

Abhishek Banerjee demands court-monitored probe into Delhi blast

Kolkata: Lok Sabha member and Trinamool Congress general secretary, Abhishek Banerjee, on Tuesday, demanded a court-monitored probe by a special investigation into the car explosion near Delhi's Red Fort Metro Station, killing eight people. "An impartial, time-bound investigation must be conducted by a Special Investigation Team (SIT), under court supervision, if necessary, to uncover the truth and ensure that those responsible are held fully accountable," said Banerjee in a statement issued on Tuesday.

He also claimed that the Union Home Ministry should explain the "security lapses" in the national capital, considering Delhi Police come under its direct control. "It is extremely distressing that such an incident has taken place in the heart of our national capital. The Delhi Police, under the Union Home Ministry, bears responsibility for maintain-

ing law and order.

How, then, are such grave lapses in security allowed to occur?" Banerjee questioned. According to him, the sequence of developments before the blast poses questions about the state of internal security and hints at a lack of effective vigilance. "Only yesterday morning, nearly 350 kg of explosives and an assault rifle were recovered from Faridabad in Haryana. Viewed together, these incidents raise alarming questions about internal security and the evident decline in vigilance," Banerjee said.

Meanwhile, initial investigation into the car explosion near Delhi's Red Fort Metro Station has hinted that this could be a suicide attack to cause maximum damage. The blast occurred on Monday evening when a Haryana-registered car, a Hyundai i20, parked near Gate No. 1 of the Red Fort Metro Station exploded, killing at least eight people and injuring



dozens.

High alerts have been issued, with security around crowded public places and religious sites enhanced. Security arrangements have been strengthened

at the Eden Gardens stadium and across Kolkata ahead of the first Test match between India and South Africa, following the fatal car explosion near Delhi's Red Fort on Monday.

'Shameless': BJP on Congress 'politicising' Delhi blast

New Delhi: A day after the terror attack near Delhi's Red Fort, the BJP on Tuesday hit out at the "shameless" Congress for "working against national interest", deprecating the Opposition parties' bid to "politicise" the tragedy in which eight people were killed. "If being shameless and working against national interest had a face, it would look exactly like the Congress," said BJP leader Amit Malviya.

"The problem with our Opposition and the loony far-Left ecosystem is that they simply do not know how to stand with the country in times of need," said Malviya, incharge of BJP's National Information and Technology Department, on X. "Soon after Pahalgam, they whined endlessly, demanding retribution. But the moment Operation Sindoor crushed terror networks, they began croaking for 'peace' – some even discovering newfound ancestral ties to Pakistan," said the BJP leader.

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"And now, instead of standing with India, they're busy politicising the Delhi

blast, questioning the government even as evidence points to a massive crack-down that has busted several terror modules, averted major strikes, and led to the arrest of dreaded operatives. Our intelligence agencies are hot on their heels," he said. Malviya said, "While top government functionaries are monitoring the situation closely and reassuring the nation, the Leader of Opposition and his sister, the second-in-command in Congress, are reportedly on yet another foreign leisure trip."

The BJP leader's stinging criticism of the Congress and its allies coincided with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who, while speaking in Bhutan, assured action against the conspirators behind the blast. He stated that Indian agencies will get to the bottom of the conspiracy and assured that those behind the blast "will not be spared". In his remarks at Changlimethang Ground in Thimphu, PM Modi said that India and Bhutan have shared a deep spiritual and cultural bond for centuries.

He said, "Today is a very important day for Bhutan, for the Bhutanese



royal family, and for all who believe in world peace. India and Bhutan have shared a deep spiritual and cultural bond for centuries. And therefore, it was India's and my commitment to participate in this important occasion." "Today, I come here with a very heavy heart. The horrific incident that took place in

Delhi yesterday evening has deeply saddened everyone. I understand the grief of the affected families.

Today, the entire nation stands with them. I was in touch with all the agencies investigating this incident throughout last night... Our agencies will get to the bottom of this conspiracy.

We have to go all the way back to Karpov and Kasparov on the top two boards to find something like India's dominance: Peter Svidler

Peter Svidler won the Chess World Cup in 2011, was a part of five Russian Olympiad-winning teams, coached R. Praggnanandhaa ahead of the Candidates tournament in Toronto this year, is a former World No. 4 and a commentator when he is not playing. But he is not your usual top Russian Grandmaster; he is an ardent cricket fan. Excerpts from Svidler's interview with The Hindu during the Tech Mahindra Global Chess League in London earlier this month:

Your thoughts on the Global Chess League?

I experienced the other side of it. Last year I was doing the commentary, and this year I got drafted into play. I understand what the league is based on, being a cricket fan. I don't know if it is going to be as big a hit as the IPL, but if that happens, it will be fantastic for chess. The calendar is quite busy, but this will be a very prominent part of the calendar. It has a carnival feel to it, while also being incredibly strong. And this is a combination of things that has proven to work in other sports. I welcome every new project, because I think the more chess, the better.

How do you view the league's time control with no increment?

I am old enough to have started playing with analogue clocks, so it is not exactly an alien concept, but obviously we have moved away from it. I understand the decision-making behind it. Because of television, you want to have a much clearer idea of how long a match takes, and you also want excitement and things happening at the end of it.

The last major tournament before the Global Chess League was the Chess Olympiad in Budapest. Were you surprised by India's twin gold and the men's team's dominance?

They were clearly going to be one of the two, three main favourites. I was doing commentary on the Olympiad, and I think by round four, we were definitely saying between ourselves, maybe even on air — who is going to take points off these kids? Like, it just didn't seem like they could be stopped. The double is very historic. The women were not as dominant as the men.

No, it is not a surprise anymore. I think a team with this line-up, knowing what we know about these guys, and the moment you realise the United States is not playing as well as maybe you would have expected that they would, become the obvious favourites for the title because there are no weaknesses; just five very strong boards. Serial winner: Svidler was a part of five Russian Olympiad-winning teams between 1994 and 2002. It was one of the most dominant performances in the history of the Olympiad... Definitely. We probably will have to go all the way back to the Olympiads where the Soviet Union played [Anatoly] Karpov and [Garry] Kasparov on the top two boards to find something like that.

You were part of five Russian teams that won the Olympiad gold.

I began playing at the Olympiad in 1994. In 1996 at Yerevan, we played kind of similar to what India did at Budapest. It



didn't seem like we were likely to drop points.

You worked as a coach with R. Praggnanandhaa ahead of the Candidates. How did you find the experience?

