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PM Modi flags off three new Vande Bharat trains, says nation advancing

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The railways have made big strides in addressing long-standing issues and will not stop till it becomes a guarantee of comfortable travel for all sections of society, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday.

Bengaluru, and Chennai with Nagercoil. "Through its hard work over the years, the railways have made big strides in addressing long-standing issues and offered new hopes and solutions. We will not stop until the Indian Railways becomes a guarantee of comfortable travel for everyone," Modi said.

He underlined that the rapid development of southern States was imperative to accomplish the goal of Viksit Bharat. "Southern India is the land of immense talent, resources and opportunities," the Prime Minister said adding that the development of Tamil Nadu, along with the entire southern India, was the Government's priority.



Karnataka in this year's Budget, which was nine times higher than in 2014. Eight Vande

Bharat trains are connecting different parts of Karnataka, he added.

The Prime Minister drew parallels from Budgets of the past and said the multiple-fold

increase in allocations further strengthened rail traffic in southern States, including Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. He said railway tracks were being improved, electrification of tracks taking place, and stations modernised. The Meerut City-Lucknow Vande Bharat Express will help passengers save around an hour compared to the current fastest train between the two cities.

System (RRTS) has helped connect Meerut with New Delhi, the distance to Lucknow has also been reduced with the introduction of the Vande Bharat Express. "The National Capital Region (NCR) is becoming an example of how PM Gathshakti's vision will change the country's infrastructure with modern trains, network of expressways, and expansion of air services," Modi said.

District judiciary crucial component of rule of law: CJ

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud on Saturday said district judiciary is the "backbone of the judiciary" and thus a crucial component of the rule of law and calling it subordinate must be stopped.



Referring to the increasing number of women joining the district judiciary in the past few years, he highlighted that judges, despite being professionals, are affected by their own "brush with reality" and their mental health may suffer as a consequence. Speaking at the 'National Conference of the District Judiciary', which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi here, Justice Chandrachud said district judiciary is the first point of contact for a citizen in search of justice.

data not only for lawyers but also for citizens and it reflects real time data of over four crore cases across the district Courts and the High Courts. The CJI said 970 e-sewa kendras were fully functional in district Court complexes, besides 27 in the High Court premises. He said e-sewa kendras assist lawyers and litigants with e-processes by providing assistance for e-filing, providing information regarding the case status and so on.

A wetter than usual August gets 16 per cent more rain :IMD

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In what remains a key factor in growth of the economy, India received around 16 per cent more rainfall than normal in August, with above normal rains forecast for September as well. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Saturday that in addition to 16 per cent surplus rainfall in August, the Monsoon precipitation over Northwest India was recorded at 253.9 mm, the second highest in August since 2001.



ally received from June to September. Several districts in the foothills of the Himalayas and the Northeast experienced below-normal rainfall as most of the low-pressure systems moved south of their usual position, and the monsoon trough also remained south of its typical position, the IMD chief said. Many States in the Northeast along with Kerala and the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, experienced deficient rainfall, he added.

mal position, resulting in good rainfall over northern and adjacent central India, parts of eastern India, and the extreme southern peninsula, especially Tamil Nadu. From August 23 to August 31, the trough shifted south of its normal position, causing very heavy rainfall over central and western parts of India. No-break monsoon conditions were observed in August this year despite an increasing trend of break days during the month, Mohapatra said. He said the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) was very active during the second half of the month, leading to good rainfall across the country.

Expect more rainy September this year

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After a wetter than normal August, India is likely to experience above normal rainfall in September too, with heavy to very heavy precipitation expected in Northwest India and the surrounding areas. Addressing a virtual Press conference, IMD Director-General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said that the country was expected to receive above normal rainfall in September, at 109 per cent of the long-period average of 167.9 mm.



peninsula, northern Bihar, and northeastern Uttar Pradesh, as well as most of the Northeast India, where below normal rainfall is expected," the IMD Chief said. The monsoon trough is expected to remain in its normal position, with the possibility of several low-pressure systems developing in the Bay of Bengal, which may travel towards west-northwest up to Rajasthan. The trough could also shift towards the foothills of the Himalayas, and there is a potential for a western disturbance to affect the region in September, Mohapatra said.

