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EVERY year in October or November, the Indian mediasphere explodes with thinkpieces and online posts defending Karva Chauth, a mostly North Indian festival in which women fast to pray for their spouse's longevity. Some try (and fail) to give the occasion a feminist

spin, others equalise things by fasting with rather than for their partner, and some get really defensive. Amusing or annoying, the discourse, if it can even be called that, is mostly harmless and with very low stakes. For the most part, women rising to prove that Karva Chauth is not a sexist tradition aren't trying to recruit others into observing it en masse as much as they are trying to parse or assuage their own complicated feelings about it. But trust the patriarchy to take things a step further. Last week, the Punjab and Haryana High Court dis-

THE VENUS FLYTRAP

The audacity of a sexist PIL

missed a PIL put forth by a Haryana resident named Narender Kumar Malhotra petitioning for a law to make Karva Chauth mandatory. Specifically, Mr Malhotra had wanted for the festival to be renamed as either "Maa Parvati Utsav" or "Maa Gaura Utsav", and for there to be a law that would make the observance compulsory for "all women, irrespective of their marital status, including wid-

ows, divorcees, separated women, and women in live-in relationships". Single women — the minority of women with the mixed but mostly good fortune of never having been married in this socio-cultural milieu — or just the young and yet-married weren't mentioned. I'd like to think they didn't want to acknowledge us, because to do so is usually a bit scary for conservative mindsets. Also, according to

this petition, organisations or individuals denying women participation in this festival ought to be held punishable by law. The whole thing is out of a patriarchal fantasy. Imagine: just under half the nation starving for an entire day, by law, praying for the well-being of the menfolk of the land. India sat at an alarming 105 out of 127 in the 2024 Global Hunger Index. Imagine if ordinary

folk with relative privilege thought about that a little more, rather than cheering façades of development and trying to push the culture back into medieval mores. This event falls into the category of "frivolous litigation", and some may also find it frivolous to dwell on it. The Punjab and Haryana HC has, after all, dismissed it entirely and also penalised the petitioner for wasting the court's time and taxpayers' money with a token ₹1,000 donation to a welfare fund in Chandigarh. This High Court responded sensibly, but that such a PIL was

filed at all is disturbing. Not only is Karva Chauth a sexist ritual, but it is also a strictly Hindu festival. The desire to impose it by law is tied to all kinds of religious and societal restrictions and discriminations, many of which do not need the backing of legality to already be in practice. That desire is also not one citizen's alone: he acted knowing that the prevalent cultural tide would support such steps, even if one court turned him down. We are all swirling, swimming or suffocating, within that tide — and it only gains force.

LET'S RENDEZVOUS

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

Changemaker Rafiq Ahmed talks about his path of leadership and walks us through his personal world of business, books, and life philosophy



AASHNA REDDY

FROM childhood memories of visiting his father's steel factory to his efforts in

empowering women in Tamil Nadu's backward districts, Rafiq Ahmed's story is one of dedication and purpose. A dynamic and multifaceted businessman, Rafiq is known for his impressive leadership across various sectors such as iron, steel, logistics, and education. As the flagship promoter of Kothari Industrial Corporation Ltd. (KICL) and director of German Iron & Steel Pvt. Ltd., he has steered these companies through transformative growth, reinvigorating legacy institutions while also pushing boundaries in emerging industries.

Beyond the corporate boardrooms, however, is a man with a deep passion for making a positive impact. Excerpts follow:

● If you weren't a businessman, what career would you have pursued?

I'm from a family where, from my birth, I saw my father as a businessman. So, I never thought about anything else. My inspiration, my hero, is my father. So, I always wanted to be a businessman. Even when I had another option after finishing my higher secondary to become an engineer, business was on my mind. But if you ask me now, I think I would have been a person from your industry — maybe a lawyer or a journalist.

● Growing up in a business-oriented family, was there ever a moment when you thought, "I don't want to do this"?

No, I've never come across a situation like that. I'm someone who like challenges. I would like to face a lot of challenges. Every day, I feel like taking on a lot, facing it, and moving forward. So, I'm not someone who would think like that.

● If you had a free day with no meetings or work commitments, how would you spend it?

To be honest, I

don't see any free time endowed. I work on Sundays as well. I read a lot of news, and my hobby is trying to understand and learn more about the global economy and the economic growth of the country.

When I used to travel as an importer, I travelled all over the world. Wherever I went, I used to think about my country and how things would work here. Now, I'm seeing a lot of changes, so I try to bring the maximum possible to our country.

● What's your favourite destination?

My favourite destination is the United States. I love the highways in the USA. I've been travelling to the USA for over 20 years. I've visited so many countries, but I like the United States the most.

● What's the best piece of advice your parents ever gave you that you still follow today?

My father always used to say, 'Work very hard.' When I was young, I didn't like it. It wasn't nice for me at the time, and he made me practise it. But now I enjoy it, and I give the same advice to my children: work hard.

● What's your favourite childhood memory that inspired your curiosity for business?