It was something new for me, as I hadn't really coached until I started working with Pragg. But it has been a joy because he is a very strong chess player, and he is also extremely pleasant to be around. It kind of mattered for me because I think there needs to be a human connection, like working for somebody you don't particularly like is not advisable. He is just such a sunny kid, cheerful, kind and just a joy. Strong connection: Svidler enjoyed his time coaching R. Praggnanandhaa, describing the Indian as 'a sunny kid' who is 'just a joy' to be around. Strong connection: Svidler enjoyed his time coaching R. Praggnanandhaa, describing the Indian as 'a sunny kid' who is 'just a joy' to be around. You have played the Candidates three times and finished third in 2013. In the generation I was part of, the people who did get a shot at the World title are probably sort of slightly above me in the pecking order. So, I think I am okay with my career. One of the highlights of which was winning the World Cup in 2011?

Yes, of course. I tend to enjoy those [knockout] tournaments. You must be the only top chess player from a non-cricketing country that follows cricket. How did it all begin? Nigel Short introduced me to cricket. I was in Greece where we were working on chess, and then at some point he told me, 'No, enough of this, yeah, let's go watch something you've never watched before.'

And you liked what you saw?

I was kind of instantly hooked.

What did you first like about cricket?

It is hard to describe. The first match I watched, along with Short on TV, was India versus Pakistan in the 1999 World Cup.

You could not have got something

bigger than that.

Yes, I think this is why I love the game, because of my first experience of it. I didn't know the rules, I didn't know anything, but the feeling of spectacle was just so obvious.

Do you enjoy all formats of cricket?

Yes, I have grown to enjoy the T20s as well. I mean, it took me a long time to convince myself I am supposed to take T20s seriously, but I do enjoy them as well now. But still if I have a choice, I would watch a good Test match over anything else. I love the drama, the technique. The sense of the build-up of narrative over five days is really... I don't know if anything compares to it. It is very, very special because, yeah, you get to see samples of life within a Test match. Of course it needs to be a good match.

Have you watched a Test from the ground?

Yes, the final Test of the 2005 Ashes. It rained for most of the day, so we didn't get to watch much cricket, but as occasions go, it was pretty decent.

The cricketers you like to watch in particular... I love spinners. I have watched Shane Warne bowl a couple of times [in international cricket]. I also watched him play for Hampshire in the final of the one-day competition here. I have also enjoyed watching Muttiah Muralitharan bowl.

As for the batters?

It is kind of weird because I always liked Michael Atherton, maybe because of his writing, because I haven't actually watched him live very much. And because of how much I enjoyed his writing and his commentary, I was kind of drawn to this idea of like a proper opener who digs in. I have watched his videos, I don't think I've ever seen him bat live. These days, your favourites bat in different styles, like Yashasvi Jaiswal.

By 2030, India to have 1.2 billion smartphones, 641 million 5G subscribers

New Delhi: India is projected to have 1.2 billion smartphone connections by 2030, with half of the users on 5G smartphones, according to a new report. According to global mobile network body GSMA, the country is projected to have over 641 million 5G subscribers by 2030, growing at 49 per cent. "India will see an unprecedented growth in the number of 5G mobile subscribers, and an explosion of data usage in the next six years," according to GSMA Intelligence projections. This stupendous growth in 5G subscribers will also lead to a huge expansion of data consumption, impelling Indian telcos to make large investments. The data consumption per subscriber is

likely to grow at a CAGR of 15 per cent between 2023 and 2029, to reach 68 GB per month per subscriber in India. In the Asia-Pacific region, India and Indonesia are uniquely positioned to leverage digitalisation to drive economic resilience, job creation, and innovation. According to the latest GSMA 'Mobile Economy Asia Pacific 2024 Report', India is projected to have 1.2 billion smartphone connections by 2030, while Indonesia is expected to reach 387 million connections by the same year, said the organisation. Furthermore, mobile technologies and services generated 5.3 per cent of GDP across the APAC region in 2023, contributing \$880 billion in economic value, and supporting approximately 13 million jobs across the region.

Living with sirens and uncertainty in Ukraine

On a clear, bright morning in late August, Megan D'Souza, an Indian student at Ukraine's National Pirogov Memorial Medical University, Vinnytsya, stood in front of a hotel overlooking the Sophia square in Kyiv, the capital. With her stood a few hundred Indian students from the university, all eagerly waiting to welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was visiting for a day. This was his first trip to the east European country since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. "This is a historic visit by an Indian Prime Minister and we are part of history," D'Souza said. Slogans of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' rent the air. While the mood was jubilant at the hotel, elsewhere, there were signs of a country at war. Kyiv was under curfew every day from midnight to 5 a.m. The streets emptied out past 11 p.m. Crowded areas were blocked at night. Barricades had been erected in front of complexes, and barbed wires encircled important buildings. Several buildings contained bomb shelters. Vinayak Niwas, a 26-year-old student from Bihar, explained, "While basements of buildings, shopping malls, and parking areas have been converted into shelters and furnished with basic amenities, there are also Soviet-era bunkers around. Those were built to withstand heavy bombardment and allow people to seek refuge for longer." Staff in hotels gave directions to shelters as part of their routine instructions. Statistics vary on the number of deaths in Ukraine since the war began. Ukrainian officials have said Russian "invaders" had killed more than 12,000 civilians, including 551 children, while the London-based Action on Armed Violence charity reported that 7,001 people had been killed as of September 23, with more than 20,000 civilians injured.

Russia's invasion has displaced millions of Ukrainians and destabilised the economy. According to the European Parliament, "More than 6.4 million Ukrainian refugees were registered worldwide and there are close to 3.7 million internally displaced people (the two groups together representing 23% of Ukraine's pre-war population)." The Russian bombardment has equally affected millions of people of other nationalities who study and work in the country. Among them are Indians — mostly students, businesspersons, and those who married locals and have settled in Ukraine. At a crossroads when the war broke, Niwas said the situation in Vinnytsya, about 270 kilometres by road from Kyiv, was "completely chaotic". He recalled, "I felt the vibrations when the first bomb hit the ground a couple of kilometres from us." In February and March 2022, around 22,500 Indian nationals were evacuated from Ukraine. Of them, 18,278 were brought back to India under Operation Ganga, an evacuation mission carried out by the Indian government. Most of them were students.