IMA urges NTF for Central law to protect doctors

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has once again written to the Supreme Court-appointed National Task Force (NTF), for a central law, seeking protection of healthcare professionals and declaring hospitals as 'Safe Zones' across the States. The NTF is tasked with creating protocols to ensure the safety and security of medical personnel.

Diseases (Amendment) Act September 2020 among others as annexures, and related legislative amendments. "The only preventive strategy that could be applied across the board and across all the States is deterrent central law in statute. Absence of such law has resulted in half-hearted actions by the police and less than optimum investigations and prosecution of the incident," it said.

UNICEF issues urgent alert on Mpox risk for children



As the World Health Organization (WHO) has called for increased vigilance against Monkeypox (Mpox), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has issued an urgent alert regarding the heightened risk for children, especially those who are malnourished or suffering from other illnesses.

that children can be exposed to Mpox through close contact with symptomatic individuals, including parents or caregivers. The virus spreads via contact with skin lesions, infectious bodily fluids, contaminated materials, respiratory droplets, and infected animals. Pregnant women can also pass the virus to their unborn babies.

far this year, authorities are taking precautionary measures with the AIIMS, RML and LNJP already allocating designated sites for the treatment of the patients in case if any. A 2022 study by Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, Delhi, noted the potential for Mpox resurgence in India due to the discontinuation of the smallpox vaccine, which had historically provided 85% protection.



IAF jettisons helicopter in Uttarakhand, no casualties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An Indian Air Force helicopter airlifting a damaged Kestrel civil helicopter in Uttarakhand on Saturday had to jettison the load due to flight safety reasons, the IAF said. It said an inquiry has been ordered into the matter. "An #IAF Mi-17 V5, while airlifting damaged Kestrel civil helicopter in Uttarakhand today, had to jettison the load due to flight safety reasons.

Rahul Gandhi to visit US for first time as LoP, to interact with diaspora

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi will visit the US from September 8-10 during which he will hold numerous interactions in Washington DC and Dallas, including at the University of Texas. Indian Overseas Congress Chief Sam Pitroda shared details of Rahul Gandhi's first visit to the US after becoming the leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha in June.

munity people. We will have a very large community gathering. We will meet some technocrats and then we will have dinner with Leaders from the Dallas area," he added. The following day, Gandhi will travel to Washington DC where there is a plan to have similar interactions with a variety of people, including think-tanks, national press club and others, the Indian Overseas Congress chief said. "There are a lot of events planned with a variety of people because we find that people also have a lot of interest in the States we run with a Congress Government," he said.

ISLAND HOPPING IN THE MALDIVES



Traveling within the Maldives proves that the journey can be just as enchanting as the destination itself say RUPALI & BAKSHISH DEAN

Just a quick 20-minute speedboat ride from the capital, Male, transforms us from weary travellers to relaxed coconut sippers in an instant. That's no small feat, especially when many islands require lengthy boat and seaplane journeys just to begin the island experience. But don't be misled despite its proximity to the capital, this island captures the enchanting 'island feel' and sets the perfect tone for arriving at this tropical paradise resort on its own private island. Four Seasons Kuda Huraa truly embodies the essence of Maldivian luxury. Since opening its doors in 1998, it has set the standard for other hoteliers hoping to offer a taste of paradise to their discerning guests. After undergoing several renovations, it's no surprise that this island boasts a remarkably high rate of returning visitors. Its positioning grants us uninterrupted views of the mesmerizing Indian Ocean, stretching as far as the eye can see. We are delighted by the choice of accommodations, whether overwater or on the beach. For our trip, we opt for a Sunset Overwater Villa with Pool, and it is simply magnificent. If it's your first time in the Maldives, we wholeheartedly recommend staying overwater—it's an experience you won't want to miss. The villa features a cloud-like bed, expansive bathroom, a magnificent bathtub, plus an infinity pool and the spacious terrace boasts an infinity pool and hammocks for relaxing while watching the fish below. Every amenity I could wish for is provided, and we especially appreciate the nightly replenishment of cooling Aloe Vera, which we slather on each evening to soothe my skin after a day in the sun. With so many amazing amenities available, it would be easy to spend your entire stay exploring the island's quarter-mile stretch. However, just a short 20-minute boat ride away, you'll find incredible world-class dive sites and renowned surf breaks waiting to be discovered.

