

FIRST COLUMN
BENEFITS OF REMAINING IN SHELTER OF GOD

By seeking refuge in the divine, we can navigate the complexities of life with ease



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

All of us wish for a pleasant life ('theek chale'). But we don't know how. We try different things, but something or other keeps on going wrong. Is it an impossible dream? No, it is not. God, being very merciful, has indicated how this can be done. Lord Krishna guides, "This 'maya' (illusory energy) of Mine is divine and very difficult to overcome. Only those, who take shelter in Me, they are able to transcend this maya." (7.14) We get in trouble repeatedly because we are naturally attracted to harmful sense objects. Useful sense objections are fine but how do you know which these are? God gives this intelligence if we remain in His shelter, just like a mother stops her little child from harming himself. God is that eternal mother for us. Lord Krishna informs, "After efforts of many births, a yogi in the end becomes wise, and he takes My shelter. A great soul, who considers Lord Vasudeva thus everything is very rare." (7.19) We can get started on this journey beginning from now and God will begin to protect us. We must allow some time for it as instructed by Lord Krishna, "Steadfast in yoga, such people while always glorifying Me and endeavouring, having firm vows worship Me with devotion, offering obeisance." (9.17) Then, what happens? God promises, "These people, who worship Me with undivided attention, meditating on Me, for these practitioners of yoga, I help in getting what one does not have and provide security of what one has." (9.22) We get started and God gets started. It is that simple. Then, what happens? Lord Krishna states, "Fix your mind in Me only; engage your intelligence in Me; thus hereafter you will remain in Me only; there is no doubt about this." (12.8) We get to live in God. What does this mean? God takes care of us as our mother. Our lives will be micromanaged. One will benefit like one can never imagine, because, as indicated earlier, God is everything, not helpless like our bio-



logical mother. Over some time our consciousness will change, as detailed by Lord Krishna, "Through consciousness offering all activities to Me; practising buddhi-yoga, having taken My shelter be always in My consciousness." (18.57) Our consciousness, which otherwise is essentially material will change to God consciousness; it will turn spiritual. When this happens, a big change will take place in our lives, as explained by Lord Krishna, "Having My consciousness, you will cross all impediments by My 'kripa' (grace)." (18.58) In the same verse, Lord Krishna warns, "If you will not heed on account of feeling of being the doer, you will perish." This is what normally happens to us human beings. We must curb our egos; God and ego do not go together. Can you imagine what privileged status we would have achieved if we heed God's instructions? Life will become smooth (theek chalegi). We will wholeheartedly take shelter in God, as instructed by God. In all respects take shelter of God only. We neither get any peace nor liberation at some stage in our eternal journey due to our refusal to surrender to God. We will do so now. What will we do then? We will follow God's instructions as detailed in verse #18.65, which is, "Develop My consciousness; become My devotee; make sacrifices for Me; and offer obeisance to Me. You will attain Me only. This I truly promise to you, because you are dear to Me." The last verse sheds light on the biggest benefit of all, in which the Lord promises, "Take My shelter only; I shall release you from all sins. Do not worry." (18.66) Why do we get repeatedly in trouble? Why are we always worried? Because our bad karmaphalas keep on manifesting. Now what will happen? They will make their appearance and God will forgive us, and we will not be troubled much. This is like being liberated while still in our material bodies. This is simply unbelievable to even think about. I won't stop trying to remain in the shelter of God as much as possible as fast as convenient. (The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

A young mother becomes a symbol of hope



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

Arti, a child bride whose education was cut short, now shines as a local hero, transitioning from e-rickshaw driver to Amal Clooney Award winner, embodying resilience and empowerment



