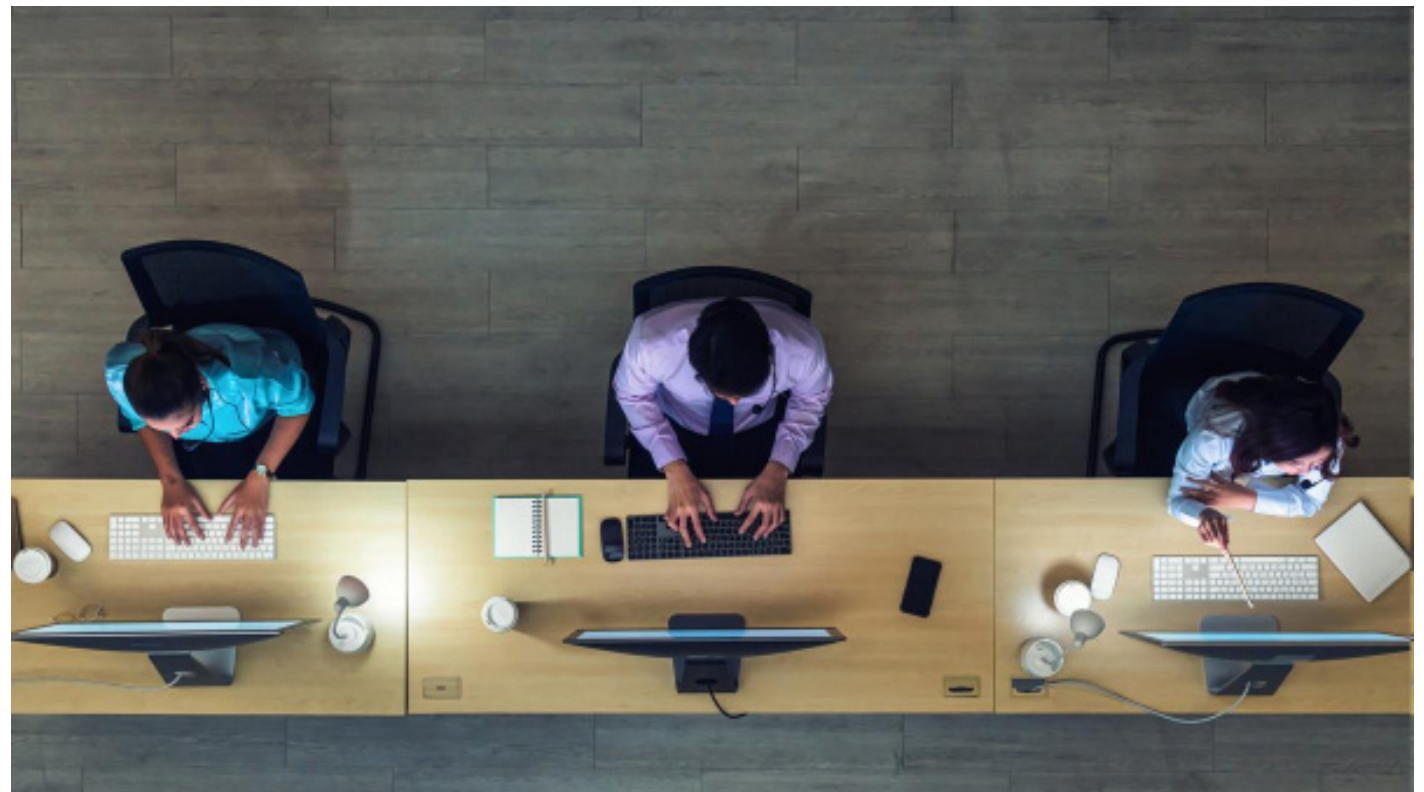


# What makes for a good workplace in India? | Top firms and HR heads share best practices and pointers

"In big law, I could not even say good morning when I walked in to the office," she recalls. "It was almost as if, if you were happy and cheerful you didn't have enough work. Everyone had their stressed face on by 9 a.m." Badami says her company continues to draw "boomerang" employees or those disillusioned by the practices of bigger firms. A searing last-days account by a grief-stricken mother recently revived the conversation around toxic workplace culture. After her 26-year-old daughter Anna Sebastian Perayil died due to work stress, Anita Augustine urged Ernst & Young chairman Rajiv Memani to reflect on the work culture in his firm. "Anna would return to her room utterly exhausted, sometimes collapsing on the bed without even changing her clothes, only to be bombarded with messages asking for more reports," Augustine wrote in a widely-shared letter, narrating the life of an overworked, overburdened employee.

One junior Ernst & Young employee told me that after Perayil's death, managers had "eased up a bit" and scheduled calls to "assess our well-being", but that's exactly the kind of knee-jerk reaction that companies with good work practices will tell you they strive to avoid. The 2024 Gallup State of the Global Workplace report reveals that 86% of Indians feel they are either "struggling" or "suffering". The survey finds nearly half the workforce is "not engaged". That a happy employee is a productive employee is borne out by reams of research, and the efforts of some to question the efficacy and effectiveness of 70-hour work weeks, floated by a handful of corporate idols as the Indian ideal. Toxic workplaces may increasingly be the norm, but some companies stand out for the efforts they make towards employee welfare. A happy employee is a productive employee. At LinkedIn India, Susan Mathew, director-human resources, describes an annual year-end shutdown that stretches from Christmas to New Year, offering employees the chance to "fully switch off and reset". The company's 'PerkUp!' programme allows employees the flexibility to use their allowances on anything from elder care and pet care to house cleaning and student-loan repayments. Other initiatives include a fortnightly dialogue with leadership and a day every month when people can team up to focus on personal passions, learning or community service.

Axis Bank has a Wellness Sherpa programme where counsellors train employees to provide "emotional first aid". "We are cognisant of the fact that people reach out to friends within their team for support," says Harish Iyer, senior vice president & head of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This is in addition to the bank's small team of in-house counsellors and EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) service providers. Barclays India employees have access to unlimited and confidential counselling support; the company organises a



two-month long 'Olympiad' with games such as carrom, chess, table tennis, badminton, cricket and futsal (this year there are 70-plus cricket teams). Barclays was among those who persuaded insurers to include gender reassignment surgeries and hormone replacement treatments; and it has a generous hybrid work policy. The four-year-old Barclays campus in Pune has a games arena, cricket nets and a tapas bar on the roof, multiple dining spaces, rest areas, a virtual reality zone with gaming consoles and a fully-loaded gym. It's part of their holistic approach, says Arun Krishnamurthy, head of human resources, listing the five elements of mind, body, social, financial and workplace. "Only when all these elements come together can we say that we are concerned about employee well-being." Godrej Industries Group says it worked consciously this year to revise its caregiving policies. "We've strengthened the support we can give to new parents of any gender," says Parmesh Shahani, head-Godrej DEI Lab. "That has included doing more for new moms, but also extended secondary caregiver leave, introduced support for eldercare, so that you can take time off and get better help for older people — and all of this is built on top of policies for care for the self, including for mental health support." Unlimited sick leave and flexi-work options are part of a support framework for employees with chronic illnesses.