Shrujan Laxmikant Mehta, 23, from Somnath, Gujarat, was evacuated through Romania. "Along with others, I travelled by bus, waving the Indian flag," he said. Mehta returned to Ukraine via Poland in

2023. Many students who are pursuing medicine in Ukraine said they had moved because an MBBS course is expensive, even prohibitive for many, in India. According to education consultancy sites and students, the fees for a MBBS course at a government medical college in India is ₹10,000-₹50,000 per year. But at a private medical college, it can range anywhere between ₹3 lakh and ₹25 lakh per year. Others said that these are lower estimates and that the actual cost can be several lakh rupees higher. To add to the problem of costs is the challenge of intense competition. Of the 17 lakh students who appear for the medical exam every year, only about 80,000 students secure admission for an MBBS course, as per a September 2022 report by Mumbai-based investment consultants, Anand Rathi Advisors. "The limited number of seats and a high minimum threshold for government colleges coupled with lofty fees is compelling students to pursue medical education in foreign countries. China, Ukraine, the Philippines and Russia account for 60% of the student outflow from India each year," the report stated.

Students said that Ukraine, Russia, and other Central Asian countries have emerged as popular choices for them to pursue medicine as an MBBS course in these countries is affordable. The average annual tuition fee of medical education in Ukraine is around 2 lakh Hryvnia or UAH (₹4.2 lakh). "Since universities in the European Union have the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), a standard means to compare credits, we can easily get admission into good postgraduate colleges and get jobs in Europe," Mehta said. "Also, the qualifying ratio of the Foreign Medical Graduates Examination, which is required for foreign degree holders to practise medicine in India, is also very good for Ukrainian universities," he pointed out. In February-March 2022, the students who returned to India had two options: they could either seek transfers to universities in other countries or wait until it was safe to return to Ukraine. Getting a transfer to a university in India was out of the question as the National Medical Commission Act, 2019, does not permit students to migrate from foreign universities to India. Tanmaya Lal, Secretary (West), Ministry of External Affairs, said that the Ukrainian Medical Council facilitated the transfer of some students who had returned to India, to other universities and countries.

But many others had to figure it out on their own. To obtain transfers to universities in Europe or Central Asia, the students had to either begin their course from scratch or pay extra, said officials. While it was relatively easy for students in the first few years of their course to restart elsewhere, for those in the fifth and sixth year, it was a difficult call to take. "When I was in India, I would write at least 50 emails a day just begging various universities to take me in," recalled D'Souza, who is in the final year of her course. She wrote to universities all over Europe which had an ECTS. "No one was willing to take me. And even if they



were willing, I would have had to start from the beginning, which was not an option for me. It was really hard. I came back to Ukraine not only because it was hard to get transfers elsewhere but also because this was the cheaper alternative," she said. While some students said they had moved to Hungary and even secured full scholarships, they had to start their course once more. Samarkand State Medical University in Uzbekistan, for instance, accommodated more than 1,000 Indian medical students from Ukraine after the Indian Embassy in Ukraine reached out to them. "We evaluated the requirements of such students and decided that enrolling them with a semester back would be a viable option to provide equivalence," said Zafar Aminov, the Vice Chancellor, speaking to the media earlier.

In 2022, the National Medical Commission of Ukraine issued a notice allowing a mobility programme for those students affected by the war. Under this, the Odessa National Medical University found a partner institute in the Georgia National University SEU, the only university which took part in the programme from Georgia, according to Ashu Rawat, Founder and Director, Leader Education, based in Odesa. Under the mobility programme, students could complete the remainder of their degree in Georgia and obtain the degree from their original university upon completion. "Around 200 students took this option. It was a very successful programme," Rawat said. During a media interaction on August 23, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar acknowledged that some students have come back to India since the evacuation due to academic compulsions. He said there are 2,000-2,500 Indian students in Ukraine at present. "If you're asking us what advisory we would give them, we would still urge caution, because you can see there is a conflict on. I mean, it depends, again, on the place, on the city. But our hope is that this conflict will come to an end, life will return to normal, and that we will see the full return of Indian students in due course," he added. The journey back to Ukraine was not only dangerous, but also difficult for students like D'Souza. There were two ways of re-

turning to Ukraine: via Poland or through Moldova. Obtaining a Polish visa was challenging for many in the early days of the war. Mehta managed to get it, but many others could not. "The biggest issue that the students who wanted to return in the early days faced was lack of connectivity and communication," said Rawat. While Moldova did issue e-visas for Ukraine, it stopped when the war began as it struggled to cope with the growing pile of applications. Plus, the country had security concerns. "At that point, there was no Moldavian Embassy in India," said Rawat. "There were also attempts by middlemen to get money from the students by promising to secure visas for them," he added. In April 2023, Moldova announced that it would open an embassy in India. The Moldovan Ambassador arrived in India in June 2023. This helped many students get a Moldovan visa. Lal said, "Around 2,100 Indian students are enrolled with the Ukrainian universities at this stage. Of them, over 1,000 Indian students are pursuing studies in person in Ukraine." Increasing expenses Ever since she returned, the situation has "not been bad," said D'Souza. "Yes, we hear the siren at least six times a day and we have water and electricity cuts. But I have only a year to go before I finish the course, so it's fine." Several students complained that the prices of utilities have increased. While the tuition fees have remained the same, university hostels have hiked their fees, they said. "When I came to Ukraine in 2019, the hostel fees every month was 800 UAH, which is about ₹1,600. It was increased to ₹1,000 UAH (₹2,030) last year. Then, it became 1,850 UAH (₹3,760) per month," one student said. "The prices of daily essentials such as rice, oil, and eggs have also increased. So, our expenses have doubled." The students said they raised these issues with the management, which simply shrugged and declared that it was helpless given the ongoing conflict. The students said they still preferred to stay in university hostels, which are safer and more convenient than apartments. "As there are power and water supply cuts, an induction stove at my university hostel — there is one on each floor — works for only three hours a day.

Managing Chennai monsoon

Over the past few years, Chennai has continued to receive unprecedented rainfall during the annual northeast monsoon. Sudden bursts of increased rainfall, with large volumes of water in very short spans, often result in urban floods, revealing the city's vulnerability. Confronting the challenges of climate change, Chennai needs to find a solution that primarily enables its water reservoirs to absorb, store or recharge groundwater. The focus shifts to the imperatives of organised urban planning and the need to protect and rejuvenate Chennai's water reservoirs — Pallikaranai marsh, Ennore creek and other large reservoirs such as Chembarambakkam lake and Red Hills lake. The organic and rapid growth of the city has disrupted the natural hydrological cycle with the expansion of concrete and tar-paved surfaces, indiscriminate constructions and felling of trees and vegetation. Environmentalists suggest that this could be some of the many reasons behind urban floods, besides augmenting the capacity of the three rivers and their reservoirs — Adyar, Cooum and Kosasthalaiyar. The city requires a new imagination of its relationship to the unpredictable monsoons, the sea, and its water reservoirs. Over the last three decades, Chennai has been at the forefront of rainwater harvesting. The Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB) provides detailed information about water harvesting and its relationship to floods. These are open-source documents that can be accessed online. (www.cmwssb.tn.gov.in/rain-water-harvesting) Chennai's history indicates that well-designed rainwater harvesting systems, following safety standards, can substantially absorb excess rainwater and minimise the adverse impact of floods. Public awareness on waste disposal, preparedness and water conservation practices are essential to address climate-induced calamities and build resilience.