LANDAA GIRAVAARU

The Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru boasts a prime location in Baa Atoll, easily reached via one of the hotel's charming private seaplanes: the delightful yellow-and-black polka-dotted Flying Boxfish or the vibrant Flying Triggerfish. From our window, we are treated to a breath-taking aerial view, gazing down at the atolls from a lofty 5,000 feet. Below me lies the expansive 44-acre Four Seasons Resort on Baa Atoll, nestled within a serene 1.5-mile lagoon. Here, nature takes centre stage, with two stretches of pristine beaches calling me to explore their untouched beauty. As we step off the pier, we are instantly captivated by the ethereal blue waters and sweeping stretches of white sand. Towering 50-foot palm trees line a grand boulevard while mature gardens burst with the vibrant colours of banyan trees, lemongrass, frangipani, and orchids. The island feels completely untouched by time, offering plenty of space for leisurely strolls or even a solid 10,000 steps a day. If we ever need a break, we can easily hop on one of the electric bicycles available for everyone, or simply call for a buggy to whisk me away in comfort. The 102 thatched beach and water bungalows, more spacious than accommodations found elsewhere in the islands, blend seamlessly into the lush jungle, vibrant gardens, and soft sands. The bungalows, set in private gated enclosures, offer an intimate retreat. This remote island is a sanctuary for conservation, led by the Marine Research Centre's vital efforts to protect marine life. As nature enthusiasts, we truly appreciate this commitment to preserving the Maldives' natural treasures. Upon arrival, guests are greeted by a lively lagoon bustling with marine life, including eagle rays, stingrays, reef sharks, clownfish, and parrotfish—just in the house reef! As part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, visitors can also experience vast pods of



dolphins, nests of sea turtles (some even lay their eggs on the island), and the spectacular Hanifaru Bay, where massive swarms of manta rays feed the plankton-rich monsoon season from May to November. For those eager to delve into local culture, nearby inhabited islands offer an inviting glimpse into the vibrant tapestry of Maldivian village life, providing an opportunity to immerse myself in the authentic rhythms of this idyllic archipelago. For those eager for adventure, the luxury live-aboard catamaran, The Explorer, is an excellent option for diving and exploring the waters surrounding both Four Seasons resorts. This stay is not only luxurious but also mindful of the environment, making it all the more memorable. Our last stop is Blu for lunch, and what an experience it was! The restaurant, beautifully designed, overlooks the main pool and the vast ocean beyond. The food is simply phenomenal—we can easily dine there for a week without getting bored. Twice a year, the renowned Italian chef Gaetano Trovato and his team enhance the culinary journey with their exquisite creations. Dinner at Arnolfo is in a league of its own. Honestly, it is the best steak we have ever had, even surpassing those from Argentina. We would gladly return to Landaa Giraavaru just to savour it once more! The Moroccan-themed Al Barakat is equally exceptional. This resort truly prioritizes wellness in many forms. While the yoga classes and spa services are fantastic, it is the AyurMa Ayurvedic centre that truly captivates me. The consultations are thorough and illuminating; we learn things about ourselves that we have never realized before. Another compelling reason to visit the Maldives—it's a chance for self-discovery! After soaking in the serene beauty of Baa Atoll, we look forward to stopping by Male City to further embrace the richness of Maldivian culture.

