

JANUARY 4 - 10, 2026

SUNDAY POST

HERE . NOW



National Bird Day – January 5

COVER STORY

34 P

Cities, let them breathe



At Odissi International 2025

Odissi in focus

On weekdays I have to rise early for school, but Sundays are special. I wake up happily, enjoy breakfast and then my mom or grandma helps me get ready for my Odissi class.

Fun-filled Sundays

I love doing many fun activities. I enjoy drawing and painting. In summer, I go to swimming class and also enjoy going on long drives with my family.

Enrichment activities

My hobbies are playing tennis, painting, and drawing. Along with Odissi dance, I also enjoy practicing Hindustani classical vocal music and learning new songs.

Rewinding with family

In the evening, I love visiting play zones and going shopping with my family, and my favourite part is eating gup-chup and momos together.

Fan of animated movies

I love watching animated movies and cartoons like Peppa Pig, Chhota Bheem, Masha and the Bear, Frozen and many more.



With dance teacher Ratnapadma Arasmita Jangyaseni



ANISHA KHATUN, OP

WhatsApp This Week

Only on Sunday POST!

Send in your most interesting WhatsApp messages and memes at: features.orissapost@gmail.com
And we will publish the best ones

THE BEST MEMES OF THIS ISSUE

- Men read Playboy for the articles, women go to malls for the music.
- He's not dead; he's electroencephalographically challenged.
- Why is the man who invests all your money called a broker?
- Why do men like love at first sight? It saves them a lot of time.



Importance of journaling

Sir, On last week's cover story, I think, a diary is no longer a Victorian relic; it is a private server for the mind in an age of public oversharing. Between headline pings and doom-scrolling, fifteen minutes of ink-on-paper slows the heartbeat to the speed of thought, converting raw adrenaline into coherent sentences. Neuroscience calls this "narrative processing": naming emotions lowers amygdala activity, cutting cortisol levels as effectively as a ten-minute meditation app, without subscription fees or data harvesting. The page also stores evidence of who we were before algorithms began predicting us—an offline backup of tastes, jokes, and griefs that no platform can delete or monetize. For professionals, a bullet-journal becomes a second brain, capturing half-formed ideas that later crystallize into patents, poems, or start-ups; for students, it rehearses arguments that reappear in exam essays with surprising fluency. In a time when memory is outsourced to clouds, handwriting re-establishes bodily ownership of experience: the pressure of pen, the smell of paper, the slight ache in the wrist—all sensory anchors that keep identity from drifting. Ultimately, diaries remind us that we are works in progress worth observing, editing, and rereading, one private entry at a time.

SAMARPITA DASH, KEONJHAR

LETTERS



A word for readers

Sunday post is serving a platter of delectable fare every week, or so we hope. We want readers to interact with us. Feel free to send in your opinions, queries, comments and contributions to

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National Bird Day – January 5

Cities, let them breathe



ANISHA KHATUN, OP

Before the morning traffic begins its familiar chorus, before screens flicker to life and buildings wake in glass and steel, there is often a softer sound waiting to be heard, a bird's call, brief yet profound. It arrives like a gentle reminder that cities, no matter how modern, are still part of a living landscape.

As urban landscapes expand relentlessly, the urgency to create bird-friendly cities grows deeper by the day. Rapid urbanisation, vanishing green cover, reflective glass buildings, excessive noise and artificial night lights have turned once-navigable skies into perilous corridors. Birds face disorientation, habitat loss, and declining food sources, pushing many species closer to disappearance. Their struggle is not separate from ours, birds are sensitive indicators of environmental health and their decline signals deeper imbalances in the ecosystems that also sustain human life.

When we make room for birds, cities become gentler, healthier and more humane. Their songs soften concrete mornings, restore ecological balance and remind us of a shared responsibility. In protecting their flight, we safeguard our own future, crafting communities rooted in care, balance and a deeper respect for the living world around us.

Ahead of National Bird Day, Sunday POST spoke to several experts to gain insights into the issue and explore ways



to help birds live peacefully within urban spaces.

