

India's agricultural stagnation: How Genetically Modified technology could boost crop yields and global competitiveness

Over the past two decades, crop production in India has made minimal progress. In 2004, cotton production stood at 470 kilograms per hectare, and by 2024, it had barely shifted, reaching just 446 kilograms. Other crops, such as soybean, showed only modest improvements. In 2010, soybean yield was 1006 kilograms per hectare, increasing to 1200 kilograms by 2024. Oilseed production improved slightly from 1840 kilograms per hectare in 2010 to 1980 kilograms by 2020. Pulses, too, experienced minimal growth, rising from 625 kilograms per hectare in 2010 to just 776 kilograms by 2020. India's agricultural yields remain far below global standards. For instance, while India produces 479 kilograms of cotton per hectare, China achieves 1990 kilograms per hectare. Similarly, while the U.S. grows 11,000 kilograms of maize per hectare, India's yield stands at 6100 kilograms. Brazil's soybean yield is 3600 kilograms per hectare, compared to India's mere 1200 kilograms.

This disparity in yields highlights a critical issue: an international conspiracy appears to be preventing the adoption of genetically modified (GM) technology in India, a solution that could boost crop production by 100% to 150%. If India embraces GM technology, it could emerge as a global agricultural leader, producing more at lower costs, and dominating the global agricultural trade. However, misinformation and superstition continue to fuel a smear campaign against GM crops, hindering this progress.

Since 1986, the Indian government has granted approvals and allocated funds for GM research. Many agricultural universities and institutions like the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) are conducting research in this field. One notable breakthrough is the development of GM mustard by Dr. Deepak Pental from Delhi University, which holds the potential to significantly benefit Indian farmers by increasing crop production and improving resilience to temperature extremes. GM seeds offer various advantages, such as pest resistance, tolerance to high temperatures and heavy rainfall, and an extended shelf life. These benefits reduce input costs and ultimately increase farmers' profits. The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), a regulatory body overseeing GM research, operates under the supervision of central government officials and prominent scientists. In today's globalized economy, where Indian farmers must compete with their international counterparts, the adoption of modern agricultural technologies is vital. Increased crop production is essential, not only for domestic consumption but also for preparing animal feed and ethanol as demand continues to grow with the population.

The agricultural sector requires the same level of investment and technologi-

cal advancement that has been granted to sectors such as defense and healthcare. In comparison, Indian soldiers use weapons from around the world, and consumers have access to globally manufactured cars, electronics, and medicines. Yet, the agricultural sector remains shackled by outdated policies that prevent the adoption of cutting-edge technology like GM seeds. China's farmers, for example, have achieved cotton yields of 1900 kilograms per hectare using GM technology, while American farmers produce 11,000 kilograms of maize per hectare through the use of GM seeds. By contrast, Indian farmers have seen only marginal yield improvements, producing just 450 kilograms of cotton per hectare over the past 20 years. The success stories from China and the U.S. make it clear that GM seeds have the potential to significantly improve yields, reduce costs, and make farming more sustainable. GM technology offers a range of benefits beyond pest resistance. It helps crops endure harsh weather conditions, such as excessive heat and rainfall. European countries such as France, Germany, and Italy, import millions of tons of cattle feed and meat annually from the U.S. and Brazil, where GM crops are widely cultivated. In India, the government approved GM Bt cotton in 2002, but wider acceptance of GM technology could lead to doubled or even tripled production across various



crops. Despite the promising outlook, opposition to GM technology continues, fueled by misinformation and unfounded fears. It is vital that India's policymakers focus on promoting advanced agricultural technologies and encouraging investments in the sector, ensuring that Indian farmers can compete on the global stage and enjoy greater profitability. In conclusion, the potential of GM technology to

revolutionize Indian agriculture cannot be ignored. With the right policies and public awareness, India can overcome its agricultural stagnation, enhance crop yields, and secure a stronger position in the global agricultural trade.

It is time to move beyond outdated fears and embrace the technological advancements that can lead Indian farmers to success.