Other companies keep managers accountable, not by monitoring work output but by tracking practices such as how many of their teammates they have acknowledged for accolades or how many late meetings they schedule and how they re-

spect their employees' chosen pronouns. Many firms have anonymous feedback mechanisms because they know that all office culture flows from the top. "More than policies and framework, role model behaviour is key," says Meena Sinha, vice president & head, human resources and communications at RR Donnelley India. Lavanya Garg, director of partnerships and people at Good Business Lab (GBL), a non-profit that works with businesses that employ blue collar workers to help them create better workplaces, says their work helped define their office culture. "Because our external mission is to get businesses to care better for their employees, we knew from day one that we would have to walk the talk. We don't expect people to work over weekends, we have a minimum requirement of days off a year and a flexible leave policy. If you're not taking enough days off, your manager will nudge you to do so," says Garg. "We genuinely believe time away from work is important for employee well-being." Parental leave — as GBL calls it — is 26 weeks for the primary caregiver and 13 weeks for the secondary caregiver. GBL makes the business case for worker well being, highlighting its correlation with productivity. Inache, GBL's anonymous redressal tool, allows workers on 50 factory floors across the country, many of them women, to register a grievance or give feedback through a call or text message. "Just having an avenue to report can affect how they feel about their workplace," says Garg. Complaints can range from the quality of canteen food to the temperature on the factory floor or a supervisor who is creating an intimidating environment.

"Everything is urgent", 'you have to look at this right now', 'take your laptop with you' when you go on holiday... is all nonsense," says India Ashok, a Bengaluru-based neuropsychologist who works with companies to optimise their work culture, and a fierce proponent of the four-day week. Even Japan, a country with an employee shortage, a brutal work culture and a term for death due to overwork — karoshi — is experimenting with a shorter work week. Ashok believes toxic workplaces are a remnant of colonialism, a monster that grew when India became the call centre for the U.S. in the 2000s. "American workers didn't want to do the work that involved rotating shifts, staying up late. They found it cheaper to outsource and they didn't care if shift work damaged our mental or physical health," she says. Indian IT firms were the first to adopt this work culture. "Shouting, scolding and public humiliation have become a norm in meetings," a recent letter written by Securities and Exchange Board of India employees to the Finance Ministry says. The letter cites mistrust, lack of respect, pitting employees against each other and an atmosphere of fear. Vineet Nayar, former CEO of HCL Technologies, was one of the few business leaders to directly address Perayil's death, warning companies against "exploiting" young employees "under the guise of 'training' or 'preparation for the real world'".

Flexibility and care for all There are many things a company can do to improve its work culture. "Actually put your money where your mouth is, and not do the greenwashing carewashing bit," says Ashok. "Don't offer stress management or yoga sessions when you notice people are quitting because of burnout."



# India-China agreement is welcome — but we don't know enough

Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri announced on October 21 that India and China had reached “an agreement... on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control... leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that had arisen” following Chinese transgressions “in these areas in 2020”. The question that remains to be clarified is whether “disengagement” will cover all extant areas of dispute where patrolling has been blocked on both sides, including the so-called “legacy disputes” in eastern Ladakh at Demchok and Depsang or only those areas that came into contention in 2020. Both Misri and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, who spoke at another event a few hours later, were reluctant to answer direct questions on these two areas, repeatedly referring to 2020 as the year of consequence. This reluctance might have several reasons.

One easy explanation is that they were deferring to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who might make the more substantive statement following an expected meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit at Kazan in Russia. But if that were so, why could the Ministry of External Affairs not have waited a few more days for him to have done so? The other possibility is that this might be the extent of information available to the public for the foreseeable future since “next steps” are still pending.

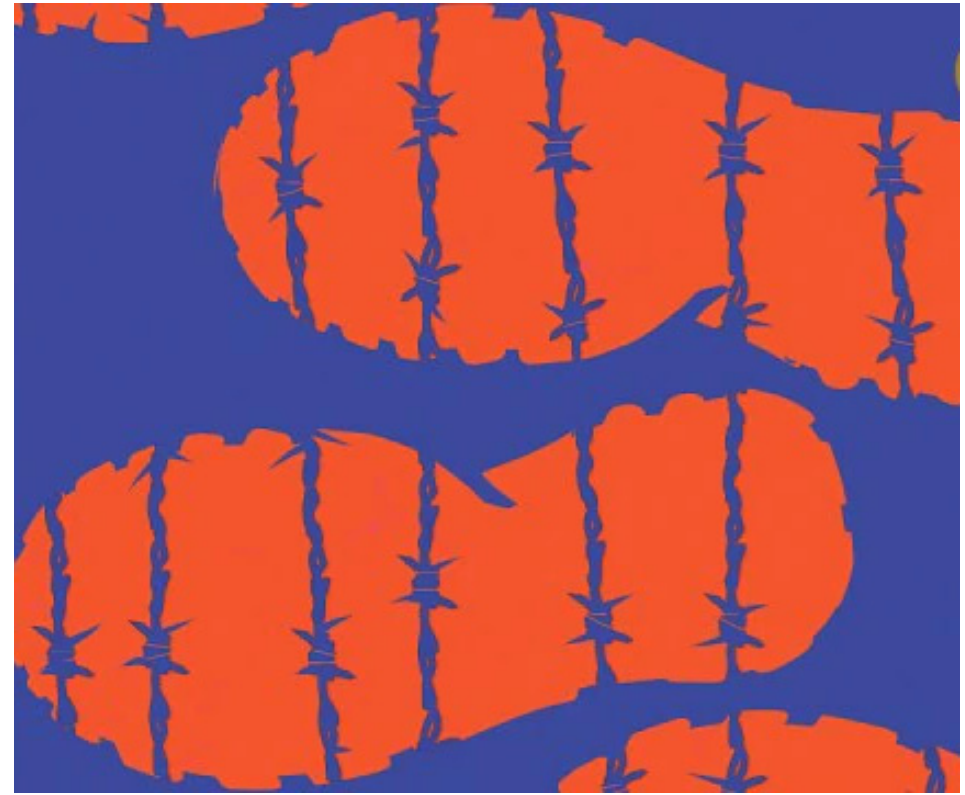
Another reason might have to do with the scale of the progress actually achieved. In September, when Jaishankar declared that “roughly... about 75 per cent of the disengagement problems are sorted out” and the Chinese followed up saying “the two countries have realised disengagement in four areas in the Western sector”, it was possible to imagine that the older disputes at Demchok and Depsang, where stand-offs continue, constituted the remainder of the “disengagement problems” that had to be sorted out. News reports since Misri’s announcement suggesting that this is the case, will need to be confirmed. The patrolling agreement is certainly an achievement of Indian diplomacy, but it is also a limited one, for India has achieved no forward movement over the past four years — it has been devoted to the task only of reversing Chinese transgressions, not punishing them, let alone resolving the boundary dispute itself. The idea for now seems to ensure the impression of progress and the optics necessary for a “successful” BRICS sojourn by the Prime Minister. This, then, highlights other issues and implications.