MALE CITY BY FOOT

While Kuda Huraa feels cosy and inviting, Landaa Giraavaru strikes us as grand and expansive, like a swinging pendulum. Since both are part of the Four Seasons family and many guests spend time at each resort, it's easy to draw comparisons, but we won't go down that road. Each place is truly a gem in its own right, and I can honestly say we cherished our time at both. Taking a seaplane back to Male offers a stunning view of the azure waters and lush green islands below. Each resort we pass has its own unique charm, showcasing the diverse beauty of this enchanting paradise. Once in Male, we are guided by a knowledgeable local expert as we explore the city's historic landmarks. We start at the harbour and move past the oldest school, a proud symbol of the Maldives' impressive 98% literacy rate. At the Royal Garden Café, nestled in a nobleman's 'Ganduvaru,' we enjoy a lovely cup of tea surrounded by beautifully carved wooden interiors. The November 3rd Memorial pays tribute to the heroes of 1988, while Sultan Park and the National Museum preserve the rich history of the sultanate era. As we continue our journey, the Grand Friday Mosque and the Islamic Centre impress with their striking architecture, and Independence Square reveals yet another chapter of Male's story. The local markets are alive with colour and energy, showcasing an array of tropical delights. In this enchanting place, time seems to stand still, inviting us to discover more at every corner. It is a journey we won't soon forget!

— Awarded the 'Best food writer in the country' by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean writes on food and travel. Bakshish Dean, a 'distinguished chef and writer' with over 25 years of experience, excels in food styling and photography, while passionately exploring wildlife, forgotten recipes, and advanced culinary techniques

KINWANI HOUSE: YOUR ABODE THAT SHINES AMIDST HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS

A peaceful retreat with old world charm and stunning views beckons travelers for a luxe, exclusive vacation, writes SHARMILA CHAND

Nestled in the foothills of The Himalayas, Kinwani House is a charming retreat that offers guests a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in the rich heritage of Tehri Garhwal. One remarkable aspect of Kinwani House is its geographical significance, with its longitude nearly aligning with 79 degrees east, passing through all twelve Shiva temples from Kedarnath to Kanyakumari, enhancing its spiritual aura, making it a unique destination. WHERE CULTURAL HERITAGE MEETS NATURAL SPLENDOR About 40 minutes uphill drive from Rishikesh, took us to the stunning home of the Royal family, 'Kinwani House'. The estate, built in 1954, now stands as an architectural gem, a testament to passionate restoration, regal grandeur and a beacon of warm luxe hospitality. It offers a unique blend of modern comfort, natural beauty, and cultural richness, making it a perfect choice for discerning travellers. From the moment of arrival, the warmth of Marisha Chheda, Resort Manager and her team sets the tone for a truly memorable stay. That exactly is the sentiment as expressed by Aditya Paul Lakhanpal, Chairman, JPL Group, when he tells me, "Our goal is to seamlessly blend the regal charm of the past with modern luxury, offering our guests a stay that is as memorable as it is meaningful. We invite you to explore the spiritual treasures of Rishikesh and experience the tranquil beauty of Kinwani House—a place



where history and luxury meet in harmony." I stepped into my Princess Suite with smiling Aryan escorting me, and was captivated by the aesthetics infused with traditional and contemporary touches, featuring signature Aalia Collection amenities. Spread over two floors, the tastefully re-done House comprises six large suites, each with their own ensuite baths, drawing rooms and private decks. Each suite is a harmonious blend of old world charm and contemporary elegance, offering a unique blend of art deco design and modern luxury, providing guests with an enriching and tranquil experience. The house also boasts lush gardens, sweeping views of the holy river Ganges, breathtaking panoramic vistas of the majestic Himalayan foothills, creating a captivating backdrop for moments of serenity and reflection. I loved my High Tea at the beautiful conservatory with a bar and sitting area for an indoor evening under the stars or a special evening of cocktails by candlelight. Every detail, from the room amenities to the dining options, is