Her face is bathed in sweat and her hair is dishevelled. But neither the scorching June heat nor the humidity can wear down the wide smile on Arti's face. Even the power cut at the Aga Khan Foundation's Project Lehar Centre, where she has been coming for entrepreneurial training, cannot dim her joy. She has just admitted her young daughter to one of the top English medium schools in Bahaich district in Uttar Pradesh. This is a dream come true for the 19-year-old single mother whose own education came to an end after being married off as a child. What has made this feat even more special for her is that it was the school that expressed keenness to admit her four-year-old daughter. The telephone call from its founder inviting her to fill out the form came soon after Arti was returning from the school having been told admissions for the session were closed. While the call and offer to waive all tuition fees came as a big surprise to Arti, it was not totally unexpected. Ever since Arti, an e-rickshaw driver, hit the national headlines for winning the prestigious Amal Clooney Women's Empowerment Award in May this year, she has become a celebrity in Bahaich. Given to young women around the world in recognition of their determination and ability to overcome challenges and make a difference, the international award has catapulted Arti from being just another pink e-rickshaw driver to the official brand ambassador for women's empowerment in Bahaich, an aspirational district with low socio-economic indicators. The buzz around her has been non-stop since her return from London where she went to receive the award from the King's Trust International founded by King Charles. There has been unrelenting attention by local and national media to know more about her remarkable jour-



WHEN THE TEAM MET ARTI, SHE WAS LIVING WITH HER MOTHER IN BAHARAICH'S RISIA BLOCK HAVING LEFT AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE, ARTI WAS DIRECTIONLESS. MARRIED AT 13 AND A MOTHER AT 14, ARTI LACKED BOTH SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

ney, including her ride in a pick-rickshaw to meet King Charles at the award reception in Buckingham Palace. She has also been publicly felicitated by top leaders and officials of the district. But all this would have never been possible had Arti not met the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) Project Lehar team. Instituted to provide vocational training, entrepreneurship, and life skills courses to marginalised young women, Project Lehar run by AKF in partnership with The King's Trust International, enables girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds to learn, earn, and thrive. When the team met Arti, she was living with her mother in Bahaich's Risia block Having left an abusive marriage, Arti was directionless. Married at 13 and a mother at 14, Arti lacked both skills and confidence. On her mother's insistence, she agreed to join Project Lehar. Little did she know that her life was about to change. Not far away, in Lauki, another village in the same block a young widow with three children was struggling to make two ends meet after the death of her husband. She was only 20 when she came in touch with the Lehar team. Left to fend for her children alone, Bitti wanted to do something other than supporting her family as a daily wagger and registered for the project. Here she would meet Megha, Saira Bano and Bhagyalakshmi, all young widows with similar backgrounds and living in difficult circumstances. Fate was about to give these four and Arti a collective second chance at life. In June 2023, when Seema Shukla Project Coordinator, state programme

manager Sudhir and the AKF team were mulling over the possibility of teaching them to drive and using this skill as a means of livelihood on the lines of the popular Sakha cabs driven by only women, it was Monika Rani, the dynamic Bahaich district magistrate, who turned this idea into reality. "We were considering how to make the girls economically self sufficient and hit upon the idea of launching the pink e-rickshaw initiative under the government Mission Shakti scheme to empower women and expand their income earning opportunities. We wanted to give single mothers, widows and women separated from their husbands the first chance to come out of the house, increase their mobility and regain their confidence," says Monika Rani. So on October 2, 2023, these five girls were chosen as the first recipients of a batch of 10 girls from Project Lehar to be given the pink e-rickshaws under this innovative scheme. A loan of Rs 1.66 lakh was provided and repayable in 38 months at an EMI of Rs 4500. Since then, there has been no looking back. Not only have the women paid eight instalments already, but they are also transforming their lives. From eating just one meal a day, Saira Bano can now give her children proper nutritious food. "I have seen days where my two children and I ate just namak and roti. Now I earn enough to fulfill every need of my children. I want to do better so that I can build my own house and get an electric connection so that my children don't have to study under a lamp and I don't have to pay to charge

