

# INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE **II** **Diary**

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## A World in Flux

### DR. C. D. DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE

**2026:** *India in a New Asia*

**SPEAKER:** *George Yong-Boon Yeo*

**CHAIR:** *Shyam Saran*

**VOTE OF THANKS:** *K. N. Shrivastava*

**14 January 2026**

There is a dream: a Kolkata–Lhasa highway via Nathu La. Bengal would boom; hundreds of millions in Western and Southwestern China would benefit. There is the reality: the clashes between the Indian and Chinese forces in Galwan in 2020, which caused bilateral relations to take a ‘sharp turn for the worse’ and raised concerns ‘about the vulnerability of the Siliguri corridor’. And then there is the unpredictable US President Donald Trump.

The ‘Donroe Doctrine’, said George Yong-Boon Yeo, former foreign minister of Singapore and a recipient of the Padma Bhushan, is ‘a return to the imperial idea’, but strategically, a pact too far. It has ‘caused irreparable harm to the “Western alliance”’, and ‘taking Greenland, by the use or the threat of use of force at the expense of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) solidarity, (is) a geopolitical earthquake’. This, and the dismissal of the Russia–Ukraine war as ‘not our war’, has done ‘irreversible’ harm and ‘history has opened a new chapter’. Venezuela, said Yeo, was about oil, not narcotics, with ‘Caracas moguls collaborating’. The world according to Trump has Canada as the 51st US state, and future targets include Cuba, Nicaragua and Colombia.

Declaring that Chinese President Xi Jinping could decide what he wished to do with Taipei (suggesting no American intervention in case of a People’s Liberation Army invasion) was another Trump ‘thunderbolt’, Yeo said, and even though America has thousands of troops in Japan and South Korea, ‘it is hard to believe that the US will send troops to defend Taiwan’. Beijing, Yeo argued, is not pushing a Chinese version of the Donroe Doctrine,



as historically, ‘it protected itself by building great walls’ and more controversially, ‘Trump might have a great contribution to the peaceful reunification of China’. ‘Trump’, Yeo declared, ‘expected countries to line up and concede. Like India, China refused’, and instead, played the rare-earth card. With the US ahead in high-tech, ties between Washington, DC and Beijing will remain ‘relatively stable’, he felt.

Calling India’s growth ‘organic’, with infrastructure such as its ports and roads, modernised bridges in Bihar and improving mobile telephony, Yeo said India is potentially a ‘separate (and unthreatening) pole’ in a multipolar world. The challenges include a less favourable international environment and Trump’s distrust of free trade. Yeo regretted that India did not join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), but acknowledged New Delhi’s difficulties with its neighbours, principally Pakistan, adding that normalcy will ‘take time’. Regarding India–China ties, he felt the trust-building process has begun, and added, somewhat optimistically, ‘the border will be demarcated when bilateral relations improve’. What about the future? Yeo recalled Panchsheel (the 1954 India–China agreement). ‘India and China have shown principle and courage in resisting Trump...in the age of Trump, these principles are needed as never before.’

■ **SRINJOY CHOWDHURY**

# A Lens into a Multipolar World

**INTERVIEW WITH:** *George Yong-Boon Yeo*

**INTERVIEWER:** *Srinjoy Chowdhury*

*15 January 2026*

Excerpts from an interaction on the current state of geopolitical affairs.

**On the India–China Galwan clashes (in 2020–21) and bilateral ties thereafter:** There has been a rupture. India's expulsion of Chinese diplomats shocked Beijing. Looking at the long term, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have never criticised each other. Inviting Xi to Mahabalipuram (in 2019) was a subtle move, and I hope, at some point, there will be a restoration. Tianjin (the optics at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in August 2025) was for (US President Donald) Trump's benefit.

**On the India–China 'trust deficit':** Rebuilding trust will take time, maybe a generation. The larger environment wants restoration, but India is suspicious and those suspicions are probably true. China may have a view that India is disorganised, but it will develop in its own way. China has been compared with a California redwood (tree) and India a big bush, less planned but growing and both with the same biomass. Corruption has been a problem in China and Xi has taken action against the army and the Chinese Communist Party.

**On Trump's actions in Venezuela, the Greenland crisis, Europe's reaction, and what China can do with Taiwan and the Philippines:** Taiwan does not think there will be war and the US does not want war. China acknowledging Taiwan's autonomy and showing respect is one way of going about it. The Philippines is aggrieved,

but the supply of weapons by India to the Philippines could mean an increase in China supplying weapons to Pakistan. The situation is not out of control, but only if the US underwrites Filipino actions could things change.

Europe is in complete shock. The Western alliance has cracked. (US Secretary of State) Marco Rubio has said 'Ukraine is not our fight'. That is a strategic shift. Europe cannot depend on the US. Europe may have to learn to live with Russia. There is also the issue of refugees.

**On China possibly attacking Taiwan and help from Trump:** If China behaves in a violent manner, the White House will have to act. China knows this.

Look at Venezuela. The US acted against (President Nicholas) Maduro. (Interim President Delcy) Rodrigues may not do the US' bidding. The US may still send troops, but Venezuela is a country of 30 million people, with lots of guns. Does the US want another Afghanistan, a long entanglement?

**On the Indo-Pacific and the expansion of the Quad, with South Korea and Singapore being more involved:** The Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US) says it is not against anyone, but everyone knows it is aligned against China. South Korea's involvement will be a message to China and ASEAN (of which Singapore is a part). Japan is committed to India; it sees a rising India and wants to maximise ties but will have to settle with China; there are 50,000 American troops in Japan. By 2050, China will be the No.1 economy in the world, India either second or third and Indonesia the fourth.

**On the situation in Iran:** Iran is an Israeli obsession. It has got the US aligned. It is creating a reaction in the US, especially among young people. The Iranians are clever people; they cannot be taken lightly.

**On North Korea:** The world can shout but cannot destabilise North Korea. They know the only way to protect themselves is by having nuclear capability. The world has to take them seriously; negotiation is the only way.

# The Pursuit of Global Harmony

**DISCUSSION:** *World Peace is Most Desirable but Why is it so Difficult to Achieve?*

**PANELLISTS:** *Shashi Tharoor; Shyam Saran; Kenneth Félix Haczynski da Nóbrega; Anil Sooklal; Vijay Nambiar; and Surendra Kumar*

**COLLABORATION:** *International House Association (IHA); Indo-American Friendship Association (IAFA); and University of Chicago Center in Delhi*

*13 January 2026*

The discussion was part of IHA's 2025–26 Global Forum series on 'Pathways to Peace: Lessons in Reconciliation', focussing on the complexities of the challenges and hopes surrounding reconciliation after conflict in the current geopolitical climate.

Surendra Kumar contextualised contemporary notions of peace by drawing parallels with ancient Vedic texts of India. Vijay Nambiar reflected on the shifting meanings of the war–peace binary, noting how modern conflicts are transforming our understanding. Referencing three great moral traditions—Kantian Western Liberalism, the Chinese Confucian tradition and the Indian Dharma realism of the Mahabharata—he highlighted the need to conceptualise justice and peace through the lens of traditional frameworks. Anil Sooklal warned of the erosion of the multilateral system and the paralysis of institutions such as the UN Security Council, and emphasised that

sustainable peace must be rooted in justice at the local and national levels.

K. F. H. da Nóbrega underscored how Brazil is navigating the troubled waters of international politics, which is currently experiencing an alarming expansion of conflict. He positioned Brazil as a bridge-builder in international affairs, committed to dialogue, inclusivity and diplomatic solutions to balance a fragmented geopolitical landscape.

