded as the pioneer of social reform in India, waged a relentless battle against regressive customs and practices. His resolute efforts to abolish sati, promote widow remarriage, and advocate for women's rights laid the foundation for a more enlightened and humane society.

His vision was rooted in the principles of rationalism and modernity. He recognised that for India to progress, it must shed the shackles of regressive practices that hindered its advancement.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's advocacy for women's education was revolutionary during a time when gender disparities were stark. He played a pivotal role in legalising widow remarriage and ensured that education became a right accessible to all, irrespective of gender.

Swami Vivekananda's teachings emphasised the importance of self-realisation and social service. He championed the idea of universal brotherhood, empowerment through education, and the upliftment of the masses, inspiring a generation to take up the mantle of social reform.

Mahatma Gandhi's contributions to India's political and social landscape cannot be emphasised enough. He employed nonviolent means to lead India's successful fight for freedom against the British rule that later inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.

Promoting equality, justice

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contributions reverberate across multiple dimensions of social reform. His relentless struggle against caste-based discrimination, drafting of the Indian Constitution and advocacy for Dalit rights created a lasting legacy that continues to shape modern India.

Born in 1891 in the town of Mhow, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar overcame formidable odds to become a

(Continued on page 30)

Charming Coorg

In the land of gushing waterfalls and coffee plantations, where green forests are framed by lavender tumble of hills, the authors stumble on a palace in Coorg that is shrouded in secrecy. They try to unravel the mystery of the royal retreat in this hauntingly beautiful corner of the country that has a way of springing surprises.

Text and photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

Nalknad Palace, Coorg

Nalknad Palace in Coorg (or Kodagu as it is now called) does not have the flagrant beauty that one associates with palaces in India. It is draped in an aura of secrecy and mystery, typical of a once-luxurious den of a king besieged by many enemies.

The palace snuggles amidst dense forest at the foot of Thadiandamol, the highest peak in this picturesque district in Karnataka. The red-tiled roof palace is speckled tellingly with escape routes, trap doors and eerie underground chambers prompting us to imagine that this is where tales of love, intrigue and betrayal may have unfolded. The interiors of this late 18th century seat of the kings of Coorg, are etched, even today, with faded murals of victory processions and the royal life, while carved teak pillars separate the various chambers.

A palace shrouded in mystery

Indeed, the palace holds secrets that it seemed unwilling to share with stray wayfarers like us till a self-appointed guide offered to show us around and related a potted history of the palace. Here, exclaimed our garrulous guide pointing to an ornate pavilion, King Doda Veerarajendra married his beloved second wife. The pavilion still stands on the grounds. When she died years later, the king, it is said, could not handle life without his better half and succumbed to insanity. And heartbreak and tragedy shadowed the royals again when the last king of Coorg, Chikka Veerarajendra who resided at Nalknad Palace, was forced to abdicate by his colonial masters in 1834 and exiled to Varanasi.

After a few treacherous twists and turns of cruel fate, the last king of Coorg sailed to England with his beautiful 11-year-old daughter Gowramma in 1852 to claim and recover his lost wealth which had been spirited away by the colonisers. There, Queen Victoria, enchanted by the ravishing little princess with her air of fragility, decided to have her baptized and took her under her wing as her godchild. She called her Victoria Gowramma. The monarch tried to play cupid between Victoria Gowramma and another deposed, exiled prince, the handsome Maharaja Duleep Singh. But the lack of chemistry between the two put paid to the monarch's plans and Victoria Gowramma chose instead to marry a much older Colonel John Campbell. Tragically, she died when she was just 23 years old under mysterious circumstances. On her death, it is said that the Coorg jewels too vanished into thin air.

We had stumbled on this royal retreat on our third visit to Coorg, in south-west Karnataka, known as much for the aroma of its coffee as the good looks and valour of the local Kodavas. In Coorg, green forests are framed by a lavender tumble of hills and the nature-scape is enhanced by the sacred Kaveri river which

Inside Nalknad Palace

meanders across the district's lush landscapes, playing hide and seek like a mischievous maiden. Waterfalls gush, and coffee plantations spray a delicate fragrance into the crisp air.

As we drove back to our resort, Tamara Coorg, 10 km from the palace and located in the village of Yevakapadi, thoughts about the palace, haunted by memories of colonial skulduggery, melted away as the beauty of Coorg filled our senses. In the seemingly endless green depths of the forest, tall bamboo stands and silver oaks rose like pagan totem poles; and, below the silver oaks, lovingly tended coffee and spice plantations flourished in a haze of green. And, occasionally, we glimpsed the sprightly jade-green, fish-speckled Kaveri river.

Medicine man and his oracle wife

Coorg has a way of springing surprises on a visitor. On an earlier visit to this charmed corner of our country, we had met a local witch doctor and chieftain of the Janu Kurubas tribe. We were on a forest walk in the Dubare Forest and were introduced to the medicine man and his oracle wife by our guide Ganesh who worked with the luxe Evolve Back resort, Siddapur, Coorg (known in its earlier avatar as Orange County). The Evolve Back resort is cocooned in a 300-acre plantation, bounded by River Kaveri and the Dubare Forest Reserve. Ganesh acted as an interpreter and told us how the witch doctor's concoction -- an assortment of chicken legs, a tarantula, tortoise eggs and a scorpion -- which when powdered and given judiciously could cure diseases as varied as an upset stomach, paralysis and post-delivery complications.

The tribal chieftain and his soothsayer wife were a highly

Green coffee berries at Tamara Coorg

The village medicine man and his oracle wife (right)

respected duo at the time, and when his wife would be possessed with supernatural powers on certain days of the week, she drew believers from places as far away as Mysore who come in search of answers to perplexing problems. The thatched roof, mud and bamboo hut of the family was clean and included a bedroom where the entire family slept, an area for storing grain, a kitchen and another open-sided hut which was the temple. Basically animistic, the simple tribals had built their temple around a termite hill which was daubed red and decorated with bougainvillea and May flowers, coconuts and other offerings.

The village huddled in a grove of trees where nearby buffaloes grazed and ambled peacefully, bamboo bells tinkling… Beyond unfurled manicured fields tilled by several families on land given by the government. In the meantime, the pregnant lady of the house had brewed a mix of local Robusta and Arabica coffee for us on a wood fire. As we sipped the coffee, we pondered that the family must be living on the edge, in what seemed to be, to our urban eyes, a penurious existence. Yet the faces that surrounded us were happy and suffused with contentment.