In the face of heavy rains, residential complexes and institutions have begun to construct rainwater harvesting wells, as well as renew existing ones that have been defunct. The initiative, however, needs to be more widespread recognising its intrinsic benefits. It is a pragmatic indication to new apartment complexes, to be more diligent and provide for well-designed rainwater harvesting pits that collect excess rains to permeate the soil. The CMWSSB guidelines suggest that water collected from the terraces can be directed through a filtration process into storage tanks. While it can considerably reduce the floodwaters, it assures a long-term water security to Chennai. Integrating these aspects into the Third Masterplan, presently under preparation by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, could strengthen the city's capacity to address urban floods. It has several other ancillary benefits such as reducing urban heat, recharging groundwater, and minimising the ingress of brackish seawater. Apartment complexes that have recharged groundwater, through rainwater harvesting, have discovered an improvement in water quality. Over the past decades, innumerable studies by CMWSSB have indicated the effectiveness of rainwater harvesting in reducing flood water volume and stopping water logging of roads. Large education campuses can



contribute to augmenting and recharge of groundwaters. However, it's a greater challenge to address and mitigate the impacts of such cataclysmic rains.

Public awareness about designing permeable, porous pavements and surfaces can encourage and allow rainwater to infiltrate the soil and recharge groundwater naturally — urban parks and gardens, porous pavements, retention wells, and green roofs. Permeable pavements and surfaces have had a significant impact on reducing urban heat as well. While much of these details are known, their dissemination could ensure effective adoption. Drawing from urban lessons of medieval Madras, these elements of rainwater harvesting can be combined with Chennai's road network and its stormwater drain system — to assist in the natural flow of water into rivers and rejuvenate the lakes and other water reservoirs, through a natural process. Stormwater channels have also been equipped with filtration and recharge wells in the city today. A pragmatic neighbourhood approach, scientifically undertaken, ensuring surface and drain slopes and levels, requires a monitoring committee, including neighbourhood citizen groups, to coordinate the efforts. Digital technologies and apps, documenting citizen data of inundation, flooding, and other issues can empower a citizen-based participation and aid the planning process, providing local data. Low-lying areas would undoubtedly require more concerted efforts in infrastructure investments and planning.

The impetus to creating urban green spaces, accessible to all, is imperative, for several reasons. During earlier natural calamities, the Greater Chennai Corporation had invited environmentalists and citizen groups to draw up ecological guidelines for tree-planting. Protecting natural ecosystems and biodiversity, regions like the Guindy deer-park and Vandalur area, and other local parks act as natural flood regulators as well. Rejuvenating untended parks, Open Space Reservation lands and other derelict zones would consolidate these nature-based solutions considerably. The flood mitigation process would require a constant monitoring and maintenance of stormwater drains. In the present scenario of Chennai's growth, nature-

based solutions (through the creation of new green spaces and rejuvenation of natural water reservoirs) can support a natural "stormwater management". Several studies have demonstrated the contribution of such nature-based solutions (if appropriately designed) in complementing the urban drainage system. The need for an integrated database system with early-warning systems has to be implemented to coordinate efforts.

Information on rescue, evacuation, helplines, relief measures, hospital support, and other relevant information have augmented such extreme predicaments. Areas with incomplete canals, or roads under construction have been the most affected. However, on a positive note, the early warning updates received by citizens provided adequate time to evacuate to safety. Several parts of Chennai continue to battle the

receding floods, inundating low-lying areas. Prioritising vulnerable communities and neighbourhoods for infrastructural remedies is imperative. In the long-term, flood mitigation measures have often influenced the microclimate, and have the potential to make the city cooler and more liveable. Citizen groups can participate in urban neighbourhood discussions to suggest local observations. Community groups monitoring stormwater canals adjacent to their homes have informally emerged in Chennai since the last decade. If these volunteer efforts by citizen groups can be supported in the planning process, the city can chart a resilient road map to cope with natural calamities. The writer is the founding Principal Architect of Artes Roots Collaborative, involved in the intersections of climate change, social landscapes, environment and habitat.

Air India says Vistara in-flight experience to continue post-merger

New Delhi: Air India on Friday said Vistara routes and schedule as well as the in-flight experience will continue and the flights operated with Vistara planes will have the code 'AI2' post-merger. The merger of the two full service carriers is scheduled to be completed on November 12, following which Singapore Airlines will have a 25.1 per cent stake in Air India.

Vistara is a joint venture between Tata Group and Singapore Airlines. Post the merger, the vintage 'Maharaja' will be retained through the frequent flyer programme of the integrated entity. "The existing members of Club Vistara will be seamlessly transferred to Air India's Flying Returns program. With this merger, Flying Returns will also evolve into an all-new avatar 'Maharaja Club'," Air India said in the statement.

Reiterating that the experience offered by Vistara will continue for customers post-merger, Air India said Vistara will be identified by a special four-digit Air India code beginning with the digit '2'. "For

instance, UK 955 will become AI 2955 helping customers identify them while booking... after November 12," the statement said. Further, it said the routes and schedule operated by Vistara aircraft will continue to be the same, alongside the airline's in-flight experience that includes the product and service such as menu and cutlery on the Vistara aircraft.

There are concerns in certain quarters on whether Vistara passengers will continue to get the same services such as now, post-merger as Air India, which is in the transformation phase, has been facing certain service issues in recent times. Air India, on October 2, also said that Vistara experience will remain post-merger. On Wednesday, Vistara Chairman Bhaskar Bhat said the integrated entity will share the best practices of the two airlines and the livery of Vistara will stay for sometime. The Air India-Vistara merger, announced in November 2022, will also see Singapore Airlines acquiring a 25.1 per cent stake in the merged entity.

At what point does all the AI, become too much AI?