Shyam Saran highlighted the paradox that peace remains difficult to achieve despite war and conflict being universally recognised as undesirable. Stressing that diplomats must be fundamentally agents of peace, he asserted that advocacy for war or hatred was incompatible with the profession of diplomacy, which relies on credibility, trust and sustained human

relationships. Saran contended that emerging and developing countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa could potentially anchor a renewed collective initiative to reinvigorate a global movement for peace in the current geopolitical environment.

Shashi Tharoor argued that peace is not undervalued but is challenged by the realities of power, insecurity, dominance and the erosion of diplomacy. Situating these challenges within India's strategic context, he underlined the need to balance diplomacy with credible deterrence, particularly in managing relations with China. He asserted that while peace demands restraint, humility, and imagination in a system that rewards power and defiance, it remains essential to avert global instability.

■ D. P. K. PILLAY

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## In Need of a New Hellespont

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**TALK:** *Hegel, Buddhism and Asia; and Hegel's Philosophy and the Welfare State*

**SPEAKER:** Klaus Vieweg

**DISCUSSANT:** Viren Murthy

**COLLABORATION:** BML Munjal University

16 December 2025

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Klaus Vieweg guided the audience through two intensive explorations into the work of the 19th-century German philosopher, Hegel. The first, 'Hegel, Buddhism and Asia', explored Hegel's understanding of 'the East'; and the second, 'Hegel's Philosophy and the Welfare State', focussed on political philosophy in a more general sense. Analytic interventions by Viren Murthy followed each discourse. This talk was the latest addition to BML Munjal University's School of Liberal Studies' ongoing lecture series, which aims to influence policymaking.

Vieweg, author of the acclaimed *Hegel, the Philosopher of Freedom*, asserted the need for a dialogue between the East and the West: 'If Asians and Europeans, Easterners and Westerners, were to build a new Hellespont (a

historical location for crossing and dialogue), they should allow Buddha and Hegel a seat on the divan—there an intriguing conversation would certainly transpire. Such a seat on the East–West divan seems a vital challenge for the 21st century. If we do not learn a way to cross bridges, then, as Hegel tells us, it is all the worse for humankind.'

Hegel had wide exposure to the East and welcomed this window into what was then 'a new world for us'. Vieweg presented Hegel as better informed about Indian and Eastern thought in general than is often assumed—from Chinese materials to Rumi, the Mahabharata and the Quran, Sanskrit studies, and the founding of comparative literature—making him 'not Eurocentric'. Hegel attacked ancient Rome and Greece as 'unfree states' and perceived them as 'cultures of synthesis' that had absorbed ideas from non-Western sources, while crediting European culture with the idea of 'universal freedom'.

Murthy drew connections between Hegel's quest and Eastern attempts to unite substance and subject, suggesting that Vedanta and Hinduism may be closer to the philosophies of Parmenides and Spinoza. According to him, Buddhism initially appears as one side of Hegel's dialectic, but towards the end, Buddhist practice seems to challenge Hegel's understanding of thinking, time and dialectic. Buddhist use of imagistic and symbolic language takes the mind into the domain of direct experience and what might be called the 'religious', raising interesting questions about the limits and possibilities of dialogue.

■ MAYA JOSHI

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## Celebration of Divine Love

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**IIC ANNUAL DAY 2026 CONCERT:** *Nirgun—The Confluence of Sufi and Bhakti*

**ARTIST:** Sonam Kalra

**ACCOMPANISTS:** *Ahsan Ali (sarangi); Amaan Ali (tabla); Faizan Ali Khan (keyboard); Amman (dholak); and Kiran Kumar (flute)*

22 January 2026

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The Centre's 64th anniversary was marked by a performance by singer and composer Sonam Kalra and her troupe. The evening commenced with opening

remarks by K. N. Shrivastava, who revisited the Centre's founding principles and its past and present endeavours aligned with them. The audience was then treated to a fine blend of devotional music and poetry. Celebrating the Nirgun poets who were devoted to a formless Divine, the performance brought to life the layered and rich teachings of the Sufi and Bhakti traditions, uniquely woven into India's syncretic fabric, conveying the message of selfless devotion to the Almighty and exploring the many paths that lead to the same destination.

Kalra presented five compositions, beginning with *Ik Onkar*, based on the opening verse of the Guru Granth Sahib, composed by one of the earliest Nirgun poets, Guru Nanak, born in the 15th century. The second composition was inspired by the words of Zaheen Shah Taji, a 20th-century Sufi poet of the Chishti order. He propounded the message of *wahdat al-wujud* (oneness of all existence), an expression also common in Nirgun poetry. The third composition was '*Ae ri Sakhi More Piya Ghar Aaye*', which has several modern, popular renditions, appealing to both the young and the old. The verses belonged to Amir Khusrau, who regarded his teacher, Nizamuddin Auliya as his beloved. The next composition took the audience to a high point in the concert with Khusrau's '*Chhaap Tilak*', featuring both Sufi and Bhakti elements, inviting listeners to let go of the ego and surrender to the love of the Divine. The next composition



blended diverse religious and musical traditions. It was an imagined conversation between Kabir, the 15th-century mystic poet, and Taji, who arrived at the same truth at different historical moments—the belief that the Divine is not found in rituals and outward practices, but rather when the Self dissolves. The ensemble concluded with verses from the philosopher and Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, including the famous '*Dama Dam Mast Qalandar*', regaling the audience with the charm of divine love and music that left them enchanted.

■ NITIKA SHARMA

## The Legacy of a Musical Genius

**PERFORMANCE:** *The Bard and the Balladeer: A Musical Tribute to Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhupen Hazarika*

**ARTISTS:** *Mayukh Hazarika; and Laili Dutta*

**COLLABORATION:** *Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region*

**31 January 2026**

The birth centenary of the late Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika, widely known as *Sudhakantha* (nectar-throated), was commemorated with a musical tribute that showcased his multifaceted legacy through renditions that blended social consciousness with profound artistry.

Hazarika regarded music as a social instrument rather than a commercial pursuit, a philosophy shaped by his association with American singer and activist Paul Robeson. Mayukh Hazarika, his nephew, opened the performance with '*Akashi Ganga Bisora Nai*', expressing longing for sincere love over material wealth amid life's cruelty. It was followed by '*Moi Eti Jajabor*', which evoked Hazarika's message of peace from one community to another and captured the wandering spirit from Mississippi to the Volga.

The concert shifted to social commentary with '*Dola He Dola*', where Mayukh noted the rhythmic paradox: despite the palanquin bearers' burdens, the fast tempo reflected their inner strength. The haunting '*Yeh Kis ki Sadaa Hai*', followed, resonating with historical justice struggles demanding immediate action. This selection exemplified Hazarika's championing of tea workers, fisherfolk and labourers, transforming their stories into poetry and protest.

Laili Dutta's expressive singing brought melodic allure to '*Bhalo Kore Tumi Cheye Dekho*' (originally sung by Lata Mangeshkar) and '*Dil Hoom Hoom Kare*', framed by Assamese verses. Her performance highlighted Hazarika's emotional richness and flawless diction. Mayukh explored the Goalpariya folk genre with the lilting Bhatiyali '*Sonar Boron Pakhi*', followed by '*Main aur Mera Saaya*', addressing Hazarika's loneliness amidst crowds, and the romantic '*Shillongore Monalisa*', written when Assam's capital shifted to Dispur.

Dutta deftly rendered the haunting '*Samay O Dheere Chalo*', pondering time's relentless passage and memory's erasure, then performed '*Radhachurar Phool Guji*' with her daughter Ahiri—spotlighting the potential of the next generation. The duo performed Jayanta Hazarika's playful '*Xosake Kuwa*', capturing the sweetness of new love.

A highlight was '*Bistirno Parore*', inspired by Robeson's '*O! Man River*', a powerful critique questioning the river's silent flow amid suffering and decay. The evening concluded with '*Manuhe Manuhor Babe*', affirming universal brotherhood.