After gulping down the delicious black coffee, we bid goodbye and walked back through the Dubare Forest Reserve to Evolve Back resort, three kilometres away. The forest is connected with Nagarahole and Waynad in Kerala and there, elephant, bison, sambar and leopard roam. We walked into the tangled, mysterious green of the jungle where 45 ft tall stands of bamboo spooked the blue sky above to form a protective green awning. Knuckled roots and fallen trees jutted out from under feathery stands of bamboo like gnarled ancient fists and a fugitive earthy fragrance hung in the air. The thick-trunk *mathi* trees stood tall, seeming to challenge elephants to test their power and strength against their formidable girth. (The *mathi* tree has medicinal value and is so strong, it can't be toppled even by the mightiest of pachyderms.)

A view of a limpid lake at Evolve Back resort

Ripe coffee berries

Revelling with the gentle beasts

Occasionally, wild flowers bloomed in colourful bouquets in the silent forest which resonated with bird calls and the crunch of dry leaves underfoot. Back at our resort, we zoned out and did nothing. The next morning, we awoke to an achingly blue sky and to life that had wound down to the slowest tempo. More rustic pleasures awaited us.

We decided to check out the Elephant Camp at Nisargadhama, 35 km away, where we came upon elephants who were revelling in their morning bath under the shade of gulmohur trees painted orange-red with brilliant blooms. We joined the mahouts in the rub down of these enormous, yet gentle beasts in the flowing Kaveri river which the locals worship. (The Kaveri is an angler's haven too, for it is home to the mighty hard-to-catch mahseer which weighs 120 lbs.)

The drive back over twisting country roads and past slumbering green plantations that glistened with golden sunlight was enchanting. We took a small detour to visit Bylakuppe, the second largest Tibetan settlement outside Tibet, complete with a monastery, a village and a flea market. The aura of the village was very Buddhist- monks in dark orange robes spinning prayer wheels and colourful pagoda- roofed monasteries.

Coorg is a hauntingly beautiful corner of the country, we discovered, as beautiful as the people who live here. For when we met a few locals on one of our ambles, their patrician profiles and proud bearing reminded us of an oft-told legend. The Kodavas are said to be the descendants of Alexander the Great's army, some of whom disillusioned with warfare travelled beyond the Vindhyas and settled in idyllic Coorg.

Gustasp and Jeroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth; sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in HongKong, have danced with the Samburus in Africa, stayed with a local family in a Malay village, cracked the Da Vinci Code in Paris… For them, writing and photography are more than just freezing moments of that journey; it's a passion.

Nahar Niwas, one of the stately mansions in Shahpura Bagh

Dial up romance in a mini 'palace' in India

Mini palaces in India are as intimate as a honeymoon and as indelible in memory as one's first kiss. These dinky palaces are the lesser-known flower girls of regal India. Here are three of our favourites, where you can celebrate your honeymoon, an anniversary or just take a luxe break.

Text and photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

Jehan Numa Palace-hotel in Bhopal

The gleaming marble **Jehan Numa Palace hotel** in Bhopal, in the heart of India, with its green courtyards, sturdy old trees, and air of gilded luxury, is pervaded by its rich past which wraps around one like a second skin.

Indeed, the past was our silent travel companion in the historic city of Bhopal, ruled for 107 years (from 1819 to 1926) by four women rulers, the gutsy Begums. Not only were the sword-wielding Begums able administrators, they left behind a rich legacy of grand palaces, mosques, hospitals, educational institutions and a syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture.

The Jehan Numa Palace was built in 1890 by General Obaidullah Khan, the second son of the last begum and commander-in-chief of the erstwhile Bhopal State Force. Rising like a white apparition on a slope of Shamla Hill, the mini palace is an artful melange of British colonial, Italian Renaissance and classical Greek architecture. The palace was imaginatively restored by the Begum's grandsons Nadir and the late Yawar Rashid. A new portrait gallery with royal memorabilia, dating to the time when Bhopal was a princely state, adorns the walls of this 100-room alluring palace- hotel.

Blushing red bougainvillea trace a path over its immaculate white façade, yawning courtyards bloom with hospitable old trees where white wrought-iron chairs and benches invite guests to sit and watch the world go by. A 100-year-old mango tree provides a shady retreat and even has a restaurant named after it – Under the Mango Tree – which serves authentic mouth-watering Bhopali cuisine concocted from the hand-written recipes of the begums of yore.

The palace-hotel has a fragrant spa, swish restaurants and spacious period-style rooms that open onto lush green courtyards or a balcony that lassoes views of the swimming pool.

The palace-hotel's identity as a former royal abode is constantly burnished by the former royals.... A bonus: You may spy former royalty ride their thoroughbreds on the race track encircling the palace.

Shahpura Bagh: This mini royal residence of the former rulers of Shahpura, a small princely kingdom in Rajasthan, exudes understated grandeur, located as it is amidst lush parkland and a lake. Shahpura, situated between Udaipur and Jaipur, may not be your typical bucket-list destination.However, Shahpura Bagh, with its two stately mansions the 19th century Nahar Niwas and Umaid Niwas, is a boutique luxury homestay run by former royals which tourists should have on their radar. The picture-perfect residences, akin to white-washed cut-outs, rise amidst a luxuriant garden, lush woodland and a lake on the 45-acre estate.

Tables set for breakfast amidst scenic surroundings at Shahpura Bagh

Nahar Niwas is the family residence which also houses a dining area, lounge and a bar for guests. The nine suites in Umaid Niwas brim with charm - high ceilings, period furniture and arched windows in the Gothic style through which honeyed light filters in a gentle stream. Each suite is done up in a different colour palette and furnished with vintage four-poster beds, closets, writing desks, antique hat stands, and hand-picked locally sourced linen.

There are two villas as well, later additions, connected by an inner sun-lit courtyard furnished with banquettes and cushions. The bougainvillea-draped walls of the villas ensconce guests in a fragrant private space while the villa rooms are a soothing mix of vintage furniture and modern amenities. An outdoor shower and a private sit-out are luxe add-ons where you can listen to birds trill and gaze at the Instagrammable foliage-filled surrounds of the villas.

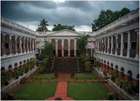
The terrace is perfect for watching the sun set over the vast estate studded with old-growth trees strung with a hammock or two, and interspersed with wheat fields and a swimming pool with picturesque pavilions for relaxation.