Let me start with something that is slightly worrying. Elon Musk owned X says that as of November 15, when their new privacy policy takes effect, the data for X users can be used by third-party “collaborators” (that’s how the new privacy policy language articulates it) to train their artificial intelligence (AI) models. Did you sign up for this? I take this as an illustration of something that’s fast getting out of hand. Is the AI envelope around everything we do, becoming thicker than the earth’s ozone layer? “The recipients of the information may use it for their own independent purposes in addition to those stated in X’s Privacy Policy, including, for example, to train their artificial intelligence models, whether generative or otherwise,” reads X’s incoming privacy policy. There are mentions of a mechanism to opt out of sharing this data, but as of now, there isn’t a setting or a toggle to suggest how to do that. Perhaps, an Elon Musk humanity-saving tweet shall shed some light on that in the coming weeks. There was a simpler time when our collective data on the World Wide Web was harvested, to serve us ads, which made money go around and multiply for corporates. Data was the new oil, they said then. Data is the new oil, now too. Just that beyond ads, AI models signify the next stage of tech evolution. Whoever has the supremacy, has the ultimate supremacy.

At this point, a question has been burning inside — at what point does all this AI become too much AI?

I pondered this (though unrelated to X’s latest unforeseen yet not entirely surprising letdown, which happened later) as Adobe detailed the new capabilities across its apps including Photoshop, Lightroom, Premiere Pro and others, at the keynote and briefings at their annual MAX conference. Most of the new stuff that’s part of the latest set of significant updates, is underlined by AI, and their Firefly models. Video-generative AI is the next big thing. That’s something I’d detailed in my pieces from the trenches.

At the three main stage sessions including the keynote and all the briefings I got access to, the company left no stone unturned to push a case for Firefly and broader AI use. It is great to see Gen AI being useful in cleaning up our photos (removing wires from cityscapes and architectures is great) and helping fill up video edit timelines with quick generations. But as I asked Deepa Subramaniam, who is Vice President, Product Marketing, and Creative Professional at Adobe, is it changing the definition of creativity?

“The act of editing in Lightroom to me is not just about getting the photo I want, but reliving that photo through the act of editing and tapping into the nostalgia,” she told me. Her opinion is that a person using these tools should hold keys to unlock creative decision-making. Whether they want to remove those pesky and eyesore electricity cables spoiling the frame of that gorgeous architecture you’ve just photographed, or not. Or to improve the texture and colour theme of the sky as you saw at

the sunset, instead of how the phone’s camera decides to process it. To do it or not, it must remain a human call — the option should be there, that’s Adobe’s take on the matter. Yet, it may not be as simple. Generative fill for photos uses AI to add background and extend a frame, which perhaps didn’t exist or the human eye didn’t see. That’s one side of the coin. On the other side, professionals using Adobe Illustrator and Adobe InDesign software will disagree that too much AI is a bad thing. ‘Objects on Path’, for example, or even generating textures, graphics, patterns, or imagery — within a shape, vectors, or even letters. You may have a valid argument that a typical skill set you’d expect a designer to have may no longer be necessary between these powerful software tools, and the end result. Any human, with some sense of aesthetics and design, could get the job done?

That may perhaps be the point. AI can and must simply remain a tool. With human oversight, when required. The use case for Adobe’s tools, Canva’s tools, Pixelmator’s AI editing options, Otter’s AI transcripts for audio recording or even Google’s AI Overviews in Search, can have a human take corrective measures as and when needed. But do we?

This takes me back to an article published in Nature earlier this year, which talked about how AI tools can often give its users a false impression that they understand a concept better than they actually do. One, willingly or out of a limited skill set and understanding, takes the other to walk down the same path blissfully. “People use it even though the tool delivers mistakes. One lawyer was slammed by a judge after he submitted a brief to the court that contained legal citations ChatGPT had completely fabricated. Students who have turned in ChatGPT-generated essays have been caught because the papers were ‘really well-written wrong’.” We know that generative AI tools are not perfect in their current iterations. More people are beginning to understand the risks,” wrote Ayanna Howard, who is dean of the College of Engineering at Ohio State University, for the MIT Sloan Management Review, earlier this year. The examples she references are of Manhattan lawyer Steven A. Schwartz and students from Furman University and Northern Michigan University. That puts the spotlight on the more liberal usage of generative AI tools, such as chatbots and image generators, which most people tend to use without further due diligence or research on the output that’s been provided. AI has been wrong on more than one occasion.

The funny thing is, more and more humans are realising that AI isn’t always right. Equally, human intelligence doesn’t seem to be identifying and correcting these mistakes as often as it should. You’d have expected the lawyer and those students who were mentioned in Howard’s illustration, to have done so. Those are specific, specialised use cases. Yet, humans in that sequence took the core tenets of a typical



AI pitch too seriously — human-level intelligence and saving time. For tech companies showcasing new platforms, updates or new products, there is of course pressure from more than one dimension. They’ve to be seen keeping pace with competition and surpassing it. Apple’s had to do it, even though not everyone who’s bought their latest iPhones, still has the Apple Intelligence suite. Google’s had to do it, and Gemini is now finding deeper integration in more phones once the Samsung exclusivity period is done. Microsoft is betting big on OpenAI, which

is why any upheaval that the latter, has become a cause of concern at Redmond too. Also, they’ve to be seen talking about all things cutting-edge, which helps stock prices (well, mostly) and keeps investors happy. I spoke about Adobe’s extensive AI pitch. Their landscape includes rising competition from Canva which has its own smart AI implementation bearing fruit (expect the recent Leonardo.ai acquisition to result in new tools), competition from tools that do specific things, and investors would still remember the \$20 billion acquisition of Figma that was abandoned late last year.

Meta lays off employees across teams at WhatsApp, Instagram and more



New Delhi: Social media giant Meta has laid off employees across multiple teams, including at WhatsApp and Instagram, as part of an apparent restructuring exercise, reports said on Thursday. Meta did not immediately comment on how many employees were impacted in the latest round of job cuts. In a statement to TechCrunch, the company confirmed multiple teams were hit by layoffs. “A few teams at Meta are making changes to ensure resources are aligned with their long-term strategic goals and location strategy,” a Meta spokesperson was quoted as saying. “This includes moving some teams to different locations, and

moving some employees to different roles. In situations like this when a role is eliminated, we work hard to find other opportunities for impacted employees,” the spokesperson added. Employees working on Reality Labs, Instagram and WhatsApp were affected by the layoffs, according to reports. Several Meta employees took to social media platforms to announce they have been laid off. Jane Manchun Wong, who was part of the Threads team, posted: “I’m still trying to process this but I’m informed that my role at Meta has been impacted. Thank you to everyone, especially my Threads and Instagram teammates, for my wild journey at Meta.”

Edelweiss Life's CDO: Pursuing partners with geographical expertise to improve customer accessibility

With a focus on strengthening its distribution capabilities, Edelweiss Life Insurance is aggressively pursuing strategic partnerships to expand its footprint nationwide and enhance customer accessibility, said Chief Distribution Officer Anup Seth. The company has a higher focus on entities that can offer expertise in specific geographies or niche customer segments.