my e-rickshaw," shares Saira. The confidence Bitti has gained has given her the courage to demand her right to the family land. She has filed a case in the civil court and wants her father-in-law to put her deceased husband's share in her son's name. "I am paying the fees for the lawyer from the money I earn as a e-rickshaw driver. I never thought I would be able to take such a big step," reveals Bitti. Bhagyalakshmi has opened a tiny kiosk selling biscuits, sweets and pencils for her mother from her earnings. "I want to expand my business. My dream is to make my elder daughter a doctor and the younger one a policewoman. When my income increases I will shift them to an English medium school. I want my children to have a bright future," she says. For Megha too, the e-rickshaw has been life-changing. "I am happy because my economic situation has changed for the better. Now I can give my children better food. I have admitted the two children to private English medium school and can the monthly fee of Rs 250 for both of them Education will ensure they never have to live on charity like I did." While association with Project Lehar and the opportunity to become self-reliant thanks to the pink e-rickshaws has turned their lives around, it has been their confidence that has helped them hold their heads high in a male-dominated profession. This is inspiring other village women to step out of their homes and fulfil their dreams. (Swapna Majumdar is a journalist writing on development and gender. The views are expressed are personal)

Battling the heat and hatred: The ongoing fight for LGBTQIA+ rights

There is widespread violence against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, fueled by a deeply ingrained prejudices against 'transgressive' love

Be-Loved - Celebrating Pride Month through TheatreKhushi Pahuja In the scorching heat of June 2024, I, along with a lesbian couple, have been shuttling from police station to police station, all to protect their fundamental rights to life and equality. The constant torment for the three of us stems from society's disdain for 'transgressive' love and an unquestioned acceptance of violence against women by family members. Familial and domestic violence is perpetuated and reinforced each time someone scrutinizes and polices one's queerness through one's body. Hope often dwindles with seemingly unending cycles of individual, systemic, and systematic violence. Especially, when



KHUSHI PAHUJA

community members like Prerna (name changed), a 23-year-old lesbian woman says, "We are investing so much money, time, and energy for protecting my rights, is it even worth it? Will things ever change?" In the face of such questions, social workers not only provide a safe listening space and support in bureaucratic procedures; but also share the responsibility of holding on to the beacon of

hope. History reminds us that hope, and perseverance lay the foundational stones for advocacy, action, and change. One history of hope is that of Pride Month. Each year, June is celebrated as pride month around the globe, commemorating the Stonewall Uprising. On June 28, 1969, like many other days in New York City, the police raided a small bar called the Stonewall Inn. Taking advantage of the laws against crossdressing, the police would raid bars to arrest queer and transgender persons. When the same happened at Stonewall Inn, the people protested. Days of riots against police brutality acted as a catalyst for the LGBTQIA+ rights movement. Following this, the movement for LGBTQIA+ rights has

expanded, bringing relief to many within the community. Various events like theatre, music, poetry, sensitisation programs, etc. happen during June all over the world, including India. Such programs are particularly important as they present possibilities for intersectional dialogue through non-conventional sensitisation methods. An example of this approach is 'Be-Loved', a theatre play by Mumbai-based Theatre Group 'Tamaasha', which was recently co-organized by Nazariya Foundation and SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India) on June 9 at the Bipin Chandra Pal Auditorium in Delhi. Be-Loved is a musical and satirical drama directed by Sapan



Saran and penned by 17 prominent writers, including artist Bhupen Khakhar, poet Josh Malihabadi, and LGBTQIA+ rights activists Maya Sharma and Saleem Kidwai. Recalling the journey

of making this play, Sapan shares, "Be-Loved is a collaborative effort. It took us about three months to put it together. We opened the play last year in June after rigorous rehearsal for 45 days." "The play dealt with a very sensitive issue with a lot of care, especially in a context where talking about sex and sexuality is a taboo. They emphasize, "You cannot forget about the issue once you have seen this play. It forces you to think and reflect when you come out of the theater hall." Resonating with this perspective, Urvashi Butalia, feminist publisher and writer says, "The play took stories on queerness by many writers and connected them with real life cases. People can dismiss stories, but it is difficult to dismiss lived realities."