The performance revealed interesting contrasts between Hazarika's gravelly baritone, marked by raw protest, and Mayukh's smoother tenor with a folk-blues sensibility, complemented by Dutta's melodic grace. Together, they

internalised the 'Sudhakantha' legacy, rendering these anthems—possessing literary merit and revolutionary spirit—accessible to a contemporary audience.

■ AMITABHA KHARE

## Classical Comfort on a Winter Evening

**SITAR RECITAL BY:** Saptarshi Hazra from Kolkata, a disciple of Netai Basu, Buddhadev Das Gupta and Pratyush Banerjee

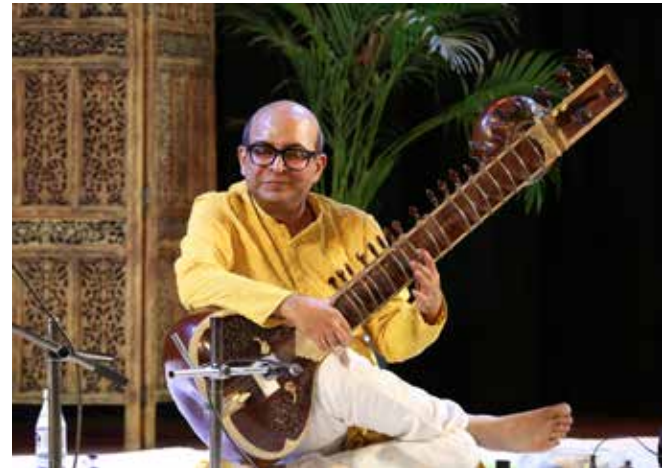
**ACCOMPANIST:** Ashis Sengupta (tabla)

**HINDUSTANI VOCAL RECITAL BY:** Priyanka Mitra from Kolkata, a disciple of Ajoy Chakraborty, Ulhas Kashalkar and Anjan Majumdar

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Ravi Pal (harmonium); and Sukanta Bajpayee (tabla)

11 December 2025

Sitarist Saptarshi Hazra of the Jaipur Senia Gharana opened the first evening of the two-day IIC Winter Festival of Music and Dance with *alap* (improvised prologue) in raga Bhimpalasi, softly stretching strings in plaintive *meends* (glides between two notes) that sounded particularly sweet in the middle octave. Increasing speed in the rhythmic *jod* (transition) section, Hazra's rapid *taan* compositions, interwoven with special clusters of notes, were reminiscent of his late guru, Buddhadev Das Gupta. His sitar designed with 17 frets instead of the customary 18–21, exhibited characteristics of the Senia style, drawing from certain elements of veena and Dhrupad traditions. In the *vilambit* (slow tempo) and the *drut* (fast tempo) *bandishes* (fixed, melodic compositions), Ashis Sengupta's tabla displayed sharp, feathery strokes echoing, in turn, his late guru Swapan Chaudhury. Hazra's fleeting touches and quivering phrases created elongated cyclic movements, which concluded in a melodious, fast-paced *jhal*. Rising from the high 'Sa' note, punctuated by clear *chikari* (drone strings) sounds, the finale delivered a threefold, thunderous combination of notes, racing and resolving precisely into a climax.



The next performer, Priyanka Mitra swept into raga Yaman with a brief *alap*. Her musical elaboration emphasised words from the bandish '*Jiya Manat Lage na Chayan*'. Her powerful voice effortlessly reached high notes, rising harmoniously from 'Pa' to the high 'Sa' and beyond. Beautiful, ascending notes blended into sombre descending phrases, touching upon *tivra* (sharp) 'Ma' with rich fervour. Forceful *gamak* (oscillations) taans repeatedly reverted towards the word '*manat*', pausing on specific notes to highlight their exhilarant pace. While notational taans were absent during her slow rendering, Mitra specifically incorporated some as part of the faster presentation. In the *antara* (second part of a composition), she sang of *saas-nanadiya*, a proverb related to family conflicts and evoking images of Radha's trials. The singer appeared most comfortable in her *aakar* (notes sung in the vowel 'Aa') taans, showcasing both strong and speedy sequences. In her second bandish in raga Yaman, the accompanying artists, Ravi Pal on harmonium and Sukanta Bajpayee on tabla, performed their individual instrumental compositions. Mitra concluded with a soulful raga Tilak Kamod composition in the semi-classical *dadra* genre.

■ AJANTA DUTT

## Homage to a Musical Heritage

**PERFORMANCE:** Dhrupad Vocal Recital

**ARTIST:** Pelva Naik

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Sanjay Agle (*pakhawaj*); and Geeta Bisht and Kunika Singh (*tanpura*)

6 December 2025

Pelva Naik is a distinguished Dhrupad vocalist trained in the Dagarvani tradition under the late Zia Fariduddin Dagar at his gurukul in Bombay, following the rigorous and immersive guru-*shishya* tradition. Naik's training within this lineage has shaped her musical approach and depth, setting it apart from institutional or school-based music education, which she noted 'lacks the sustained holistic transmission characteristic of gharanas'.

Staying true to the acoustic purity of Dhrupad, Naik consciously avoided a digital tanpura and instead used two acoustic tanpuras to preserve the natural

resonance and tonal richness essential to the genre. At the artist's request, careful attention was accorded to the concert's ambience: focussed spotlights were preferred over central overhead lights, creating an intimate, contemplative mood conducive to Dhrupad's spiritual character.

The performance opened with a short, slow and meditative *alap* while swiftly introducing raga Bhimpalasi, rendered in the Dagarvani style. The *alap* employed traditional notes such as 'ta', 'ra', and occasional 'na', allowing the raga to unfold gradually and introspectively. This was followed by a *bandish* (fixed, melodic composition) and a more detailed exploration of raga Bhimpalasi, set to a 12-beat cycle, or *Chautaal*, in the Dhrupad composition '*Kunjan me Racho Raas*'. The lyrics evoked devotional imagery associated with the divine play of Krishna, reinforcing the spiritual essence central to Dhrupad music.

The recital then transitioned to raga Yaman, beginning with a *vilambit* (slow tempo) *alap*, followed by *jod* (transitional section) and *jhala* (fast-paced instrumental conclusion), and later an *alap* in *madhya laya* (medium tempo). The concert concluded with a short *bandish* in *Jhaptaal*, a 10-beat pattern, in raga Yaman. This closing piece was presented experimentally, as the original composition was initially set in raga Jaijaiwanti. Naik adapted it to Yaman, simplifying the structure while preserving the emotional and lyrical integrity of the composition, with verses such as '*Keena Praveena Sakhi Binati Kar Jor Ke*' and '*Umge do Anokhi Raen Si*'.

■ KRITIKA AGRAWAL

## A Transcendent Evening

**PERFORMANCE:** *The IIC Double Bill: Music and Dance Recitals*

**KATHAK RECITAL BY:** Neelakshi Khandker-Saxena from Delhi

**ODISSI RECITAL BY:** Krishnendu Saha from Udaipur

8 January 2026

Neelakshi Khandkar-Saxena, the evening's opening artist, began her Kathak recital with '*Sundar te Dhyani*', a popular Marathi devotional composition, or *abhang*, by the 17th-century saint Tukaram and a paean to Vitthal, a revered deity considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and worshipped in Maharashtra. Saxena, a student of the renowned Kathak exponent Rajendra Gangani, demonstrated her skills and prowess with *Teentaal*, a 16-beat rhythmic cycle pure dance piece. Her rapid spins and energetic footwork tapping out the complex patterns unique to the Jaipur Gharana and the Shiv Paran were a sight to behold. She also performed a piece dedicated to her first guru, Sadhana Naphade, to mark her 80th birthday. Saxena's *abhinaya* (expression) skills shone in her interpretation of a Meera bhajan, in which she asked Lord Krishna to let her remain his devotee. The highlight of the performance, however, was

the captivating *jugalbandi*, a rhythmic interplay between the dancer's footwork and the percussionist's tabla beats.

