



**WORLD 5**  
INDIA ABSTAINS IN UN ISLAMOPHOBIA RESOLUTION

**MONEY 6**  
PETROL, DIESEL PRICE CUT BY ₹15.3 IN LAKSHADWEEP

**SPORT 8**  
PANT RECOVERY EARLIER THAN ANTICIPATED: NCA

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## COUNTDOWN TO JUNE 4 BEGINS

Seven phase LS polls on April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25, June 1 announced

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

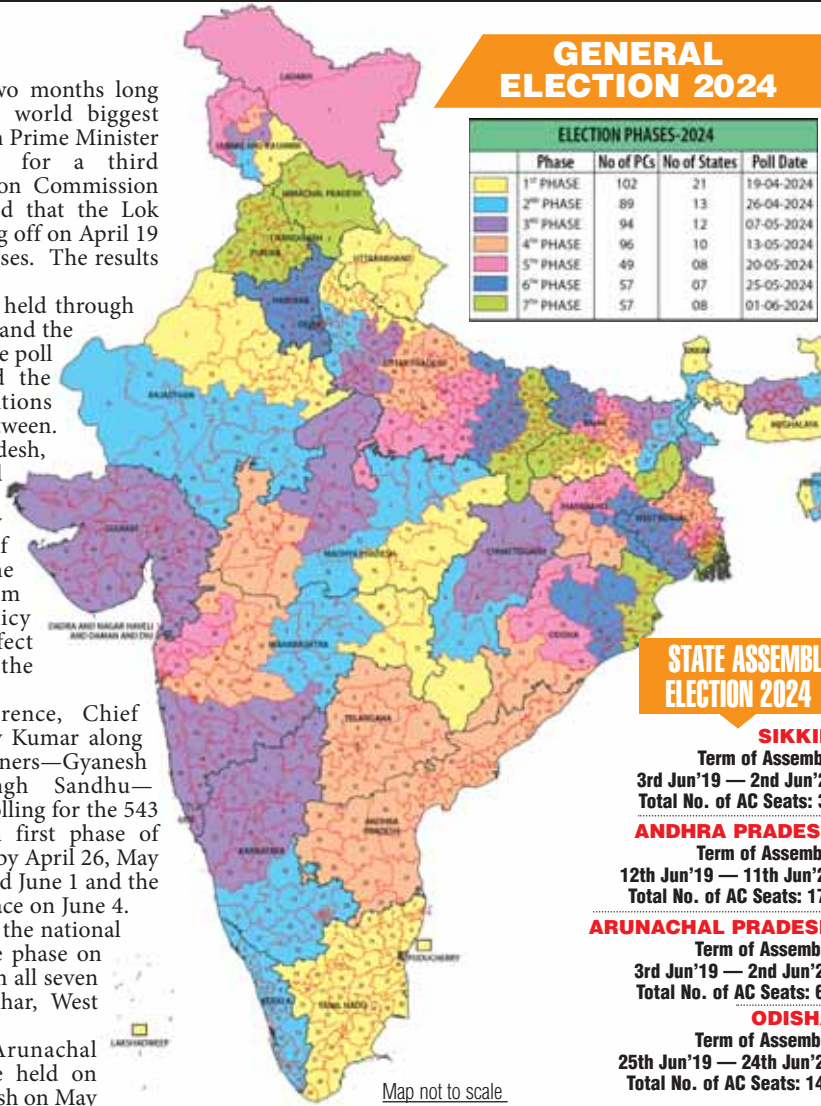
Setting the stage for a two months long electoral battle for the world biggest election exercise in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi will bid for a third consecutive term, the Election Commission (EC) on Saturday announced that the Lok Sabha elections will be kicking off on April 19 and will be held in seven phases. The results will be declared on June 4.

The general elections will be held through the months of April and May and the EC claimed to have framed the poll schedule keeping in mind the regional climatic conditions besides certain festivals in between. Four States, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Sikkim will also be holding simultaneous Assembly elections. The Model Code of Conduct, which bars the Government in power from announcing any new policy decisions, comes into effect immediately after the announcement.

Addressing a press conference, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar along with two election commissioners—Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu—announced that Lok Sabha polling for the 543 Sabha seats will begin with first phase of polling on April 19, followed by April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1 and the counting of votes will take place on June 4.

While Lok Sabha elections in the national Capital will occur in a single phase on May 25, polling will be held in all seven phases in three States -- Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.

Assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim will be held on April 19 and in Andhra Pradesh on May



13. Elections to Odisha Assembly will be held in four phases on May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Bypolls will also be held for 26 Assembly constituencies, Kumar said. The Assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir would take place soon after the Lok Sabha polls due to security concerns, with both events deemed unfeasible to be held simultaneously. The Lok Sabha polls will be conducted in seven phases starting April 19, with the results to be declared on June 4, while voting in Jammu and Kashmir will take place in five phases.

The term of the 17th Lok Sabha is set to end on June 16 while the terms of the Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Sikkim assemblies will end on June 11, June 2, June 24 and June 2, respectively. Last time the Lok Sabha polls were announced on March 10 and held in seven phases beginning April 11. Votes were counted on May 23.

In the first phase on April 19, voting will take place in 102 constituencies spread over 21 States/UTs including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir with 10 States/UTs completing the poll process in this phase.

### STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2024

- SIKKIM**  
Term of Assembly  
3rd Jun'19 — 2nd Jun'24  
Total No. of AC Seats: 32
- ANDHRA PRADESH**  
Term of Assembly  
12th Jun'19 — 11th Jun'24  
Total No. of AC Seats: 175
- ARUNACHAL PRADESH**  
Term of Assembly  
3rd Jun'19 — 2nd Jun'24  
Total No. of AC Seats: 60
- ODISHA**  
Term of Assembly  
25th Jun'19 — 24th Jun'24  
Total No. of AC Seats: 147



### Poetic CEC talks tough on model code violations

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

From taking a tough stand on hate speeches to bust the myth of information and realities and share that in 12 States and Union Territories, the ratio of women voters will be higher than men, the Election Commission on Saturday categorically listed out a set of advisories for political parties, urging them to refrain from personal attacks and even use of foul language.

The election watchdog emphasised the need for a campaign based on issues, stressing a zero tolerance policy for hate speeches and

speeches based on caste or religious lines. In an effort to curb the spread of misinformation, the commission has enlisted 2,100 advisors to monitor these issues closely, with strict action promised against any violations. In the one and half hour long Press conference, the CEC Rajiv Kumar made attempts to keep the ambience of massive hall of Vigyan Bhawan lighter by sprucing up his Press conference with poetries and shayaris. On allegations of EVM, he answered: "Adhoori hasrato ka iljaam, har baar hum par lagana thik nahi, wafa khud se nahi hoti, khata EVM ki kehete ho, aur baad mein jab parinaam aata hai toh uspe kaayam bhi nahi rehte"

Continued on Page 2

### Kejriwal gets bail in ED summons case

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi court on Saturday granted bail to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in two complaints filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against him for skipping summons in a money laundering case linked to the alleged Delhi excise policy scam. The court of Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra also allowed Kejriwal to leave the courtroom. "Offence being bailable, accused Arvind Kejriwal is admitted to bail," it said. The court further directed the ED to hand over documents related to the complaints to Kejriwal. The ED has filed two complaints before the magisterial court, seeking Kejriwal's prosecution for skipping multiple summonses issued to him in the case. The latest complaint pertains to Kejriwal not honouring summonses no. 4 to 8 sent by the federal probe agency under Section 50 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The ED had earlier moved the magisterial court seeking Kejriwal's prosecution for not attending the first three summonses issued to him in the money laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy.