As Rituparna Borah (she/they), Director, Nazariya Foundation pens, "Events like this are the best ways to show to the world that advocacy can be done in various ways either through UN mechanisms, through the government, or plays like this. With collective power we can challenge any hate, discrimination, and violence against the queer-trans community." "Such events help us to reach an audience that is generally not approachable for training sessions, or for whom training sessions are not accessible. Therefore, when we engage with allies through well-accepted mediums like theater, music, etc., the much-needed information gets conveyed to a huge audience," adds Randhoni Lairikyengbam, Assistant Director, SAATHII.

The echoing sentiments of audience members about how the play moved them to highlight the importance of collective efforts toward sensitization using multiple advocacy mediums. It restores hope that change is possible when we create spaces where people can critically reflect on their actions, thoughts, and behaviour, and feel part of the collective. Pride Month, therefore, is not only a time to celebrate queerness and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights but also an opportunity to look back into history and remind ourselves of the perseverance of those who fought for the rights and then move into the future with hope, care, and kindness. (The author is a social worker and a sexuality educator; views are personal. Charkha Features)

France bans extreme-right and radical Islamic groups ahead of polarising poll

AP PARIS

France's government on Wednesday ordered the dissolution of extreme right and radical Muslim groups, four days before the first round of high-stakes legislative elections...

ment ordered the dissolution of multiple extreme-right and 'radical Islamist' groups. A series of decrees announcing the shutdown cited the risk of violence.

his proposal to abolish free health care for foreigners and tougher regulations around the acquisition of French nationality.

Foreign Affairs on security and defense issues. Bardella has softened many of the party's hard-line positions, and was put on the spot during the debate over another key issue, the age of retirement...

Opposition parties on both sides of the political spectrum have been scrambling to form alliances and field candidates. The elections were called by Macron earlier this month after his party suffered a crushing defeat...

ICC convicts al-Qaida-linked leader of atrocities in Mali

AP THE HAGUE

The International Criminal Court has convicted an al-Qaida-linked Islamic extremist leader of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Mali's Timbuktu.

links to al-Qaida that held power in northern Mali at the time. Women and girls suffered in particular under Ansar Dine's repressive regime, facing corporal punishment and imprisonment...

the police around the world do. In Timbuktu, victims of Ansar Dine crimes were awaiting the verdicts and possible compensation.

UN tells Israel it will suspend aid operations across Gaza

AP WASHINGTON

Senior U.N. officials have warned Israel that they will suspend the world body's aid operations across Gaza unless Israel acts urgently to better protect humanitarian workers...

'Palestinian who was shot, tied to army jeep posed no threat'

Jenin (AP): When Mujahid Abadi stepped outside to see if Israeli forces had entered his uncle's neighbourhood, he was shot in the arm and the foot.

er act of brutality in Israel's crackdown on the occupied West Bank, where violence has surged since Hamas' October 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza.

hospital bed. "Suddenly, the call was disconnected." Raed later saw false reports on social media that a Palestinian had been killed in the raid.

Kenya clears debris after protests in which 6 died

AP NAIROBI

Kenya's cleared debris from a building that was the site of protests in Nairobi in which six people died.

raise taxes as frustrations over the cost of living are simmering. Many young people who helped vote Ruto into power with cheers for his promises of economic relief have taken to the streets to object to the pain of reforms.

a more conciliatory approach. "We expected him to appreciate the gravity of the issue and empathize with the young people," Manyora said.

Paris court upholds validity of arrest warrant for Syrian Prez

Paris (AP): The Paris appeals court ruled on Wednesday that an international arrest warrant for Syrian President Bashar Assad issued by France for alleged complicity in war crimes during Syria's civil war is valid and remains in place.

A U.N. letter sent to Israeli officials this month said Israel must provide U.N. workers with a way to communicate directly with Israeli forces on the ground in Gaza, among other steps, the officials said.