The second performer, Krishnendu Saha, presented pieces that interwove emotion and tradition under the overarching theme of *Nirmitti* (artistic creation). Saha began with the traditional Ranga Puja, an offering to the stage to invoke the divine for an auspicious beginning and followed it with a '*Ganesh Vandana*'. The combination of choreography and creative musical

design of this piece by Saha's guru, Sharmila Biswas, recognised for her contribution to Odissi classical dance, using ritualistic lyrics by priests and traditional artists, was ingenious. The artist's second piece, '*Maya Manav*', also choreographed by Biswas and based on Bichitra Ramayana (the Odia version of the Ramayana), depicted man's eternal quest for the unattainable—much like Lord Rama's unfruitful endeavour to capture the illusory golden deer. The next piece, Saha's own choreography, was a pure *abhinaya* number depicting a conversation between a Krishna devotee and his Lord, and was based on a Kannada bhajan. His concluding piece, *Dashavatar*, premised on the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu, showcased his storytelling skills

and fluid body movements with his portrayal of the various avatars in minute detail. Interestingly, Biswas' choreography linked Darwin's theory of human evolution to Dashavatar and the manifestations of Lord Vishnu.

■ SWAPNA MAJUMDAR



# A Tribute to a Literary Icon

**PERFORMANCE:** *Faulad ka Aakash: Performative Readings of Mohan Rakesh's Short Stories*

**SCRIPT:** Purwa Bharadwaj

**PRESENTED BY:** Alka Rajan; Apoorvanand; Purwa Bharadwaj; and Raza Haider

7 January 2026

Walking into the auditorium on a cold January evening, one felt not so much the anticipation of a performance as the quiet expectancy of a reunion with a fellow Hindi literature enthusiast for a shared experience. *Faulad ka Aakash*, a performative reading of three short stories by Mohan Rakesh—'Aadmi aur Deewar', 'Ek Thehra hua Chaaku' and 'Faulad ka Aakash'—marked his 101st birth anniversary.

Scripted by Purwa Bharadwaj, the performers read out their lines turn by turn, sitting in a row on the stage. There was no attempt to theatricalise the texts; instead, voice, pause and cadence carried meaning. It foregrounded language and the essential psychological truth of Rakesh's writing.

Returning to Rakesh after decades was a sobering experience. Sixty years after he wrote these stories, the concerns and anxieties of the then newly urbanising, post-Independence India remain current. Rakesh's urban, middle-class world is emotionally claustrophobic; with fractured marriages, unarticulated resentments,



ethical compromises and lives lived in quiet despair. The essential loneliness of each person is an overriding theme, only deepened by today's digital isolation.

Rakesh stood at the centre of the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) literary movement of the 1950s and '60s, comprising writers such as Nirmal Verma, Kamleshwar, Bisham Sahni and Mannu Bhandari, who shifted Hindi fiction towards psychological realism and ambiguity. *Nayi Kahani* did not offer solutions; it spoke of *Weltschmerz* (a feeling of melancholy and world-weariness) and the loneliness of individuals trapped in a humdrum, aimless middle-class existence.

The programme concluded with Yusra Naqvi's heart-touching rendition of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's 'Ye Daag Daag Ujala', an aptly chosen song that echoed Rakesh's own scepticism about the existence of a perfect world.

■ ARCHANA GARODIA GUPTA

# Ancient Knowledge Across Cultures

**TALK:** *On Tracing the Footprints of Indian Scientific Heritage*

**SPEAKER:** Vijaya Jayant Deshpande

**OPENING REMARKS:** Shyam Saran

**CHAIR:** Sudha Gopalakrishnan

13 January 2026

Opening the first South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive (SAMHiTA)—Bharat ki Soch Public Lecture Series, organised by IIC's International Research Division, Shyam Saran recalled his experience during the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage, when a fellow traveller lost all hope of survival. A local Tibetan woman, drawing

on her traditional knowledge of indigenous plants and herbs, helped the traveller regain consciousness and recover. This anecdote underscored the enduring significance of traditional medical knowledge, setting the tone for the talk.

Vijaya Jayant Deshpande's lecture was divided into two major parts: how the translation of the 11th-century manuscript *Rasopanishad* from Sanskrit to English has revealed chemical and metallurgical insights into the work of medieval alchemists; and how the study of language and literature helps trace Sino-Indian scientific interactions across ages. Appreciating the Centre's efforts to document and digitise ancient Indian manuscripts for public access through the SAMHiTA project, she observed that while the systematic collection of manuscripts is an important step, it must be followed by preservation, transliteration and translation to make these texts accessible for scholarly research. She also introduced her two major works: *Restoring the Dragon's Vision: Nagarjuna and Medieval Chinese Ophthalmology* (2012) and *Rasopanishad: A Discourse on Indian Alchemy*

(2022). While discussing the *Rasopanishad*, Deshpande highlighted that it documents around 950 plants with detailed physical descriptions. She discussed several chemical processes known to ancient alchemists, such as ways of removing impurities from metals. Methods for separating pure metals, such as gold, silver and zinc, were also discussed.

In the second part of her lecture, Deshpande noted that China's introduction to Buddhist knowledge traditions began with Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty (28–75 CE), who invited Buddhist monks to China to acquire comprehensive learning. After the 6th century, intellectual exchange between India and China increased significantly. The 7th-century Chinese traveller Xuanzang translated several Indian Buddhist texts, which later influenced the

Tang (618–907 CE) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. During this period, not only texts but also technologies were translated, transliterated and transferred. Buddhist medical literature included references to gynaecology, paediatrics, massage therapy and ophthalmology. She further noted that metaphoric references to ophthalmic surgery in the 2nd-century CE texts of Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna greatly influenced its incorporation into Chinese medicine.

Sudha Gopalakrishnan concluded by emphasising that Indian medical knowledge had significantly influenced Chinese medicine. She underlined the importance of preserving texts and manuscripts and of strengthening India–China translation projects.

■ VINAY KUMAR

## Unearthing a Literary Treasure

**TALK:** *Recovering the Plays of Māyurāja*

**SPEAKERS:** *Andrew Ollett; and Naresh Keerthi*

**CHAIR:** *Sudha Gopalakrishnan*

**3 December 2025**

Initiating the talk organised as part of the Kriti-SAMHiTA lecture series, Sudha Gopalakrishnan introduced Andrew Ollett and Naresh Keerthi, who are editing and translating the works of the 8th-century poet-playwright Māyurāja. Reflecting on their rigorous journey of procuring, reading and interpreting two important yet understudied plays attributed to Māyurāja, Gopalakrishnan highlighted how their work forms part of a larger effort to reinstate Māyurāja's place in the world of Sanskrit poetry, much as earlier scholarship revived interest in Kalidasa.

Ollett and Keerthi began by situating Māyurāja historically, drawing on textual references, noting that he was likely

a Kalachuri prince, familiar to key literary theorists of the 9th and 10th centuries, such as Anandavardhana and Rajasekhara, and that his works follow the larger literary tradition shaped by Banabhatta and King Harsha. They further discussed their ongoing critical work on Māyurāja's two surviving plays, *Tāpasavatsarāja* (Udayana the Ascetic) and *Udāttarāghava* (Raghu's Exalted Descendants), detailing how these works had been published over the years and pointing out the gaps and uncertainties that had made studying these texts difficult for so long. They highlighted the methodological problems associated with working on rare and fragile manuscripts, such as reading damaged folios, dealing with inconsistencies in the writing, clarifying unclear or obfuscating text, and putting together missing parts. This painstaking work has not only filled long-standing gaps in the texts but has also shed further light on Māyurāja's style, choices and role in the development of early Sanskrit theatre.