'Changes in bird populations warn us when ecosystems are in trouble'

Dr Swetashree Purohit, Regional Coordinator for Odisha at Bird Count India, underlines the indispensable ecological role birds play in maintaining healthy ecosystems. She says birds act as natural pest controllers by feeding on insects and rodents that damage crops and spread diseases. Beyond this, they are vital seed dispersers, helping forests regenerate and restoring disturbed habitats. "Many birds also pollinate wild plants and crops, quietly supporting our food and medicine systems," she notes. Scavenging species further contribute by cleaning up carcasses, reducing disease risks and accelerating nutrient recycling in soil. Importantly, birds serve as sensitive indicators of environmental health. "Changes in bird populations warn us when ecosystems are in trouble," Dr Purohit says, making their presence, or absence, a crucial signal of ecological imbalance.

However, urban environments pose

growing challenges for bird life. Dr Purohit points out that cities replace green, breathable spaces with concrete, glass, and traffic, creating hostile conditions for most species. Birds then face a stressful mix of noise, light, heat, pollution and predators that few species can truly tolerate, she adds.

She further explains, "Habitat destruction and fragmentation leave fewer nesting sites and shelters, while manicured landscapes and paved surfaces drastically reduce in- fruits and seeds, leading to chronic food short-

Noise pol-

fic and construction disrupts bird communication, mate attraction, and territory defence, while bright night lights disorient birds, alter natural rhythms and cause deadly col-

Rapid urbanisation strips away green refuges, replaces them with mirror-walled towers that reflect deceptive skies. This makes our winged neighbours face disorientation, habitat loss, while declining food sources have put several species on the brink of disappearance

lisions during flight or migration. Added to this are urban heat islands, air pollution and pesticide exposure, which weaken immunity and reduce prey availability. Glass buildings, vehicles and power lines cause frequent fatal collisions, while free-ranging cats and dogs prey on eggs, chicks and adult birds. Over time, sensitive native species disappear, leaving cities dominated by a few hardy generalists like pigeons and crows, resulting in a biologically poorer and less vibrant urban soundscape."

She stresses that cities can still be redesigned to coexist with birds through thoughtful choices and community action. She advocates for safer buildings using bird-friendly glass, window films, decals, or grills and reducing unnecessary night lighting, especially during migration seasons.

Besides, creating greener spaces is equally important, planting native trees, shrubs and climbers instead of only lawns or exotic species can provide food, shelter, and insects, Purohit further says.

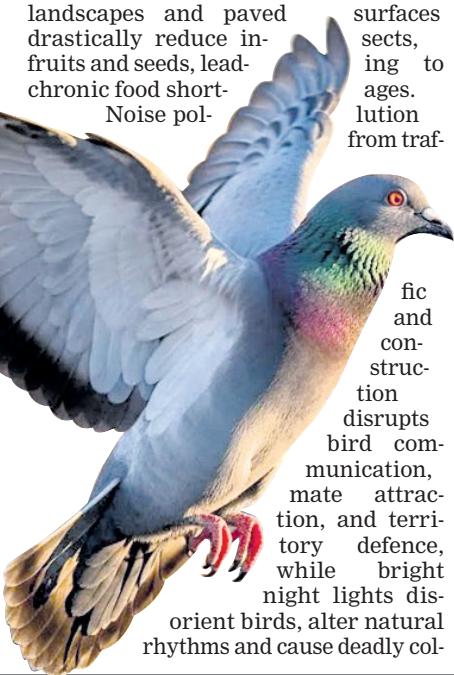
She also encourages placing shallow water bowls, providing shade during heat waves and installing nest boxes and feeders away from glass and traffic. Reducing everyday hazards by avoiding pesticides and managing pets responsibly can make a significant difference. Finally, Dr Purohit highlights the power of collective effort through citizen campaigns, school initiatives, bird counts and advocacy for policies that protect mature trees, urban wetlands and bird-friendly building designs, steps that can help create truly bird-friendly cities and communities.

Disappearance of Brown-winged Kingfisher is a sign of threat to mangrove ecosystem

Rutika Nath, a wildlife biologist, draws attention to Bhitarkanika's kingfishers as living indicators of what bird-friendly planning can achieve, even offering lessons for cities and communities.