Indeed, you can find quietude here and it's tempting not to stir out of the property. Meal times are convivial with tables set outside under a mango tree or indoors in **Nahar Niwas** lit by vintage chandeliers and crystal objets d'art.

The hosts often stroll past to chat with guests about brightly plumed birds that they may have sighted that day on the property or point out the jackal and jungle cat that often sneaks past thick foliage when dusk falls.

At Shahpura Bagh, the royal and the rural co-exist and sing a melodious duet for anyone who cares to listen.

Rajbari Bawali was a dilapidated palace that once belonged to one of the richest, most powerful zamindari (landed gentry) families, a one-and-a-half-hour drive from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. It took Ajay Rawal, the current owner, seven years to restore the 250-year-old Rajbari Bawali and convert it into a 30-room boutique luxury hotel.



Rajbari Bawali, a restored Zamindari mansion

The interiors of this palace-hotel are fashionably eccentric and furnished with antiques that Rawal had collected over the years, thanks to his passion for old things. Yet everything seems to have a pre-ordained place in the general scheme of things. The corridors which overlook a splendid pillared courtyard are lined with Singer Sewing machines. A huge Louis Vuitton trunk, which perhaps sailed on gracious ocean liners of the past, occupies space in a corner outside a suite while the suites and rooms are kitted out with grand handcrafted four-poster beds hung with frilly layers of fabric, old sitars, drums, carved treasure chests, sinuous old metal chandeliers, sepia-tinted photographs, large winged armchairs, skylights, distressed chests of drawers… In the dining area, a polished grand piano occupies centre stage. It was sold to Rawal on condition that the then owner could play it whenever she visited Kolkata… There are many objets d'art with fascinating back stories.

When Rawal first stumbled on the Rajbari, in 2009, it resembled the crumbling palace of a long- forgotten potentate. The roots of banyan trees coiled serpent-like around the grounds and had destroyed walls and several wings of the palace. Yet the historic pile was brushed with magic and, finally, after repeated visits, he succumbed to the poignant romance of the place and the promptings of his inner voice to save this splendid historic pile for posterity…

It was hard to believe that this stately mansion was located in an obscure hamlet that was once part of the Sunderbans. Back in the day, its wild topography was covered with swamp land and mangroves and dotted with a few isolated homes where Raul tribals lived. Tigers would stroll past, to sip

A traditional welcome at Rajbari Bawali

Entrance to Rajbari Bawali

Fine dining at Rajbari Bawali

water at the water holes and, even today, there is an aura of luxuriant fertility about this neighbourhood, carved out of the Sunderbans…

And the Rajbari adds to the fairy-tale ambience with bespoke experiences that offer a glimpse of the opulent Zamindari lifestyle of one of the richest and most powerful families in Bengal. Guests get to savour splendid Zamindari spreads and culinary demonstrations where you bite into living history. Come evening, take to the river on a vintage country boat with a sundowner and watch life unfold along the river banks as musicians strum your senses.

Every evening, back at the Rajbari, oil lamps are lit in the central courtyard, and a prayer ceremony, accompanied by the blowing of conch shells, pounding of drums, and the swirling of a tray-full of diyas, celebrates and signals the end of the day.

Gustasp and Jeroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth, sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in HongKong, have danced with the Samburus in Africa, stayed with a local family in a Malay village, cracked the Da Vinci Code in Paris… For them, writing and photography are more than just freezing moments of that journey, it's a passion.

Our Last Six Issues

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"I take pride in translating complex ideas into visually compelling solutions and have a track record of delivering projects on time."

Simple at heart, yet effervescent, **Prajakta Karan Bharati** (43) has sketching in her instincts and blood. An avid explorer of nature, her sketches are visual portraits of her artistic expression. Through her interior design company, Design Theory, she has been depicting her realms that have met wide acceptance.

In an informal chat with **A. Radhakrishnan**, she speaks at length on designs, their appeal, sustainability, what define ideal designs, and argues that one needs to constantly upgrade to keep pace with transformations that accrue in the industry.

Prajakta Karan Bharati

Were you artistic as a child?

As a child I loved creating visual representations of scenes, objects, and people using various drawing techniques and mediums of expressive sketching.

The pivotal moment was when I began teaching sketching to 40 students. It allowed me to exercise my creativity and led me to consider design as a career.

How did you enter this line?

My first project was creating a kitchen, and after that the impressed client requested that I also design her living room. My uncle then asked me to design a complete flat. In the process, I got a lot of clients who wanted to know if my projects were vastu compliant. Realising how important it was to my field, I also did a diploma in vastu.

I christened my business, Design Theory, as it summed up my experiences and passion for design in conjunction with the entire process theory. I take pride in translating complex ideas into visually compelling solutions and have a track record of delivering projects on time and collaborating effectively with diverse teams.

What is the difference between interior design and interior decoration?

Interior design involves a broader scope of work, including space planning, architectural considerations, and project management, while interior decoration is primarily focused on enhancing the visual aesthetics and style of a space through the selection and arrangement of decorative elements.

What is sustainable design?

Sustainable design, also known as green or eco-friendly design, focuses on creating interior spaces that minimise negative environmental impacts and promotes the well-being of occupants. It involves the conscious use of resources, materials,

(Top and bottom) Building, office designed by Prajakta (right)

and technologies to reduce waste, conserve energy, and support ecological balance. The goal is to create spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also socially responsible and environmentally friendly.

Do you prefer functionality or appeal?

The preference between functionality and appeal in interior design depends on the specific context, purpose, and goals of the space. Both are essential aspects, and striking the right balance between the two is often the key to creating a well-designed space that meets the needs of its users.

To elaborate with an example, in a kitchen, functionality would involve designing an efficient layout that allows for easy movement and access to appliances, storage, and workspaces.

Appeal, on the other hand, refers to the aesthetics and visual attractiveness of the space. It involves the use of design elements, colours, textures, and furnishings that create a pleasing and inviting environment, and significantly impact the mood and emotional experience of the occupants, influencing their overall satisfaction with the space.

How do you understand your client's requirements?

Asking the right questions to your clients is crucial to understanding their needs, preferences, and goals. Essential questions during the initial consultation include purpose and functionality, aesthetic preferences, budget and timeline, lifestyle and habits, spatial requirements, existing furniture and items, lighting and energy considerations, emotional response, accessibility and universal design, privacy and noise considerations.

