Housework deserves rights, not halos

BY INVITATION



ASHWINI DESHPANDE

This week, the Supreme Court put a floor under the value of a homemaker's labour: a minimum of Rs 30,000 a month. The loss of "domestic care" when a homemaker dies or is incapacitated in a road accident, the bench of Justice Sanjay Karol and N K Singh held, is a distinct injury to the family, deserving compensation in its own right. The court noted what economists have long documented: women's unpaid care work contributes an estimated 15-17% of India's GDP, yet remains invisible. The bench also called homemakers "nation builders": a eulogy that I will return to.

The judgment is the latest milestone in a quietly progressive strand of Indian jurisprudence. In Jan 2021, the Supreme Court in Kirti v Oriental Insurance held that a homemaker's notional income must be seriously computed in accident claims, with Justice N V Ramana observing that this recognises the labour of millions of women. In June 2023, Madras high court went further. Justice Krishnan Ramasamy, in Kannaian Naidu v Kamsala Ammal, ruled that a wife who "toils as a homemaker" is entitled to an equal share in assets standing in her husband's name, because his ability to go out and earn rested on her unpaid labour at home. Hers, the judge noted, is a 24-hour job without holidays; it cannot be ranked below the husband's eight-hour one.

The numbers behind these judgments are stark. India's Time Use Survey shows women spend close to five hours a day on unpaid domestic work, against barely half an hour for men — among the most unequal divisions in the world. This burden is the single biggest barrier to women's paid work in India, and it shapes the terms of re-entry: later, lower, for less.

When Kamal Haasan's party promised "salaries for housewives" before the 2021 Tamil Nadu elections, I argued in these pages against the idea. My objection stands. A monthly wage for housework — paid by the husband or by the state — takes the male-breadwinner family as a given and sets it in concrete. It converts an unjust division of labour into a permanent job description. It would deepen women's dependence, not reduce it: a salary routed through the household would, in most Indian homes, not be under the woman's own control. And it says nothing about the real issue — that men share the work.

So, are the courts doing what I argued against? No, and the distinction is the difference between pocket money and power. Wages for housework would pay women to stay where they are. The courts are instead recognising the value of women's unpaid labour at the point where entitlements are decided. Madras high court did not order husbands to pay their wives a salary. It said the house, the land, the savings that accumulate during a marriage are joint products of his employment and her labour, and she owns half. That is not a wage; that is a property right. Ownership gives women what a salary never could: a claim independent of the husband's goodwill, bargaining power within the marriage, and a viable exit from a bad one.

Now, about the halo. Courts and politicians alike reach for the language of veneration: homemakers as nation builders, mothers as goddesses, the home as the woman's temple. This is precisely the vocabulary conservative voices deploy to sanctify women's confinement to the home. They glorify the pedestal, and no one asks why she cannot step off it. Women do not cook and clean out of patriotism; they do it because an unequal division of labour leaves them little choice. These judgments matter for the entitlements they create — compensation and property shares — not for the eulogies that accompany them.



CHORE GAP: A scene from 'Lunchbox'. Courts now recognise invisible labour. Next step's a matrimonial property law

The limits are also clear. Recognition that arrives only when a woman dies in an accident, or when a marriage ends in litigation, is recognition deferred — a posthumous audit of a lifetime of work. And as Justice Ramasamy himself noted, no Indian law yet recognises a wife's contribution to matrimonial property; he could rule as he did, but another judge may not.

That is the unfinished agenda. Parliament should codify what the courts have begun: a matrimonial property law treating marriage as an equal economic partnership. Women who keep family farms and firms running — while being counted as 'not working' — must be recognised as workers with a claim on the earnings. Public investment in childcare and eldercare must shift the load off women's shoulders, instead of pricing it there.