Bhitarkanika is home to seven species of kingfishers, including the Common, Collared, White-throated, Black-capped, Stork-billed, Pied and the rare Brown-winged Kingfisher.

"The Brown-winged Kingfisher, locally called Khaira macharanka, lives mainly in mangrove forests and its best-known home is Bhitarkanika National Park," Nath says. She explains that this landscape of winding creeks, muddy shores and tidal rivers highlights how closely birds depend on clean water and native vegetation, elements that urban spaces must also restore if they are to become bird-friendly.





Listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List and protected under Schedule II, the Brown-winged Kingfisher faces mounting threats from mangrove degradation, shrimp farming, tourist boat noise and rising sea levels that wash away nesting banks. Nath warns, "When this bird disappears, it's a warning sign that the mangrove ecosystem is also in danger," a message that resonates strongly for cities losing wetlands and green buffers.

She further says that the bird's breeding cycle underlines the importance of undisturbed spaces. "The Brown-winged Kingfisher nests during March and April, digging burrows in muddy riverbanks or decayed tree trunks near tidal creeks and both parents share the work of raising the chicks," Nath says. The species prefers native mangrove trees like Sundari, Keruan and Bani for perching and nesting, reinforcing the need for indigenous plants in urban landscapes. Nath also highlights the role of local communities: "Traditional fishing practices have helped protect these habitats, and today community-run boat safaris and birdwatching tours support livelihoods while conserving nature." She believes such models, combining habitat protection, native vegetation and community involvement, can guide the creation of bird-friendly cities where birds and people coexist sustainably.

'Loss of native vegetation affects bird populations'

Manaranjan Das, a bird guide at Kuldha Wildlife Sanctuary, believes coexistence is still possible with mindful urban planning and everyday citizen effort. Having lived close to forested areas, Das has closely observed migratory birds and their needs. He explains that birds are extremely sensitive to their surroundings and choose habitats that offer safety, food, water, and suitable nesting spaces. "There are certain birds that depend on a specific type of

'Children should be educated and made sensitive towards living beings'

Akash Ranjan Rath, environmentalist and founder of the Jungle Lore Foundation, emphasises that making cities bird-friendly requires thoughtful planning rather than isolated

tree. They only consume the fruit available on that tree," he says, highlighting how the loss of native vegetation directly affects bird populations. If an area feels unsafe or unsuitable for breeding, birds simply stop returning, breaking long-established migration cycles.

Das explains that different bird species migrate in different seasons, some during winter, and others in summer, while passage migratory birds briefly stop along specific flyways. These birds rely on wetlands, forests and green pockets within cities to rest and refuel before continuing their journey. "Passage migratory birds use stopover sites like wetlands or forests, not to stay long, but to regain energy," he explains. When such green corridors disappear due to unchecked construction and habitat disturbance, birds lose critical survival points. For bird-friendly cities to thrive, urban spaces must integrate green cover, water bodies and quiet nesting zones into development plans rather than treating them as afterthoughts.

Urbanisation, Das says, has introduced newer threats as well. The excessive focus on ornamental plants has reduced food availability for birds. He urges communities to plant fruit- and flower-bearing native trees instead. Another serious concern is the growing number of cell towers. According to Das, electromagnetic radiation from mobile masts can disorient birds, interfere with navigation, damage embryos, thin eggshells and reduce reproductive success in species like sparrows and storks. However, he believes small, consistent actions can help rebuild trust. "We can keep water in small pots on balconies or terraces, arrange food, and teach children not to disturb birds or breach their privacy," he says, adding, "It is a long way, but with consistent efforts, we can create bird-friendly cities and communities where humans and birds thrive together."

Rath strongly believes that the key to long-term coexistence lies in developing and protecting the peripheral areas of cities. If these outer zones are rich in vegetation and relatively undisturbed, birds can gradually adapt and move closer to urban centres. "If we want birds to thrive in cities, we must develop the peripheral areas. Then, gradually, birds will get into the city and there will be coexistence," he explains. He adds that these areas should remain less populated or semi-isolated to minimise human interference, allowing birds to breed and forage without constant stress. Over time, such green belts can function as safe corridors that connect natural habitats with urban spaces, making cities more hospitable for diverse bird species.