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"The difference - the fundamental difference between theater acting and film acting is disjunctive"  
— James Lipton



You may admire him, you may despise him, but you can never ignore him, both on and off screen. Indeed, that is **PARESH RAWAL**, a pillar of Indian cinema, embodying roles as a hero, villain, comic, and versatile actor celebrated for his unmatched range and flawless portrayals. With a career spanning several decades, Rawal has left an indelible mark on the Indian film industry through his nuanced portrayals, impeccable comic timing, and compelling dramatic performances. He has seamlessly transitioned between genres, effortlessly embodying a diverse array of characters with depth and authenticity. He became a Member of Parliament (MP) from Ahmedabad East constituency in the 2014 Indian general election on a BJP ticket. In 2014, he was awarded the Padma Shri. Rawal's journey in acting has been nothing short of extraordinary, marked by his unwavering commitment to his craft and his ability to continually push the boundaries of his art. One of his most remarkable contributions to Indian cinema has been his ability to infuse realism and depth into his characters, elevating them beyond mere caricatures and stereotypes. Rawal is celebrated for his mastery of both comedic and dramatic roles, effortlessly

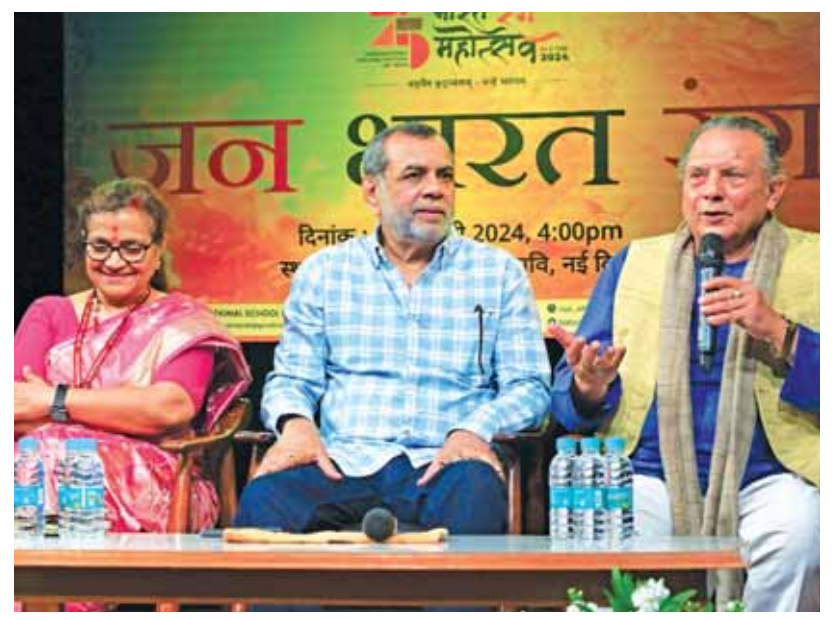
oscillating between light-hearted comedy and intense drama with equal finesse. His impeccable comic timing has endeared him to audiences across generations, while his ability to evoke genuine emotion has earned him critical acclaim. Furthermore, Rawal's dedication to his roles goes beyond mere performance; he delves deep into the psyche of his characters, bringing them to life with layers of complexity and nuance. Whether portraying a bumbling comic or a morally conflicted individual, Rawal's performances resonate with authenticity and depth, leaving a lasting impression on viewers. In addition to his prowess as an actor, Rawal has also made significant contributions to Indian theatre and television, further solidifying his status as a true icon of the performing arts. His ability to seamlessly transition between mediums highlights his versatility and enduring relevance in an ever-evolving industry. Paresh Rawal's illustrious career serves as a testament to the transformative power of acting, showcasing how dedication, talent, and a relentless pursuit of excellence can elevate the craft to new heights. As he continues to captivate audiences with his unparalleled performances, Rawal remains a shining beacon of inspiration for aspiring actors and a true legend of Indian cinema. He talked to **GYANESHWAR DAYAL** about his acting and stint in politics.

# THE MAN OF MANY FACES

## GOOD, BAD AND HILARIOUS

**You are celebrating Bharat Rang Mahotsav 2024 National at the School of Drama. What is it about and how has the experience been? How do you see it as the Chairperson of NSD?**  
We are very excited about it. We are into the 25th year and that too in Amritkal. It is all about connecting people; understanding people. Theatre is entertaining as well as enlightening. It is a medium through which we can patch our differences and know each other better. I am happy that we are celebrating it in Amritkal which makes it even more special.

**You are an actor who took to politics. How has politics changed your acting and choice of scripts and approach?**  
Well, broadly speaking, actors are confined to their comfort zone, in a way they are insulated from the problems the country faces. When you are in Parliament you know about it from all angles, laid threadbare. And that gives you a right perspective. I would say that stays with you and subconsciously affects your acting and approach to cinema.



**Your journey in the world of acting has been nothing short of remarkable. How do you approach the roles you accept?**  
I try to do justice to the role I get and my training in theatre helps me a lot. I am Eklavya of theatre which means all the details and minute nuances of the role must be given due importance and done with finesse.

**You have done myriad roles but there must be one which is close to your heart?**  
I would say the role of Sardar Patel. He was indeed one of the greatest statesmen and politicians we have had. It not only made me a better actor but also a better citizen. While preparing for it, I was flabbergasted by his personality and work. I came to know that the history we are taught is mutilated and full of lies. There were many people who got us independence, not just two. Sardar Patel was sidelined and forgotten.

**You have been associated with Marathi theatre for a long time. Do you think theatre is more progressive than cinema?**  
Yes, that is correct to say. Theatre is progressive and has long traditions of breaking stereotypes and helping society do some serious thinking about itself.

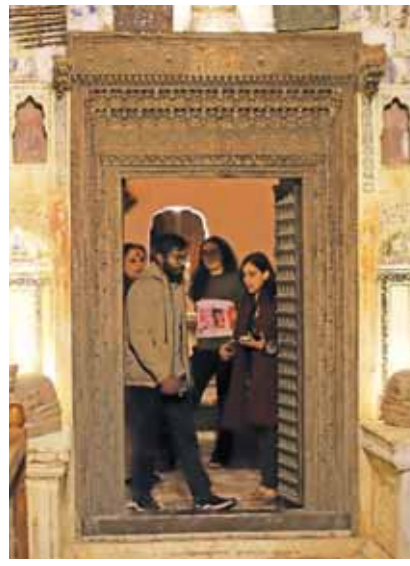
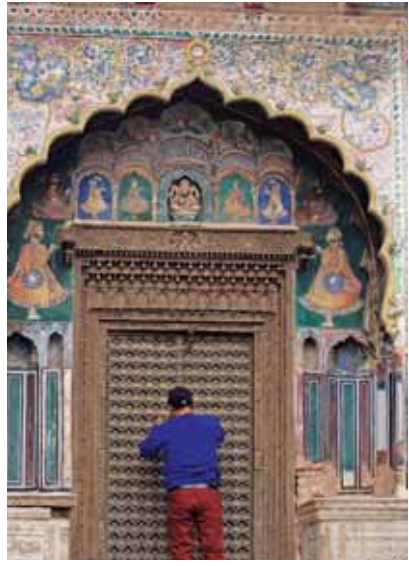
**Your ability to seamlessly transition between comedic and dramatic roles is truly commendable. How do you approach such diverse characters?**  
Each character, comedic or

dramatic, comes with its own set of challenges and nuances. For me, the key lies in understanding the essence of the character and tapping into their emotional core. Whether it is finding the perfect timing for a comedic scene or delving into the complexities of a dramatic role, I always strive to bring authenticity to my performances. I also believe in extensive research and preparation, which allows me to inhabit the character fully and deliver a memorable portrayal.