The courts have stopped pretending that housework is a labour of love with no economic worth. The harder task is ours: to stop believing it is women's work. The most radical valuation of housework is not a number a judge fixes after a tragedy, nor a halo — it is a husband doing half of it, unremarked, on an ordinary Tuesday. ■

Deshpande is head of the Economics dept, Ashoka University

Then bus conductors listened to our poems. City of Mumbai has changed, but so have I

*At 91, **Gulzar** has outlived at least two versions of the city, the one that destiny "deposited" him into in 1950, and the one he continues to observe and absorb. 'Aamchi Mumbai', his new collection of 36 poems and 25 stories, is not an attempt to explain Mumbai in 2026 but to preserve the city that lives inside him, populated by migrants and mill workers, eccentrics and survivors. Speaking to **Mohua Das**, he reflects on why poetry is his way of making sense of the world*

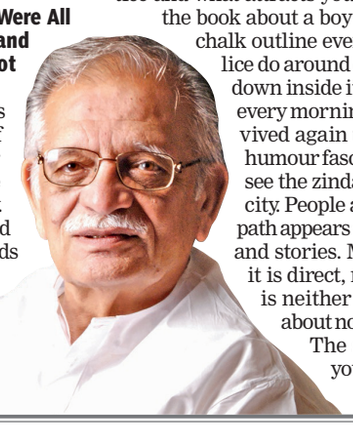
FOR THE RECORD

You have lived through mills becoming malls and Bombay becoming Mumbai. What do you miss most?

I remember the Bombay of mills, with smoke constantly rising from the chimneys. It was an industrial city, known for textiles across the country. I remember buses where no passenger was allowed to stand. It was a city of progressive labour unions, labour laws and workers' movements. I have seen workers' rallies and remember (Shripad) Dange Sahab, the great union leader, carrying the banner and leading those marches. Mazdoor gareeb zaroor the, par us gareebi mein bhi ek izzat thi. Usme sharmindagi nahin thi. (The workers may have been poor, but there was dignity in that poverty. There was no shame in it.) We used to attend Progressive Writers' Association meetings at Charni Road with people like Sardar Jafri, Rajindra Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and Sahir Sahab. We were younger writers, so after those meetings ended, we would continue our discussions on the upper deck of a tram all the way to Dadar. Conductors and passengers would listen to poems and stories and even participate. All that is not there now.

And yet, in poems such as 'These Were All Villages, Once!', 'Sealink', 'Haji Ali' and 'Skyline', there is nostalgia but not necessarily resistance to change...

What Mumbai has retained is its progressive outlook. Earlier, if somebody wanted to dream bigger or look beyond the country, the route somehow passed through Bombay. Even today, Mumbai looks outward and pushes people from the national towards the international. The skyline has changed completely. I remember how Mira-Bhayandar, Borivali and Bhandup, once jungles, have become mini Mumbais. There are tall buildings where once there were palm trees and open views. But some things have become more beautiful. Haji Ali earlier felt trapped within the city. Today, when you pass it from the flyover, especially during high tide, it looks like a gem to me. The city has grown, but some of that change is beautiful.



You view the city from street level, sometimes even below street level... the beggar at a traffic signal, life on the footpath, chawls, scavengers. How have you kept that line of sight open?

I would say not only eyes, keep your antennas open, and the city will nourish you and keep you informed. If I spend the whole day at home and then go out in the evening to look for life, then I am finished as a writer. Life is not displayed in a showroom. It is touching you every moment. That is true not only for writers but for painters, musicians, actors and performers.

We find very little of the glitzy or corporate side of Mumbai in the collection. Was that a deliberate choice?

I think it is one's temperament... what you notice and what attracts you. There is a story in the book about a boy who draws his own chalk outline every night like the police do around dead bodies and lies down inside it only to roll out of it every morning and say, 'See, I survived again today'. His sense of humour fascinates me. You must see the zinda (living) part of the city. People ask me why the footpath appears so often in my poems and stories. My association with it is direct, not imagined. But it is neither something to boast about nor turn into a tragedy. The struggle is not that you slept on a footpath. The struggle is how you lived through it. Suppose a man has lost a leg. Do you think he never smiles or is never happy? He may limp and clean taxis or rickshaws for a living, but he still laughs and lives. Don't count him out.