With this talk, Ollett and Keerthi brought into focus the broader literary significance of Māyurāja's work, thus underscoring how such meticulous philological efforts enable a deeper understanding of early Sanskrit drama.

■ MITALI TEWARI

## Parsing out our Persian Roots

**TALK:** *A Persian Palace in Patna? Looking Afresh at the Mauryas and Achaemenids*

**SPEAKER:** *Upinder Singh*

**MODERATOR:** *Nayanjot Lahiri*

**COLLABORATION:** *@Crossroads*

**30 January 2026**

The talk revisited the long-debated relationship between the Mauryan and Achaemenid empires. It placed ancient India within a wider geopolitical framework, arguing that the Mauryan Empire emerged in a world already shaped by the Persian Achaemenid Empire's expansion into Gandhara, Arachosia, Gedrosia and Hindush—regions corresponding to parts of present-day Afghanistan and northwestern South Asia. Inscriptions of Darius and the reliefs at Persepolis depict Indian delegations, while the Persepolis Fortification Tablets attest to the administrative integration of Eastern territories. Archaeological finds, including Achaemenid-style coins and ceramic parallels at Bhir Mound near Taxila and at Charsadda, both in present-day Pakistan, suggest a selective imperial presence in the northwest,

though without the monumental opulence of the Persian heartland.

The lecture reassessed possible Achaemenid echoes in Ashoka's inscriptions. Parallels have been noted between Persian King Darius' proclamations and Ashoka's inscriptions, including the use of the first person, multilingualism and geographically expansive royal messaging. Yet the ideological contrast remains striking: Achaemenid monumental art foregrounded the king as conqueror, whereas Ashoka avoided royal imagery and articulated a moral vision centred on *dhamma*, an ethical and social code that formed the Ashokan Empire's policy, famously renouncing warfare in Rock Edict XIII.

Singh examined early efforts to locate Pataliputra and Ashoka's palace. She highlighted the significant, though often overlooked, contributions of P. C. Mukherjee, who played an important role in documenting remains in the region. Attention then turned to D. B. Spooner's

excavations at Kumrahar in Patna in the early 20th century, funded by Ratan Tata. Spooner interpreted the remains of a large pillared hall as a Mauryan palace modelled on Persepolis and advanced the idea of a 'Zoroastrian Period of Indian History'. His claims drew sharp criticism from scholars such as A. B. Keith and K. P. Jayaswal and were later formally disclaimed by the Archaeological Survey of India. Subsequent excavations indicated that the structure was more likely an audience hall.

While the Mauryan state may have operated within a shared imperial ecumene—assimilating communicative practices yet articulating a distinct South Asian vision of kingship—Singh underscored Spooner's broader view of long-term migrations and sustained interactions linking ancient Iran and India, transcending nationalist or imperialist frameworks.

■ SUSAN VERMA MISHRA

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## Asian Currents in Western Education

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**TALK:** *Connections, Collaboration and Cross-Fertilisation: The Enduring Importance of Cross-Cultural Exchanges Between Institutions of Higher Education for the Future of Asian Studies*

**SPEAKER:** James Robson

**CHAIR:** Sabaree Mitra

**COLLABORATION:** Institute of Chinese Studies

10 December 2025

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In an era of geopolitical uncertainty and reduced academic mobility, the relevance of sustained cross-cultural engagement among institutions of higher education has gained renewed significance. Asian Studies, a field historically nurtured by intellectual exchange and institutional collaboration, now faces the challenge of preserving its transnational foundations while adapting to contemporary constraints. This lecture underscored the enduring importance of academic connections and cross-fertilisation for the future of Asian Studies.

Sabaree Mitra, in her opening address, highlighted the contributions of pioneering scholars such as Ji Xianlin and P. C. Bagchi, whose academic engagements helped institutionalise Asian Studies through sustained dialogue between Asia and the West.

James Robson traced the historical evolution of Asian Studies by outlining key Asia-related research centres

in the West and situating them within broader patterns of scholarly exchange. He reflected on how these institutions have played a critical role in shaping the discipline through long-standing engagement with Asian academic communities.

Drawing on specific historical figures, Robson discussed Japanese scholars such as Kaneko Kentarō of the Iwakura Mission of 1872, Chōkichi Kikkawa and Inouye Yoshikazu, emphasising their role in early academic mediation. He also highlighted Ge Kunhua, who began teaching Chinese at Harvard University in 1879, as a landmark figure in institutionalising Asian language studies. The tradition of cross-fertilisation was further illustrated through the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, a museum of trees, particularly the contributions of Japanese botanist Kingo Miyabe. Buddhism emerged as another connecting thread, exemplified by the *Eight Men Ferrying a Statue of the Buddha* painting from China's Mogao Caves, displayed at the Harvard Museum.

Robson also discussed scholars such as James Haughton Woods, John Leighton Stuart, Wallace Brett Donham and Langdon Warner, underscoring their role in professionalising Asian Studies at Harvard. He reflected on the Harvard-Yenching Institute's support for Asian institutions since the 1930s and its expanding engagements in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

While noting the disruptions to academic exchange caused by geopolitical strains and the COVID-19 pandemic, Robson stated that institutions of higher education continue to serve as bridges of cross-cultural understanding, making renewed collaboration essential for reimagining the future of Asian Studies.

■ KAJAL JENA

# India's French Connection

**TALK:** *The Forgotten History of French Imperialism in India*

**SPEAKER:** Robert Ivermee

**MODERATOR:** Zohra Chatterji

**CHAIR:** K. N. Shrivastava

**COLLABORATION:** Alliance Française de Delhi

9 January 2026

The lecture revisited the lesser-known history of French imperial ambitions and activities in India, placing them within the broader framework of European colonial competition on the subcontinent. Robert Ivermee began by noting that the study of colonialism in South and Southeast Asia focusses overwhelmingly on the British experience. French involvement, when considered, is usually examined only in relation to the rise of the British East India Company. Drawing on his recent book *Glorious Failure: The Forgotten History of French Imperialism in India*, he argued that throughout their presence in India, the French acted as an imperial power seeking to extend influence, territory and revenues through the threat and use of force, often leading to conflict with both European and Indian powers.

Ivermee discussed the 18th-century map of India and highlighted the French settlements of Karikal, Yanaon,

Mahe, Chandernagore and Pondicherry. He traced the origins of the French presence to 1674, when the Compagnie's imperial arm secured permission from the local governor, Sher Khan Lodi, to establish a colony at Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast. The first company failed, prompting the establishment of a second company in 1719 under the influence of the Scottish economist John Law. This company initially proved more successful than its predecessor, and one of its most profitable revenue sources was the slave trade between East Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, Isle Bourbon and India. However, this success was short-lived, as the economic collapse known as the Mississippi Bubble occurred in 1720.

The talk examined the intensifying commercial rivalry between French and British companies in the 1720s and 1730s, followed by the military conflict during the War of the Austrian Succession. The decline of French power was confirmed during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), when British forces expelled the French and occupied their settlements. Although several colonies were restored under the 1763 Treaty of Paris, France faced clear inferiority after British dominance in Bengal and the Carnatic.

Ivermee also highlighted anti-British alliance plans involving the Marathas and Mysore, Tipu Sultan's embassy to France, and French military plans during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. He concluded with reflections on changing historiography, including the late 19th-century posthumous recognition of Joseph F. Dupleix, the governor-general of French territories in India, who died in obscurity in 1763.