**You began with a career and then had a stint with politics. How does politics shape your acting style?**  
Acting is, of course, a craft which must be learnt and perfected while politics is learned when you enter it. When you are in Parliament you get to know the real India, its people, its problems, what the Government is doing, and where you fit in. It is a humbling experience.

**Do you think actors have a role to play in politics?**  
Of course. If they want to become full-time politicians, they should prepare for it. If they do not want to enter it, fine but still they should know about it. After all, they are also part of society and should be aware of its challenges and problems. They should not just curse sitting on the sidelines and come forward to make a change. Those who enter politics must be serious about it and be aware and of the opportunities and challenges politics throws at them.

ACTING IS A CRAFT WHICH MUST BE LEARNT AND PERFECTED WHILE POLITICS IS LEARNED WHEN YOU ENTER IT. WHEN YOU ARE IN PARLIAMENT YOU GET TO KNOW THE REAL INDIA, ITS PEOPLE, ITS PROBLEMS, WHAT THE GOVERNMENT IS DOING, AND WHERE YOU FIT IN. IT IS A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE

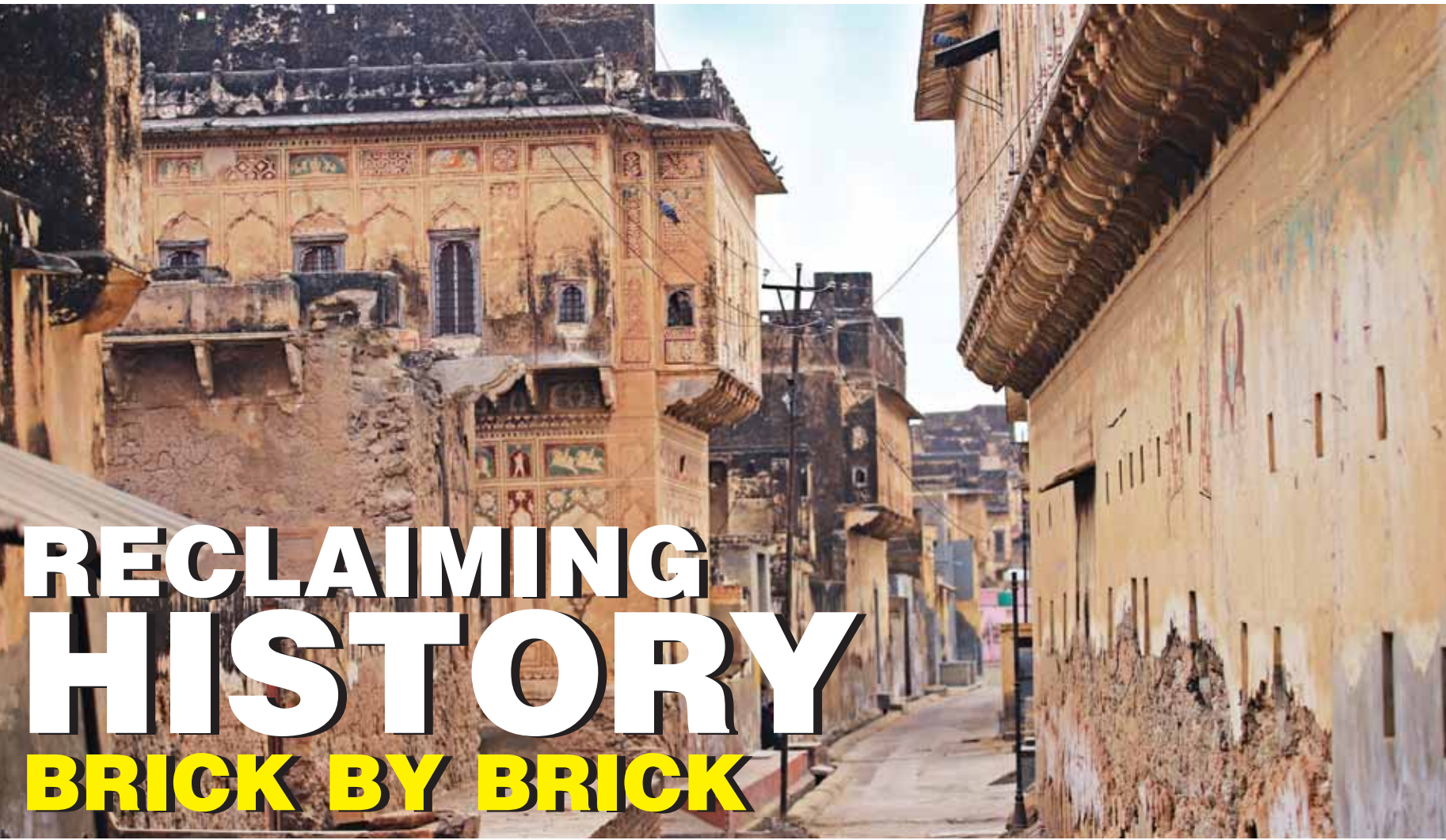


## SHRUTI FOUNDATION A PERSONAL JOURNEY

In the heart of Ramgarh Shekhawati in the heart of Ramgarh Shekhawati beats the pulse of a revitalization movement led by the indomitable spirit of Shruti Poddar. A scion of the illustrious Poddar family, the creators of Ramgarh Shekhawati, Shruti Nada Poddar embarked on a deeply personal journey to breathe life into the faded glory of her ancestral town. With unwavering resolve and a singular focus, she founded the Shruti Foundation, a beacon of hope for the preservation and restoration of Ramgarh Shekhawati's heritage. She also heads INTACH Shekhawati chapter, covering tree districts of Rajasthan and has won accolades for her single-handed efforts at bringing Ramgarh Shekhawati ion the world map. Shruti's connection to the Indian cultural ethos runs deep, which led her back to India from her life in the UK, to a promised land she unwittingly dreamed of, surprisingly and intuitively led her back to the abandoned land of her ancestors. Heartbroken with the decay and destruction of this astonishing town, the decay of the town's once-majestic havelis and the erosion of its cultural identity over a entury, she was spurred into action. Determined to reclaim the town's lost splendour, Shruti returned to her roots, armed with a vision of renewal and a commitment to effect change, fuelled by a profound sense of duty towards this great land, its tangible and intangible heritage, its local communities, particularly



the power of the women and the indigenous greatness of this great land of patronage of knowledge and culture, also called Doodra Kashi. Over the span of a mere decade, Shruti's tireless efforts have borne fruit, transforming the landscape of Ramgarh Shekhawati in remarkable ways. From the moment one steps off the train at the railway station, the signs of rejuvenation are unmistakable. Some of the dilapidated facades have been lovingly restored, vibrant murals adorn once-muted walls. Shruti's approach to revitalising Ramgarh Shekhawati is characterised by a blend of innovation and tradition. She has spearheaded initiatives to revive traditional crafts, promote eco-tourism, and empower local artisans. Through the Shruti Foundation's collaborative efforts with the community, heritage conservationists, and government agencies, Ramgarh Shekhawati is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Yet, perhaps the most awe-inspiring aspect of Shruti's journey is her unwavering commitment to the cause. Her passion is infectious, inspiring others to rally behind her vision and join the movement to revitalise Ramgarh Shekhawati.