One, that India’s BRICS engagement is a sensitive matter at this point in geopolitical time — Russia’s Ukraine invasion and China’s “no-limits partnership” with the former has drawn such Western opposition that it cannot fail to singe India, too. New Delhi needs more than “strategic autonomy” as an argument to explain a head-of-government engagement and that is something the patrolling agreement delivers, essentially drawing attention away from the BRICS summit itself. Two, there are now concerns within the Indian government about the feasibility of keeping up

restrictions on Chinese investments, particularly when India remains dependent on manufacturing supply chains and technology transfers from that country. Even a limited agreement on the LAC offers a face-saving way to move forward on trade and investment from China.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the Army was missing from the scene when the announcement of the patrolling agreement was made. Arguments could be made that the final mile had to be covered by diplomats, but for a military aiming at theaterisation, with the attendant requirement of global-level strategic and diplomatic engagements, it is rather odd that senior military officials were missing from the dais. This is also particularly ironic for if there is one stand-out feature of India’s response to the Chinese transgressions of 2020, it is that the Army was not allowed to respond in kind — with the exception of the capture and brief occupation of the Kailash Range in August 2020. That, even as it built up along the LAC, the Army’s primary role of responding to aggression was curtailed by diplomatic tasks.

Perhaps, the Army or the government or both decided that a like-for-like response was escalatory, which begs the question why concerns about escalation must matter only to India. Or, that despite claims of multiple plans to counter Chinese moves, the Army was simply not equipped to execute them with the political leadership, preferring to focus on incremental measures, such as shoring up border infrastructure instead. This, then, raises the question of why such gaps exist or why it takes a crisis to get critical physical infrastructure development moving. Either way, the debate has not been joined in public. If there has been “forward movement” in India in the wake of 2020, it has been in the sense



that like in 1962, the events in eastern Ladakh awakened a generation or two of Indians to the long-term challenge that China will likely pose to Indian interests.

With the benefit of some distance from the events of 2020, Indians should also now be asking more questions. Why did China do what it did? What might it do next? Why has Indian expertise been lacking in answering these questions? Or, if the expertise is available, why has it not found greater acknowledgement and public visibility? Equally important are questions of

accountability surrounding the events of 2020 itself. What were the lapses on the Indian side that caused intelligence on the Chinese build-up to be ignored? Why has public accountability not been forthcoming? Without answers to these questions and more, India will remain unprepared for the next border crisis with China. The writer is an associate professor, at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, and director, of the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR. Views are personal.

## Eggs and height: We find out if there is any link

Eggs are a powerhouse of nutrients, and according to author and content creator Krish Ashok, eggs can also help increase height. “Eggs are a superfood. Those government school children who eat eggs in their mid-day meals have reduced stunting and are better at height than those who don’t eat owing to various religious reasons,” Krish Ashok told host Nitin Thakur. He added that eggs comprise six grams of protein, and the yolk has fat-soluble vitamins.

Many people like to start their day with eggs — in various forms — for breakfast owing to their easy availability and quick prep time. Eggs contain essential nutrients like riboflavin and selenium, which support various body functions. Experts say egg whites are also low in fat and cholesterol-free, making them a popular choice for those looking to manage their weight or cholesterol levels. Dr Bhavana P, chief dietitian, Gleneagles Hospitals, Lakdi Ka Pul,

Hyderabad said eggs are rich in high-quality protein, which is crucial for muscle development, tissue repair, and growth. “They also contain important vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin D, which helps the body absorb calcium — a key nutrient for bone health. Adequate calcium intake contributes to stronger bones, which is essential for optimal height potential,” said Dr Bhavana. Additionally, the vitamins and minerals in eggs, like iron, phosphorus, and vitamin B12, support healthy body functions that contribute to growth, said Dr Bhavana.

Fauziya Ansari, dietitian at Apollo Spectra Mumbai, said eggs are believed to have significant health benefits for physical well-being. However, there is no direct correlation between eating eggs and an increase in height. Eggs or any kind of food—vegetables or fruits—can’t instantly make you taller. Your height is determined by genetics, nutritional intake, and physi-

cal activity,” said Ansari. Dr Bhavana seconded Ansari and shared, “Growth depends on parents’ genes and good nutrition during pregnancy for bone health and fetus growth, and physical activity along with good balance nutrition.” After a certain age, your height stops growing because the growth plates in the bones responsible for increasing height tend to close. “Remember, do not blindly believe everything you see online or try to incorporate it into your daily lifestyle. These hacks or videos you see online are often not verified or true, which can further misconceptions in many,” said Ansari. Research suggests that regularly engaging in physical activities like cycling, yoga, and stretching can help increase height by a few inches. **DISCLAIMER:** This article is based on information from the public domain and/or the experts we spoke to. Always consult your health practitioner before starting any routine.