■ KAJAL JENA

# Call for a COP of Action

**DISCUSSION:** *The World is not Binary: Reflections from a COP of Truth and a COP of Implementation*

**LEAD PRESENTATION BY:** Arunabha Ghosh

**PANELLISTS:** Ravi Shankar Prasad; Laveesh Bhandari; and Ajay Mathur

**CHAIR:** Shyam Saran

4 December 2025

Shyam Saran opened the session with the hope that the perspectives shared by the speakers would resonate with decision makers, stating that India cannot respond effectively to regional climate impacts without meaningful regional cooperation. While acknowledging his pessimism, he looked to the panellists for optimism and stressed that climate transitions require substantial financial resources, careful management and sustained vigilance to avoid India being cast as a future climate culprit.



Reflecting on his experience as special envoy for South Asia at COP30, Arunabha Ghosh argued that climate discourse often narrows its focus to carbon emissions or individual countries, overlooking climate justice as both principle and practice. He described COP30 as a 'COP of Truth', a term used by Brazilian President Lula, while urging that multiple truths be recognised. Held a decade after the Paris Agreement, COP30 focussed partly on finalising its finer details, with the Paris Rulebook marking

an important milestone even as climate multilateralism remained fragile. Ghosh emphasised intensifying climate extremes alongside global crises of development, poverty and debt, noting that over 60 countries remain in debt distress and that these realities must inform climate negotiations.

Ghosh outlined President Lula's four pillars of global collective action—a Leaders' Summit, formal negotiations, an Action Agenda, and global mobilisation. Despite fiscal and governance constraints, he stressed the importance of bottom-up initiatives and identified gaps in ambition, perception, solidarity, implementation and partnerships. COP30 was also framed as a 'COP of Implementation', with progress on adaptation and climate finance described as a 'tripling of the doubling' and a renewed

focus on the Paris Agreement's Article 9.1 regarding financial support to developing nations, just transition pathways, and building a green economy in India. He urged future COPs to focus on delivery, becoming COPs of 'how' rather than merely 'what'.

During the panel discussion, Ravi Shankar Prasad described COPs as evolutionary, Ajay Mathur highlighted geopolitical and capacity challenges, and Laveesh Bhandari emphasised pragmatic India–China cooperation, technology-led solutions and greater Western investment. Saran reiterated that climate change is a global challenge and that COP remains the only multilateral process, while Ghosh concluded by calling for the COP to become 'a bank of actions rather than a bank of commitments'.

■ PRIYANKA MISRA

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## India's Strategic Autonomy

### BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP:

*Nehru's Bandung: Non-Alignment and Regional Order in Indian Cold War Strategy* by Andrea Benvenuti

**DISCUSSANTS:** Andrea Benvenuti, Amitabh Mattoo, Ajay K. Mehra, Pallavi Raghavan

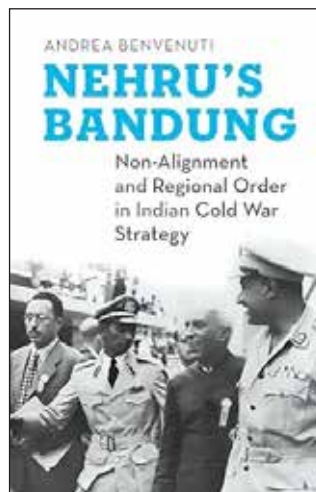
**CHAIR:** Shyam Saran

15 January 2026

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The origins of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) can be traced back to the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947, which reflected Jawaharlal Nehru's early commitment to an independent foreign policy. Having led India through a prolonged anti-colonial struggle, Nehru was determined that the newly independent India would not become subordinate to any major power bloc. The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reinforced his resolve to keep India away from military alliances and Cold War rivalries. NAM thus emerged not merely as a diplomatic posture but as one of the largest peace movements in human history.

During the Cold War, the bipolar international system compelled newly decolonised nations—often termed the 'Third World'—to align with either the United States or the Soviet Union. The 1955 Bandung Conference acted as a crucial midpoint between the Asian Relations Conference and the formal institutionalisation of NAM in 1961. It articulated the principle of strategic autonomy,



defined as the ability of states to take independent decisions in accordance with their national interests rather than external pressures.

This book has renewed interest in the Bandung Conference, portraying it as a foundational moment in the rise of the Global South as a significant force in world politics. India emerged as the most influential voice at Bandung, with Nehru as the conference's most recognisable and articulate leader.

Amitabh Mattoo characterised Bandung as an ambitious experiment—one that succeeded insofar as it engaged with political realities. Though often criticised as a forum of rhetoric rather

than enforcement, Mattoo argued that Bandung was a strategic, not emotional, initiative aimed at institutionalising restraint. He credited the conference with delaying militarisation in Asia and convincing newly independent states that they possessed agency and meaningful choices.

Ajay K. Mehra highlighted the broader historical context, noting that over 15 countries gained independence around this period and that 29 nations assembled at Bandung, symbolising a resurgence of Asia on the global stage. Nehru viewed the summit as an assertion of anti-colonial solidarity and a collective effort to secure peace through cooperation. Pallavi Raghavan described the Conference as a meticulously documented intergovernmental gathering, underscoring Nehru's ambition to promote a 'third way'. In this sense, Bandung represented a non-violent alternative to Western power politics, reinforcing the moral and strategic foundations of non-alignment.

■ ARYAN SINGH

# A 'Catalyst' for Global Change

**FILM:** *One Fire: A Documentary Film about Theosophy*

**DIRECTED BY:** Terhi Ahava

**COLLABORATION:** *Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

15 January 2026

In an era defined by hyper-specialisation and cultural fragmentation, the documentary serves as a timely reminder of a movement that sought the 'universal' in an age of empire. It offers a nuanced examination of the synthesis of East and West, as well as a profound look at the spiritual and intellectual scaffolding that has shaped the modern global mind.

The film charts the journey of the Theosophical Society from its roots in 1875 New York to the lush environs of Adyar, Madras. At its centre is the enigmatic Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who preferred to be known as HPB. Her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, challenged the rigid Victorian silos of science and religion. However, the documentary's most compelling argument lies in its portrayal of theosophy not merely as an occult curiosity but as a primary catalyst for global change.

For the Indian viewer, the documentary provides a vital historical corrective. It is a reminder that the Society's co-founders, Henry Steel Olcott and HPB, did not arrive as proselytisers, but as students of Eastern wisdom, sparking a Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka and providing the organisational impetus for the Indian National Congress. The film connects the esoteric to the emancipatory, illustrating how Annie Besant's occultist framework of 'Universal Brotherhood' directly informed the Home Rule League and the foundational ethics of the Indian independence movement.

Beyond politics, the documentary presents a fresh perspective on the 'Theosophical DNA' found in modern culture. It traces a direct line from Besant's *Thought Forms* to the birth of abstract art in the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Hilma af Klint, and from HPB's cosmic cycles to the pedagogy of Maria Montessori.

The film's most poignant segment covers Jiddu Krishnamurti, the 'World Teacher' who eventually dismantled the very organisation built to house him. In his rejection of all 'pathways' to truth, the ultimate theosophical paradox is visible: a movement dedicated to tradition that ultimately birthed the most radical form of individual spiritual autonomy.

More than a biographical film, *One Fire* is a visual essay on the 'Divine Wisdom' that bridges the gap between the scientific atom and the human soul. It invites viewers to consider whether the 'one fire' of universal interconnectedness is precisely the balm our currently polarised world needs.