# RECLAIMING HISTORY BRICK BY BRICK

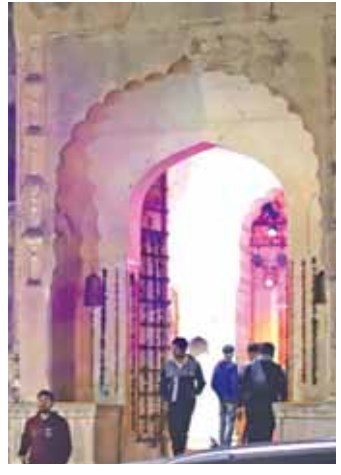
Join us as we embark on a transformative journey through the winding lanes and storied landmarks of Ramgarh, where the past intertwines with the present in a vibrant tapestry of tradition, resilience, and hope. Text and photographs by **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

Nestled amidst the arid plains of Rajasthan, India, lies the quaint and non-descript town of Ramgarh Shekhawati. Steeped in history and adorned with intricate havelis (traditional mansions), this hidden gem is a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the region. Time stands still in Ramgarh Shekhawati, as the town stands as a living chronicle of bygone eras, while simultaneously embracing modernity. Today, efforts by organisations like the Shruti Foundation, INTACH Shekhawati chapter and Vedaaranya Healing seek to revive and preserve its legacy, ensuring that its charm endures for generations to come.

**HISTORICAL NEEDLEPOINT**  
**RAMGARH SHEKHAWATI** traces its origins back to the 17th century when it was established by the Poddar merchant community. Situated along the ancient trade routes, the town flourished as a bustling centre of commerce, art, and culture. Its prosperity during the heyday of the Marwari traders is reflected in the opulent havelis that adorn its streets. These havelis, with their intricately carved facades, vibrant frescoes, and ornate architecture, served as symbols of wealth and social status. They also bore testimony to the artistic prowess of the craftsmen who meticulously adorned them with scenes from Indian religious and cultural narratives, folklore, the musical instruments, the flora and fauna and other prevalent objects and applications of the time. Each haveli narrates a story, preserving the essence of a bygone era within its walls. There are more than 200 havelis and over 30 chhatris or cenotaphs, intricately carved braving the heat and dust customary to the region. Add to them as many wells and Johads, which are no longer in use but stand as testimony to the life and lifestyle of the bygone era. In Shekhawati, earning the title of 'Seth' required a different approach. One had to undertake at least seven acts of public good, such as constructing besides their own Haveli, a Chhatri for travellers, a temple, a well, a water harvesting Johad, creating a gaushala for cows, a dharamshala, a Vidyalaya, an ayurvedic rasayanshala for the community.



While times may have changed, the seven or more wooden carved levels on entry doors in Shekhawati symbolising a Seths status still speak volumes. They did not solely indicate wealth, but rather the generosity and benevolence of the owner on seven levels or more for the people.



**PRESENT STATE OF HAVELIS**  
**DESPITE THEIR** historical significance, many of Ramgarh Shekhawati's havelis have fallen into disrepair over the years. Neglect, mindless construction and the passage of time have taken their toll on these architectural marvels, with fading frescoes and crumbling facades threatening to erase their splendour forever. Ramgarh Shekhawati as suffered the betrayal of its own people. The generations of opulent Seths mostly turned their back of Ramgarh and never returned, some left caretakers to look after the havelis who didn't mind conniving with the usurpers of the wealth of the havelis. However, amidst the dilapidation, there remains a glimmer of hope. Efforts by local authorities and heritage enthusiasts are underway to conserve and restore these havelis, breathing new life into their weathered walls. The preservation of Ramgarh Shekhawati's cultural heritage



has become a rallying cry for those who recognize the importance of safeguarding the town's legacy for future generations. **THE CONSERVATION EFFORTS**  
AT THE forefront of this conservation movement is the Shruti Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of India's architectural heritage. Through initiatives focused on restoration, documentation, and community engagement, the foundation is working tirelessly to revive the splendour of Ramgarh Shekhawati's havelis. And it is not just the havelis but its mandate goes beyond the architecture and touches people's life, reviving their craft, providing them employment and purpose. One such endeavour is the restoration project undertaken by the Shruti Foundation, beginning with the restoration of part of the Ramgarh Fort and various Havelis of Ramgarh Shekhawati, including the beautiful Deepchand



Kishanlal poddar Haveli, Vedaaranya Haveli and MOHAR Haveli. Shruti Nada Poddar, Convener, INTACH Shekhawati Chapter invited INTACH Architectural division, which resurrected the unique Ramgarh Shekhawati Veda temple, the only Veda temple in India dedicated to Vedas and not deities!

**PRESERVING THE LEGACY**  
IN ADDITION to its stunning havelis and ongoing restoration efforts, Ramgarh Shekhawati



boasts a rich tapestry of cultural traditions that further enrich its allure. The town is home to a lineage of knowledgeable vaidis or Ayurvedic doctors, carrying forward centuries-old healing traditions. Their expertise in holistic wellness adds another layer to Ramgarh Shekhawati's cultural heritage, offering visitors a glimpse into the ancient wisdom of India's traditional medicine systems. The last ten years have been truly magnificent in the life of Ramgarh Shekhawati. It is seeing a turnaround and it is visible right from the railway station, adorning beautiful frescoes and giving a glimpse of the town to visitors looking for a cultural experience. Furthermore, no visit to Ramgarh Shekhawati would be complete without indulging in its culinary delights. Authentic Rajasthani cuisine, renowned for its bold flavours and aromatic spices, takes centre stage here. From savoury dal baatichurma to decadent ghevar, to Vedaaranya Haveli's special cuisine including bajre ka Upoma, every dish tells a story of the region's culinary heritage, inviting visitors to savour the tastes of tradition.

(Vedaaranya Heritage and Healing Festival) since 2016. This annual celebration showcases the town's rich traditions to the world, drawing visitors from far and wide to experience its enchanting beauty and cultural diversity. Through heritage walks, exhibitions, performances, and workshops in the old world ambience of its Fort and its havelis, the festival serves as a platform and a fascinating journey of awareness and appreciation of Ramgarh Shekhawati's great heritage, fostering a deeper connection with its past and present. As efforts to preserve and promote Ramgarh Shekhawati's heritage continue, there is growing recognition of its significance on the global stage. With over 200 intricately carved havelis dotting the small town, Ramgarh Shekhawati stands as a testament to the architectural brilliance of yesteryears. It may well be on its way to earning UNESCO World Heritage status, joining the ranks of the world's most cherished cultural treasures. As the sun sets over the limestone facades and winding lanes of Ramgarh Shekhawati, it whispers tales of a glorious past and a promising future. In its havelis, streets, and traditions, the town embodies the essence of Rajasthan's timeless charm, inviting travellers to embark on a journey through history, culture, and heritage. Ramgarh Shekhawati stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of India's cultural legacy. Ramgarh Shekhawati embarks on a journey of revival and rejuvenation, the efforts of organisations like the Shruti Foundation and INTACH serve as beacons of hope. Through their dedication and perseverance, they are fostering a sense of cultural identity and pride among its inhabitants. With each stroke of the brush and each brick laid in place, the town's havelis are being transformed into living monuments, testifying to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of heritage. In the heart of Rajasthan's desert landscape, Ramgarh Shekhawati stands as a timeless reminder of the beauty of the past and the potential of the future. It also reminds us what we can do to our heritage if we turn our back on it.