Effective communication and active listening are vital. Encourage your clients to share as much information as possible, and use their answers to shape your design approach and create a space that aligns with their vision and requirements.

Who is the ideal home designer?

Designing a home requires careful consideration of various aspects to ensure that the space meets the needs and preferences of the occupants while creating a harmonious and functional environment.

An ideal home designer is not only skilled in design aesthetics but also possesses excellent problem-solving abilities and a deep understanding of how people interact with their living spaces.

What makes for an ideal kitchen design?

An ideal kitchen design is one that combines functionality, efficiency, aesthetics, and reflects the unique needs and preferences of the homeowners.

Ultimately, it is one that enhances their daily routines, and becomes the heart of their home where they can enjoy cooking and spending time with family and friends. Add personal touches and decor that reflect the homeowners' tastes and lifestyle, making the kitchen a warm and inviting space.

What wood would you recommend for designing?

The choice of wood depends on the specific application, desired aesthetics, durability, the intended use, maintenance requirements, and budget constraints.

It should be ensured that the wood used is sustainably sourced and certified if environmental considerations are important to you. Commonly preferred wood types are oak, maple, cherry, walnut, mahogany, birch, ash, pine, teak and cedar.

What is a good way of using lights in your room?

Using lights effectively in a room can greatly impact its ambience, functionality, and overall aesthetics. Lighting can be Layered Lighting, combining different types of lighting to create depth and flexibility. Ambient Lighting is usually achieved through overhead fixtures like chandeliers, pendant lights, or recessed lighting; Task Lighting which focuses on specific areas for tasks such as reading, cooking, or working and includes desk lamps, under-cabinet lighting, and reading lights.

Accent Lighting which highlights architectural features, artwork, or decorative elements, using spotlights, wall sconces, or track lighting. Dimmers that allow you to adjust the light levels to suit different moods and activities, making the room more versatile. Natural Light by keeping windows unobstructed and using light-coloured window treatments which creates a pleasant and energising atmosphere.

Use of diffusers or frosted bulbs to soften the light and prevent harsh glares, especially in spaces where people spend extended periods, such as living rooms and bedrooms. Wall Washer fixtures distribute light evenly across walls, helping to make the room feel more spacious and balanced.

By carefully planning and integrating these lighting techniques, you can create a well-lit and inviting room that enhances the functionality and visual appeal of the space.

Which are the non-traditional areas where you can apply interior design and specialise yourself?

There are many non-traditional areas, allowing designers to specialise such as hospitality, healthcare, retail, exhibition and events, office, film industry, educational spaces, yacht and aircraft interior, residential, public spaces, furniture design, wellness and spa.

These areas offer exciting opportunities for designers to expand their skills, explore their creativity.

What in your portfolio are you most proud of?

In 2016, we completed two office projects in the Congo Republic, and in 2017, a restaurant project in Cameroon, both in Africa. These were really challenging projects in designing and executing, but we delivered it successfully.

The 150 projects we have completed include many prestigious residential as well as commercial projects, among them, Mannat Villas, Tungarli, Lonavla, a 27 bungalow project which received the best project recognition from the Lonavla Municipal Corporation. I was also honoured with Best Interior Designer Award by BANM (Builders Association of Navi Mumbai) in 2010 in Stall Design category.

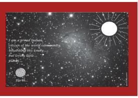
How do you keep up with industry changes?

It is essential for staying relevant, to keep informed, and competitive in the field. The interior design industry is constantly evolving, with new trends, technologies, and best practices. Some effective ways to stay updated are through continuous learning, industry publications, social media and design platforms, trade shows and events, professional associations, client feedback, networking, etc.

What advice would you like to give those who have chosen interior designing as their career?

Success in this field comes with perseverance, continuous learning, and a commitment to delivering exceptional designs that enhance people's lives. Stay curious, keep exploring, and enjoy the journey. Formal degree or diploma in interior design builds a strong foundation and develop your skills further through workshops, online courses, and hands-on experience. A well-curated portfolio showcases your style, creativity, and versatility to potential clients and employers.

A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance writer, poet and short story writer.


I am a proud Indian,
citizen of the world community,
inhabiting this lonely....
but lovely little ...
planet....
Earth...

(contd. from Pg 16)

beacon of hope and change. His personal experiences of caste-based discrimination fuelled his determination to challenge the oppressive social order and create a more just and equitable society.

Babasaheb's lifelong mission was to empower the Dalit community and secure their rightful place in society. His role in drafting the Indian Constitution played a pivotal role in enshrining principles of equality, justice, and affirmative action. He was instrumental in driving monumental reforms that sought to dismantle the oppressive caste system.

Jyotirao Phule was a social activist and anti-caste social reformer and writer from Maharashtra. His life was dedicated to the upliftment of marginalised sections of society. His reformist ideas challenged the caste system, untouchability and orthodox practices. His efforts to promote education and social empowerment laid the groundwork for a more egalitarian India.

Defying norms

The annals of Indian history are illuminated by the trailblazing efforts of women reformers who defied societal norms, shattered barriers, and catalysed transformative change. These visionary women, from diverse backgrounds and eras, played a pivotal role in challenging gender inequalities, championing women's rights, and shaping the trajectory of social progress.

Annie Besant, an English social reformer, aligned herself with Indian nationalist causes. Her efforts to promote education, women's rights, and religious tolerance resonated deeply with Indian society, forging an important bridge between Indian and Western reform movements.

Pandita Ramabai, a scholar and social reformer, devoted her life to the upliftment of women. She established the Arya Mahila Samaj, a platform that offered education and vocational training to widows and other marginalised women. Her work laid the foundation for women's education and empowerment, advocating for their economic self-sufficiency and social dignity.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, India's first female legislator, spearheaded campaigns for women's health and hygiene. Her pioneering efforts led to the establishment of cancer treatment centres and women's hospitals, addressing critical health needs of women across the nation.

Her journey is a testament to the power of vision and determination. Born in 1886 in Madras Presidency, her life was marked by a relentless pursuit of education and excellence.

She became one of the first women to enter the prestigious Madras Medical College, defying societal norms and setting the stage for a lifelong commitment to health and social reform.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a multifaceted reformer who contributed significantly to India's cultural renaissance. Her timeless work included promoting traditional arts and crafts, advocating for women's economic empowerment, and championing the cause of women's representation in political spaces.