designed to ensure guests feel truly at home. DINING: CELEBRATION OF LOCAL FLAVOURS! I was happy to see the menu that blends local regional dishes and world cuisine. Be it a hearty breakfast featuring both Indian and international favourites, or meals, the food caters to every palate. Here you celebrate both global flavours and the rich tapestry of Pahari cuisine. No wonder, the star of my meal was 'Pahari Thali' with local ingredients and specialties of the region. Chef Arvind Negi, Aalia Collection pointed out, "Our culinary offerings blend local flavors with global influences, ensuring a delightful gastronomic journey. From fragrant biryanis and robust curries, to succulent kebabs and the authentic Pahadi thali, our menu across celebrates the diverse cultural heritage of India. For our discerning global travelers, we present a thoughtfully curated selection of international dishes. Whether one wishes to experience Oriental, Continental, Italian, or Thai flavours, we love to create exquisite dishes. Our sweet offerings are the perfect finale to your dining experience enhanced by homemade fresh ice creams." ROOTED IN WELLNESS Start the day with a serene Sunrise Yoga session, followed by an indulgent spa treatment featuring varied therapies. What better way to unwind, than the temperature-controlled outdoor pool, a perfect de-stress mantra.

Advertisement for Kinwani House, Canara Bank, and a Vehicle Auction. Includes details about the house, bank services, and a table of vehicles for auction with columns for Branch, Borrower/A/c no., Type of Vehicle, Registration No./Engine No./Chassis No., Make, Reserve Price, and Contact.

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion"
— Dalai Lama



MOSCOW FILM FESTIVAL KICKS OFF WITH FOCUS ON INDIAN CINEMA

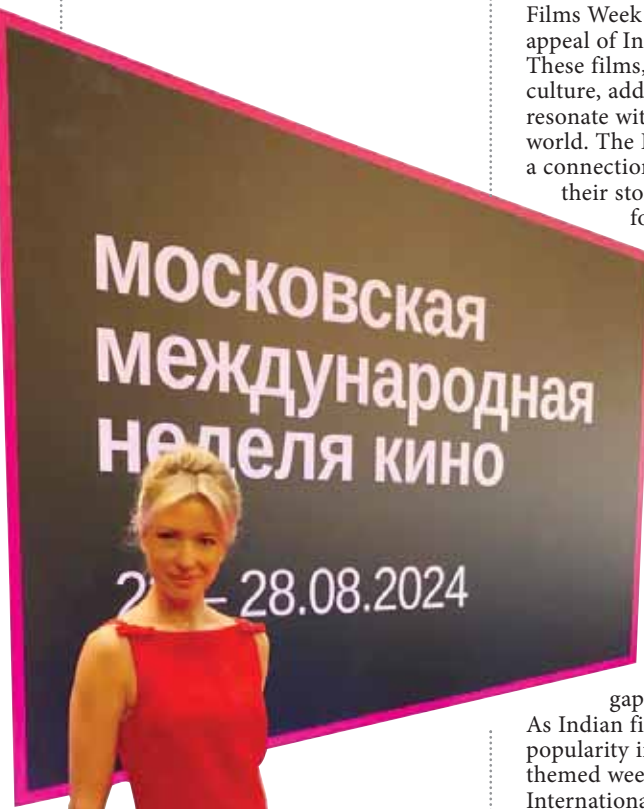
Laapata ladies and *Kalki* resonate with Russian audience, opening up huge possibilities for Indian cinema in Russia, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**