The army initially said Abadi was a suspected militant, but later acknowledged he had not posed a threat to Israeli forces and was caught in crossfire with militants.

After he was shot in the arm, he hid behind his family's car. Then he was shot again, in the foot. Unable to move, he called his father and told him he was about to die.

and other communications equipment so they can communicate with each other and safely move around Gaza," Miller told reporters.

UK betting scandal now engulfs Opp Labour Party

London (PTI): The escalating scandal of candidates placing general election-related bets has widened from the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to the Opposition Labour Party.

here with the intention of giving any winnings to local charities," said the now-suspended Labour candidate. "While I did not place this bet with any prior knowledge of the outcome, this was a huge mistake, for which I apologise unreservedly," he said.

Suspected Houthi attack targets ship in Gulf of Aden

Dubai (AP): Suspected attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels early Wednesday targeted a ship in the Gulf of Aden, while a separate attack claimed by Iraqi militants allied with the rebels targeted the southern Israeli port city of Eilat, authorities said.

opened off the coast of Aden, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) center said. The captain of a merchant vessel reported a missile impacted the water in close proximity to the vessel," the UKMTO said.

Suspected N Korean hypersonic missile exploded in flight, South Korea says

AP SEOUL

A suspected hypersonic missile launched by North Korea exploded in flight on Wednesday, South Korea's military said, as North Korea protests the regional deployment of a US aircraft carrier for a military drill with South Korea and Japan.

capital, it said. No damage was immediately reported. The Joint Chiefs of Staff said it believes the weapon was a solid-fuelled hypersonic missile.

tion whether the missiles have achieved their desired speed and maneuverability during the test flights. In recent years, North Korea has also been developing more missiles that use solid propellants.

about an hour's drive from the border, for three hours early Wednesday, in the second such disruption since the North's balloon launches began on May 28, according to South Korean aviation authorities.

US officiant marries 10 same-sex couples in HK

AP HONG KONG

Ten same-sex couples got married in the United States over the internet from Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous southern Chinese city that does not formally recognize such unions but offers them legal protections.



a woman. It's between two people who love each other," said Lucas Peng, a 66-year-old Singaporean businessperson living in Hong Kong.

said he hoped the event would send a message to the public. "In Hong Kong, there's not yet a way to go to a marriage registry to get married, but there's still this way we can offer for them to realize their dreams of getting married," Tung said.

recognizes those couples' legal rights, though the city doesn't call them marriages. It has no laws banning same-sex relationships. In September, the Hong Kong's top court ruled that the local government should provide a legal framework for recognizing same-sex partnerships, including rights to inheritance, joint custody of children, taxation, spousal visas and benefits from employment with the local government.

US journalist goes on trial in Russia for 'espionage'

AP ■ YEKATERINBURG

Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich went on trial behind closed doors in Yekaterinburg on Wednesday, 15 months after his arrest in the Russian city on espionage charges that he, his employer and the US government vehemently deny.

"He was an accredited journalist doing journalism, and this is a sham trial, bogus charges that are completely trumped up," Conti said.

"Evan has displayed remarkable resilience and strength in the face of this grim situation," US Ambassador Lynne Tracy said on the first anniversary of his arrest.

of what the Kremlin calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine and statements seen as discrediting the military.

Gershkovich's arrest because Russia refused to renew their visas. With Gershkovich's trial being closed, few details of his case may become public.

ing and based on calculated and transparent lies. Journalism is not a crime," Journal publisher Almar Latour and chief editor Emma Tucker said in a statement after his trial date was announced.

another card that strong. Putin has alluded to interest in freeing Vadim Krasikov, a Russian imprisoned in Germany for assassinating a Chechen rebel leader in Berlin, but Germany's willingness to aid in a Russia-US dispute is uncertain.

Suspect kills self after shootings near Las Vegas leave 5 people dead, teen hurt

AP ■ LAS VEGAS

A man who fatally shot five people and critically injured a 13-year-old girl at apartments near Las Vegas has killed himself, authorities said on Tuesday.