# GRIET Partners with Curtin University Malaysia for Research and Student Exchange

Strengthening Global Academic Ties to Enhance Student Opportunities and Collaborative Research Initiatives

Gokaraju Rangaraju Institute of Engineering and Technology (GRIET) proudly announces the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Curtin University Malaysia, marking a significant step towards fostering research collaboration and student exchange between the two esteemed institutions. Dr. KVS Raju, Senior Administrative Officer at GRIET, emphasized the institute's commitment to creating more international partnerships, indicating plans for future MoUs with other highly ranked universities around the globe to enhance student benefits. As part of this collaboration, Prof. Swadesh Kumar Singh, Dean of R&D at GRIET, revealed that Curtin University will introduce student projects this year. Students in their third and final years across all branches will have the unique opportunity to physically travel to Curtin University Malaysia to engage in these projects. During the signing ceremony, Prof. Vincent Lee Chieng Chen, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Curtin University, expressed his enthusiasm for the MoU, stating that it would be advantageous for both institutions. He remarked, "This partnership opens doors for unparalleled opportunities for our students and faculty alike."

Mr. GVK Ranga Raju, Vice President of the Gokaraju Rangaraju Educational Society (GRES), reiterated GRIET's dedication to enhancing student quality through global exposure, asserting, "We are committed to providing our students with meaningful experiences that will prepare them for a globalized world." Prof. Lim Chye Ing, overseeing international relations, reinforced the aim for a long-term partnership, emphasizing that "collaborative initiatives like these are vital to enriching our educational framework." The signing ceremony was also attended by Dr. Moola Mohan Reddy and Prof. Sujan Debnath, who highlighted the potential benefits of this partnership for the broader academic community and society.



nership for the broader academic community and society. Curtin University is internationally recognized for its robust industry connections, high-impact research, and a wide array of innovative courses. The university has recently positioned itself among the top one percent of institutions worldwide, according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2023. This partnership between GRIET and Curtin University Malaysia marks a significant development in the global academic landscape, promising to create enriching experiences for students while fostering innovative research endeavors.

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## Experts highlight delaying breast cancer diagnosis in men leading to worse outcomes



New Delhi: While breast cancer is often perceived as a women's disease, men also suffer from the deadly disease. However, stigma delays their diagnosis and treatment, potentially worsening outcomes, said experts on Wednesday. October is marked as Breast Cancer awareness

month. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 0.5–1 per cent of breast cancers occur in men. While this percentage may seem small, it translates to thousands of men worldwide facing this diagnosis each year.

"Despite its rarity, breast cancer in

men is often diagnosed later than in women. Many men are unaware that they can develop breast cancer, leading to delayed detection. However, early detection significantly improves survival rates," Dr. Ramesh Sarin, Senior Consultant, Surgical Oncology, Apollo Cancer Centres, told IANS. "One of the biggest challenges in addressing male breast cancer is the stigma surrounding it. Many men feel embarrassed or emasculated by a diagnosis traditionally associated with women. This stigma can lead to delayed diagnosis and treatment, potentially worsening outcomes," she added. The most common type of male breast cancer is invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC), which starts in the ducts and spreads to surrounding tissue. Other types include invasive lobular carcinoma (ILC), Paget's disease of the nipple, and ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), a non-invasive form. According to Sarin, the symptoms of breast cancer in men are similar to those in women. As women, men should also be aware of potential signs like a lump or thickening in the breast tissue, changes in the skin covering the breast, such as dim-

pling, redness, or scaling, changes to the nipple, such as redness or scaling, or a nipple that begins to turn inward or discharge from the nipple. "It's important to note that most breast lumps in men are not cancerous. However, any unusual changes should be promptly evaluated by a healthcare professional," Sarin said. Age, family history, genetic mutations, radiation exposure, liver disease, and obesity are the risk factors that can increase a man's risk of developing breast cancer. Dr. Anshuman Kumar, Director of Surgical Oncology, Dharamshila Narayana Superspeciality Hospital called out the need to live a healthy lifestyle and avoid ultra-processed foods.

Processed and ultra-processed foods, especially when consumed warm in plastic containers, release harmful chemicals like phthalates and bisphenol A (BPA), which are known to disrupt hormonal balance and contribute to cancer risk. Irregular eating habits and exposure to food adulterants, insecticides, and heavy metals further exacerbate the situation," Kumar told IANS.



# Congress in the coalition trap

An ambitious Shiv Sena faction led by Uddhav Thackeray (Sena-UBT), angling for the chief minister's office and fighting to make itself seen as the real Sena, has pushed the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra to settle for a deal that is likely place it on par with the Congress for the number of seats the two parties will contest in the upcoming assembly elections. Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar has proposed a formula for 255 seats wherein all three parties settled on 85 seats each. The remaining 33 seats, of which 18 are for smaller allies, will be settled later. If the Pawar political formula holds for the 15 unallotted seats as well, Congress candidates will be in the fray in less than 100 seats in Maharashtra, a historic low for the Grand Old Party. Ironically, the Congress has had to compromise on seats just after it did remarkably well in the general elections — the party won 13 of the 17 seats it contested (a strike rate of 76.4%) in the state.

Read with the Congress's tactical move to stick with the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, despite the latter's reluctance to provide the seats requested by its state unit, it is clear that the Congress high command, in the backdrop of the Haryana result, has decided to trust its instincts rather than back the satraps, who are more focused on local interests than the national picture. The Congress leadership seems to believe that allies — and coalitions — are necessary to keep the BJP in check, in the states and at the Centre. The tricky question is if it can convince its own leaders and cadres about this vision and get them to play the coalition game wholeheartedly.

The Congress has always had its share of coalition sceptics. This was evident when the party held a conclave in Pachmarhi in 1998, soon after Sonia Gandhi took over as the organisation head, to discuss the advent of coalition governments at the Centre. Between 1989



and 1998, the Janata Dal-led National Front and United Front, and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had trumped the Congress to form the government at the Centre. However, the Pachmarhi conclave felt that the rise of coalitions represented a transient phase. Five years later, the party nuanced its stance at the Shimla conclave to appeal for "the unity of secular forces". By then, the BJP had built the NDA into a representative coalition that included many influential regional parties. The Congress' reluctance to forge

alliances had neither helped the party recoup nor enabled it to win office. The Pachmarhi line was quietly abandoned and the unexpected results of the 2004 general election led to the formation of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with Congress as its pole. The UPA got a second lease of life ahead of the 2024 general election in the form of the INDIA bloc that succeeded in preventing the BJP from gaining a simple majority in the Lok Sabha. It may well be the chastening experience of Haryana and the memory of the

INDIA bloc doing well in the general election that has influenced the Congress to privilege bonds within the MVA over the sentiments of its Maharashtra unit. This may be a practically wise move since the party's primary consideration now is to keep the BJP out of power rather than expand its footprint. Maharashtra is a crucial election and a win for the NDA would wipe out the gains the INDIA bloc made in June. How the Congress negotiates the contradictions of its national goals and regional priorities will be keenly watched.