Highlighting broader environmental challenges, Rath points out that pollution remains a major threat to birds. Air and water pollution negatively affect their health, food sources and breeding success. Contaminated water bodies reduce fish and insect populations, while polluted air can weaken birds' respiratory systems and overall immunity. He also touches upon the role of evolution in changing bird populations, noting that some species adapt to shifting climates and urban pressures, while others fail to survive. Beyond infrastructure and planning, Rath stresses the importance of awareness and education. People need to understand the ecological value of birds and their role in maintaining environmental balance. "Children should be educated and made sensitive towards living beings," he says, adding that fostering empathy and responsibility from a young age is crucial. According to Rath, only a combination of informed citizens, mindful urban planning, and sustained ecological efforts can ensure that birds continue to thrive alongside humans in growing cities.

In a digital world hiding online actions is largely a myth. Because every interaction leaves a permanent digital footprint easily linked by advanced AI and data analytics, even from 'anonymized' data sets, revealing unique patterns that can re-identify individuals through seemingly harmless data points like location, posts, and browsing habits



The fall of Monsignor Jeffrey Burrill, a high-ranking priest of US wasn't divine—it was digital. Anonymous app data traced the celibate priest's late-night Grindr pings, outing a life at odds with his pulpit. In a world where phones whisper secrets, even holy men leave footprints.

Expectedly, the resignation of Burrill in 2021 sent shockwaves through the US Catholic Church—not because of a scandal involving minors or abuse, but because of something far more modern and insidious: the illusion of anonymity in the digital age.

Burrill, then the General Secretary of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), was a top official entrusted with guiding the Church's response to clergy misconduct. Yet, his own private life became the subject of scrutiny when *The Pillar*, a Catholic news outlet, revealed that Burrill had allegedly used the gay dating app Grindr and visited gay bars and private residences over a period of years. The evidence? App data signals tied to his mobile device—data that, while anonymized, was traceable through meticulous digital forensics.

The story didn't just expose a priest's private contradictions. It exposed a fundamental truth: you are never truly anonymous online.

"An analysis of app data signals correlated to Burrill's mobile device shows the priest also visited gay bars and private residences while using a location-based hookup app in numerous cities from 2018 to 2020," *The Pillar* reported.

The data wasn't hacked. It wasn't leaked by a whistleblower. It was legally purchased, aggregated, and analyzed—an everyday commodity in the digital economy. Every tap, swipe, and location ping left a breadcrumb trail that, when pieced together, painted a vivid picture of a man living a double life.

Burrill's resignation was swift. In a memo to bishops, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles stated that while the allegations did not involve minors, Burrill stepped down "to avoid becoming a distraction to the operations and ongoing work of the Conference".

But beyond the Church's internal drama, the incident ignited a broader conversation about privacy, surveillance, and the moral implications of digital exposure. Critics questioned the ethics of *The Pillar*'s investigation. Jesuit priest and LGBTQ advocate James Martin condemned the use of "immoral means to spy on priests," warning of a slippery slope toward widespread surveillance within the Church.

Yet, the episode also un-

The resignation of Jeffrey Burrill, a high-ranking priest, in 2021 sent shockwaves through the US Catholic Church—not because of a scandal involving minors or abuse, but because of something far more modern and insidious: the illusion of anonymity in the digital age

derscored a chilling reality: in an era where data is currency, even the most sacred identities are not safe from unmasking.

Burrill, who had served the Church for over two decades, was not accused of illegality. His actions, while violating Church doctrine on celibacy, were not criminal. But in a world where data brokers profit from behavioral breadcrumbs, moral failings can be weaponized with algorithmic precision.

The monsignor's story is more than a cautionary tale for clergy. It's a wake-up call for anyone who believes that incognito mode, pseudonyms, or app permissions can shield them from scrutiny. Every device has a digital fingerprint. Every interaction leaves a trace. And in the right hands—or the wrong ones—those traces can reconstruct a life.