Political prodigy

The list would be incomplete without the mention of Indira Gandhi, whose remarkable political journey shattered glass ceilings and showcased the potential of women in leadership roles. As India's first woman Prime Minister, she made indelible contributions to governance, foreign policy, and social welfare, leaving an indomitable legacy for future generations.

Born into a family deeply entrenched in India's struggle for independence, Indira Gandhi was destined for a life of public service. Her early exposure to the ideals of social justice and political activism set the stage for her eventual foray into the world of politics. As the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, she inherited a legacy that would become the foundation of her own political journey.

Her leadership was defined by her commitment to advancing policies that aimed to uplift the masses and bridge socio-economic disparities. Her ambitious initiatives encompassed agricultural reforms, poverty alleviation programs and the nationalisation of key industries. Through these measures, she sought to empower the marginalised and create a more equitable society.

One of Indira Gandhi's most enduring legacies is her role in spearheading the Green Revolution—a transformative agricultural movement that significantly increased crop yields and transformed India from a food-deficient nation to a self-sufficient one. Her foresight and dedication to agricultural modernisation played a pivotal role in ensuring food security and propelling India onto the global stage.

Grassroots activism

One of India's best-known grassroots activist, Aruna Roy's pioneering work in the field of social activism exemplified the power of grassroots movements. She co-founded the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), advocating for transparency, accountability and the right to information. Her efforts underscored the potential of collective action to drive systemic change.

Many reformers have employed grassroots activism that uses people in a zone for a movement. Collective action at the local level by mobilising communities and masses has been very effective in achieving social changes. Instances of these have been umpteen as documented by the thousands of civil society players across India.

The role of women reformers in Indian history is a testament to their unwavering resolve, courage and dedication to advancing societal progress. From challenging archaic customs to advocating for education, health, empowerment, and political representation, these trailblazers have paved the way for a more equitable and inclusive India.

Their enduring legacy serves as an inspiration for current and future generations to continue the pursuit of gender equality, social justice, and human rights. As India marches forward, the contributions of these remarkable women remain a beacon of hope, reminding us of the transformative power of individual agency in shaping the destiny of a nation.

Ruchi Verma is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Preserving cinematic heritage

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur is a lone warrior fighting for the cause of preserving films of the yore. A producer-director graduating from the FTII, Pune, he laments that of 1700 silent films made in India, only nine have managed to survive. **Shoma A. Chatterji** *sketches his role as a committed archivist.*

***Bicycle Thief* , a 1948 film**

The terms "restoration" and "preservation" have very positive associations so far as cinema across the world is concerned. The digitalization of cinema has spread the idea that celluloid cinema on 8mm, 16mm and 35 mms is passé and will no longer be in vogue in another ten years perhaps. Then, what about the classic films that have not been digitised because they were not fit enough to be digitised or, perhaps, it did not occur to anyone that these might get destroyed because of lack of proper infra-structure in film organisations for the conservation and preservation of old films, classic or not?

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur began assisting his mentor, writer-lyricist and director, Gulzar. Gulzar suggested he enroll himself at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune to study film direction and scriptwriting. After graduating from FTII, Shivendra launched himself as a producer-director in 2001 under the banner "Dungarpur Films".

"I always was always interested in preservation – something I learnt from my father. I had read an interview with Martin Scorsese about the Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna, Italy where they screened restored films. I was so fascinated that I decided to attend the festival. I think the seeds of restoring and preserving concretely as my life's mission were sowed with this decision. It worked like a trigger," he says.

"When we began the Film Heritage Foundation in 2015, saving India's film heritage was an obscure cause with most people asking, "What is film heritage?" Four years later, after having conducted film preservation and restoration workshops in Mumbai, Pune and Chennai, we have finally put film preservation on the map of India," says Shivendra Singh Dungarpur who is fighting a battle with a small team of dedicated people for the preservation and restoration of film prints. Another workshop is scheduled to be held in Kolkata in November in collaboration with the 24th Kolkata International Film Festival. The restored celluloid prints of Satyajit Ray's first trilogy will be screened during the workshop.

Since its inception in 2015, this highly commendable flagship training programme has travelled successfully to cities such as Pune, Chennai, Hyderabad and Kolkata and attracted unconditional endorsements from film luminaries such as Amitabh Bachchan, Shyam Benegal, Naseeruddin Shah, Kamal Haasan, Mani Ratnam, S.S. Rajamouli, Nagarjuna, Chiranjeevi, Prosenjit Chatterjee and Goutam Ghose.

"My fascination with films began as a child when I spent warm, summer evenings on the verandah of my grandparents' home in Bihar, watching the antics of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin to the accompaniment of the whirring sound of the film projector. I loved the smell of film, holding the film strips up to the light to see tiny images that magically sprang to life as the film threaded its way through the projector. I grew up to become a filmmaker. But while making films is my passion, it is inextricably linked to the artistry, texture and feel that celluloid lends to the image and the stories that we tell," says Dungarpur.

In an interview to Manasi Chandu of The Indian Post in September 2020, Dungarpur lamented the lack of sufficient funding needed to finance such an expensive project.

"Films are not a singular experience. While creating cinema, humans established it as a form of group activity, with shared experiences. How can you negate that experience to something online?" asks Dungarpur.

In March, 2020 when the lockdown was announced, Dungarpur had to shut down his organisation — Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) — overnight, not knowing how long the lockdown announced by the government would last. "Running an archive is like taking care of your child. And when that's suddenly taken away from you, and you have no means of taking care of your baby, you don't know what to do", said Dungarpur.

The main concern for the archive was the condition of all the film material in storage, which required preservation in temperature-controlled vaults and dehumidifiers with routine cleaning and checks to keep them from getting exposed. The archive currently has over 50,000 photographs, 500 films, and other film material including song booklets, lobby cards and posters.

Unable to keep away from his 'child', Dungarpur decided to quietly walk down from his house in Breach Candy to the archive in Tardeo to open it up four weeks after the lockdown was announced. His paranoia wasn't unfounded — since the humidifiers and air conditioner were turned off for a month, some of the film material had crumbled to dust, with a few nitrate reels decomposing, thanks to Mumbai's humidity.

But there was no time to fret. Dungarpur took it upon himself to clean up the office, and made it a point to visit his workplace regularly to run the air conditioner and dehumidifiers in order to save the film material.