Zelenskyy scolds officials who shirk their duties

AP ■ KYIV

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signaled Wednesday that he is getting tough on officials he suspects are shirking their duties in the war with Russia that is now in its third year.



will be a serious conversation, and I will draw appropriate conclusions regarding them," Zelenskyy has frequently visited front-line areas during the war. He said his trip to the Donetsk region was to introduce the new commander of the Joint Forces Command, Andrii Hnatov.

rebuking an unnamed general for having "killed more Ukrainian soldiers than any Russian general," in what was seen as a reference to incompetent management of troops.

NATO picks outgoing Dutch PM Mark Rutte as its next secy-general

Brussels (AP): NATO

appointed Mark Rutte as its next secretary-general on Wednesday, putting the outgoing Dutch prime minister in charge of the world's biggest security organisation at a critical time for European security as war rages in Ukraine.



A helicopter drops water on the Apache Fire as it burns in Palermo, Calif., on Tuesday, Jun. 25, 2024. According to Cal Fire, more than a dozen new fires sparked by lightning

Sri Lanka finalises debt restructuring agreement

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's government said on Wednesday it has finalised a long-delayed debt restructuring agreement for USD 5.8 billion with its bilateral lenders, including India and China, in Paris to meet a key condition of an IMF bailout.

televised address to the nation later tonight by President Wickremesinghe, who has steered the effort to take the island out of the economic crisis since Sri Lanka declared its first-ever sovereign default in 2022.

"On behalf of Sri Lanka, I would like to sincerely thank the OCC chairs - France, India, and Japan - as well as the Export-Import Bank of China for their leadership in this process, as well as all OCC members for their unwavering support," he said.

Heatwave kills 450 in Karachi region in 4 days

Karachi (PTI): A searing heat wave that has hit Pakistan's biggest city has led to the death of at least 450 people over the last four days, a leading NGO claimed on Wednesday.

services to the poor, homeless, orphan street children, discarded babies and battered women. "The sad fact is that many of these bodies have come from areas where a lot of load shedding is going on even in this harshest weather," he said.

Pakistan PM Shehbaz extends olive branch to Imran Khan

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Wednesday extended an olive branch to his predecessor and political rival Imran Khan, offering to hold talks with him if he was facing "troubles" in jail.

The Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have been at loggerheads for years, particularly after the February 8 elections, which Khan's party claims it had won.

the opposition, proposed to Khan to sit for a dialogue but such slogans were raised again. "So who is responsible for this bitterness [between politicians]. We don't even shake hands now," he said.

As Iran's prez vote looms, tensions boil over renewed headscarf crackdown

AP ■ DUBAI

Seemingly every afternoon in Iran's capital, police vans rush to major Tehran squares and intersections to search for women with loose headscarves and those who dare not to wear them at all.

for harsher penalties. Meanwhile, authorities have seized thousands of cars over women having their hair uncovered while also targeting businesses that serve them.

dressed in the all-encompassing black chador alongside uniformed police officers. While police haven't published arrest numbers about the crackdown and media haven't given it major attention, it's widely discussed in Iran.

"Sooner or later, the authorities will realise that it would serve their interests better to pull back," Iran and neighbouring Taliban-controlled Afghanistan are the only countries where the hijab remains mandatory - even conservative Saudi Arabia has dialled back on its morality patrols.

others protested a decision by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to order women to wear hijabs in public. In 1983, it became law, enforced with penalties including fines and up to two months in prison.

women have had their cars arbitrarily confiscated as punishment for defying Iran's veiling laws," Amnesty International said in March.

Rights in Iran. The centre said at least 12 women activists have been sentenced to prison since Raisi's deaths for their work. But there are signs that

Iran's government, and 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, know there are risks to escalating enforcement.

Advertisement for Indira Gandhi University Meerpur, Rewari, featuring an employment notice for non-teaching posts.