In 2022, Burrill quietly returned to ministry in his home diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, where Bishop William Callahan welcomed him back, stating there had been no allegations of illegal misconduct. But the damage to his reputation—and the broader message—lingers. You are never truly anonymous. Not in the confessional, not in the cloud.



Illusion of anonymity

YOU MAY NOT KNOW

There are quite a few misconceptions we can find about digital data protection.

Here's a look at some of them

Why anonymity fails

Digital footprints: Every click, post, and location check-in creates data trails that platforms, ISPs, and data brokers log. Data aggregation: Combining seemingly unrelated data (like food delivery, ride-sharing, and fitness app data) can paint a detailed picture of your life, unmasking patterns that identify you.

Re-identification: Researchers have shown that just a few data points (gender, postcode, birth date, a hobby) can pinpoint individuals, and even "anonymized" datasets (like Netflix's) have been de-anonymized by linking them with other public data.

Device & location data: Smartphones constantly leak location data and unique identifiers, acting as constant digital fingerprints.

Common misconceptions

VPNs are foolproof: While VPNs mask IP addresses, users must trust the VPN provider, and some (especially free ones) log and sell data, defeating the purpose.

"Incognito" mode: This only clears local history; companies and governments still collect your data.

Different accounts: Using aliases or separate accounts doesn't guarantee anonymity, as patterns and device IDs can still link them back to you.

The reality

Permanent data: Your online activity is largely permanent and stored, making it difficult to truly disappear.

Surveillance economy: Your data is a valuable currency, collected and analyzed to predict behavior, often without explicit, informed consent.

What you can do

- Use privacy-focused browsers and secure apps.
- Be conscious of what you share and agree to.
- Understand your rights (like those under India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023) to access and delete your data.

Madhuri on her early days

Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit recently opened up about her early days in the film industry.

Speaking exclusively to this news agency, she recalled a time when luxury and convenience on sets were virtually non-existent. Talking about shoots in places like Ooty, Madhuri reminisced how actors and crew often had to make do without vanity vans, proper amenities, or comforts, with hairdressers and assistants braving the outdoors just to keep everyone ready.

While she cherishes the passion that defined those times, Madhuri admits she prefers not to dwell on those days. However, the Devdas actress also highlighted that the sacrifices made back then were driven purely by a deep love for the craft.

Madhuri Dixit stated, "When we were shoot-

ing in Ooty, we used to find some jungle to go to. And then our hairdressers and all used to stand with all shawls. I don't want to remember those days. They were quite... But through it all, I think we enjoyed ourselves. I mean, we loved what we did. And we all came together because of that love. And we were ready to make those sacrifices. At that time, we didn't even know it was sacrifices. It was way of life at that time."

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Sidharth marks 2025 as a year of growth

Actor Sidharth Malhotra reflected on the year 2025 as a year full of growth. He admitted that his life changed for the better in 2025, bringing a major shift that added depth and a softer strength to his personality.

Adding Harry Styles' "As It Was" as the background score, Sidharth dropped a video compilation of some of the major highlights of 2025 for him.

From accompanying his better half, Kiara Advani, to her Met Gala debut to welcoming his daughter Sarayaa Malhotra, to shooting his projects Param Sundari and Vvan, 2025 has truly been a wholesome year for Sidharth.

Putting 2025 in perspective, Sidharth shared a lovely note on social media that read, "Somewhere between sets and home, life shifted forever and for the better, adding a new depth, a softer strength and a reason to see the world a little differently. Grateful for the growth, the grace, the cinema. Cheers 2025 (sic)."

The Shershaah actor steps into 2026 with a lot of gratitude and a clear purpose.

"Walking into 2026 with a full heart, a clearer purpose and endless gratitude. Happy New Year, everyone. Big love!" he added.

July 16, 2025, Sidharth and Kiara announced the arrival of their baby girl on social media, claiming that the little one has changed their world forever.