KTR testifies against Konda Surekha in defamation case

Hyderabad: BRS working president KT Rama Rao testified against Minister Konda Surekha in a defamation case filed by him at the Nampally court on Wednesday. He said the Minister's defamatory remarks caused damage to his reputation and the integrity of his party. Appearing before the court, Rama Rao said Surekha's allegations were "deeply hurtful" and extremely despicable, with some of them being "unspeakable" for any normal person. He stated that her allegations – accusing him of being a drug addict and hosting rave parties – were baseless and motivated solely by her desire for cheap publicity. "As she is in a responsible position of being a Minister, her words have seriously damaged not just me but the party as a whole," he said. The BRS working president said the witnesses, who have known him for 18 years, shared his distress over the remarks. He stated that her accusations were particularly harmful in the context of his public service, where maintaining a respectable image was paramount. He also mentioned the prior complaints lodged with the Elec-



tion Commission regarding Surekha's similar remarks, for which she was reprimanded. Rama Rao's testimony, lasting nearly half an hour, included the submission of video evidence showcasing Surekha's comments. Along with him, BRS leader Dasoju Sravan also testified as a

witness. The court will record the statements of other witnesses on October 30. Though he had issued a legal notice earlier and demanded an unconditional apology from Surekha, there was no response from the Minister, forcing Rama Rao to file the case in the court.

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.

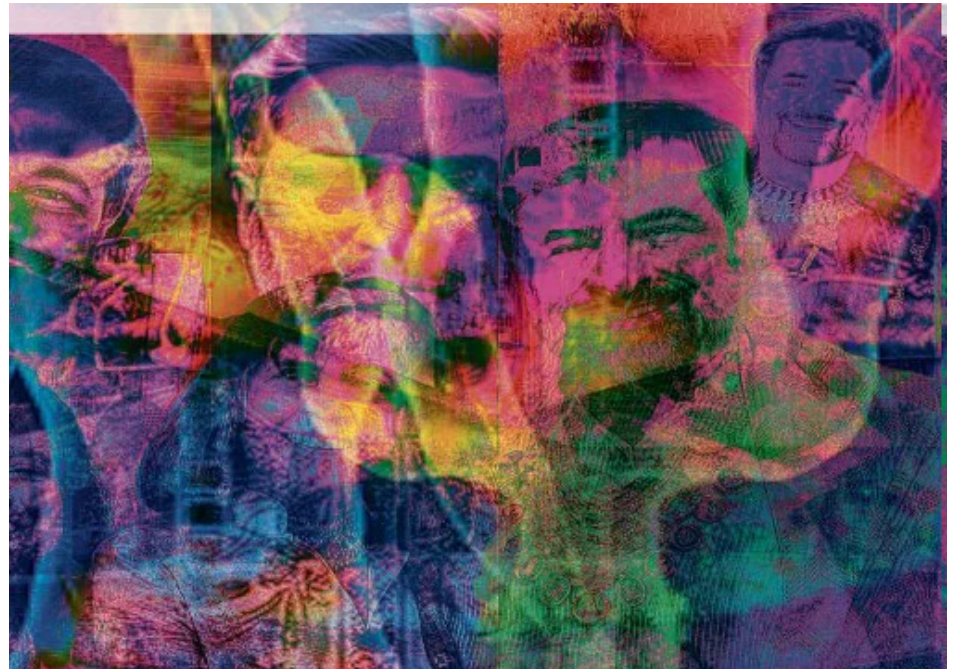
Ferose VR – a celebrated global industry leader and The New Indian Express columnist – was chosen by SALA's Ambika Sahay, Mayuranki Almaula Sangeeta Mehra and Kiran Malhotra, to unlock the man behind Slice of Life, my column (in The Indian Express), that they had grown to embrace. Ferose offered to provide 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 Srijith 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.

Industrial & Logistics Sector Records 53.5% YoY Demand Growth in Q3 India

The industrial and logistics sector demonstrated remarkable resilience in Q3 2024, achieving 17.5 million square feet in Q3 2023, according to the latest report by Savills India, a global real estate advisory firm. India's status as a burgeoning hub for industrial and logistics operations. Tier I cities led the charge in Q3 2024, with 14.0 million square feet (80%) of the total, while Tier II and III cities contributed 3.5 million square feet (20%).

This growth was driven primarily by sustained demand from the third-party logistics (3PL) sector. Notably, there was a sharp rise in demand from the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and e-commerce sectors, contributing 17% to the total absorption.

In addition to strong absorption rates, the sector witnessed a fresh supply of 19.3 million square feet in Q3 2024. Tier I cities accounted for the majority of this supply, with 16.4 million square feet (85%), while Tier II and III cities contributed 2.9 million square feet (15%).



17.5 million square feet—up from 11.4 million square feet in Q3 2023, representing a year-over-year increase of 53.5%, solidifying India's position as a global real estate advisory firm. Tier I cities led the charge in Q3 2024, with 14.0 million square feet (80%) of the total, while Tier II and III cities contributed 3.5 million square feet (20%).