## OpenAI plans to launch new powerful AI model 'Orion' by December: Report

San Francisco: ChatGPT maker OpenAI is reportedly planning to launch its next AI model called 'Orion' in December this year which is potentially up to 100 times more powerful than GPT-4. According to a report in The Verge, unlike the release of OpenAI's last two models — GPT-4o and o1 — Orion won't initially be released widely through ChatGPT.

The report mentioned, citing sources, that the Sam Altman-run AI company is planning to grant access to companies first, in order to help them build their own products and features. OpenAI or its CEO Altman were yet to react to the report.

According to the report, Microsoft is "preparing to host Orion on Azure as early as November". Microsoft also declined to comment. "The company's goal is to combine its LLMs over time to create an even more capable model that could eventually be called artificial general intelligence, or AGI," the report mentioned. The release of

Orion comes as OpenAI, which has secured a historic \$6.6 billion funding at a \$157 billion valuation, is restructuring itself as a for-profit entity. Last month, three top executives — including Chief Technical Officer Mira Murati — left the ChatGPT developer. Of the 13 people who helped found OpenAI in 2015, only three now remain at the company.

According to reports, Murati is raising money from venture capitalists to finance her own AI startup. The new funding in OpenAI was led by previous investor Thrive Capital. The VC firm invested around \$1.3 billion. Microsoft reportedly invested a little less than \$1 billion, while Nvidia pledged \$100 million and SoftBank reportedly put in \$500 million. "The new funding will allow us to double down on our leadership in frontier AI research, increase compute capacity, and continue building tools that help people solve hard problems," the company wrote in a blog post.

## IDBI Bank Limited - Financial Results for the Quarter and Half Year Ended



IDBI Bank today, announced its quarterly results for Q2 FY25. The Net Profit stood at ₹1,868 crore for Q2 FY25, registering a strong growth of 39% YoY. The operating profit stood at ₹3,006 crore with a YoY growth of 45%. NIM was recorded at 4.87%, and Net Interest Income stood at ₹3,875 crore with a YoY growth of 26%. Cost of Deposit stood at 4.66% for Q2-2025 as compared to 4.22% for Q2-2024. CRAR stood at 21.98% with YoY growth of 72 bps. Return on Assets (ROA) stood at 1.97%,

YoY growth of 38 bps and Return on Equity (ROE) stood at 20.35%, YoY growth of 130 bps. Net Interest Income improved by 26% in Q2-2025 to ₹3,875 crore as against ₹3,066 crore in Q2-2024.

Net Interest Margin (NIM) improved by 54 bps in Q2-2025 to 4.87% as compared to 4.33% in Q2-2024. Net NPA ratio improved to 0.20% as on September 30, 2025 as against 0.39% as on September 30, 2024. PCR stood at 99.42%, YoY improvement by 32 bps.

# Another plot to erase the legacy of Bangabandhu

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, having emerged as a sovereign State through a tortuous war of liberation 53 years ago, is currently caught in an existential crisis. In the aftermath of the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in early August, the State has been reeling from one crisis to another owing specifically to the efforts of those who now hold political power to bring about a wholesale break with the past. Last week, the interim government in Dhaka cancelled eight national holidays linked to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's memory, including the March 7 commemoration of the informal declaration of the country's independence by Mujib in 1971, the August 15 National Mourning Day marking his assassination, and the November 4 National Constitution Day. On the very day the Awami League government lost power (August 5), mobs stormed Gonobhaban, the prime ministerial residence. Worse was the torching of the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi. The site, once the family home of Bangladesh's founder Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the place where he and most of his family were gunned down in a bloody coup d'état in August 1975, was turned into a museum to preserve Mujib's legacy by his surviving children, his daughters Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, in 1994.

The assault on the museum, popularly referred to as Dhanmondi 32, sent shock waves throughout the country. The security forces did nothing to prevent the rampaging mobs from setting it on fire. To date, no one in the interim government has condemned the ransacking and burning down of Dhanmondi 32, which raises questions about the motives of those currently wielding authority in Bangladesh. It is not the first time that the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has come under attack in independent Bangladesh. His assassination in 1975 swiftly led to the coup leaders pushing the country down the road to mediaeval darkness. The nationalist slogan "Joi Bangla" was replaced with the Pakistan-sounding "Bangladesh Zindabad". In the years following Mujib's assassination, neither the name of Bangabandhu, revered as the Father of the Nation, nor of his close political associates who led the War of Liberation were mentioned in public. Mujib and the history of the war were airbrushed out of history. The legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was restored only after Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina led the Awami League back to power in June 1996.

Mujib died at the age of 55, but in that relatively brief span of time he transformed politics in what was East Bengal/East Pakistan. Even as he argued for political pluralism in Pakistan, Mujib was focused on the rights of Bengalis within a State that had come into being through the partition of India in August 1947. Beginning in the mid-1950s and going all the way to the early 1970s, Mujib emerged as a Bengali nationalist unwilling to compromise on what he perceived was a need to end the political and economic discrimination against his people. In all, Mujib spent 13

years in incarceration — the first prison stint was soon after the establishment of Pakistan and the last was when the Pakistan army arrested him and put him on trial before a military court in 1971. In the late 1960s, he was charged in the Agartala conspiracy case and accused of conspiring to have East Pakistan secede from Pakistan. Following a mass uprising, the case was withdrawn, and all accused were released in February 1969. At that point that a grateful nation conferred on him the honorific "Bangabandhu" (friend of Bengal). In December 1969, Mujib gave a fresh expression to Bengali aspirations by announcing that the province of East Pakistan would henceforth be known as Bangladesh.