## THE GENESIS

Legend has it that Ramgarh Shekhawati owes its existence to a poignant tale of love and resilience. Once ridiculed by her own family for not having a rich kingdom, the Queen of Sikar Kingdom, whose family were the rich king and queen of Churu, returned to her husband, the king of Sikar Kingdom, and went into isolation, giving up food and water. In response to her adamant demand for a new and most rich and beautiful town ever, the Sikar maharaja called the wealthy merchants of Churu, the Poddars, and requested them to cross over with seven families. The Poddar Seths agreed to cross over from Churu to Sikar and build a new town as never before under the following conditions - They would be granted the region they picked, they



would pay zero tax, they would rule the town themselves, with their own administration and their own law and order, and last but not the least, they will not sit below the king. Having no choice, the King agreed. Thus, Ramgarh Sethan (Ramgarh of the Seths) the only town in the world not ruled by the King in the 18th and 19th century was born, emerging as a testament to the power of love and determination. Thus, from the crucible of royal decree and entrepreneurial pact, the resplendent enclave of Ramgarh Shekhawati emerged, forever enshrined as the 'Ramgarh Sethan' - the bastion of opulence and prosperity. It flourished as one of the richest town of that era with the highest per capita income in the world in 1900.

# SCS: Old battleground, new twist

The South China Sea (SCS) has once again come into focus following sudden skirmishes between the coast guard vessels of the Philippines and China last week. The ongoing assertion by the Philippines of territorial claims over the Spratly Islands and China's outright refusal to acknowledge these claims lie at the heart of the current crisis.

This dispute has deep historical roots, with China asserting its rights over the entire SCS, a claim that other countries involved simply reject. The contentious issue of control over sea waters and its resources has long strained relations between China and the other claimants.

Since 2009, during Hu Jintao's presidency of China, the country has steadily intensified its efforts to solidify its position in the SCS, despite Hu's advocacy for China's "Peaceful Rise" Doctrine. In this endeavour, the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing devised a subtle strategy involving the use of its military and coast guard to surveil foreign vessels, explore and exploit resources in disputed islands, drawing the attention of the international media and SCS neighbouring countries. However, starting in 2013 with Xi Jinping assuming the presidency after Hu, Beijing escalated its activities by initiating the construction of artificial islands and stationing military and civilian personnel in various parts of the SCS. This aggressive expansion has increasingly posed a security threat to other claimants in the SCS.

They have all begun to question China's extensive claims over the land parcels and adjacent waters in the SCS. As China has asserted its claim through frequent naval patrols and island-building in the Paracels and Spratlys, other nations have sought support from the US and Japan to deploy their military and naval vessels in the area. Interestingly, the US, without directly participating in the conflict, has started sending



military ships and aircraft near the disputed islands under the guise of 'freedom of navigation' operations. Meanwhile, Japan, a close ally of the US in the region, although having no direct claim in the SCS, regularly provides ships and military equipment to countries like Vietnam and the Philippines. The involvement of global powers is heightening tensions in the regional power balance, which may compel China to further militarise the SCS.

In addition to China, seven countries consistently claim resources and water bodies in the SCS. These countries include Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, and Taiwan. However, Chinese claims and territorial occupation of the sea are the most prominent in the region. This greatly concerns all other nations involved in the conflict, posing one of the most serious security threats to neighbouring nations in the Western Pacific area.

More than the concerns about troublesome neighbours, the US is deeply troubled by the increasing Chinese claims and security buildup in the SCS. The SCS, along with the East China Sea (ECS), is an area where US-China strategic interests constantly clash. This strategic competition encompasses various issues in the SCS, including but not limited to:

- US security commitments to the Western Pacific, encompassing treaty obligations to the Philippines
- Maintenance and enhancement of the US-led security architecture in the Western Pacific
- Sustaining a regional balance of power favourable to the US and its allies
- Defending the principle of peaceful dispute resolution
- Maintaining the universal doctrine of freedom of navigation, also known as freedom of the seas

These factors compel Washington to focus more on the Asia-Pacific region than the conflict-laden West Asia.

Currently, the US aims to restrict China from engaging in additional base construction, deploying more military equipment to the islands, initiating new constructions at Scarborough Shoal, declaring straight baselines and Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ), taking actions over the Philippines to either operate in or vacate the Spratly Islands, and granting Filipino fishermen access to water bodies surrounding Scarborough and the Spratly Islands. Additionally, Washington clearly desires Beijing to adhere to and abide by the verdict issued by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague on July 12, 2016, which was established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

This verdict, which China outrightly rejects, was fully in favor of the Philippines based on a case lodged by the latter against the former in 2013. The Philippines brought the

case against China for its claims and activities in the SCS. However, China did not respect the verdict of the international court because it was not prepared to accept a decision against its interests. In fact, Chinese President Xi Jinping asserted that China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the SCS would not be affected by this ruling.

The tribunal challenged China's extensive claims over the SCS and dismissed its 'Nine-dash line' thesis, which claimed sovereignty over 90 percent of the SCS. The tribunal also rejected China's historic rights over the resources of the SCS, stating that there was no legal basis for such claims.

Finally, the court declared a large part of the SCS as Neutral International Waters (NIW) or exclusive economic zones of other nations. This ruling was nonetheless a significant setback for Xi's regime and other members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) who viewed the

entire SCS as the exclusive territorial zones of the country, inviolable by any other nation.

China reputedly claims to have historic rights and claims over the SCS. Despite the legally binding nature of this historic ruling on China, it chose not to comply. Instead, the Communist leadership in Beijing dismissed it as 'ill-founded' and 'naturally null and void.' This saga clearly illustrates China's determination to assert its expansive territorial claims over the SCS, regardless of the provisions of the UNCLOS. Such an attitude from Beijing strongly indicates its aggressive pursuit of sovereignty and complete disregard for the rules-based international order. While Beijing advocates for a rules-based international order, it seeks to establish one on its own terms and conditions rather than adhering to the existing framework.

Why are all these countries actively involved in the SCS? Located in the Western Pacific Ocean, the SCS is the largest marginal sea in the region. The Paracels and the Spratlys are two chains of islands claimed by many countries in the region, particularly all of them in their entirety by China through its 'Nine-dash Line' Thesis. The significance of the SCS lies in its status as a major international shipping lane. According to estimates by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD), over 21 per cent of international trade, amounting to 3.37 trillion dollars, passes through these sea lanes.

Also, the entire SCS encompasses more than 250 islands, reefs, sandbars, etc, which are rich reservoirs of minerals and other sea-borne resources. Experts also suggest that the sea is believed to contain nearly 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

However, these Paracels and Spratlys are largely uninhabited. Also, the SCS

oversees the operation of more than half of the world's fishing vessels, and these fishing reserves serve as a potential source of livelihood for millions across the region. Thus, all these countries surrounding the SCS are fiercely asserting their claims over it. Beyond this, their regional and geopolitical interests are clearly evident in the clashes and differences of opinion that have surfaced so far.