Q3 2024 vs Q3 2023: Absorption across Tiers

- Q3 24 Absorption (Mn sq. ft)
- Q3 23 Absorption (Mn sq. ft)
- Y-o-Y change (%)
- YTD Q3 24 Absorption (Mn sq. ft)
- YTD Q3 23 Absorption (Mn sq. ft)
- YTD Y-o-Y change (%)

Overall
 17.5
 11.4
 53.5%
 44.8
 34.0
 31.8%
 Tier I
 14.0
 8.9
 57.3%
 35.4
 26.6
 33.1%
 Tier II & III
 3.5

2.5

40.0%
 9.4
 7.4
 27.0%

Source: Savills India Research

Q3 2024 vs Q3 2023: Supply across Tiers

- Q3 24 Supply (Mn sq. ft)
- Q3 23 Supply (Mn sq. ft)
- Y-o-Y change (%)
- YTD Q3 24 Supply



PhonePe offers its users the convenience of buying 24K Digital Gold from the comfort of their home 24*7. Apart from one time purchase, PhonePe also empowers every Indian to invest in Gold digitally via SIP and helps customers invest long term systematically. Customers also have the flexibility to invest in Digital Gold with any amount of their choice. The accumulated gold is stored digitally in the user's account, backed by physical gold stored in secure vaults. On selling the stored Gold anytime, users can get their money credited to their bank accounts

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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 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,

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.

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, Pixeltator’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.

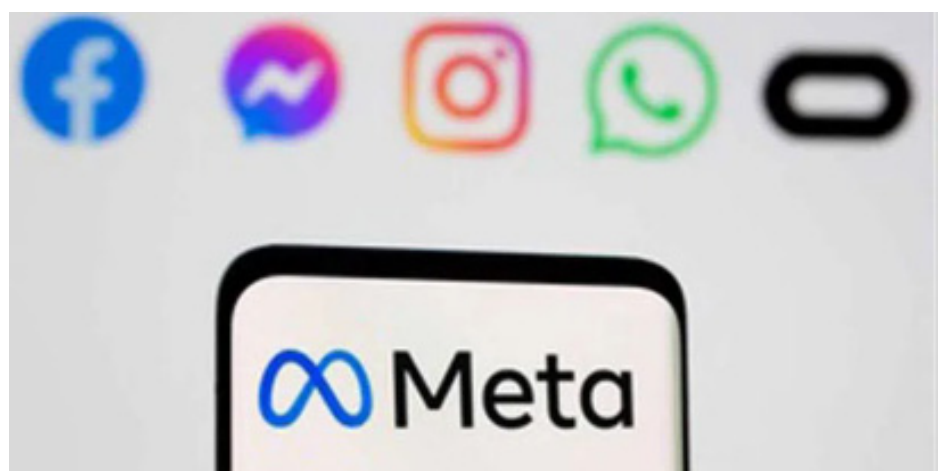
The funny thing is, more and more humans are realising that AI isn’t always right. Equally, human intelligence doesn’t seem to be identifying and correcting these mistakes as often as it should. You’d have expected the lawyer and those students who were mentioned in Howard’s illustration, to have done 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.”

Review of Hillary Clinton's *Something Lost, Something Gained*: Guarded storytelling

In a chapter about the women that populated "Hillaryland", a slightly bombastic term that former U.S. Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton uses to talk about her days as First Lady in the White House, she makes a telling comment about her life in politics. "The warped thing about friendship in Washington, D.C., is that once you vent to a friend about your troubles, you increase the chances your friend will need to hire a lawyer."

That in a nutshell appears to describe not only Clinton's associations with friends, but also her colleagues in what can only be described as a unique and quite unbelievable life path. It began with a stellar legal career, and led to her often awkward and always controversial run as First Lady of Arkansas and then the U.S., her unsuccessful presidential nomination run against Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of State to President Obama, and her unsuccessful presidential run against Donald Trump in 2016. For each of those periods of her life, there is a memoir: *Living History*, *Hard Choices*, *What Happened*, and her latest, *Something Lost, Something Gained*. However, it is not always possible to get the unsanitised version of events of what happened, as Clinton writes guardedly about anything she may be held liable for later. Despite all the coverage, and the reams of impeachment documents about Bill Clinton and his sexual misconduct for example,

Clinton gives no quarter to those who may want to know, even genuinely, about how she dealt with the accusations.