■ RICHA VADINI SINGH

# Rediscovering Female Divinities

**BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP:** *Goddesses in South Asia: Traditions and Transformations*, edited by R. Mahalakshmi; Malavika Binny; and Megha Yadav

**DISCUSSANTS:** Mahishini Colonne; Anamika Roy; Jaya Tyagi; Shalini Shah; R. Mahalakshmi; Megha Yadav; and Malavika Binny

29 January 2026

This volume emerged from a May 2023 hybrid conference organised by Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for Historical Studies as part of its course 'Religion and Society'. It comprises 13 essays spanning the major early Indian religious traditions—Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Puranic and Tantric—as well as village goddesses, minor deities, and contemporary manifestations of goddesses such as Mariyamman and Roop Kanwar. The essays are

organised into four thematic sections—'The Discursive Field', 'Of Mothers and Others', 'Protection and Power', and 'The Making of a Goddess'. They delve into subjects ranging from how the gendered portrayal of Shiva and Parvati as a divine couple in the Neelkanth temple, built in several phases between the 1st and 12th centuries CE, in Uttar Pradesh's Kalinjar, legitimises normative social ideas; how statues of the Devi and Mahishasura at Mahabalipuram and Ellora indicate the tribal absorption of local cults and forms originating from Brahmanical traditions; comparative studies of Vedic and Avestan goddesses in Zoroastrianism; and the worship of goddesses such as Varahi in Nepal, among others. This impressive compilation advances the study of perhaps the most perplexing, undocumented and unstructured field in Indian religious studies.

The discussion raised insightful points on reading goddesses through texts written by men, the conflict between control and veneration in patriarchal society, and historiographical trajectories. Issues of assimilation and contestation were highlighted, including how regional and local goddesses are categorised under the heading of a 'Mahadevi', the relationship between ritual legitimation and state power, and whether goddess worship is significantly correlated with women's social standing.

Panellists praised the volume's methodological rigour and the variety of its content, including textual, pictorial, epigraphic and anthropological sources—but they also urged more research on local, Buddhist and Jain customs. The discussion highlighted the lacunae in

awareness around goddess traditions and underscored the importance of young scholars approaching this active area of study with fresh historical, critical and feminist lenses.

■ **RITIKA KOCHHAR**

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## Voter's Ink—Make It Pink?

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**BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP:** *What Women Want: Understanding the Female Voter in Modern India* by Ruhi Tewari

**DISCUSSANTS:** Shamika Ravi; Gaurav Gogoi; Priyanka Chaturvedi; Ram Madhav; and Ruhi Tewari

**MODERATOR:** Nidhi Razdan

6 January 2026

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It was a chilly winter evening in Delhi, the kind where fresh *pakor*as and hot tea provided the fuel for what promised to be a heated discussion: 'What Women Want'. Something of the utmost relevance in 2026—understanding Indian women voters through the lens of author Ruhi Tewari's latest book.

Nidhi Razdan set out the context of the 1984 elections, particularly the resurgence of women voters, as the starting point for the enquiry. Tewari, whose book relies on a mix of data and on-ground reportage, explained the evolution of the modern woman voter across different phases, beginning with a newly independent nation, the post-1990 Mandir–Mandal politics and the self-help grassroots movement.

Shamika Ravi explained that over the decades, women voters had stopped being proxies for men and had risen steadily in number since the 1950s. Gaurav Gogoi pointed out that women's needs are becoming nuanced and sophisticated, and that the party he represents is trying to take this into consideration.

Responding to Razdan's provocative question about welfare schemes becoming a bribe to vote, Ram Madhav said that the situation in Indian politics was such that it was no longer possible to predict voter behaviour, and thus, a single factor could not be credited with any win or loss. 'Women vote independently now, where governance is playing a role. What intellectuals call a bribe, one needs to respect the wisdom of voters.' Priyanka Chaturvedi added that no one could truly understand what women want because voting has begun to go beyond the identities of economics, religion and caste.

Chaturvedi made a key point that all parties want the women's vote but not their representation. Tewari recounted how a woman in Tamil Nadu had told her that more women were needed to talk to women. 'I would use the word "rational", not "transactional", for women voters today,' said Gogoi, explaining that a wider view on women not just as a voters but also as citizens needs to evolve. At the same time, it remains pertinent that the skills of child-rearing and care for the elderly be instilled in young men.

■ **SHALINI SINGH**

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## Scaling New Heights

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**TALK:** *The First Lady of Siachen: Fanny Bullock Workman*

**SPEAKER:** Ashok Abbey

**CHAIR:** Shyam Saran

**GUEST OF HONOUR:** Ata Hasnain

**SPECIAL INVITEE:** Kokila Sudha

**COLLABORATION:** *The Himalayan Club; and The Himalayan Environment Trust*

19 December 2025

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Describing American explorer and mountaineer Fanny Bullock Workman (1859–1925), or FBW—inscribed by

her on rocks on the sides of the Siachen Glacier—as a closet suffragette is a colossal understatement. A strident feminist? Yes!

The American Alpine Club carefully catalogued FBW's eight seasons in the Karakoram and Punjab Himalayas between 1898 and 1912: 'She had made modest, guided ascents in the Alps with husband William Hunter Workman (1847–1935) interspersed with bicycle trips around Europe beginning in 1889. Cycling adventures, over time, took them to...South Asia, where they toured India, Burma, Java, and Ceylon. In 1898, as a break from touring, they trekked out of Srinagar and past Leh to the Karakoram La and then traveled across India to Darjeeling to attempt to walk around Kanchenjunga. The beauty and challenges of the Karakoram enthralled them. They returned...to explore and climb, among others, the Biafo, Hispar, Chogo Lungma, and Siachen Glaciers.'

Why, nevertheless, might the irascible chronicler ask, did FBW's forays peak around the first decade of the last century—when the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 supposedly terminated the last desperate Great Game efforts to control Central Asia—only to be soon overshadowed by the numbing disaster of the *Titanic* and the relentless ferocity of the First World War? The answer to the Workmans' preferred period lies somewhere in between. As British geographer J. B. Harley's (1932–1991) essay 'Deconstructing the Map', published in the journal *Cartographica*, suggests, the interpretation of oriental exercise of power is insufficiently grasped by Western cartographers. And, as George Mallory lamented on his way to Everest in 1921, 'We are about to walk off the map'.

Hence, it might be suggested that the Euro-American Workmans veered around to the Karakoram. But woe betide them! Riding the wave of Italian infatuation with K2, the world's second-highest peak towering above the Karakoram, the Duke of the Abruzzi in 1909 mounted a well-funded expedition. Just then, three British explorers, including Tom Longstaff, crossed the Salto Pass for the first sighting of the Siachen Glacier.

In fairness, as Ata Hasnain and Ashok Abbey suggested, the Workman duo can be considered among the early seekers—*bandobast* (arrangement) and gender equity intact.

■ SUDHIR SAHI

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## Of Lines and Looms

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**EXHIBITION:** *Ehsaas-e-Qalam aur Pashm*

**ARTISTS:** *Qamar Dagar; and Ehsaas*

**CURATED BY:** *Manisha Gawade*

**COLLABORATION:** *Qalamkaari Creative Calligraphy Trust*

**29 January to 8 February 2026**

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The multidisciplinary exhibition, featuring calligraphy by Qamar Dagar and Pashmina shawls by Ehsaas, was inaugurated with a short film on calligraphy, followed by a Pashmina fashion walk and a Dhrupad rendition by Faiyaz Wasifuddin Dagar of the Dagarvani Gharana.

Calligraphy in ancient Greece meant 'beautiful writing': the fine art of elevating handwriting into visual art. Whereas modern Western calligraphy has, over time, acquired additional dimensions—including commercial uses, ranging from its incorporation in announcements and advertising to functional inscriptions and designs—in East Asia and the Islamic world, calligraphy is believed to emerge from the heart and sensibilities, seeping through one's very being, before being rendered with brush, pen and paper.