It is not surprising to many strategic experts that China does not want to be subordinate to or follow the dictates of the existing global liberal order led by the US and the rest of the West.

Thus, China, especially under Xi, has consistently advocated for a multipolar world and a new world order in which Beijing will establish (or has already set) the terms and conditions. At no point does it want to be dominated by the West, especially by the US. It unequivocally demands equal terms of engagement and treatment in all international forums, on par with Western nations.

China's territorial claims, both on land and in neighbouring water bodies, seem to have no bounds; they are continually on the rise. Its imperial ambitions have become increasingly apparent in recent years.

However, by turning the South China Sea into another flashpoint, alongside Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, China is not only threatening American interests in the Asia-Pacific but also challenging the security architecture of Western allies in the region. This may lead to more global powers aligning against Beijing.

Xi and his regime should be cautious not to overextend their reach, as this could drive more nations to align with the US. China must learn to respect the existing global order before others feel compelled to rally behind an Asian order led by Beijing.

*(The writer is currently president of the Global Research Foundation)*

**The South China Sea has once again become a focal point of international attention following sudden clashes between coast guard vessels of the Philippines and China. As tensions rise, the involvement of global powers like the US and Japan adds further complexity to the situation, potentially pushing more nations to align against Beijing. Amid these escalating tensions, it becomes imperative for China to reconsider its assertive stance and respect the existing global order to avoid further international backlash**



MAKHAN SAIKIA

## PERSPECTIVE

# Cannot afford tiger safari in Corbett core area

**The SC's recent verdict on tiger safari in Corbett Tiger Reserve marks a crucial step in wildlife conservation. Amid concerns over illegal construction and deforestation, the ruling underscores the intrinsic link between tigers and forests, stressing the need for effective habitat protection and restoration measures**

The Supreme Court's order last week to ban tiger safaris in the Core area of Corbett Tiger Reserve, while permitting them in buffer and peripheral areas, represents a significant judgment concerning the conservation of flora and fauna. Also, it underscores the impact on the ecological services provided by forests, including their carbon sequestration potential. A three-judge bench led by Justice BR Gavai criticised former Uttarakhand Forest Minister Harak Singh Rawat and former Divisional Forest Officer Kishan Chand for permitting illegal construction and deforestation.

The bench emphasised, "The tiger perishes without the forest and the forest perishes without the tigers. Therefore, the tiger should stand guard over the forest, and the forest should protect all its tigers." The court further expressed concern over poaching and illegal destruction in tiger habitats and established a committee comprising former DGF Chandra Prakash Goyal and two serving officers of Uttarakhand, Anup Malik and Samir Sinha, occupying the positions of head of forest force and chief wildlife warden respectively. The committee has been given three months to propose suggestions for more effective management of tiger reserves in India, assess the cost of restoring damages inflicted on Corbett tiger habitat, and propose

measures to recover damages from those responsible for such destruction. It is also tasked with making recommendations regarding restrictions on ecotourism facilities in the best interest of protection. Moreover, the court directed the CBI to conclude its investigation into the criminal intent of individuals responsible for the destruction of the tiger habitat in the renowned Corbett Tiger Reserve. During the case hearing, the court also took into consideration the suggestions provided by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

Based on the feedback from these two national agencies, the court has allowed the opening of safaris for rescued tigers and cubs within the buffer and peripheral areas of the core of the tiger reserves, while prohibiting the housing of zoo-born tigers in such facilities. It is important to note that buffer areas are equally important as core areas and are legally designated as such. Both core and buffer areas constitute the tiger reserve. When a tiger loses its territory to a more dominant one, it often gets pushed into the buffer area. In many reserves, such as Corbett, the habitats in buffer areas are comparable to those in the core.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, prohibits the opening of any safari or rescue center in buffer areas. Section 38-O of

the Act stipulates that tiger reserves must be kept inviolate, meaning that management efforts should ensure that both the core and buffer areas of the tiger reserve remain undisturbed.

The NTCA, in collaboration with state forest departments, has been consistently working to relocate villages from within tiger reserves and resettle families outside. It would be contradictory to remove human and livestock populations from tiger reserves only to open them for safaris. Studies on tiger occupancy surveys indicate that tigers do not inhabit areas occupied by humans and livestock. The social dynamics of tiger territories suggest that we require 800 to 1,200 square kilometres of undisturbed habitat to sustain a viable tiger population, provided there is an adequate prey population. Such areas could support 70 to 75 tigers, including breeding females but excluding cubs. Furthermore, the tiger population would be genetically robust if two such source population areas were connected by corridors.

In October 2012, the NTCA issued SC-approved guidelines for creating tourist facilities and regulating visits in core areas. These guidelines stipulated that not more than 20 per cent of the core area in any tiger reserve should be open to visits. Additionally, they restricted the number of safari vehicles and the duration of visits, and prohibited the construction of

any tourist infrastructure within the tiger reserve. The proliferation of tourist resorts outside the reserve has disrupted the movement of elephants, leading to an increase in conflict cases between humans and wild animals.

Often, the forest areas within corridors are not managed by the Wildlife wing of the Forest Department. These areas are also interspersed with human settlements, where multiple activities take place. Effective management of corridors is crucial, and new economic activities such as industries and mining are prohibited to minimise human presence.

I am uncertain whether the Pakharo area, where the tiger safari is constructed, is in the core or buffer zone of the Corbett Tiger Reserve. However, what I am certain of is that it serves as the gateway for tiger movement towards the Lansdowne forest division, where tigers breed in substantial numbers. Also, it forms a corridor for tiger movement through the Lansdowne and Haridwar forest divisions, connecting to the Rajaji Tiger Reserve, another source population. These landscapes are also vital for the movement of elephants. I have observed a proliferation of tourist resorts between Pakharo and Lansdowne, with many of them fenced off to prevent access by wild animals, especially elephants. Numerous island fences within elephant corridors

hinder the movement of herds, leading to human-elephant conflicts. Unfortunately, what the Minister and DFO have done is erect another island fence, which will undoubtedly impede elephant movement within the Corbett Tiger Reserve itself.

I have had the opportunity to visit the site where the habitat inside the Corbett Tiger Reserve has been destroyed. More than 6000 Sal trees have been felled to make way for water holes and to provide a perimeter fence for the safari to prevent the entry of wild elephant herds. I understand that higher authorities permitted DFO Kishan Chand to fell less than 200 trees. However, I fail to comprehend why a DFO would continue cutting trees far beyond the permitted limit, with his superiors remaining silent spectators. Why did they not visit the site when the destruction was ongoing? In my assessment, this is a complete failure of administration in Uttarakhand.

These forests are extremely dense, with nearly 0.8 canopy density, and the felled Sal trees had a girth of more than 2 meters. One of the tasks assigned to the Supreme Court-appointed committee is to assess the cost of restoring the tiger habitat. My understanding of restoration encompasses not only the removal of all structures constructed using angled iron, RCC, etc, used in creating fences, buildings,

and bunds for the water holes, along with the spillover structures, but also the regrowth of the habitat previously dominated by more than 6000 Sal trees and other hardwood species.