"We are looking at deepening our presence by partnering with entities that specialize in niche segments or hold geographic expertise. In our experience, such partners bring insights that allow us to craft more personalized, need-based offerings for our customers, giving us a distinct competitive advantage," Seth said. About Edelweiss Life Insurance: Edelweiss Life Insurance (formerly Edelweiss Tokio Life Insurance) established nationwide operations in July 2011 with an immovable focus on protecting people's dreams and aspirations. The company has been focussed on bringing innovation, simplicity, and a new-age approach to life insurance, aligned with the expectations of the customer today. It has been offering need-based and innovative life insurance solutions to help customers live their #zindagiunlimited.

With a customer-centric approach, the company has been operating as a multi-channel distribution business to effectively serve its customers across the country. As of March 2024, the company has 109 branches in 88 major cities.

Awards:

The company has earned recognition from several reputed industry forums over the years. Here are some noteworthy awards:

- Recognized as Great Place to Work for 4 consecutive years
- Employee Excellence Award 2023 by The Economic Times
- Golden Peacock Award 2023 for Risk Management
- Most Trusted BFSI Brands in 2023-2024 by the Marksmen Network
- GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS title for collecting the highest number of pledges for organ donation in a single day
- Won a total of 7 awards for the Organ Donation initiative, noteworthy among them were by Exchange4Media, Pitch BFSI Marketing Awards and Indian CSR Awards



Hosting the BRICS summit: Why Kazan in Tatarstan matters in Putin's Russia



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Russia for the 16th BRICS summit, which China's President Xi Jinping and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa are also attending, besides the host, President Vladimir Putin. The host city, Kazan, is among Russia's largest and wealthiest cities, deriving its prosperity from a robust petrochemicals and military industry, as well as a fast-growing information technology sector. In 2009, it was branded Russia's third capital after Moscow and the cultural capital St Petersburg. Kazan is also one of the country's cities of the future — in the sense that it already anticipates some

of the significant demographic changes that are contributing to Russia's evolving national identity.

Russia and RussianThe country Russia is the homeland of the Russian people, the largest Slavic ethnic group, who speak Russian as their mother tongue. Since most ethnic Russians are Orthodox Christians, religion too has been central to the imagination of who is Russian. But this definition does not capture the socio-cultural diversity of the world's largest country. Sprawled from Finland to its west to Alaska to its east, Russia is a transcontinental, multi-ethnic

giant straddling Europe and Asia, and all but touching America. More than 80 per cent of its population is ethnic Russian, but it also comprises as many as 193 ethnic groups and 21 national republics, which are home to specific ethnic minorities. The minority groups have been historically sidelined and repressed by the ethnic Russian majority. But this could be about to change. The proportion of ethnic Russians and Slavs in the population has been declining, and this trend will likely accelerate. The birth rate among ethnic Russians (1.3 children per woman) is significantly lower than that among Muslim ethnicities (2.3), and the share of Muslim ethnic minorities in Russia's population could, in coming decades, triple from the current 10%. Besides becoming ethnically less Russian and religiously more diverse, Russia's population will likely also be smaller. Official data published last month showed the country recorded its lowest birth rate since 1999 in the first six months of 2024, Reuters reported. To offset the population decline, Russia is expected to allow more migration, with the bulk of new migrants being Muslims belonging to Turkic and Asiatic ethnic groups. East & West city Kazan is especially relevant to this discussion on Russia's demography. Located roughly 900 km to the east of Moscow at the confluence of the rivers Volga and Kazanka, this city of 1.2 million is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, the homeland of the Tatar people, the second largest ethnic group in the country after Russians. The Tatars are a predominantly Muslim Turkic

ethnic group with their own language and distinct culture. The population of Kazan is split roughly equally among ethnic Russians (48.6%) and ethnic Tatars (47.6%). This makes Kazan a symbol of the kind of nation Russia is gradually evolving into: a blend of Europe and Asia, a melting pot of diverse ethnicities and religions. Commentators have noted evidence of Kazan's diversity in the neighbourhood of the city kremlin, the fortified complex that lies at the heart of many Russian cities. Next to the official buildings stands the Orthodox Annunciation Cathedral and the Kul Sharif Mosque — among the largest in Europe — with its distinctive white tiles and turquoise dome and minarets. Originally built in the early 16th century, Kul Sharif was burnt down by Ivan the Terrible during the Siege of Kazan, which led to the fall of the Khanate of Kazan and brought Tatarstan under Muscovite control in 1552. The mosque was rebuilt with Saudi and UAE help in 2005. Tatars under Putin President Putin has sought to play a balancing game in his dealings with Russia's ethnic minorities. He has tried hard to incorporate ethnic minorities into the mainstream, reconcile differences, and championed a nationalism that promotes the greatness of Russia, not ethnic Russians. But he has dealt with secessionist sentiments with an iron hand, as his approach towards the Chechens showed. Putin's persecution of Crimean Tatars following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the devolution of powers and status from the leader of Tatarstan in 2021 have been sore points.

How Hinduism has captured the American imagination

Jeffery Long appeared on screen against the backdrop of a towering bookshelf filled with texts showcasing his academic depth. Breaking the mould of a typical scholar, the Elizabethtown College professor wore his long hair in a loose ponytail and a bright red T-shirt from hippie mecca Woodstock. As a white American Hindu, Long is no stranger to defying stereotypes. Long grew up in Bible Belt Missouri, a small protestant town where even being a Catholic made you a minority. Although his family was religious, religion was not forced upon him. However, when his father suffered a terrible accident, Long began contemplating the meaning of life and death. His father passed away two years later, and Long was left to wrestle with the fact that he died an imperfect man. "I didn't think he was going to hell, but I didn't think he was going to heaven either," he says to indianexpress.com. "Dad still had a lot of work to do." As he explored these existential notions, Long studied every religious text he could come across, before eventually finding a copy of the Bhagavad Gita in a church parking lot. Immediately, he was transfixed by the concept of soul rebirth, and although he remained Catholic for many years after, that is when his lifelong affiliation with Hinduism began. Today, Long is one of the 2.5 million Hindus in the United States. The spread of Hindu philosophy in America can be attributed to two overarching factors. First, of course, is the Indian diaspora, a growing body of immigrants that arrived in America largely after 1965. The other is its cultural influence, through yoga, gurus, and popular artistes like the Beatles.