A significant aspect of his career relates to the Six Points programme of regional autonomy he placed before Pakistan's political classes in February 1966. Based on the Six Points, Mujib and the Awami League participated in the 1970 election. In a 313-seat national assembly, the Awami League won an impressive 167 seats. The man once tried for treason was now poised to take charge as prime minister (PM). But that was not to be. Intrigue by the Pakistan army and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party to deprive the Bengalis of power in Islamabad eventually led to a genocide the army unleashed on March 25, 1971. Before his arrest, Bangabandhu passed on a declaration of independence to his party leaders in Chittagong. Bangladesh's indepen-



dence war raged over nine months. Crucial support from India and the Soviet Union buttressed the struggle as the Mukti Bahini, the Bengali guerrilla army, fought the Pakistanis. Away in what was then West Pakistan, Bangabandhu, charged with waging war against Pakistan, was sentenced to death by a military court in November 1971. He escaped execution due to the intensification of hostilities between the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini on one side and the Pakistan army on the other. Released from Pakistani captivity by the new government of Bhutto,

Bangabandhu arrived in London on January 8, 1972. He flew to Delhi on January 10 to convey his gratitude to PM Indira Gandhi for India's moral and material assistance to the Bengali cause. On the afternoon of the same day, he returned home to a tumultuous welcome. Bangabandhu's legacy has endured. Questions about his post-1971 political moves have been there, of course. But he remains a pivotal figure in Bangladesh's history. His ideals of democracy and secularism underscore the nation's ethos: He remains Bangladesh's Father of the Nation.

## Australian researchers uncover cause of mRNA vaccine side effects

Sydney: Australian researchers have discovered why mRNA vaccines can cause side effects such as headaches and fevers in a breakthrough, that they said could help improve the efficacy of vaccines. A new study published by Melbourne's Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity and RMIT University on Thursday provided the first detailed analysis of how messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) vaccines circulate and break down in the human bloodstream, Xinhua news agency reported. The mRNA vaccines are designed to stay in the lymph nodes to produce antibodies to fight infections but the research, which analysed 156 blood samples from 19 individuals over 28 days after receiving an mRNA COVID-19 booster immunization, discovered that a tiny amount of the vaccine found its way into the bloodstream. "The extent to which the vaccine enters the bloodstream varies between individuals, which may explain some of the side effects such as fever, headache, and fatigue, reported after vaccination," Yi Ju, co-author of the research from the School of Science at RMIT University, said. "This variation in vaccine presence in the blood could trigger inflammatory responses, leading to these side effects in



certain individuals." The first mRNA vaccines were approved for COVID-19 in 2020. Rather than using a weakened virus, mRNA vaccines use genetic instructions to prompt the body to produce a pro-

tein that triggers an immune response. Since their introduction, scientists have used mRNA vaccine technology to develop vaccines and therapeutics for other conditions including cancer.



# 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. The 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. 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. 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. Bringing the BRICS summit to Kazan has been seen as a conciliatory step. Moscow and Tatarstan spent more than 8 billion rubles (\$80 million) on city renovation projects in the lead-up to "the largest foreign policy event ever held" in Russia, Russian media have reported.

## Suhas Palshikar writes: RSS, a century later

As RSS has completed a hundred years of existence, there will surely be multiple analyses of the organisation and its achievements. In view of its sudden ascendancy in the last decade, the RSS is bound to appear larger-than-life to both its opponents and supporters. Therefore, it will be meaningful to note two key achievements that may impact India's public life in the decades to come. One suspects that the RSS itself may not exactly boast publicly about these achievements because, for the last hundred years, it has remained taciturn about its actual goalposts and achievements. Nevertheless, it will surely intensify efforts to consolidate these gains. Therefore, students and observers of Indian society need to note these achievements and discuss their effects. The first achievement is to twist and transform the meaning of Hinduism, the idea of Hindu religiosity and the practices adopted by Hindus. From its early days, the organisation has always been in awe of its *bête noire* — monotheistic religions. So, efforts to imitate them in shaping Hindu sensibilities have always proved attractive to it. At the same time, the early 20th-century European idea of nationalism as a phenomenon based on the complete oneness of a community has also dominated Hindutva thinking. Combining these two urges, Hindutva has sought to intervene in the bewildering diversity of ideas and practices that are adopted by different groups claiming to be Hindus. In order to bring homogeneity to this chaotic-looking diversity, Hindutva has offered two

pathways. One is that of nationalism based on an identity that is named as Hindu identity. In reality, this identity is often predicated on the idea of the other and deep suspicion of that other. The "other" is most often identified in terms of followers of Christianity and Islam. In this sense, the idea of "we" acquires strength from exclusion rather than inclusion. Over time, besides parochial and religion-based nationalism, Hindutva has also sought to redefine the meaning of being a Hindu. Particular symbolisms have been popularised as pan-Hindu. Since the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, an effort was undertaken to identify a particular idea of Lord Ram as the core of being Hindu. Geographically and across social hierarchies, Lord Ram may have had different connotations but a particular image of the deity was popularised as the symbol of common religiosity. Thus, Hinduness came to be identified with loyalty to this symbolism. Hindutva is currently engaged in a more complex project. It seeks to ensure that local deities and traditions are "nationalised". Rather than conceding the local flavour and autonomy of many practices and deities, the effort is to weave them into a more sanitised and straightforward narrative. This project involves an unprecedented homogenisation of traditions and practices in a manner that disconnects those traditions from their local meanings and reference points, converting them into regional cogs and facilitating the construction of a new, all-India idea of the Hindu.

The success of this project means that being Hindu will eventually have a non-local, non-diverse and uniform meaning that will be easy to connect to the stigmatisation of any divergence. This is no mean achievement. More than constructing an electoral bloc of Hindus, this achievement of transforming the flexible meaning of being Hindu into a regimented identity acquires significance for bridging regional Hinduisms to a pan-Hindu conception of Hindutva. This is nothing less than demoting a civilisation to the status of a religion-based nation. The second achievement of Hindutva has been its clever capture of the entire social space. RSS was never confined to only the religious, the cultural or the political. It has practically been everywhere. In each sphere of public life, Hindutva floated parallel organisations of its own. Simultaneously, it ensured a presence for its sympathisers and supporters. While the former allowed Hindutva to evolve into a social universe dedicated to the propagation of its views — a universe that would replace pre-existing social organisations when opportune power equations would emerge, the presence of its supporters in all walks of life meant that through them, its ideas would continue to penetrate the mainstream and gain slow legitimacy. Thus, while it continued to have sympathisers in the media, among Congress politicians, judges and bureaucrats, RSS also made sure that it would be ready with an alternative social sphere through its own media, think tanks, banks, training centres,



# The Biodiversity COP

Ahead of the annual climate change meeting, scheduled in Baku, Azerbaijan, this year from November 11, countries are currently assembled in the Colombian city of Cali for the UN Biodiversity Conference that takes place every two years. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) came out of the same 1992 Rio Earth Summit that gave rise to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). CBD aims to protect global biodiversity, restore natural ecosystems, and ensure that benefits from the world's biological resources are equitably distributed.