Calligraphy in the East, therefore, is a dedicated form of art, with its visual form widely influenced by the meaning or the feel of the subject as a whole, or even as individual words. Following this, and coming from a renowned musical family, Qamar Dagar chose titles like *Naad* (resonance), *Hrim* (cosmic energy) and *Quvvat* (inner force), expressing her musical perceptions as Hindi-Urdu pictorial calligraphy in mixed media on paper. Her choice of pastel shades in perfectly graded tones exuded a quiet force, validating the power of music.

The other half of the exhibition displayed Pashmina shawls and pictorial representations of the technique for extracting wool from the Ladakhi-Himalayan Changthangi goat and processing it into fine Pashmina yarn. The small amount of wool available per goat, the delicacy of the yarn and the time-consuming process of weaving and embroidery make the final product very precious, preventing it from becoming a cost-effective, viable material for widespread use.

Curator Manisha Gawade explained that Pashmina could not be displayed for longer than a day due to the risk of damage; therefore, the shawls on display were changed each day throughout the entirety of the exhibition!

■ ARUNA BHOWMICK

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## A Triple Treat

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**EXHIBITION:** *Three Moderns: Himmat Shah, Krishen Khanna, Thota Vaikuntam*

**CURATED BY:** *Uma Nair*

**12 to 22 December 2025**

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In the meditative space of the Gandhi-King Plaza, the exhibition brought together the work of three pioneering figures of modern Indian art, offering a rare opportunity to witness their distinctive sculptural languages that have shaped Indian modernism. The exhibition also honoured the late M. G. K. Menon, who envisioned the Gandhi-King Plaza as a venue for art and sculpture.

Himmat Shah's stone sculptures, carved in Emperador, brown and white marble, expressed his pursuit of

formal beauty through a language of minimalism. These sculptural heads invoked a sense of divinity that had distilled through the artist's engagement with the material as a form of thinking. While presenting a language of abstraction, his sculptures communicated a synergy between the natural and the artificial, making it difficult to distinguish the sculptural form from the tree beneath which it stood.

Krishen Khanna's quartet from the 'Bandwallas' series paid tribute to the lives of subaltern figures in Indian society. While this subject had also found space in his earlier abstract, figurative paintings, the sculptural medium vividly captured the energy of movement and material. The monumental fibre-glass figure of the seated Bandwalla, for instance, intrigued the spectator with its striking spatial presence, which exuded Khanna's sympathetic vision.

Thota Vaikuntam's exhibits featured a large fibre-glass head and a trio of bronze heads from his Sacred Gaze series, which celebrate the spirit of rural Telangana. While the large head presented the goddess of fertility in a moving combination of form, material and colour,



his bronze sculptures, according to the curator, served 'not only as powerful aesthetic statements of art that can assail the senses, but as beacons of cultural identity'. The divinity depicted in his sculptures was rooted in the folk idiom, distinct from the more pronounced universalism of the divine visible in the vocabulary of Himmat Shah.

■ DIGVIJAY NIKAM

## Departures

*We are deeply saddened by the passing away of the following Members of the IIC family, and convey our heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved families.*



SHRI VIRENDRA CHADHA | A-0739



SHRI ASHOK BACKLIWAL | A-1573



MR. THOMAS MATHEW A-1841



MRS. JASJIT MANSINGH A-3224



MS. ASHA TANDAN A-6965



SMT. NITI MUBAYI A-7064



SMT. SUDHA GUPTA A-7355



SHRI SHIVRAJ V. PATIL L-0372



SMT. RUPINDRA MAJITHIA | M-1227



SMT. RAJEE SETH M-1591



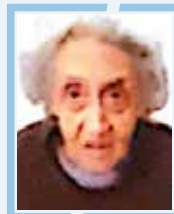
MR. WILLIAM MARK TULLY | M-1857



DR. S. N. MUKHERJEE M-2469



MR. AVTAR SINGH BHASIN | M-2862



MRS. VANI SUNDARJI M-2949



SHRI B. S. OJHA M-3096



SHRI SWARAJ KAUSHAL | M-3366



## Director's Note

Despite a particularly severe winter, the Centre had many occasions to celebrate at the start of the year. On 14 January, the annual C. D. Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, on 'India in a New Asia', was delivered by George Yong-Boon Yeo, Singapore's former cabinet minister, with India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, as the chief guest.

The Centre's Annual Day was celebrated on 22 January, marking its 64th anniversary. The evening began with a Members' special tea, followed by a cultural programme. This year's performance, 'Nirgun—The Confluence of Sufi and Bhakti' by singer and composer Sonam Kalra, brought to life the layered nuances of Sufi-Bhakti traditions. The celebration continued with dinner, featuring a sumptuous spread of Thai cuisine for Members at the Seminar Halls.

The Staff Annual Day was celebrated on 21 January. President IIC, Shyam Saran felicitated employees who had completed 25 years at the Centre, and certificates of appreciation were presented to those who had rendered commendable service during the year.

To relish food under the winter sun, several lunches were planned for Members over the past two months: an Italian lunch on 15 December at the Rose Garden, a Christmas special on 25 December at the Annexe Court, and a New Year lunch on 1 January at the Fountain Lawn. A special lunch was also organised for Super Senior Members in the Rose Garden on 4 December. President IIC, Shyam Saran, welcomed the Members and thanked them for their long association with the Centre. Winter favourites such as *Sarson ka Saag* and *Makki ki Roti* with jaggery and white butter were added to the Catering menu in December, as were barbecue lunches over the weekends at the Annexe Lounge Terrace.

The second phase of the IIC kitchens renovation project began in December 2025. It involves the complete renovation of the Kamaladevi Block Basement 1 facility, the Butchery and the Annexe Lounge Kitchen, including the Lounge Bar, and is expected to be completed by February 2026.

The renovation of 16 Annexe Hostel rooms began in October 2025 and is being carried out in three phases. Renovation of six rooms on the third floor has been completed, and that of six rooms on the second floor is in progress and is expected to be completed in March 2026.

Following recommendation from security experts, the boundary wall along Joseph Stein Lane has been redeveloped. Work on Max Mueller Marg, covering the area between Gate No. 2 and the end of the lane, is in progress and is expected to be completed in six to eight months.

Following the Members' request, the Centre has applied to NDMC for permission to install a new passenger lift in the Programme Block. This is likely to begin within two to three months.

The IIC-IRD organised a scoping meeting for the Bharat Ki Soch project on health, wellness and nutrition in January, bringing together 15 experts, including scholars and practitioners in healing traditions, government officials, and representatives of manuscript repositories. Anil Rajput, chairman of Bharat ki Soch Foundation, emphasised the need to build resilience in uncertain times by drawing on indigenous traditions. The discussion generated insights and leads for the project, spanning approaches to mental health, regional traditions, research gaps, new opportunities emerging through AI, and the creation of bibliographic resources.

With all winter plantations completed, the IIC lawns are now in full, vibrant bloom. The sale of seasonal flower seedlings in pots was organised over the past two months.

The Annual Subscription Fee (ASF) 2026-27 is due for payment on 1 April 2026. Members are requested to pay their ASF as soon as possible and well before the due date to avoid deactivation of their membership.

Many private programmes, events and parties are held at various venues of the Centre, hosted by individuals or private organisations. These are open to guests by invitation only. It has come to the Centre's notice that some individuals have been accessing them uninvited. We seek the cooperation of the Members to stamp out such intrusion, nuisance and menace.

Ending on a high note, it is a matter of pride for the Centre that six of its Members have been honoured with Padma Awards this year. In this year's national honours list, Kallipatti Ramasamy Palaniswamy (M-3608) has been awarded the Padma Bhushan, and Buddha Rashmi Mani (M-4630), Satyanarayan Nuwal (A-6237), K. Vijay Kumar (A-6527), Deepika Reddy (AT1951) and Prabhakar Basavprabhu Kore (CM-281) have been awarded the Padma Shri.

**K. N. SHRIVASTAVA**