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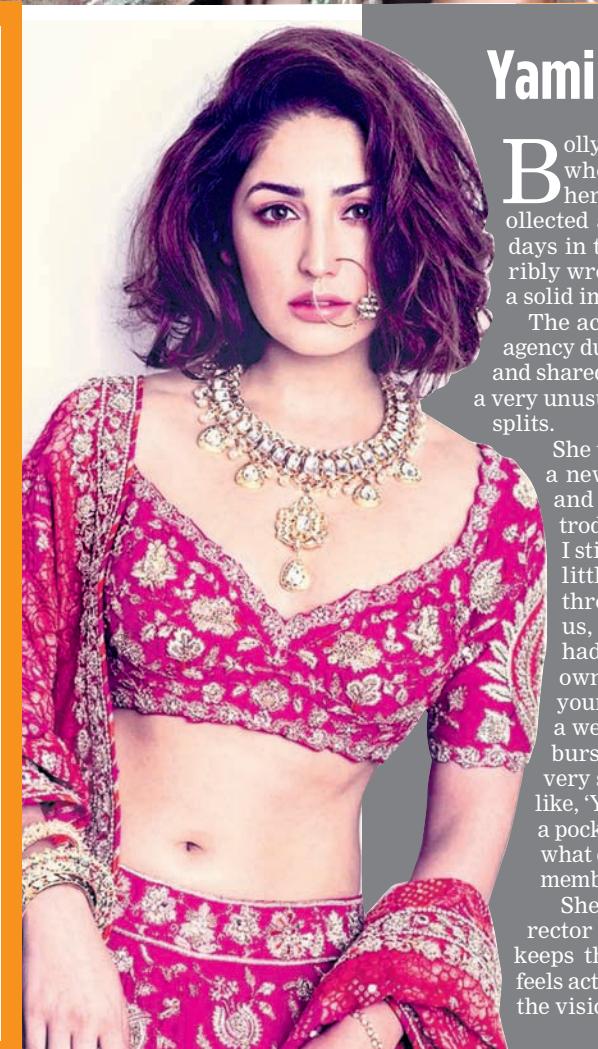
Malaika's rare candour

Malaika Arora recently spoke with rare candour about some of the most defining chapters of her life during a podcast, addressing her divorce, public scrutiny, relationships and the double standards women continue to face. Reflecting on her separation, the actress revealed how deeply she was judged, not only by the public but also by people close to her. Despite the backlash and constant questioning of her choices, Malaika said she has no regrets, adding that choosing her own happiness was essential, even if it meant standing alone.

She also touched upon the intense trolling she faced during her relationship with Arjun Kapoor, particularly over their age difference, highlighting how society reacts differently when women move on. Pointing out the imbalance, Malaika noted that men are rarely questioned for similar choices, while women are quickly labelled and judged for stepping away from traditional norms. According to her, breaking away and building one's own life is not wrong, it sets an example.

Speaking about love and marriage today, Malaika said she still believes in love and the institution of marriage but is not actively seeking it. Content and fulfilled, she remains open to love if it finds its way to her. She concluded with advice to younger women, urging them to live fully, gain independence, and understand themselves before choosing to settle down.

AGENCIES



Yami gets candid

Bollywood actress Yami Gautam, who is fresh off the success of her recent film *Haq*, has recollected an incident from her early days in theatre when she went horribly wrong with the lines yet made a solid impact.

The actress spoke with this news agency during the promotions of *Haq*, and shared how she delivered a line in a very unusual way that left the room in splits.

She told, "I remember there was a new theater teacher at school and theater was just being introduced. There was a line that I still remember, 'Keep still, you little devil, or I will slit your throat'. Now there were 35 of us, the students, and everyone had to say their lines in their own way and then it would be your turn again. I said it in such a weird way once that everyone burst out laughing. I was being very serious on my part. She was like, 'You sounded like a street, like a pocket man'. I said, 'I don't know what else to do, but at least you remember my lines. I gave it a shot'".

She also spoke about how a director streamlines the story, and keeps the narrative on track. She feels actors are the means to achieve the vision of the director.