This year's meeting — the 16th Conference of Parties to CBD, or COP16 — is the first after a landmark agreement on biodiversity was finalised two years ago. This agreement, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework that was concluded at COP15 in Montreal in 2022, lay down four goals and 23 targets to be achieved collectively by 2030. These include the so-called 30 x 30 targets — a commitment to put at least 30% of the world's lands and oceans, especially biodiversity rich areas, under conservation by 2030, and to initiate restoration work in at least 30% of degraded land or marine ecosystems by 2030. The discussions under CBD, which have been extremely low-profile in comparison to climate change negotiations so far, are slowly gaining in prominence because of the growing realisation of the severity of the issue, and the implications of it being left unaddressed. The climate crisis and the threat to biodiversity are closely linked — both are caused by indiscriminate extraction of natural resources, over-consumption, and unsustainable human activities. The two crises also feed off each other. Climate change has been expediting the loss of biodiversity, while changes in land and oceans have been contributing to global warming.

While climate change and biodiversity discussions have taken place on separate tracks over the last three decades, their interlinkages are becoming increasingly evident. This has resulted in a growing convergence in the goals and outcomes of these two negotiations. Momentum for 30 x 30 One of the main objectives of COP16 is to expedite progress on the 30 x 30 targets which are the most immediate. Under the Kunming-Montreal Framework, each country is supposed to prepare and submit action plans to halt and reverse biodiversity loss within their jurisdiction. These National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, or NBSAPs, are similar to the Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs, that countries have to submit under the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, mentioning their time-bound goals and actions being taken. So far, only 32 countries out of the total 196 parties to CBD, have submitted their NBSAPs. Many more are likely to do so during COP16. The High Seas Treaty, also known as the agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdictions or BBNJ, which was finalised last year as a separate international agreement to maintain the ecological health of oceans, was a major step forward in meeting the 30 x 30 targets. One of the objectives of the High Seas Treaty is to demarcate protected areas in biodiversity-rich parts of the oceans — just like national parks or wildlife re-



serves on land — where human activities can be regulated and restricted. Shared genetic resources Another goal of the High Seas treaty is to ensure that the benefits from exploitation of genetic resources in the oceans outside of national boundaries of countries, are equitably distributed among all. Oceans host a massive variety of life forms from tiny microbes to giant fish, some of which may be beneficial for medical, commercial, or scientific reasons. This also fits in with COP16 discussions, where the sharing of benefits from common genetic resources is expected to figure prominently. Back in 2010, at COP10, countries had finalised an Access and Benefit Sharing mechanism, also called the Nagoya Protocol, that lay down the general principles of the rights and claims of countries on their bio-resources and rules for their commercial utilisation. At COP16, countries are negotiating the sharing of benefits from the use of genetic information of plants and organisms that has been made possible by advances in modern science. The genetic sequences, stored digitally, are commercially lucrative, and are used by corporations for making a variety of items, including high-yield crops, beauty products or medicines. COP16 is expected to deliver some decisions on how these digital sequences can be used, who can use them, and what a fair and equitable mechanism for sharing of profits would be, particularly for the indigenous populations who might have been the original owners of the bioresource. Like in climate change negotiations, finance is crucial in CBD discussions as well. One of the 23 goals of the Kunming-Montreal Framework is to mobilise at least \$200 billion per year by the year 2030, from all sources, for spending on biodiversity conservation. Out of this, developed countries must provide at least \$20 billion every year to developing countries to support their biodiversity-related work.

This money has to increase to at least \$30 billion every year by 2030. Ways and means to mobilise these financial resources is one of the main items on the agenda at COP16. Countries are also supposed to ensure that perverse incentives

or subsidies that are harmful for biodiversity are phased out, eliminated, or repurposed. These can be incentives that allow overfishing, encourage deforestation, or subsidise the use of fossil fuels. Under the Kunming-Montreal Framework, such mea-

sures should scale up to at least \$500 billion by 2030. Countries at COP16 are also expected to discuss the possibility of setting up a biodiversity fund, new finance mechanisms, and biodiversity credits on the lines of carbon credits.

## Earliest known asymmetrical animal



What makes Quaestio particularly remarkable is the unusual "backward question mark"-shaped structure on its back, making it the earliest known creature to display a consistent asymmetry in its body design. Scientists have uncovered fossils of a 555-million-year-old creature, Quaestio simpsonorum, in South Australia's Nilpena Ediacara National Park, revealing what may be the earliest example of an asymmetrical body pattern in animals. This small, ancient marine organism, which moved across the ocean floor like a "marine Roomba," feeding on microscopic algae and bacteria, represents a significant milestone in the evolution of complex life.

What makes Quaestio particularly remarkable is the unusual "backward question mark"-shaped structure on its back, making it the earliest known creature to display a consistent asymmetry in its body design. This discovery is crucial because

asymmetry played a vital role in the development of more complex organisms, allowing for the evolution of differentiated body parts. In humans, for example, asymmetry allows organs like the heart and liver to occupy different sides of the body, contributing to functional complexity. The fossils were unearthed from Nilpena, a site renowned for yielding some of the earliest known complex life forms. Despite decades of fossil excavation in this region, nothing quite like Quaestio had been previously found. Evidence of its ability to move further excited researchers. Fossilised tracks discovered behind one of the specimens suggest that Quaestio could actively navigate the ocean floor, potentially grazing on food sources as it traveled. This combination of movement and asymmetry hints at the evolutionary advancements taking place during the Ediacaran period, which preceded the more well-known Cambrian explosion of life.



# 1968, a John Lennon love story: Beatles Ashram in Rishikesh set for a makeover

In the February of 1968, a lovestruck John Lennon would go on early morning walks to the post office on the premises of Chaurasi Kutiya, a retreat in Rishikesh on the banks of the Ganga where he and the other members of the Beatles band practised yoga guru Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation. His post office walks, as his wife Cynthia who accompanied him on that India visit would later realise, was to check if singer Yoko Ono, with whom he was in a relationship, had sent him a telegram. Inside one of the meditation huts of the now abandoned Chaurasi Kutiya ashram is a pop art that immortalises this love story – a line from Yoko's telegram to Lennon that reads, "Look up at the sky and when you see a cloud, think of me."