Although many of the practices of Hinduism date back millennia, the term itself was only coined in the late 18th century. As an intellectual concept, its introduction to America can be attributed to three men, the transcendentalists of New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Beginning in 1820, Emerson demonstrated a keen interest in India, and over the next decade, extensively read texts such as the Upanishads and the Laws of Manu. In 1937, a year after founding the Transcendental Club in Concord, Massachusetts, Emerson delivered a lecture on Hindu theology to a group of Harvard seniors, one of whom was Thoreau. In time, Thoreau would read every volume of Indian philosophy he could find, leaving behind a vast collection of Oriental literature. Thoreau in turn was followed by Whitman, one of the foremost American poets. Whitman came across Emerson's essays on theology in 1854 and wholeheartedly embraced the transcendentalist worldview. As the 20th century historian Malcolm Cowley observed in a literary society speech in 1959, "Most of Whitman's doctrines, though by no means all of them, belong to the mainstream of Indian philosophy." According to Philip Goldberg, the author of *American Veda* (2010), while there were no yoga studios, gurus or even Indians during this time, these men incorporated what they learnt about Hinduism from books into their

own writings. The impact was so profound that "all the students in America today will read Emerson and Thoreau and get some Indian philosophy, whether they realise it or not." The literary tradition of Hinduism would be accelerated further by America's next generation of intellectuals such as Aldous Huxley, Joseph Campbell and JD Salinger, all of whom received mentoring from Vedanta Society swamis. However, in between the two cohorts came Swami Vivekananda. Parliament of the World's Religions (Wikimedia Commons) Parliament of the World's Religions (Wikimedia Commons)

When Vivekananda arrived in Boston in 1893, most Americans had little to no contact with Hinduism or Indians. Therefore, when he spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, clad in a silk tunic and turban, his message of pluralism and tolerance was received with enthusiasm across the country. According to Wendy Doniger, a retired professor of Divinity at the University of Chicago, Vivekananda's "personal charisma" made headlines and started the study of Indian philosophy in America. Goldberg states that Vivekananda presented Hindu philosophy in a way that could be adapted to American religious traditions, making it appealing to the broader public.

After Vivekananda introduced Hindu theology to America, Paramahansa Yogananda arrived to extol its practices. Called the 'Father of Yoga in the West', Yogananda founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) in Los Angeles in 1925. At the time of his death in 1952, Yogananda's SRF was the most important and extensive Hindu organisation in the United States, partially due to the popularity of his book, *An Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). The reason Hindu teaching proved so popular is because the early gurus never tried to compete with Christianity. As Long states, "The initial teachers presented it as something rational, something scientific, a practice of health more than an organised religion." However, Hinduism remained on the fringes of American society until the 1960s, when its popularity was supercharged by the mass immigration of Indians and widespread cultural changes. Post-1965 immigration and the growth of Hindu communities

In the 1910s and 1920s, US populist rhetoric became increasingly nativist in response to rising immigration. This nativism peaked with the 1927 publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, which blamed India's problems on the sexuality of Indian men and argued Indians were unfit for self-governance. Wendell Thomas's *Hinduism Invades America* (1930) reinforced this view, echoing long-standing critiques by American Christian missionaries about Hinduism's shortcomings. This changed after World War II, when India fought on the side of the allies. Following the war, the American Foreign Department funded the American Institute of Indian Studies which in turn catalysed the formation of Indian Studies departments across academia. Doniger, who was a beneficiary



of this funding, says this is when Americans stopped seeing India as some "exotic, weird land full of dark-skinned people speaking a funny language." As scholars discovered the parallels between Indian and Greek philosophy, Hinduism's stock was further elevated. During the 1960s and 1970s, students and professionals from India were attracted to America's new policies, specifically the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which encouraged the immigration of professionals. These immigrants retained much of their cultural heritage and went to great lengths to pass it along to their children. As Suhag Shukla, co-founder of the Hindu American Foundation said in an interview with indianexpress.com, amongst the diaspora there was a need to explain Hindu traditions, to "take a step back and not take our cultural heritage for granted." She says that the diaspora has been integral towards creating awareness of Hinduism, not necessarily by preaching the religion but by maintaining its customs. "The people that I come across are not Hindu because they have to be but because they want to be," she says, "and that has promoted a positive representation of Hinduism in American culture." A woman listens to chants during Holi, the festival of colors, at the Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork, Utah (Reuters) A woman listens to chants during Holi, the festival of colors, at the Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork, Utah (Reuters) In the years after 1965, Hindu immigrants initially gathered in rented halls and homes for festivals, pujas, and study groups. Over time, they began fundraising to build full-scale temples. The 1980s and 1990s marked a major shift as temple building became a key way for Hindu communities to establish their presence in the US temples which served not only as places of worship but also as centres for cultural connection and teaching Hindu traditions to future generations. Today, there are just under 1500 Hindu temples in America. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act also opened US bor-

ders to a diverse group of Indian gurus who came to engage with the American countercultural movement, drawing followers from both Indian Hindus and non-Hindus alike. The spirituality movements of the 1960s In the late 1960s and 1970s, new forms of Hindu religious life emerged in the US, and the term guru became widely known. One of the first to arrive was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who gained fame as guru to the Beatles. He popularised transcendental meditation, presenting it as a universal, scientific practice that offered a much-needed reprieve for the fast-paced American society of the mid-20th century. By the 1980s, there was Sri Ravi Shankar and the Art of Living Foundation, Mata Amritanandamayi, Karunamayi Amma, Mother Meera, and many others. However, some gurus evoked considerable controversy. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, known as Osho, drew a large and devoted following both at his ashram in Pune and later in the United States. Known in India as the 'sex guru' for his unconventional views on sex, marriage, and relationships, and in the US as the 'Rolls-Royce guru' for his lavish lifestyle, Rajneesh's teachings directly challenged traditional values. Additionally, while he lived in extravagant luxury, his followers often lived in stark contrast. Rajneesh's movement, widely regarded as a cult, generated both fascination and outrage. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh drives by his followers at Rajneeshpuram in one of his many Rolls Royces in 1982 (Samvado Gunnar Kossatz, Wikimedia Commons) Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh drives by his followers at Rajneeshpuram in one of his many Rolls Royces in 1982 (Samvado Gunnar Kossatz, Wikimedia Commons) Perhaps the most influential of all the gurus was Swami Prabhupada, who arrived penniless in New York in 1965 and began chanting 'Hare Krishna, Hare Rama' in Tompkins Square Park. Within a few months, he opened a storefront temple on Second Avenue,

How an event like SALA, where the arts are celebrated, sowed the seeds of change

Sent a cup of poison by her husband who discovered her love for Krishna, Meera drinks it and is even more consumed by the connectedness that comes with true devotional love, and each sip of poison furthers her belief that in the end what happens is what needs to happen. From my Air India seat on a direct flight from San Francisco to Mumbai, I reflect on these words as I experience staggering physical pain doing its best to break me apart. These last lines of Mhara Re Girdhar Gopal, a much-loved bhajan, are a deeply-rooted mantra that is the encomium to true love and devotion, to life and living. I understand through the words of the popular bhajans of Meera and Kabir that to find love we need to make peace with some heartburn, and that to gain, we must learn to lose.