The Moscow International Films Week, an event that has become a significant cultural bridge between Russia and the world opened up in Moscow with much fanfare at Khudozhestvenny Cinema and with people from film fraternity from around the world in attendance at the gala event. On the first day of the Film Week, screenings of both foreign and domestic films took place, including the nationwide premieres of the Indian sports drama *Field* and the philosophical-mystical drama *Alzheimer* from Iran. This year it is an Indian-themed week with focus on Indian cinema and celebrating Indian art of storytelling on celluloid. The film festival is hosting films from more than 40-countries but the flavour of the festival is completely Indian. The second day was completely dedicated to Indian cinema, with Russian artists performing on Indian songs and Indian cuisine being served at the venue with Bollywood songs playing in the background. The Indian segment of the festival is dedicated to celebrating the richness and diversity of Indian cinema, offering Russian audiences a taste of India's cinematic brilliance through a curated selection of films. Among the highlights are two remarkable Indian films, *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki*, which have captivated the Russian audience with their unique storytelling and cultural nuances. Indian cinema has long been admired in Russia, with classics from Bollywood making their mark in the past. Ra Kapoor was a household name in Russia and 'mera joota hai Japani, an all-time hit. The Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is a testament to the enduring connection between the two cultures. This year's selection is not just about showcasing films; it's about highlighting the shared human experiences and emotions that transcend borders. As one Russian filmmaker quipped, "Indian and Russian films are made with heart, the most striking similarity between Indian and Russian films is that the songs are woven into the storyline." This is despite the fact that much is lost in translation and language barrier remains a significant impediment. But that is about to change as Swapna Dutt, the co-producer of *Kalki*, told the Pioneer that they would be releasing the film dubbed in Russian. "Indian films were once very popular in Russia, we want to open that bracket again. I am sure Indian films have a huge market here," said Swapna Dutt.

THE INDIAN SEGMENT OF THE FESTIVAL IS DEDICATED TO CELEBRATING THE RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF INDIAN CINEMA, OFFERING RUSSIAN AUDIENCES A TASTE OF INDIA'S CINEMATIC BRILLIANCE THROUGH A CURATED SELECTION OF FILMS. AMONG THE HIGHLIGHTS ARE TWO REMARKABLE INDIAN FILMS, "LAAPATA LADIES" AND "KALKI," WHICH HAVE CAPTIVATED THE RUSSIAN AUDIENCE WITH THEIR UNIQUE STORYTELLING AND CULTURAL NUANCES

Laapata Ladies, a film that delves into the complexities of womanhood in contemporary India, has struck a chord with Russian viewers. The film's narrative, which intertwines humor with social commentary, offers a glimpse into the challenges and aspirations of Indian women. The Russian audience, known for its appreciation of nuanced storytelling, has responded positively to the film's portrayal of universal themes such as identity, freedom, and societal expectations. *Kalki*, another standout film screened on the second day, explores themes of mythology and modernity, blending them in a way that is both thought-provoking and visually stunning. The film's exploration of Indian mythology, set against the backdrop of modern societal issues, has intrigued Russian viewers. The film's ability to weave together the old and the new, the mythical and the real, resonates deeply with a culture that values its own rich historical and cultural heritage. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* at the Moscow International Films Week highlights the growing appeal of Indian cinema in Russia. These films, while rooted in Indian culture, address universal themes that resonate with audiences across the world. The Russian viewers have found a connection with the characters and their stories, appreciating the films for their depth, creativity, and the way they tackle complex social issues.



The Indian-themed week has also opened doors for cultural exchange, with discussions and workshops that allow Russian audiences to engage more deeply with Indian cinema. This exchange of ideas and cultural narratives fosters a deeper understanding between the two nations, reinforcing the importance of art in bridging cultural gaps. As Indian films continue to gain popularity in Russia, the Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is likely to become a regular feature, showcasing the best of Indian cinema to Russian audiences. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* is not just a win for the filmmakers but also a testament to the universal appeal of Indian stories that, while deeply rooted in their own cultures, speak to the shared human experience. The Moscow International Films Week's Indian-themed week is more than just a showcase of films; it's a celebration of the cultural connections between India and Russia. The warm reception of films like *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* by the Russian audience is a reflection of the power of cinema to transcend borders and bring people together through the shared language of storytelling.