He is a patron of the British Film Institute and a donor for the restoration of Hitchcock's silent classic *The Lodger*. He also facilitated the restoration of the Indian classic Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* (1948), done by Scorcese's World Cinema Foundation that was premiered in the Cannes Classic section in 2012. "As one of the first initiatives, we curated a package of Indian films and newsreels entitled The Golden 50's: India's Endangered Classics screened at Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna, Italy from June 28 to July 5 2014 in collaboration with the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) and the Films Division," Dungarpur elaborates. The idea was to showcase India's unique cinematic heritage and to create awareness about the urgent need for its preservation and restoration. Most of the original negatives do not exist and what survive are dupe negatives and prints in poor condition.

Director Shivendra Singh Dungarpur

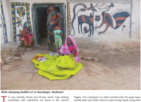
Dungarpur's journey as a filmmaker began with the feature-length documentary *The Celluloid Man* which maps a historic journey with P.K. Nair the first director of the National Film Archive of India in Pune. *Celluloid Man* won two National Awards in India at the 60th National Film Awards for the Best Historical / Biographical Reconstruction and for Best Editing in 2013. It has also won the "Nestor The Chronicler" award for the best archival film for *Celluloid Man* at the XII Kyiv International Documentary Film Festival 2013, Ukraine. Dungarpur was given the Bimal Roy Memorial Emerging Talent Award. He also bagged the Special Jury Award at the 13th edition of the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) 2014.

His next documentary *The Immortals* (2015) was commissioned by the Busan International Film Festival to direct a commemorative documentary on Indian cinema. He begins with Watson's Hotel in South Mumbai, where representatives of the pioneering Lumiere Brothers cinematic firm organised India's first film screening, in 1896. His latest film *Czech Mate: In Search of Jiri Menzel* with an incredible screening time spanning seven hours and more, is his most ambitious film. It is the longest documentary to have cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification. It can be said to be the longest history on celluloid to explore the history of the Czech New Wave that took the world of cinema by storm around the 1950s.

Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards.

The painted villages of Jharkhand

Sohrai and Khovar which have striking similarities to pre-historic art, sport the mud walls of over 100 plus villages of Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, attracting tourists from all over, thanks to the efforts of a couple Justin and Alka Imam, who have been promoting and conserving this dying art.



Walls displaying Graffito art in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

Till very recently Sohrai and Khovar which have striking similarities with prehistoric art found in the ancient painted caves of Isco, located in Barkagaon in Hazaribagh, was a dying art, but thanks to the patronage of art promoter and conservator-couple Justin and Alka Imam it now sports the mud walls of over 100 plus villages of Hazaribagh attracting tourists coming in droves to visit the "painted villages" of Jharkhand.

The art forms of Khovar and Sohrai have been organically created by a living culture. Providing a perspective and guide to view the traditional mural paintings, Bulu Imam in his seminal work, titled *Hazaribagh School of Painting and Decorative Works*, says "We must not let this prejudice our judgment of them, because, after all, they are the purest indigenous offering and flowerings of truly Indian culture in the most ancient sense."

Khovar is a type of *graffito* art using reversed slip pottery technique which consists of applying a ground base coat of manganese black earth and letting it dry, after which a wet slip of kaolin (white earth colour) is applied and cut or scraped off in various designs or motifs with a plastic or bamboo comb, or with fingers. The underlayer is in stark contrast with the upper layer, usually black and white. Sohra is done during Diwali using cloth swabs or chewed twigs of the sal tree.

One of the leading practitioners of the Khovar and Sohrai wall art is Malo Devi Mhato (45) of Jorakath, a village standing amidst sal (shorea robusta) forest in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. Her oeuvre includes comb-cut paintings which she has exhibited in several cities abroad including Australia, England, Canada and Italy. Mhato's painting on the walls of Hazaribagh railway station has been widely appreciated.

A member of the group who executed several murals on the walls of public facilities and offices in Jharkhand, she says, "I picked up the basics in my childhood while my mother painted the walls of our mud home and after my marriage, I learnt more from my *sasu ma* (mother in law).

Two years after the discovery of Isco caves, in 1993, the Australian High Commission funded INTACH to bring Khovar and Sohrai mural art onto paper using glue-paper technology.

Artists at Birsa Munda Airport. Behind them is their creation

Till 1995, INTACH nurtured over seventy traditional women artists who successfully transferred the mural comb-cut Khovar art onto handmade paper. It resulted in the formation of the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative (TWAC) and soon drew the attention of art curators from Australia who took back works for exhibitions in major cities in Australia. In 2000 the Australian Museum, Sydney invited three traditional women artists to paint murals on large-size boards and canvas which went into major collections.

Twice a year womenfolk from the ethnic communities, namely Munda, Santal, Oraon, Agaria, Birhor, Kurmi, Prajapati, Ghatwal and Ganju create verdant images of flora and fauna paint their mud homes with clay inside and out, celebrating harvest with Sohrai art done in colour while during the wedding season, it's time for the Khovar murals to appear on the walls, made in black and white. The colours used are all locally sourced—kali mitti (manganese black), lal mitti (red oxide, dudhi maati (liquid kaolin) and peeli mitti (yellow ochre).

Considered auspicious symbols related to fertility, the paintings have been vanishing for varied reasons- village folks turning their homes into cement and concrete structures, young girls reluctant to pursue family traditions, increased incidences of migration to cities in search of livelihood and displacement of settlements due to mining activities and setting up of large thermal power projects.

Naively drawn but painted with great felicity and imagination the paintings are illustrative—deer and goat milk-feeding the young, birds feeding their chick, peacock and mongoose fighting with a snake, a peahen breaking an egg, the fabled "man bird" on four-legged bird "chibba", skeletal forms revealing baby animal inside the mother womb etc. Then there are plants and animals which once flourished in the forests of Hazaribagh, namely the humped cattle, Nilgai, Indian rhinoceros, elephant, hog deer, wild buffaloes, chital, wild boar and birds like the Bengal Florican, fowls, egret, wire-tailed swallow etc. Border patterns and decorative motifs signifying the river, trees, fish, lotus and mandala dominate the walls.

Explaining the process the painting goes through Justin elaborates, "After the monsoon has washed and weathered the mud house walls, the women artists repair and re-plaster their clay walls, courtyards, and rooms with cow dung, husk and earth readying it to apply the colours at different stages with cloth swabs and scrap it off with broken pieces of combs or chewed twigs of sal tree revealing motifs in dark black etchings, depicting the forest animals, birds, plants, flowers, fishes and symbols."