Lennon's fledgling love story, one of the many priceless nuggets from the Beatles' India stay in 1968, will now come to life as the Uttarakhand government plans to renovate the ashram. It hopes to turn the 17-acre space – with a string of concrete, double-storey hobbit houses, pathways overrun by weeds and deserted buildings – into an 'International Heritage Tourism destination'. The Beatles The Beatles during their stay at the ashram in 1968. Standing on the banks of the Ganga, the ashram is now a space frozen in time. Under tall trees and amid patches of wild canna plants are the buildings and meditation centres of Mahesh Yogi's Chaurasi Kutiya, which after the Beatles' 1968 stay became popular as the Beatles Ashram. The iconic British band spent nearly a month here, meditating and writing at least 30 songs, including those from The Beatles (White Album) released later that year. For the Ahmedabad-based HCP Design, Planning & Management Pvt Ltd, which is executing the renovation project, this is the second ashram project after the Gandhi Ashram Redevelopment Project in Gujarat. Helmed by architect Bimal Patel, the firm has handled several high-profile projects, including Central Vista and the new Parliament building in Delhi, and the Kashi Vishwanath corridor project in Uttar Pradesh. According to Anand Patel, project head at HCPDPM, "The project is expected to commence by the end of 2024. It will take about 18 months to be completed at an estimated cost of Rs 90 crore." Inside the ashram Part of the Rajaji Tiger Reserve, on the eastern banks of the Ganga, the ashram was set up by Mahesh Yogi in 1963, with his Transcendental Meditation Teacher Training Course attracting participants from around the world. He is known to have built it with a USD 100,000 grant from American heiress Doris Duke. Among the most famous visitors to the ashram were the Beatles, who were then famously embarking on a journey from psychedelia to transcendence. In February 1968, John Lennon, George Harrison, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr arrived at the Rishikesh ashram accompanied by their wives and their manager. Here, they wrote some of their most popular songs, including 'Back in the USSR', 'Dear Prudence', 'Julia' and 'The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill'. Ved Bhavan Constructed in 1976 at Chaurasi Kutiya in Rishikesh, Ved Bhavan was used as a lecture hall and to conduct classes. Chaurasi Kutiya gets its name from the 84 medita-

tion rooms – 42 each on either side of a yoga centre. The complex has nearly 25 buildings, most of which are in a dilapidated state, including the sprawling bungalow that Mahesh Yogi lived in while at the ashram. Though it's unclear when he left the ashram, the spiritual guru died years later, in 2005, in the Netherlands. Among the few buildings that are relatively untouched by time are the unique pyramid-shaped Anand Bhavan and Siddhi Bhavan, built in 1976, which served as residences for those training to be teachers of Transcendental Meditation. Inside the ashram, the story of the Beatles is told through a gallery with over 20 photographs taken by Paul Saltzman, a Canadian filmmaker and television producer who chronicled the Beatles' stay. A striking feature of the ashram is the series of concrete huts, which served as meditation caves for "sanyasis and brahmacharis". The walls of the 121 huts, built in 1976-78, are embedded with round pebbles sourced from the river banks. Each of these huts have a narrow, winding stairway that leads to the floor above. As per the renovation plan, at least 20 of these huts will be refurbished for people to use as meditation spaces. Keeping a legacy alive It was in 1961 that land for the ashram was leased to Mahesh Yogi by the then Uttar Pradesh government. After the 20-year lease expired in 1981, the place was taken over by the state government. While the ashram remained abandoned, its Beatles connection continued to draw visitors. In 2015, the Uttarakhand forest department took over the ashram, which is the only part of the Rajaji Tiger Reserve that is open through the year. That year, the ashram reported 20,000 visitors, which spiked to 35,000 in 2018 when Paul McCartney came to celebrate 50 years of the Beatles' visit to Rishikesh. The ashram saw more tourists in June 2023, when the Uttarakhand government, which had hosted a three-day Infrastructure Working Group (IWG) meeting in Rishikesh as part of the G20 summit, took the delegates to the ashram. That year, the number of visitors rose to 45,000. A vision document for the redevelopment has been readied and is now with the Public Works Department (PWD) of the Uttarakhand government for vetting, a state government official told The Indian Express. Uttarakhand Forest Minister Subodh Uniyal said not much of what is inside the ashram will be disturbed. "The plan is to keep it in as-is condition. The idea is to preserve the legacy of the Beatles," he said. Though the project is being undertaken by the state tourism department, the area falls in the jurisdiction of the forest department as it is part of the reserve forest that is a habitat for tigers and elephants, among other protected species. Conservator of Forests & Director of Rajaji Tiger Reserve, Koko Rose, told The Indian Express, "Around 9-13 buildings will be refurbished – the Maharshi's bungalow, the building where the Beatles stayed, the Vedic kitchen. There will be no new construction and no razing. The idea is to enhance the tourist experience. Being a forest area, nobody will be allowed to stay overnight, play loud music or do anything that could disturb the wildlife." "A cafeteria, a museum shop and administration



office will be housed in the renovated buildings. The other buildings will have exhibitions on the Maharishi, Beatles and the Rajaji National Park. We plan to repair and

restore 12 of the 25 buildings on the site. All the remaining buildings will be left as they are to serve as a memory of the time gone by," he said.

## OpenAI plans to launch new powerful AI model 'Orion' by December: Report



San Francisco: ChatGPT maker OpenAI is reportedly planning to launch its next AI model called 'Orion' in December this year which is potentially up to 100 times more powerful than GPT-4. According to a report in The Verge, unlike the release of OpenAI's last two models — GPT-4o and o1 — Orion won't initially be released widely through ChatGPT.

The report mentioned, citing sources, that the Sam Altman-run AI company is planning to grant access to companies first, in order to help them build their own products and features. OpenAI or its CEO Altman were yet to react to the report. According to the report, Microsoft is "preparing to host Orion on Azure as early as November". Microsoft also declined to comment. "The company's goal is to combine its LLMs over time to create an even more capable model

that could eventually be called artificial general intelligence, or AGI," the report mentioned. The release of Orion comes as OpenAI, which has secured a historic \$6.6 billion funding at a \$157 billion valuation, is restructuring itself as a for-profit entity. Last month, three top executives — including Chief Technical Officer Mira Murati — left the ChatGPT developer. Of the 13 people who helped found OpenAI in 2015, only three now remain at the company. According to reports, Murati is raising money from venture capitalists to finance her own AI startup. The new funding in OpenAI was led by previous investor Thrive Capital. The VC firm invested around \$1.3 billion. Microsoft reportedly invested a little less than \$1 billion, while Nvidia pledged \$100 million and SoftBank reportedly put in \$500 million.