IANS

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas – Jan 9

Scent of home soil



ANISHA KHATUN, OP

Every sunrise abroad is a quiet negotiation: chase the next deadline beneath sleek skylines, drive children to pristine schools, swipe cards for comforts their parents never knew. Yet the pixelated scent of monsoon earth, the noise from street-vendor carts, the lilt of mother-tongue laughter tug like an undertow

Living far from one's homeland is an experience layered with ambition, sacrifice and quiet longing. For those who leave in search of better opportunities, the journey is not just about crossing borders but about carrying memories, values and identity across continents. The physical distance may promise growth and stability, yet the emotional distance is never absolute. Home continues to exist in the smallest details.

For many professionals settled abroad with their families, life becomes a careful balance between building a future and holding on to the past. The rush of daily work, the comfort of modern living and the responsibilities often coexist with an unspoken nostalgia for familiar faces, traditions and a sense of belonging that cannot be replicated. Home becomes less of a location and more of an emotion, something deeply personal, quietly cherished and instinctively protected.

This emotional connection does not fade with time; instead, it matures. It shapes how values are passed on to next generation, how festivals are celebrated and how identity is preserved in a foreign land.

Ahead of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, a couple of NRIs shared with Sunday POST their emotion and more.

Asutosa Sahoo, a soft-

ware engineer living in New Jersey, USA, with his family for more than 15 years, says, "Life here is comfortable, fast-paced, and full of opportunities, yet a part of my heart still belongs to Odisha. No matter how far I travel or how settled I become, the emotional connection with my homeland remains unchanged. Raising my children in a foreign country has deepened this bond even further. Through stories, language, festivals and food, we try to pass on the essence of our roots to them. Celebrating festivals in a small community gathering or teaching my children to speak a few Odia words feels like preserving a piece of our identity."

Sahoo further shares, "While Dallas has given us professional growth and stability, our homeland has given us our values, emotions and sense of belonging. My wife and I often speak about home, about family gatherings, familiar traditions

and the warmth of people that no modern comfort can replace. Living abroad has taught me that home is not just a place, but a feeling carried within. One day, I hope my children will understand where their roots lie and feel proud of the land that shaped their parents."

Ankita Priyadarshini, technical architect working in Sydney, Australia, says, "Even when we live thousands of miles away, Odisha continues to shape our everyday lives in quiet yet powerful ways. It exists in our

thoughts, in the rituals we follow and in the way we celebrate moments that matter. Though we may be far from its soil, our emotional roots remain deeply planted in its language, its festivals and the memories that have shaped our identity. Living abroad often makes this connection stronger. We consciously recreate traditions in foreign lands, not out of obligation, but out of love and belonging. Teaching our children familiar customs, celebrating festivals together and keeping our mother tongue alive within our homes become acts of preservation. Through these moments, we ensure that the cultural flame continues to burn, even across generations born far from home."

"Our journeys abroad are also a reflection of where we come from. Every achievement carries with it the values and spirit instilled by our homeland. When we succeed, it is not just personal, it becomes a shared pride felt by families and communities back home. In this way, distance never truly separates us from Odisha; it only redefines how we carry it within us, every single day," Priyadarshini concludes.



A sample page of
Voynich Manuscript

Ink that refuses to speak



Wilfrid Voynich, the Polish bibliophile, who bought the manuscript

An ancient text called the Voynich Manuscript still baffles scientists. Hand-written in an unknown language, the manuscript has been carbon-dated to early 15th Century CE. Hundreds of cryptographers and master code-breakers have tried to decipher it over the years, with none succeeding in grasping its meaning or origin

On a quiet afternoon in 1912, Polish book dealer Wilfrid Voynich closed the heavy oak door of a Jesuit college near Rome, tucked a small, unprepossessing codex under his arm, and stepped into legend. The vellum pages he carried were covered with looping, liquorice-black script and illustrations of plants that have never grown on Earth, of women who sprout pipes instead of limbs, of suns and moons locked in geometric dances. From that moment, the manuscript—soon christened with Voynich's own name—became the most stubbornly unreadable book in the world.

Inside were 234 parchment folios whose margins swirled with unknown letters and whose pigments—lapis, malachite, arsenic green—glowed like trapped jewels. Carbon-dating later fixed the skins at 1404-1438, yet no ownership stamp, no ex-libris, no proud “finis” anchored the volume to any scriptorium. Voynich, a veteran of revolutionary smuggling networks, sensed he had stumbled upon the bibliophile's holy grail: a book that promised to rewrite the story of the Renaissance mind.