From leading corporate giants to shaping culinary excellence, PAWAN SONI'S journey is a celebration of passion and innovation in the food industry, says SAKSHI PRIYA

FROM CORPORATE SUCCESS TO CULINARY STARDOM A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF FOOD BLOGGING AND AWARDS

In the culinary world, where flavours tell stories and meals become cherished memories, Pawan Soni has forged an extraordinary path. A former Vice President at global giants like HSBC and GE Capital, Soni made a bold yet passionate shift from the corporate boardroom to the vibrant food scene. Driven by his love for discovering hidden gastronomic gems, he founded Indian Food Freak, a blog that has since grown into one of India's most influential food and travel platforms. His journey took a remarkable turn in 2014 when he launched The Big F Awards, a celebration of culinary excellence that has now become one of Delhi NCR's most prestigious events. Now entering its 11th year, The Big F Awards have distinguished themselves with an unwavering

commitment to transparency and integrity. Built on the principle of not imposing any financial burden on nominees, these awards have earned a reputation as a fair and respected platform for recognising excellence in the food industry. Over the past decade, they have become synonymous with culinary credibility, highlighting the region's finest dining establishments and championing new talents, including home chefs and bakers who bring fresh flavours and creativity to the table.

This year, The Big F Awards embark on an exciting new chapter by expanding their reach to encompass the entire Delhi-NCR region, reinforcing their vision of inclusivity and growth. This grand event will showcase a diverse array of culinary talent, with new categories that reflect the latest trends and celebrate the art of both dining out and home cooking. Attendees can look forward to an immersive experience where innovation, artistry, and passion are celebrated in a truly memorable way. At the heart of this celebration is a distinguished jury, featuring some of India's most renowned culinary experts, such as Chef Kunal Kapur, Chef Nita Mehta, Rocky Singh, and many others. These esteemed judges will rigorously evaluate each nominee, visiting the restaurants and sampling the dishes before casting their votes. This commitment to fairness ensures that the awards remain a beacon of trust and excellence in the food industry.

For Pawan Soni, The Big F Awards are more than just an event, they are a community and a platform for supporting genuine connections and inspiring culinary creativity. As he prepares for the upcoming awards in September, Soni envisions an evening that brings together the best of Delhi NCR's food scene, offering an opportunity to celebrate, connect and elevate the standards of culinary excellence. With a legacy of integrity and innovation, The Big F Awards continue to shine as a cornerstone of the region's vibrant food culture. Founded in 2014, The Big F Awards have become a symbol of credibility and fairness, consistently upholding the highest standards in the industry. This year's edition promises to build on this legacy, with new surprises, new talents, and new stories to be told. Join Pawan Soni and his esteemed panel in this grand celebration of culinary brilliance, where the finest in food artistry come together to create an unforgettable experience.

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A CONVERSATION WITH PAWAN SONI

Pawan Soni shares insights into his transition from corporate life to food blogging, the challenges he faced in

the early days and his commitment to transparency and excellence in The Big F Awards. He provides valuable perspectives on the growth of his blog, the influence of his corporate background and what to expect from this year's prestigious event.

You left a successful career as Vice President at MNCs like HSBC and GE Capital to follow your passion for food. What motivated this career shift, and how did your corporate experience shape your approach to food blogging and awards?

Back in our day, social media wasn't a thing. Like many, I followed the conventional route—completing an MBA and then diving into the corporate world. But food was my escape. Traveling the world, I discovered hidden culinary gems and started writing for newspapers and magazines. Eventually, I launched my own blog, Indian Food Freak. Before I knew it, my passion for food had grown into a full-blown career.

“MY CORPORATE EXPERIENCE WAS THE YEAST THAT HELPED INDIAN FOOD FREAK RISE. THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN ORGANISING THE AWARDS WAS SECURING SPONSORS WHO BELIEVED IN THE VISION BUT DIDN'T INFLUENCE THE RESULTS.”

In foodie terms, my corporate career was a recipe for success, but my love for food was the secret ingredient. I traded PowerPoint for paprika and now, I'm serving up a plate of purpose. Jokes aside, my corporate experience was invaluable. It taught me critical skills in sales, operations, and more, which I still use in my second career. Having worked with ethical companies, I've always prioritized transparency. Even after 11 years of running the food awards, I ensure there's no money exchange involved, whether for nominations, attending the awards or in any other aspect.

When you started Indian Food Freak food blogging was relatively new in India. How did you introduce the concept to an unfamiliar audience, and what strategies did you use to build your initial following?