The Imam couple has persevered to keep the traditional art alive on the village walls. Explains Alka who got married to Justin in 1998 and ever since then has dedicated her life to the preservation and promotion of the traditional mural arts besides offering newer avenues for the folk artists, "In the early years, we would load our car with the earth colours and scour the villages and identify the practitioners of the art. We would gift them with colours in order to motivate the women artists and to keep the art alive."

Besides providing the earth colours, the Imam couple encourages the artists to colour their walls offering them occasional gifts like saris, blankets, LED bulbs and wall clocks. Interestingly, these incentives have not only provided crucial encouragement but also ensured the continuity of once-prehistoric art. The Sohrai Kala Mahila Vikas Sahyog Samiti (SKMVSS), solely made of practitioners of the art as its members received the GI tag within nine months of the application.

So far the Imam's have created a database of 300 plus practitioners of Hazaribagh mural art- all members of Sahyog Samiti-who have executed collaborative projects at Bhagwan Birsa Jaivik Udyan, Birsa Munda Airport (Ranchi), Circuit House, Jharkhand Governor's House, Delhi's Asian Heritage Foundation and others. In addition, their individual works have been exhibited in art galleries in India and abroad.

In May 2020, thanks to the Imam couple's efforts Sohrai-Khovar was offered the geographical indicator (GI) tag—a first for Jharkhand. One can locate these painted villages on Google too.

Dand village resident Anita Devi (36) has been painting her home since the age of 12. She was among the many who executed the murals at Hazaribagh and Latehar Railway stations and participated at the Lalit Kala Art Camp, held in Chennai in 2019 with two of her canvases. Says she, "When tourists come visiting our village and wonder at the painted walls it gives me a sense of pride and makes us happy. Some even visit us to buy the art pieces done on paper."

Hiraman is a freelance writer and a weekend farmer.

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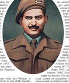
Blazing fighter of Rajputana Rifles

Piru Singh Shekhawat was born on 20 May 1918 to Lal Singh in village Rampura Beri, Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan. Youngest of seven children – three sons and four daughters – he hated school due to its restricted environment, and one day, ran away after being scolded by the teacher. He never returned to school and helped his parents in their farm. He was keen to join the army and was accepted at the age of eighteen after several attempts.



He was enrolled in the 10th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment on 20 May 1936 at Jhelum. After completing his training in May 1937, he was posted to 5th battalion of the same regiment where he took part in operations on the North Western Frontier. Singh was an outstanding sportsman and represented his regiment in hockey, basketball and cross-country running at inter-regimental and national level championships. Despite his earlier hostility to schooling, Singh took education seriously and passed the Indian Army Class Certificate of Education.

He was promoted to the rank of Havaldar in February 1942. After the Second World War, he was sent to Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force, where he served until September 1947. Following the Partition, Singh was transferred to the 6th Battalion of the Rajputana Rifles.

War had started between India and Pakistan in October 1947 for control over Kashmir. In July 1948, Pakistan launched offensive strikes in the Tithwal sector and captured a ring contour on 8 July. This forced the Indian troops in the forward positions across river Kishanganga to retreat. In an attempt to reverse the situation, the 6th Battalion of the Rajputana Rifles, was moved from Uri to Tithwal and assigned the task of capturing two positions on the ridge.

On 18 July 948, the 'D' Company launched its first attack at 01:30. His MMGs (Medium Machine Gun) had been sighted to cover all possible approaches. As the attack advanced, it was met with heavy MMG fire from both flanks. Grenades were hurled from enemy bunkers. Piru Singh was then with the forward most Section of the company.

Undeterred even after seeing more than half of the Section killed or wounded, he let out the battle cry "Raja Ram Chandra ki Jai", encouraged the remaining men and rushed forward towards the nearest enemy MMG position. Grenade splinters ripping his clothes and wounding him at several places, he continued to advance. He was on top of the MMG position wounding the gun crew with sten gun fire. Disregarding his bleeding wounds, he jumped at the MMG crew, bayoneting them to death. By then he was the sole survivor of the section.

Left alone, he advanced towards the second Pakistani medium machine gun post. At this juncture, he was almost blinded by a grenade blast. His sten gun ammunition had run out. Singh lobbed grenades at the next Pakistani post. Jumping into another trench, he killed two Pakistani soldiers with his bayonet. Before he could move out, a bullet struck him in the head. Even as he succumbed, he hurled a grenade into a nearby Pakistani trench.

He was posthumously awarded India's highest military decoration, the Param Vir Chakra. Singh was never married. In the 1980s, the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), named 15 of her crude oil tankers in honour of the Param Vir Chakra recipients. The crude oil tanker named MT "Company Havildar Major Piru Singh, PVC" was delivered to SCI on 12 October 1984. Due to MARPOL Convention on single hull tankers, SCI phased out all her 15 PVC series crude tankers on completion of their economic age of 25 years. A road roundabout called Shahid Piru Singh Shekhawat Circle' was named after him, in Jhunjhunu, by the Government of Rajasthan. An intersection called 'Piru Singh Chowk' has been named after him in Yol, Himachal Pradesh.

Contributed by Renu Prakash from the data bank of Late Brig. Suresh Chandra Sharma

SULOCHANA LATKAR (1928-2023)

Bollywood's iconic mother

Sulochana Latkar nee Rangu Diwan (1928 - 2023) was a well-known actress who appeared in 250 Hindi films and 50 Marathi films over a six-decade career. She played a variety of parts, including leading roles, supporting characters, and motherly portrayals with depth and sincerity. Born in the village of Khadaklat, Karnataka, she wed at the age of 15, Aabasaheb Chavan, a member of a landlord family. As her parents had already died from the plague pandemic, she moved to Chikodi withher older brother to the home of her father's lawyer friend. She soon got a job at a monthly salary of ₹ 30 at film producer Master Vinayak's Prafulla Pictures firm. Additionally, she also acted as an extra in some films.

Later she joined Jayaprabha, the famed Marathi film company run by Bhalji Pendharkar, who shaped her career and who, after being moved by her expressive eyes, renamed her Sulochana, from the Sanskrit 'the one with the beautiful eyes,' which would later catch the attention of the film industry and filmgoers for decades to come.

With the 1942 release of Marvi, Sulochana made her film debut in Hindi. She debuted in 1943 with a small role in the Marathi film Chimukala Sansar. She was cast in the 1944 Hindi mythology film Maharathi Karna and in 1948, she was cast in her first lead part in the Marathi film Sasurvaas.