Mile high in the sky, looking down at the earth, I realise how minuscule the world is, and how irrelevant individuals are. I am reminded how small I am and even smaller the suffering I must endure to reach true connectedness and the necessary end. I am also reminded that counting our blessings can give us a momentary salve that brings hope and comfort, the most essential balm of all. And so I fight through the pain to recall the events of the last four days, of the warmth and reception afforded me as a presenter at the South Asian Literature and Art festival (SALA), where other South Asian luminaries and icons also shared their stories.

Ferose VR – a celebrated global industry leader and The New Indian Express columnist – was chosen by SALA's Ambika Sahay, Mayuranki Almaula Sangeeta Mehra and Kiran Malhotra, to unlock the man behind Slice of Life, my column (in The Indian Express), that they had grown to embrace. Ferose offered to provide me with his questions beforehand, but I suggested we give the attendees the gift of a genuine, unscripted meeting between two humans where a hesitation, a rolling of eyes, an expression of an emotion that says a million words in their sum and total, would be the heart and soul of our conversation. I became as vulnerable and raw as I could ever be, in the hope that I could touch a few lives to see the world for what it really is and to rise to become better versions of self and make our societies more empathetic for those differently abled. Our session was received well, and Ferose approved.

During another presentation, I was on a panel with three remarkable humans Heena Patel, Keith Sarasin and Sriji Gopinath, culinarians who shared little vignettes into their lives, their inspirations, their passion and their struggles. While on stage, I remember thinking that nothing much could happen in those very short 45 minutes that would spark a movement for bettering the lives of chefs, the foods being celebrated together, and the lives of hospitality staff. Of course, we all celebrated India and its rich culinary heritage, we asked each other questions, and we highlighted the need to have more hyper-focused and regionalized offerings. All noteworthy activities, but nothing that would change the face of Indian cuisine any-

where. Our panel was a nice glimpse into the lives of us four chefs but it celebrated the status quo that I believe is keeping Indian food behind in the annals of culinary history. Our discussions, celebrating and promoting our journeys, offered nothing that would change the food offerings, business ethics, and employee experience in the restaurants of tomorrow. I am usually happy to play Pollyanna, as I truly believe that in the end good prevails, but tomorrow's chefs and culinary operators ought to gain a deeper critique of our times and businesses from us so they can be the change we need for Indian food to progress into its richer and more authentic versions. By being the cantankerous old man of the panel, I was able to give my honest assessment of what Indian cuisine is today.

Then there was that amazing lunch at Shobha Tharoor's home in Campbell, where I got to see her husband Raj Srinivasan and hear her life's story and where I was given further glimpses into their personal and shared journeys. Their hospitality and generosity gave me the best gift any friend can want: time. Rich moments that gave Shashi Tharoor, my aunt Aruna and me, as well as Ananth and Sharanya, son and daughter-in-law of our hosts, the ability to connect and further our bonds of friendship. The love, care and protection that Shashi's sisters have for their celebrity brother always gives me a connection to my sister Seema, reminding me of the many blessings she has bestowed upon me. Shashi Tharoor, a true wizard with words, was the star of that luncheon. His kindly, genteel manner, his firm yet gentle musings on the reality of life, his unwavering belief in humanity – these come alive in the ease and candour with which he shares and heals. Of course, yummy pizza made by Ananth in Shobha's "all-American kitchen" with beautiful looks, but no thought given to practicality, was affirmation that even in a desert an oasis can be found, when there's a foundation and possibilities of dreams. Shobha, like countless other immigrants, creates deliciousness despite the odds presented to her by a nation disconnected to food and cooking, life and circumstance.

Salima Hashmi was at SALA, and I couldn't get enough of her, an incredibly gifted and talented artist, generous in sharing her story to inspire others. She is a living and in-flesh connection for me to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the revolutionary Pakistani poet who started giving me words and hope at age nine, helping me see a world that might be better than what I saw in my caged brain. Chronic pain, where the physicians have only palliative care as their offering, is a way of life. It is a constant downer and a drain to both EQ and IQ. Barbiturates numb the pain but would make me a happily numb vegetable. I am fortunate that the passions I have, when I indulge in them with full gusto, take me to those euphoric heights where creativity takes over and pain is relegated to a child seat at the very back of the car that is on a joyous ride. My nights in Palo Alto were the most painful nights of my life yet, but this counting of my blessings blessed me with eight hours of deep sleep on my journey.



How lucky I am to have family and friends who heal me by showing me the face of deeply human humans who bring our collective together. I thank my stars for the opportunity to be at events like SALA where the arts are celebrated to serve the purpose of fuelling passionate creativity by humanity to show hope and bright futures

as we sow the seeds of possibilities and change. I have access and agency, I have options and choices, and, most of all, I have an abundance of love from family and friends. These blessings are my barbiturate, and when I reflect on them, I see, or at least I am distracted from, the pain and feel that life is beautiful.

India leads in 6G following record 5G rollout: Experts



Mumbai: After a successful 5G rollout, the country is now taking lead in 6G as the 'Digital India' initiative transforms the economy, with the Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile (JAM) trinity emerging as a solid foundation block, experts said here on Friday.

Sumnesh Joshi, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Communications said that the country has seen one of the fastest roll out of 5G services across the world and has taken the lead in 6G.

Addressing an event organised by ASSOCHAM, Joshi said that today, everyone has a bank account creating a robust ecosystem for innovative services such as financial credit or micro credit, micro insurance, mutual fund and even share-related products. "We have to leverage the ecosys-

tem that we have created in our country. Today, we are even able to transact just 5 rupees, 10 rupees, 15 rupees. We can now think of making a payment without the smartphone, without the QR code. Aadhaar-based payments is the next logical step and the need of the hour is to connect all the systems," he told the gathering.

The ministry has taken effective measures to block international calls showing India numbers. "This is an important step in dealing with fraudulent calls. There is a need for collaboration between the ecosystem partners for real-time data sharing, whether it is the fintech industry, communication or government of India, home affair, police, state government. So, we can take immediate action if anything is happening," Joshi added.