'Wisps of faith' At perhaps her most vulnerable, Clinton writes only that when she was holding her marriage together with "wisps of faith", she knew that her husband was "a good man and a good President". While one might decry her choices, one cannot question her right to make them is what the book asserts, even as she refers to herself as a "nettlesome conundrum". One may not question Clinton's commitment to feminism, however, and her own contribution to making those "18 million cracks in the glass ceiling". The best chapters of her book contain passages about women's empowerment, taking her from working to secure the safety of women after the Taliban takeover, to women suffering the impacts of climate change in Gujarat's salt pans, to her own uncommon "sisterhood" with other First Ladies like Lady Bird Johnson, Rosalynn Carter, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama. It is also clear that even now, at 76, Clinton isn't letting any grudges go — not against the Republican party she supported as her father's daughter, but fought the rest of her life; not against Melania Trump, whom she excoriates for participating in "her husband's bigotry"; nor about Trump's election win against her in 2016, which she still believes was stolen, or about the Janu-



ary 6 Capitol Hill riot in 2021. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, left, and Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton shake hands after the presidential debate in Hempstead, New York, in 2016. While she doesn't write enough about her relationship with the present challenger to Trump, Kamala Harris, in the book, Clinton makes it clear that her mission is to somehow ensure he does not

return to power to unleash an authoritarian future she envisages replete with a "federal abortion ban" and "concentration camps for refugees".

To that end, *Something Lost, Something Gained* suggests that no matter who wins on November 5, Clinton intends to "keep marching on," to recall words from a song from *Suffs*, the Broadway musical she co-produced in 2022.

The ignoble western bias in Nobel Prizes

The Nobel Prizes, except perhaps in the field of science, are riddled with extraneous considerations, rarely impartial, and highly Europe-centric. The world — including Indians — gives great importance to them, but it is time to set the record straight.

The Prizes were instituted in 1901 through the will of Alfred Nobel (1833-96), a Swedish scientist and inventor of dynamite, who donated his entire fortune for awards that annually recognise those who "conferred the greatest benefit to humankind". Nobel's intent was noble, but those subsequently tasked to implement it have repeatedly displayed a regrettably narrow view of "humankind". Between 1901 and 2024, 976 individuals and 28 organisations have been conferred these prizes. Of these, Indian citizens have only five, and those of Indian origin have seven. That means Indian citizens account for only an unbelievable 0.51% of those who have "conferred any benefit to mankind"!

Take for instance the Nobel Prize in Literature. Out of 121 people so far awarded, only one Indian, Rabindranath Tagore, in 1913, figures in the list when India has 22 officially recognised languages and one of the richest linguistic heritages in the world. Even more revealingly, out of these 121, 95 are from Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US): the UK has 13, France 16, the US 13, Spain 6, Germany nine, Sweden eight, Norway four, Denmark three, Austria, Switzerland, and Greece have two each, and Finland and Iceland

have one each. That means that some 80% of global literary talent is incestuously concentrated in these languages.

Some great writers have been selected outside this charmed circle, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia, 1982), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria, 1986), Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1990), and Orhan Pamuk (Turkey, 2006). This year's prize has gone to South Korean writer Han Kang. She is undoubtedly talented, having won the International Booker Prize for fiction in 2016 for *The Vegetarian*. But, at 53, her literary oeuvre is still small, six novels, some poetry, and a collection of essays. Granting that quantity is not the only criterion, I wonder why Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), who wrote 100 path-breaking novels, and 20 collections of brilliant short stories, never made the grade.

Or, for that matter, why didn't RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, UR Ananthamurthy, Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh, and Gulzar, to name just a few? Gulzar, now 90, has one of the largest collections of dazzling poetry, plays, screenplays, and children's books globally. Perhaps, we lack good translators and need to urgently overcome this deficiency. Han Kang was lucky to have a brilliant English translator, Deborah Smith. So was Gitanjali Shree, whose novel, *Ret Samadhi*, translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, won the International Booker Prize in 2022. But even so, the sheer insularity of the award is shocking. The selection for the Nobel Peace Prize is as egregious. True, Mother



Teresa in 1979 deserved it. To some extent, so did Kailash Satyarthi in 2014. However, Mahatma Gandhi, among the greatest messiahs for ahimsa the world has seen, was nominated five times — every year from 1937 to 39, in 1947, and just a few months before his assassination in 1948. He never got it. The Swedish Academy, which in 2006 accepted that "it was the biggest omission in our 106-year history", can hardly atone now for what was blatantly a pro-British bias then. On the other hand, Henry Kissinger, who ruthlessly used napalm bombs in Vietnam, received it. The truth is that the Nobel Peace Prize is highly politicised. Dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn got the prize in 1970 because