She quit the same year as the studio was set on fire by demonstrators after Mahatma Gandhi wasslain, as Pendharkar was a fervent RSS devotee. Relocating to Pune she began working for Mangal Pictures.

Best known for her leading roles in Marathi films like *Meeth Bhakar, Vahinichya Bangdya, Dhakti Jaoo,* and *Sangte Aika*, she also excelled in *Laxmi Aali Ghara, Mothi Manse, Jivacha Sakha, Pativrata, Sukhache Sobti, Bhaubheej, Akashganga, Sasu Varchadh Javai, Sadhi Manse* and *Maratha Tituka Melvava*.

She moved to Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1953. Her performance in *Anarkali* and *Baaz* were standout performances. She played Kaikeyi in *Sampoorna Ramayana*, a hit film directed by Babubhai Mistri.

Her performance in 1956's popular mythological play Sati Anusaya directed by Dhirubhai Desai proved problematic since, following the film's success, she was exclusively offered religious roles. She also appeared in films starring Raj Kapoor, including *Jaagte Raho* and *Do Ustaad*.

Sulochana was offered the role of a mother in the 1959 movie *Sujata* by director Bimal Roy. Initially hesitant as she was only 30, she eventually accepted the part. There was no turning back for her after it became a success, and she was forever labelled as the 'Mother of Bollywood'.

She made an enduring impression in Hindi films like *Sujata, Kasauti,* and *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*, portraying a mother figure to top heroes such as Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Rajesh Khanna, and Amitabh Bachchan.

She portrayed a mother or a close family member in films with Sunil Dutt as the leading character, in *Heera, Jhoola, Ek Phool Char Kante, Chirag, and Bhai Bahen, Reshma aur Shera, Jaani Dushman, Umar Qaid*; with Dev Anand in films like *Jab Pyar Kisise Hota Hai, Pyar Mohabbat, Johnny Mera Naam, Amir Garib, Joshila* and *Warrant*; and with Rajesh Khanna, notable films such as *Kati Patang, Baharon Ke Sapne, Mere Jeevan Saathi, Prem Nagar, Aakraman, Aashiq Hoon Baharaon Ka* and *Tyaag*.

She won several coveted awards during her lifetime - Padma Shri Award (1999), Chitra Bhushan Award(2002), Maharashtra Bhushan Award (2009), Filmfare Lifetime Achievement Award(2004), four Hridaynath Mangeshkar Awards, and Saraswatibai Dadasaheb Phalke Lifetime Achievement Award (2009).

Sulochana, who had respiratory issues, passed away in Mumbai aged 95 and was cremated with State honours.

A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance writer, poet and short story writer.

NITIN DESAI (1965 –2023)

Indian cinema's quintessential Art Director

If Art Direction is a craft, Nitin Desai took it to pristine levels. He was a genius, a visionary artist who not only knew his calling inside out, but also the people who laboured over its comprehension. A stalwart in production design, he had become an integral and inseparable part of Indian cinema's fraternity. As one who designed some of the most iconic sets, he was also known to be a large-hearted *Marathi Manoos* who rose to dizzying heights in the glitz and glamour of Bollywood.

Born in Dapoli, Konkan's scenic coast, on 9 August 1965, Desai grew up in Mulund, a quiet suburb in central Mumbai. As one who studied at the JJ School of Art, he had an uncanny knack of looking at things and how they ought to look under the scrutinising gaze of the camera. His tryst with films began in 1987 as an assistant for TV serial *Tamas*. It was Yash Chopra who steeled him for Bollywood, and later, his assistant Sanjay Leela Bhansali who ushered him into spotlight.

Industry insiders recall how in 1994 people thought it was a huge risk to hand over the work to a novice Desai for the Vidhu Vinod Chopra blockbuster, *1942: A Love Story*. Desai not only proved naysayers wrong, he won the *Filmfare* Award for that ₹ 80 lakh set. It was the beginning of his rise and rise. Bhansali aligned with his vision and together they made history in *Khamoshi* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, where both thrived on their experimental instincts. Bhansali taught him to think big and look at the wider picture. The extravaganza that Desai brought to his *Devdas* was in evidence again but ironically, the latter had laughed off at the absurdity of *Devdas*' grandeur. The sets cost in crores and one could only gasp at their majesty. Fable has it that then Maharashtra Governor P.C. Alexander had requested the Film City Director to retain Chandramukhi's 'kotha' as a permanent tourist spot. How Desai managed to give them the magnificence is stuff folklores are made of.

From *Lagan* (2001), *Jodha Akbar* (2008), *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* (2015), not to speak of other Marathi and Hindi films, Desai kept conquering new horizons and setting new benchmarks. Top names like Ashutosh Gowariker, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Rajkumar Hirani and Sanjay Leela Bhansali courted his craft. However, when he turned a film producer himself with a devotional film *Desh Devi*, he made it a minimalistic beauty – showing he could straddle all genres, all budgets.

Desai won four National Awards and three Filmfare Awards. In 2005, he set up his own ND Studios in Karjat spread over 52 acres which was also host to the reality *Big Boss* show. The journey that began as second fiddle in TV serials culminated into films with *Bhookamp*, a film by Aadhikari Brothers in 1993. There was no looking back thereafter as Desai struck gold with *1942: A Love Story*. The titles of *Parinda, Maachis, Baadshah, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar* proudly proclaimed his name. *Salaam Bombay* and *Amok* (a French film) brought him global spotlight. *Jungle Book, Kamasutra, Such a Long Journey* and *Holy Smoke* (both foreign films), *Slumdog Millionaire* and an expansive KBC set, carried his trademark imprint. With *Raja Shivchhatrapati*, he turned TV series producer. The Marathi biopic *Balgandharva* (2011) was his production.

At his peak, he debuted as a lead actor in *Hello Jai Hind* directed by Gajendra Ahire. Most of his blockbusters were period films. With mounting success, his debts too mounted and financial crises followed. He defaulted on his Rs 252-crore loans and a bankruptcy court had admitted an insolvency petition against him.

For someone whose imagination knew no bounds, Desai was apparently bogged down and stress had begun to take its toll. He chose to end his life on 2 August 2023 at just 57 – a complete anti-thesis of a personality who seemed a fighter all the way.

Raju Korti is a senior journalist with over four-decade experience of working in media institutions.

CHARTER

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Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?

Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?

Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?

Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?

Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?

Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?

Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?

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Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor
(October 9th, 1930 - February 21st, 2007)

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