Poetry has been at the heart of your writings, whether in ghazals, nazms, film lyrics, experiments with tanka or presenting poets across borders. What do you value most in poetic expression?

I look for a live moment in a poem. I'm not giving a lesson. I am working on a show about the environment. But environment is not about saying, look how dirty things have become. How do you make people aware of trees? Of leaves? My next book, called 'Spinning the Moments', has a poem called 'Ek akela patta' where a tree is half submerged in flood water, but that one lone leaf still attached to the tree whispers to it, 'Darna mat, main hoon na'. My heart goes out to that moment. That's what makes a poem.

Most of your books, including 'Aamchi Mumbai' are bilingual, but so much of your writing is in the wordplay and nuances. After years of translating and being translated, what is essential even when carried into another language?

A young man from Kerala once wrote to me asking if he could publish a Malayalam version of my book 'Suspected Poems' that his father had translated while he was in jail during a communist movement. I liked the gesture and told him to go ahead. Later, he came to meet me with the book. That act of sharing is wonderful.

You describe Mumbai as a lifelong partner who has 'admonished', 'beaten' and 'scared' you, but 'never dropped you from its lap'. What do you understand about the city — and about yourself — today that you didn't when you first arrived at Bombay Central as a teenager?

Bombay is like the eldest brother in a family who takes care of the younger ones. When I write, 'Yeh shehar woh nahin jahan main 60 saal pehle aaya tha' (This is not the city where I arrived 60 years ago), the city replies to me: 'Yeh sab theek hai, par tum bhi woh nahin jo 60 saal pehle aaye the.' (All that may be true, but you are not the same person who arrived here 60 years ago either.) It is because of us that the city changes, and it is because of the city that we change. The migrating population that comes every day and goes back leaves its impressions. The city learns from them and makes space for them.

When The Beautiful Game goes behind paywalls and visa walls

BY INVITATION



SARTHAK DEV

'La Pelota Vuelve A Casa'. The streets outside Mexico City's Azteca Stadium are lined with flags carrying this slogan, which translates to 'The ball has come home.' Forty years after the Azteca was immortalised into football lore by Diego Maradona's raised hands, the World Cup has come back to Mexico, and along with it, Canada and the US. But home?

Home is where the heart rests at ease, where the warm glow of the sun illuminates the air inside. Home is where friends become family. Home is where you stumble towards, late at night, and the moment the door opens, know that you're safe. Home is where you want to return to every day. Coming home, if the poster is insistent about its message, has never felt so hostile.

Holding 80% of the world's biggest sporting event in the world's richest economy meant a few things could be taken for granted: ease of movement, abundant infrastructure, first-world stadium experience, and a chance to, even if for a fleeting moment, experience life on the other side of the Statue of Liberty.

Instead, even getting to the World Cup is hard. The Trump administration's visa blacklist spans more than 75 countries, including many participating in the World Cup. Fans from these countries will have to fork out $5000-$15000 for a bond to enter the US. That's merely a pinprick. At the airport are rifle-carrying immigration agents in Kevlar vests who will let you know they're doing you a favour, if at all they agree to let you in. Omar Abdulkadir Artan, a Somalian referee accredited by FIFA for the World Cup, was interrogated at the Miami airport for eleven hours and then thrown into a holding cell. After questioning him about his ties to terror groups, Artan was sent back to where he came from. Iranian fans were told that their ticket allocation, mandatory for all participating teams, had been completely revoked. The Senegal and Uzbekistan teams were searched and frisked in disrespectful, dehumanising ways. And while all this was happening, FIFA president Gianni Infantino was launching new cryptocurrency partners and hobnobbing with celebrity streamers.