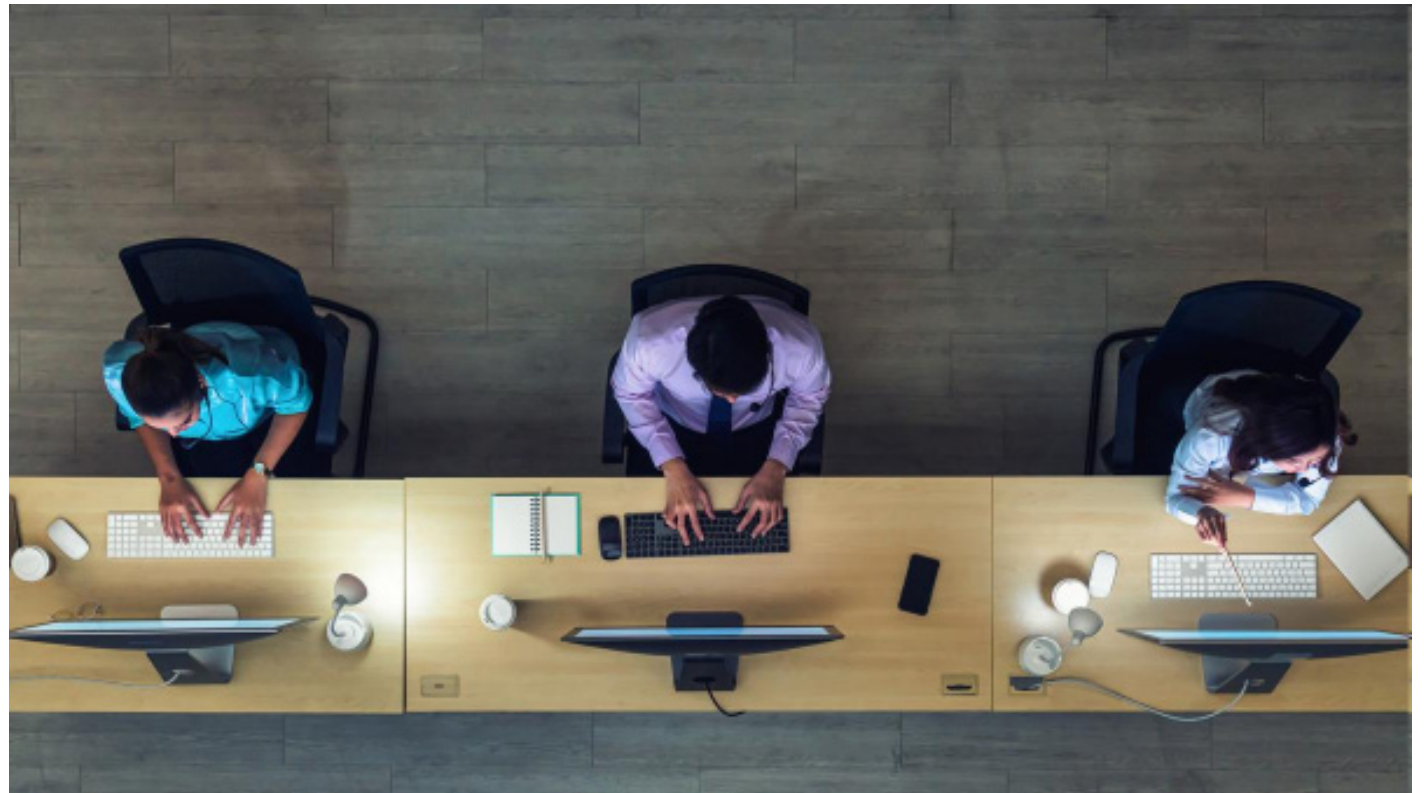
he was a useful pawn in the West's campaign against the erstwhile Soviet Union. But later, when he became critical of certain aspects of western civilisation, his admirers dried up, and his death in 2008 hardly created a ripple. VS Naipaul, Indian by descent, British by choice, who made a career of being critical of India, and, after 9/11, endeared himself to the West by being even more critical of the Islamic world, was an obvious choice too. It is not that these were not highly talented writers. But so were many others. However, in their case, there were factors other than purely literary merit that also played a role. We in India give too much importance to western recognition.

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 respect 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." She suggests companies leverage AI to take over some boring/ repetitive tasks. RR Donnelley's Sinha says that flexibility is key. "We understand and acknowledge that well-being means different things to different people, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. So, we give employees choices," she says. "For example, we do not have mandated training hours. Instead, we give them access to learning resources and curated courses they can take at a time and pace convenient to them." Barclays' Krishnamurthy says it's a mistake to look at the focus on well-being as being at the cost of productivity. "We need to take away the notion that flexibility and care are only for people with special needs," he says. "They are super important to every individual." Flexibility can only be normalised if top executives lead the way and utilise available perks, such as using a break in the workday to go to the gym or leaving early if their schedule permits. As for how good companies react when bad things happen? "When events against our ethos occur, we need to first acknowledge them.