The natural setting of the area, which has been disturbed by cutting and filling of earth, can never be fully restored. Artificially grown trees in an area of equal extent can never serve as proper compensation. Forest departments have a poor track record of successfully implementing compensatory afforestation. I am more than certain that the Sal and other miscellaneous species lost in the destruction can never be replaced. These forests are a gift from nature, and once lost, they cannot be regenerated by human efforts. The destruction of forests and the fragmentation of habitats and corridors are irreversible. Relatively pristine forest areas with high biodiversity values across states are designated as sanctuaries and national parks, commonly referred to as protected areas (PAs).

Various laws and guidelines are in place to ensure the integrity of PAs is maintained. While forests are often burdened with rights and concessions, as well as the rights of dwellers and tribal communities, PAs generally have fewer such encumbrances. Some PAs, like Corbett National Park, are also designated as Tiger Reserves. Many rivers in the central Indian landscape and peninsular India originate in

forested areas, typically within PAs.

Air and water are among the most crucial ecological services provided by forests. The primary reason for conserving forests and wildlife is to ensure that these ecological services are not disrupted. Without them, our existence on this planet would be uncertain.

Ministers like Harak Singh Rawat and officers like Kishan Chand have the capability to pave the way for more safaris and rescue centers in the buffers of tiger reserves or any other protected areas (PAs). The court's approval for buffer and peripheral forests opens the door to potential misuse. Under the guise of road formation, maintenance, creation and upkeep of water holes, and removal of invasive species, heavy machinery such as JCBs for earth cutting and filling are already being utilized in many PAs. The practice of earth cutting in PAs must come to an end. The Forest Conservation Act Amendment of 2023 has classified zoos and safaris as forestry activities, eliminating the need for approval to establish these facilities in forested areas. Without proper regulation of this provision, officers who favor the use of JCBs may end up causing destruction to the forests.

*(The writer is a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force) Karnataka)*



BK SINGH



**YOUR WEEK AHEAD**

MADHU KOTIYA



**ARIES** March 21-April 19

This week promises a blend of international connections and swift developments. Expect uplifting news from afar or a familiar encounter crossing borders. Be prepared for sudden travel opportunities linked to your professional pursuits. A positive turn in legal affairs may emerge, demanding decisive action on your part. Health-wise, a phase of recuperation is on the horizon, allowing you to resume your usual activities. As the week concludes, joy surrounds family matters, especially concerning your offspring. Their academic achievements or an unexpected matrimonial proposal will bring delight, leading to enthusiastic wedding preparations. For those in established partnerships, expect a deepening of bonds, enhancing both harmony and commitment in the relationship. This period is marked by rapid transitions, pivotal decisions, and heartwarming familial developments, guiding you towards a harmonious blend of personal and professional fulfillment. **Lucky number** 25 | **Lucky colour** Turquoise **Lucky day** Thursday



**LEO** July 23-Aug 22

Seeking a fresh start away from daily tumults and discord might be your heart's desire. It's crucial to reflect on your past journeys and future directions. Such introspection brings clarity, paving a smoother transition towards tranquility. Positive outcomes require decisions aligned with your aspirations, remembering that actions, once executed, shape your destiny. Imagine the harmony of finding someone with whom you share an unparalleled bond. This connection, akin to the confluence of two luminous entities in the cosmos, intensifies their radiance. As you navigate this week, you may encounter this profound partnership, where each enhances the other's brilliance, crafting a shared path illuminated by mutual understanding and support. **Lucky number** 24 | **Lucky colour** Olive **Lucky day** Saturday



**SAGITTARIUS** Nov 22-Dec 21

This week is poised to be a period of significant transformation, with unexpected shifts unfolding rapidly in your professional environment. Anticipate a series of beneficial developments to emerge shortly, marking a turn of events that could significantly alter your current trajectory. However, if you've recently been basking in a streak of success, it's wise to remain vigilant. Challenges may arise in the form of deceit or betrayal, with potential adversaries looking to undermine your achievements or financial stability. Such encounters could prove to be deeply unsettling. As the week progresses, your inherent boldness and zest for life will come to the forefront. You possess an indomitable spirit and a fearless approach to life, which fuels your swift decision-making and embraces a dynamic perspective. **Lucky number** 12 | **Lucky colour** Mint **Lucky day** Wednesday



**TAURUS** April 20-May 20

This week calls for a period of calm reflection and distancing yourself from bustling social scenes. Engaging in calming practices such as mindfulness or deep relaxation techniques can be beneficial for your inner tranquility. Recently, dissatisfaction might have clouded your professional and personal realms, but it's crucial to not let this overshadow the current period. The horizon looks promising, with opportunities for financial growth and success in your endeavors. Trusting your gut feeling could help navigate through simpler situations, leveraging your fair-minded and thoughtful approach to transition smoothly from challenges to positive outcomes. This approach not only paves the way for financial and emotional fulfillment but also guides you towards a deeper understanding of yourself and your surroundings, leading to a fulfilling journey towards personal growth. **Lucky number** 21 | **Lucky colour** Lavender **Lucky day** Monday



**VIRGO** Aug 23-Sep 22

As the week unfolds, you may find yourself grappling with limitations. Your current endeavors have saddled you with an overwhelming array of duties, leaving you feeling ensnared and unable to extricate yourself. This sense of being trapped, coupled with apprehensions about making any moves, suggests an undercurrent of challenges stifling your progress. The presence of adversaries, or perhaps those who wish to see you falter, adds to this complex scenario. Obstacles, driven by misplaced desires and a lack of awareness, further complicate your journey towards success. However, amidst these trials, there remains a glimmer of optimism. An inherent strength within you holds the key to overcoming these hurdles. As the week comes to a close, a wave of tranquility washes over, allowing you to rise above worldly concerns. **Lucky number** 13 | **Lucky colour** Maroon **Lucky day** Friday



**CAPRICORN** Dec 22-Jan 19

This week marks a period of achievement and stability in your life, built on a foundation of hard work and dedication. The rewards you're experiencing may seem like a sudden boon, yet they are often the result of your own efforts. It's a time to recognize not just your material wealth but the richness of your inner life as well. Advancements in your career, symbolizing a boost in your confidence, are likely. You find yourself being a source of support and inspiration for those around you, earning respect and admiration. Your unique perspective allows you to approach situations with fairness and insight. As the week draws to a close, you turn your focus inward, engaging in practices that enhance your inner peace and understanding, reflecting on the depth of your knowledge and enlightenment. **Lucky number** 17 | **Lucky colour** Peach **Lucky day** Friday



**GEMINI** May 21-June 20

This week, you embody a spirit of kindness, generosity, honesty, and tranquility. An opportunity for a burgeoning relationship presents itself, promising deep fulfillment and joy. Listen closely to your inner guidance, as it plays a crucial role in bringing your most cherished dreams and aspirations to fruition. Professionally, your resilience, swift decisiveness, and unwavering commitment pave the way for overcoming challenges, leading to noteworthy achievements. Your efforts are likely to garner widespread recognition and respect, celebrating your unwavering dedication. This period marks the culmination of previous competitive challenges, allowing you to relish in the rewards of your hard work. As the week draws to a close, a sense of celebration permeates the air, with plans for a significant gathering or event highlighting your recent successes and the joy they bring. **Lucky number** 18 | **Lucky colour** Coral **Lucky day** Sunday