This week, the US played their first men's home World Cup match in 32 years. The cheapest ticket for that game, a seat somewhere high in the nosebleed section of the Los Angeles Stadium, costs nearly $2000—more than the most expensive ticket for the last World Cup final. Currently, the average cheapest ticket price for group-stage games in the 11 US host cities exceeds the most expensive tickets for knockout games at every previous World Cup. The cheapest tickets for the World Cup final are currently going at five figures. I hope you won't bother finding out how much the most expensive tickets cost.

FIFA have arrived here through what they call 'dynamic pricing', which means surges and dips based on demand. And their argument is that these high prices, across all phases of the tournament, are reflective of a server-crashing melee. And then, three days before the opening ceremony, FIFA dumped nearly 180,000 unsold group stage tickets on their official resale website.

In many cities, public transport prices have been raised sharply, while parking spaces at stadiums cost hundreds of dollars per game. Then, despite scientists' warnings of oppressive heat at host cities, it took a massive backlash for FIFA to allow fans to carry water bottles to stadiums. The fine print, however, is that fans are allowed only one filled bottle per person. For more, they'd have to dig out tens of dollars towards the official water partner.

Who, truly, is this tournament for? A World Cup is supposed to be a festival for the world — for fans from tiny countries to share space with a CEO from New York, for travellers on shoestring budgets to make new friendships and memories with other travellers from a different continent. And for all of them to arrive at a stadium, a bowl of concrete and plastic, and inject it with life.

The pull of a World Cup is illustrated best in the story of Pannalal and Chaitali Chatterjee, a couple of modest means from Kidderpore in Kolkata. Between 1982 and 2018, they travelled to ten consecutive World Cups, even when their own country was never in one. Which fan, outside the first world, will be able to follow their team across this summer of greed?

In Leo Tolstoy's 'How Much Land Does a Man Need?', Pahom keeps acquiring more land for his greed, until the pursuit kills him. If the quarter-million unsold tickets and all the unbought hotel rooms are any sign, FIFA might be close to the point where they learn a lesson about how much exploitation their biggest stakeholders, the fans, will endure.

Twenty-five years ago, on the day of his retirement, Diego Maradona had said, "La pelota no se mancha." The ball shouldn't get stained. Sorry, Diego, the ball has become filthy. ■

12 years later, a stronger state, but a more contested republic

SWAMINOMICS



SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

Twelve years after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, promising 'minimum government, maximum governance', India stands transformed. The transformation is real. Some of it is also troubling.

The economy is stronger. India grew by a remarkable 7.7% in 2025-26 despite Trump's tariffs and the Iran war. It has overtaken Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy. The state is also more digitised and capable. The NDA govt did not invent many programmes transforming India but implemented them so well that they are now linked with Modi, who has surpassed Jawaharlal Nehru's record as longest continuously serving elected PM. Bank accounts for all, and Aadhaar were conceived of by the UPA. Rural electrification, rural roads, and sanitation all predated 2014. But under his govt, Aadhaar enrolment expanded from 65 crore to 140 crore, and Jan Dhan accounts from almost zero to 55 crore. Swachh Bharat built 11 crore toilets. Virtually every rural house now gets electricity.

The combination of Aadhaar, UPI, and direct benefit transfers has created a digital public infrastructure unmatched in most of the world. India now accounts for nearly half of global real-time digital payments.

Equally important has been India's emergence as a technology hub. More than 1,800 Global Capability Centres — once called in-house centres — of multinationals now operate in India, employing over two million professionals. Starting as back-office operations, they are now centres for high-end design and artificial intelligence. Google, Amazon, and Microsoft plan to invest $67.4 billion in new data centres to be used to design AI programmes. The patents will be held by multinationals, but the GCCs will create millions of top-class Indian technocrats who will eventually be hired by India's top companies, spreading the high-tech benefits widely.