Introducing food blogging to India was like adding a new spice to a traditional recipe—initially unfamiliar, but now indispensable. I focused on creating content that was relatable, authentic, and sprinkled

with humor. I remained honest and objective in all my reviews, even if it meant ruffling a few feathers among friends in the industry. By avoiding fancy jargon and staying true to my readers, I built trust and loyalty. My guiding principle has always been to write for my readers, not for the restaurants.

How did you address the skepticism or resistance from both the public and industry professionals during the early days of food blogging, especially when it was an emerging field?

Skeptics are like stale spices - they need to be replaced with fresh perspectives. I proved that food blogging wasn't just a flash in the pan by consistently delivering quality content and building a loyal community. Facebook played a significant role in this, as I created a space where food enthusiasts could exchange opinions and learn from each other.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in creating content for your blog in the early days, and how did you overcome issues related to resources, technology or audience engagement?

The early days were like cooking with limited ingredients—creativity was key. I tackled challenges by infusing my content with storytelling, leveraging social media, and engaging with my audience like a master chef. Content was never an issue because food is something we encounter daily. To improve the visual appeal, I invested in a DSLR. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Indian Food Freak has grown into one of the largest food and travel blogs in India. What were some of the initial challenges you encountered when starting your blog and organising The Big F Awards, and how did your corporate experience help you navigate these obstacles?

My corporate experience was the yeast that helped Indian Food Freak rise. The biggest challenge in organizing the awards was securing sponsors who believed in the vision but didn't influence the results. My sales and marketing skills were crucial here. Convincing people of the brand visibility that our awards could offer was key, and looking back, I'm proud to say that I delivered on those promises.

This year, The Big F Awards has expanded to cover the entire Delhi-NCR region. What motivated this expansion, and what new opportunities and challenges do you anticipate?

Expanding The Big F Awards to Delhi-NCR was like adding a new course to the menu—a natural progression. Since it takes nearly six months to organize the awards, with our jury visiting each restaurant to taste the food before

delivering a verdict, venturing into other cities wasn't feasible. However, Delhi-NCR should be treated as one city, with people frequently traveling for work and pleasure. Including Delhi has given us broader and, in some cases, better choices, helping foodies make informed decisions when they dine out.

The introduction of categories for home bakers and home chefs is a unique and thoughtful addition. What inspired these new categories, and how do they reflect current trends in the food industry?

Home bakers and home chefs are the new spice merchants—they're driving innovation and shaping trends. These categories reflect the democratisation of food and the rise of culinary entrepreneurship. I'm pleased to see that home chefs and bakers are now taken seriously. Not only have their businesses expanded, but many new ventures are focused solely on this segment, helping them grow by organising pop-ups at five-star hotels, developing apps for delivery, and introducing them to wider audiences.

Winning the Best Influencer Award by BBC Good Food in 2018 is a significant achievement. How did this recognition impact your career and the growth of Indian Food Freak and The Big F Awards?

We all seek acknowledgment and appreciation. Winning the award was a validation that I was on the right path. It boosted my morale and increased confidence in the products and content I deliver.

The Big F Awards are known for their transparency and integrity. How are you ensuring these values are upheld in this year's expanded edition, especially with the addition of new categories?

Transparency and integrity are the secret ingredients in The Big F Awards' recipe. We ensure fairness by using a robust judging process, clear criteria, and a commitment to accountability. From selecting the right jury to deliberating each result, we remain steadfast in our dedication to honesty and transparency.

As you prepare for the 11th edition of The Big F Awards, what are your personal goals for the event, and what do you hope attendees and participants will take away from this year's awards?

My personal goal for The Big F Awards is to foster a culinary community that's the icing on the cake. I hope attendees and participants leave inspired, with new connections and a renewed passion for the food industry. People don't mind losing as long as they know they lost to a worthy opponent. Our aim is to be fair and just while building camaraderie among all industry professionals.

PAWAN SONI
Food critic and founder
of the Big F Awards