Rumors flew immediately. Jesuit records hinted the manuscript had once belonged to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who allegedly paid 600 gold ducats—enough to buy a small vineyard—convinced it was the lost notebook of Roger Bacon, the friar who reputedly forged a talking brass head. From Rudolf it passed through court pharmacists, alchemists, and finally the polymath Athanasius Kircher, whose 1665 catalogue lists “a book written in an unknown alphabet, given by a friend.” There the trail vanishes until Voynich's re-discovery. In an age of telegraph wires and steamships, the codex arrived like a time traveler clutching a passport no one could read.

Six sections, six rabbit holes

Open the manuscript and you fall through six wormholes of speculation. First comes the Herbal: 113 plants painted with botanical precision—except none match species from Alexandria to Padua. Roots terminate in jellyfish tendrils; petals scale like dragon skin. Next, Astronomy: fold-out sheets crowded with 29-eyed suns, zodiacs scrambled into cosmic anagrams. Biology gives us naked women—always the same rounded belly, always the pragmatic bun—standing in green baths connected by intestinally tangled pipes. Cosmology offers nine medallions that look like star charts drawn by someone who has only heard stars described. Pharmaceutical lines up jars that might contain perfume, poison, or powdered moonlight. Finally, Recipes: 300 paragraphs each fronted by a star, as though the author meant to cook the universe but misplaced the ingredients list. Each section obeys its own visual grammar, yet the script—elegant, economical, written without hesitation—flows unchanged throughout. Word lengths follow Zipf's law; letter clusters repeat like conjugations; five distinct

scribal hands have been detected, implying a workshop rather than a lone crank. Whoever these scribes were, they shared a secret language that never slipped into decryption, not even for a single verb.

A century of would-be solvers

Every generation births a new champion. In 1921, University of Pennsylvania professor William Newbold announced he had detected microscopic Greek shorthand swirling around individual letters—only to be reminded that Bacon could not have invented the microscope. During WWII, NSA recruits practiced on Voynich photocopies; the code-breakers who cracked Purple and Enigma left the manuscript untouched. In 1978, herbalist Edith Sherwood matched 124 drawings to Mediterranean flora and declared the text a dialect of proto-Romance; critics replied that the matches required more imagination than botany. Most recently, AI enthusiasts trained neural networks on medieval Welsh, announcing breathlessly that the manuscript is a women's health guide—until statisticians showed the algorithms had simply learned to hallucinate Voynichese.

Still the book is not random. Voynichese avoids the consonant pile-ups typical of gibberish; word positions cluster like topical vocabulary; even erasures reveal deliberate re-inking. Someone meant this to be read—eventually.

Why the riddle matters more than the answer

Perhaps the manuscript's greatest gift is its stubbornness. In an era when satellites map every roofline and algorithms finish our sentences, the codex insists that the past can still outwit the present. Each failed decipherment mirrors its era's obsessions: Rudolf's alchemy, Kircher's Egyptology, Victorian spiritualism, Cold War cryptanalysis, modern machine learning. The book becomes a mirror; we see in it what we most want to see.

Today the volume rests under bullet-proof glass at Yale's Beinecke Library, humidity locked at 50 percent, light dialed to twilight dimness. Visitors queue for thirty seconds—long enough to glimpse a single folio turned weekly like a slow-motion calendar—then leave shaking their heads, half-disappointed, half-relieved that something in our annotated world still eludes annotation.

Last word

Until some future reader finds the right lens—chemical, linguistic, or purely imaginative—the Voynich Manuscript will remain what it has always been: a midnight door left ajar, inviting us to peer through, to wonder, and to remember that not every puzzle is meant to be solved. Some are meant to keep us awake, ink-stained and wondering, while the unknowable text

curls across the page like smoke from a candle we swear we just blew out.

OP DESK



Voynich Manuscript under bullet-proof glass at Yale's Beinecke Library