Global venture-capital and private equity funds have created a revolution in start-ups, 110 of which have become unicorns—worth over a billion dollars each. This has greatly broadened the corporate base, offsetting concentration in conventional fields. Tata, Reliance, and Adani are investing heavily in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, batteries, data centres, and renewable energy, backed by the govt. Modi aims to create Indian national champions capable of competing globally, much as South Korea once nurtured Samsung and Hyundai.

Yet at the same time, democratic institutions have weakened, the space for dissent has shrunk, the political neutrality of investigative agencies is contested, and minorities increasingly fear they are second-class citizens.



PLUS MINUS: Aadhaar, UPI, and direct benefit transfers have created a digital public infrastructure unmatched in most of the world

Every major international democracy indicator points downward. The govt calls them biased. Yet when institutions across the world reach broadly similar conclusions, it can't be dismissed as just bias.

The Election Commission was once among India's most respected institutions. But a Lokniti-CSDS survey conducted last year found confidence in the EC falling, with only 28.6% saying they trust the EC to a "great extent." The survey covered Delhi and five states. The deletion of nearly 90 lakh names from the West Bengal electoral rolls caused much controversy in the recent election. The EC says the deletions were all fair. But democracy depends not only on fairness but on voter perception of fairness.

Opposition points to what they see as growing use of investigative agencies as instruments of political pressure. When Eknath Shinde split the Shiv Sena in 2022 and formed an alliance with BJP, politicians who crossed over with him often found investigations losing urgency. Similar patterns emerged after defections from the NCP. The latest exodus of MLAs from the Trinamool Congress has generated similar allegations.

Nearly half the AAP's senior leadership ended up in jail in connection with a liquor policy, with former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal arrested in March 2024, weeks before the Lok Sabha election. The trial court acquitted him later, but he claimed the political damage had been done. BJP denied allegations that it was targeting opposition leaders.

Pew Research Centre's Social Hostilities index was 'very high' at 8.7/10 in 2014 and worsened to 9.3/10 as per data published in 2024. Pew's Government RestricIndex has gone from 4.8/10 to 6.4/10. Other rights organisations have also documented growing concerns about minority rights. Critics argue that inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech have become more common in public discourse.

Supporters of the govt point to economic gains and improved state capacity. Critics counter that the 'idea of India' has changed from secular democracy to a more majoritarian political order. Economic growth alone may not resolve these concerns. ■

WORD DROP

KOKUSHOBI

A new Japanese term, Kokushobi, is making the rounds globally, and it's not related to anime. It is Japan's newly adopted term for days when temperatures soar to 40°C or higher, reflecting the growing reality of extreme heat in a warming world. The word combines koku—meaning harsh, cruel, or severe—with shobi (hot day), and has been variously



translated as "cruelly hot day" or "severely hot day". Selected through a nationwide public vote, the introduction of the term is significant because it marks a linguistic response to climate change, as many countries across the globe see heat waves and temperatures regularly crossing 40°C. It is also a reminder that what was once considered exceptional weather is increasingly becoming part of everyday life.

INBOX

NOT A STAGE

Apropos of ' Dear Indian tourist...' (ATM , June 7), do we really need to blast music, gather a crowd and turn every space into our personal set? In order to feel welcome, Indian tourists must realise that travel is not a talent show, and not every airport is a stage.

—M K Goel, Delhi

Email your letters to the editor at *sunday.times@timesofindia.com* with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Hum do, humare teen: A case for bringing back bigger families

BY INVITATION



JANHAVI NILEKANI

The recent SRS 2024 report shows that India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is 1.9, compared to a replacement rate of around 2.2. We are a rapidly ageing society, heading towards fewer working-age adults for every retiree.

Even this understates the scale of India's pending population decline. Over 500 million Indians — 40% of the population — live in states where TFR is at or below 1.5. There are no signs of a floor; fertility continues to drop in all regions.