**LIBRA** Sep 23-Oct 22

This week, your forward momentum might attract unwelcome attention from those who wish to see you falter. Beware of those aiming to tarnish your reputation as obstacles and opposition could emerge, potentially flipping your world on its head. Additionally, there's a risk of your own innovative energies being misdirected to work against you. However, remember, the greatest challenge comes from within. Workplace disagreements and resistance from critics could test your patience and convictions. Despite this, maintain your composure and seek common ground when possible, clinging steadfastly to your goals without letting external forces sway your path. As the week concludes, a wave of nostalgia may inspire a return to familiar surroundings, where reuniting with loved ones will rejuvenate your spirit, allowing you to recharge and return with a renewed, optimistic outlook. **Lucky number** 19 | **Lucky colour** Navy Blue **Lucky day** Tuesday



**AQUARIUS** Jan 20-Feb 18

This week marks a profound beginning for you, as initial surges of deep feeling set the stage for transformative experiences. You'll encounter moments of intense passion, joy, and enlightenment early on, signaling a time when your most private hopes and ambitions could start to materialize. However, as the week progresses, you may find yourself grappling with familial tensions, enveloped in a cloud of melancholy and nostalgia that ties you to bygone times. Despite this, as the week draws to a close, you'll witness a significant shift away from these challenges towards a brighter, more serene state of being. This period of transition might inspire you to seek a fresh start in a new environment, suggesting a move or significant change in your professional setting is on the horizon. **Lucky number** 16 | **Lucky colour** Indigo **Lucky day** Friday



**CANCER** June 21-July 22

You are entering a period marked by deepening connections, where feelings of closeness and affection are set to flourish. Embrace this time by listening to your intuition and aligning with your inner desires. This phase is ripe for experiencing the joy of new or unconditional love, whether it manifests as a significant romantic development, a commitment, or the joy of a new beginning. Alongside these developments, you may find yourself engaging more passionately in competitive activities, striving for personal bests. However, challenges in the form of disagreements or intense rivalries could surface, urging the need for compromise and understanding. Striving for equilibrium is key—acknowledge differing perspectives and work towards unity and peace. In doing so, you'll find that harmony can be achieved, even in the face of adversity. **Lucky number** 20 | **Lucky colour** Teal **Lucky day** Wednesday



**SCORPIO** Oct 23-Nov 21

At the start of the week, emotional turbulence dominates your experience, leading to heightened sensitivity over minor concerns such as health fluctuations, challenges with family dynamics, or a lack of attention from your partner. Seeking solitude, you find solace in creative expressions, channeling your feelings through writing or other artistic endeavors. As the week progresses, a surge of vitality and ambition empowers you to take control, embracing commitments and tasks with integrity. Your readiness to uphold promises and tackle responsibilities head-on may lead you to receive a significant assignment, demanding your full dedication and effort. Approaching the week's conclusion, anticipate a pivotal shift in your circumstances. Opportunities for professional growth or entrepreneurial ventures are on the horizon, promising a positive transformation in your life's direction and heralding a period of prosperity and fulfillment. **Lucky number** 15 | **Lucky colour** Mustard **Lucky day** Sunday



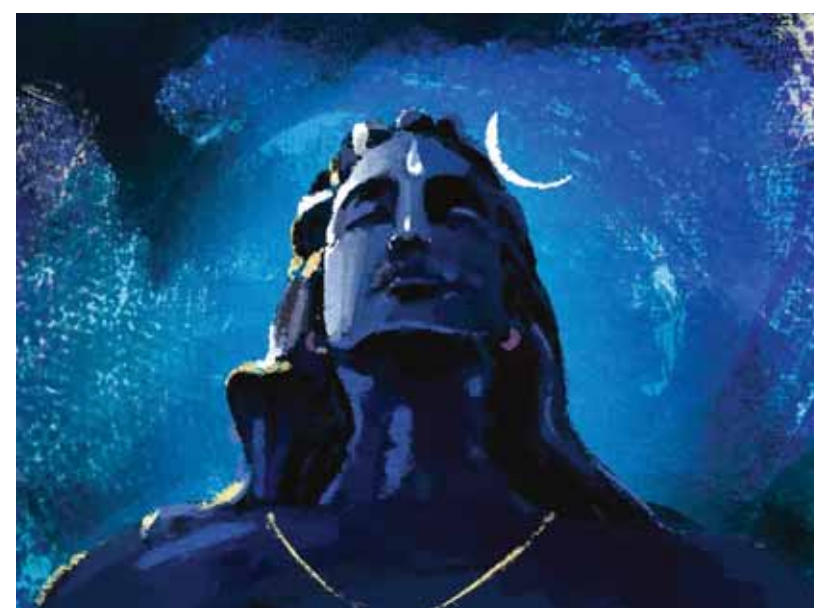
**PISCES** Feb 19-March 20

This week, individuals are deeply influenced by their emotional currents, embodying the roles of compassionate caregivers, healers, and nurturers. Their open-hearted generosity extends a supportive hand to those in need, offering guidance and shelter without hesitation. Their actions are driven by a profound commitment to the well-being of others, showcasing their innate ability to navigate and alleviate the challenges faced by those around them. These individuals are characterized by a remarkable blend of mental and physical resilience. Their strength, derived not merely from empathy and affection but also from an indomitable force within, enables them to persevere. Their unique approach to life, unfettered by sentimentality, surprises many, revealing an unexpected depth of character. Through these qualities, they effortlessly earn the admiration and deep connection of those they hold dear. **Lucky number** 22 | **Lucky colour** Fuchsia **Lucky day** Thursday

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# Shiva shows how the world evolved



His entourage assortment of multitude forms of existences, some of them weird and even invisible. To name a few, divine beings; human beings; devilish existences; animals; birds; goblins, and even invisible existences such as ghost. Symbolically, His entourage is indicative of the multipolar manifest world with all its enormity and diversity. This symbol stands for the dynamic

world ever on the move at its own pace, as a bull, while pulling a cart keeps moving unprovoked at a constant speed. It will not stop in the way till it reaches a place designated for being fed and taking rest. After a while, the bull again takes the journey forward. After reaching the desired destination, it again reverts to its normal place of abode after completing the voyage. The manifest world too, after being on the run for a specified time, gets back to the primal source to acquire a restful state, whence it gets recharged once again. Following which, out of the seeds of life withdrawn into primal source, fresh creation cycle takes off. Let us now have a look at those forming Lord Shiva's entourage. It exemplifies multitude of existences forming this world. It will be important to note that as per Indian perception approximately 8.4 million species are there in existence. Perhaps, even the chroniclers of modern science suggest a number close to Indian perception. The divine beings are personification of the cosmic forces, vital to creation, sustenance, and recycling of existential order. Human beings are said to be armed with intelli-

gence and awareness level, much higher than other creatures. The onus, thus, lies on them to work towards qualitative existence of the whole living order. Devilish existences imply ignorant people having a clouded mind. Because their intelligence level is under limitation, they are primarily driven by animalistic instincts. They, therefore, are not expected to be conscious about their collective obligations. It also implies all negative orientation of mind that may prove detrimental to harmonious and peaceful coexistence. The presence of invisible existences such as ghosts, make out a purposeful reference. These unseen creatures supposedly symbolise the formless existence during the interregnum period between two successive lives. They, therefore, symbolise continuum between successive lives. In a way it can be said that Lord Shiva's entourage presents a picture of all seen and unseen existences forming this living world. **The writer is an astrologer, vastu consultant and spiritual counsellor. Connect with him at Tel: 91-11-9818037273/9871037272 Email: bharatbhushanpadmadeo@gmail.com**