In the govt maternity hospitals I work with, the labour wards are visibly emptying. Annual births peaked at about 29 million at the turn of the millennium. Today, around 23 million babies are born each year. As these ever-smaller birth cohorts grow up, the shrinkage spreads through the population. The absolute number of children has already peaked around 2010 and has been falling since.

Population decline is not inherently harmful, and we can adapt to its challenges. More working-age adults can join the workforce, especially given extremely low female labour force participation rates. Retirement ages can be increased. Machinery can replace human physical labour. Artificial intelligence can replace human cognitive labour. Internal migration can be expanded.

Adaptation, though, takes time. Nor is it guaranteed. Longer working lives, increased machinery and AI, reduced pensions, and increased internal migration — each of these is hugely controversial. Passing a single law on any of these subjects takes years.

India's population management programmes themselves show how long reform can take. Fifty years after the Emergency, and twenty-five years after annual births peaked, the system is still focused on reducing births. Of married Indian women aged 15 to 49, 37% are permanently sterilised. If they later desire another child —due to infant loss, remarriage, improved financial circumstances — they no longer have the choice.

India urgently needs pro-natal policies that incentivise childbearing. Sikkim and Andhra Pradesh have moved in that direction with cash and other incentives, but much more is needed. While pronatalism won't reverse population decline, it can at least slow its pace. Keeping the national TFR above 1.5 and ensuring each individual state is above 1.1 is a reasonable ambition.

Stabilising TFR above 1.5 requires plenty of families with three or more children. Today, we think of three children as unaffordable, although rupee incomes have increased substantially. In terms of opportunity cost, though, children have become very expensive. Our options for careers, travel, and hobbies are better than ever before, and so, to have a child, we must give up more. In an earlier age, I might have had multiple kids. In this era, I opted for one son and time to write op-eds.

Today, at Aastrika, a maternity hospital in Bengaluru, a third child is a rarity, mainly seen among our expat clients. Yet, to slow population decline, three-child families need to become a mainstream choice. Realistically, some Indian adults will choose a childfree lifestyle while others will have a strong desire for 'one-and-done'. To compensate and keep overall TFR above 1.5, society must support large families. It's surely easier to support a family to have a third child than to encourage a committed single to settle down with an EMI, report cards, and parent-teacher meetings!

Supporting large families will require us to transfer resources through tax advantages, subsidies, and other incentives. This ensures that the cost of raising future generations falls on all adults, and not just on those who put in the hard work of child-rearing, from which the rest of us will benefit. Our policy debate is far from pronatalism, but in the meantime, we must at least stop disincentivising large families. Unfortunately, the two-child norm and anti-natal thinking are embedded throughout our policy architecture. Maternity leave benefits are 26 weeks for the first two children, and only 12 thereafter. Income-tax relief for education applies only for the first two offspring.



PLAN CHANGE: Fifty years after Emergency, the system is still focused on reducing births

Such legislation needs urgent reform. At today's fertility rates, every 100 Indian adults are succeeded by just 49 adult grandchildren at Karnataka's TFR of 1.5, and only 37 at Tamil Nadu and Kerala's TFR of 1.3.

The gap between 1.5 and 1.3 sounds small. In reality, it is 49 adults rather than 37 in two generations — a substantial difference. Those extra adults protect society and living standards, in case robots and AI agents cannot be deployed at scale, or if regulatory infrastructure cannot adapt fast enough to population decreases. They allow us to care for the elderly with dignity.

In the past, family portraits centred grandparents, surrounded by their grandchildren. Today, portraits centre children, surrounded by their elders. We still have a window for cultural change: a revival of large families, siblings, and cousins. Not for all families. Not even for most. But for a meaningful minority. A gentle glide, rather than abrupt population collapse, requires full-throated embrace of a new credo: *Hum do. Humare teen.* ■

Nilekani is founder and chairperson of Aastrika Foundation and Aastrika Midwifery Centre