Actually, we are from a business family. It's a self-owned business, and my father was the owner of it. I saw all the people working under him — thousands of people — and I used to go to school and observe the respect people gave him when the boss arrived. That inspired me to be a leader. I saw my father as a

leader, and I wanted to be like him. In those days, respect was given differently, and expectations were high. Now, respect is there, but what I personally respect are the colleagues who work with me. I don't call them employees; I prefer calling them colleagues. They respect me for my hard work and the support I give them, and it's mutual.

● You've worked in multiple sectors — iron, steel, logistics, and education. If you had to choose one as your favourite, which one would it be and why?

Iron and steel are my favourite. My father had a steel factory, and during my school days, when I was in 10th grade, there was a holiday, and my father used to ask me to get ready. I used to travel to Coimbatore on the Blue Mountain train on Friday nights, and I'd spend my holidays — 50 to 60 days — in the factory.

This was a compulsory thing! It wasn't even a choice or interest. But I started getting inspired by the business. Later, when I ventured out on my own, the first profit I made was from steel imports, and I eventually set up a steel factory. So, I have a lot of passion for this.

● Reviving historical institutions like Kothari Industrial Corporation and Industrial Economist is inspiring. What motivates you to take on such challenging projects?

Kothari Industrial Corporation is a 100-year-old company. Being part of it, becoming a director, then managing director, and now a promoter — it makes me feel very proud. When I was young, we were in Delhi for three years. My father had invested in a factory, and I used to see corporate life. I was inspired by it. So in 2013, when I came here, and then joined Kothari, there were challenges. But the fire inside me made me stronger. It's not just business, it's a passion and a service to society.

● What's the most rewarding part of creating jobs for women in backward districts of Tamil Nadu?

If you want to change your country, your state, or your district, money needs to go to the government,

and skill development is essential. Women should be skilled, and corporates have a responsibility to drive this change. In Perambalur, for example, we've employed 2,000 women who were housewives. They had no revenue, and their families struggled. When they get jobs, recognition, meals, transportation, protection, and the pride of wearing a uniform that says, 'I'm working at Kothari for an American brand like Crocs,' it transforms their lives.

Now, their entire family status has changed. For my birthday, women from Perambalur wished me, 'Anna namba ooru la vishesham na koopuda maatanaga anna, ipo vandhu mariyadha vandhiruchu' (If there was ever a celebration in our town, they'd never call us but now we have respect and dignity). Seeing tears of happiness in their eyes is my biggest reward.

● How would you describe your leadership style?

I take the challenge, support my team, and make them believe in themselves. That's my way. As a leader, I think it's important to inspire your team to grow and trust themselves while standing by them during challenges.

● What's one place in Chennai you never get tired of visiting, and why?

My favourite place is Nungambakkam. My office is here, and I even bought a house within walking distance. My favourite hotel is Taj Coromandel, where I'm a chamber member. And of course, I love visiting my restaurant, Una Villa. Everything I need is on this road, and as someone dedicated to work, I enjoy everything in this space.

● What's a book or film that's had a significant impact on the way you think about business?

I recently read *Shoe Dog*. Personally, I admire leaders like Warren Buffett. His lifestyle and the way he works are very inspiring. I've read about him and consider him a proven role model.

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(Jitha Karthikeyan is an artist and curator, passionate about making art accessible to the larger public)

PRIDE comes in all forms and mankind will always find innovative ways to exhibit it. When it comes to the nation, there are typically two triggers for it to burst forth among the population like an erupting volcano; sports and Independence/Republic Day. Proclamations of national identity often work its way onto our faces and body on these specific days, as we paint them in the tricolours of our flag.

The practice however, originated long before the birth of flags or countries. Dating back to pre-historic times, body painting was primarily used for rituals and was a way of announcing status within a tribe. A distinct mark was painted on those in power. Indigenous tribes also believed that masking oneself with paint would ward off evil spirits. Pigments extracted from whatever the surroundings offered, like fruits and leaves were used for these artistic applications.

Cosmetic face painting became popular with the European nobility in the 18th century but soon faded away after the fall of the French aristocracy. Blackface makeup was also used in theatre during the 19th century when non-black artists played the role of black people. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s put an end to this practice, too.

Against the backdrop of this history, it is but natural that the human body as a canvas would soon be adopted by artists. In modern culture, face painting can be traced back to the early 1900s. It was at the Chicago World's Fair that Max Factor, who was an authority on cosmetics for film stars, tried to

TALKING ART

UNLEASHING ART ON SKIN



market his make up, a full body paint, in the firm belief that it should be accessible to every woman. He used a model to present it, by covering her nude body with his paint, which succeeded in scandalising the public and ultimately led to his arrest.

Soon, artists took to this medium and in the 1950s and 60s, body painting became an alternative art movement. Artists covered models in paint and made them roll on a canvas, thus creating an image transfer. The effects produced were interesting and brought artists like Yves Klein who made an entire series employing this technique, into the limelight.

Body painting as a medium of expression soon spread to all countries and a multitude of artists accepted it. American artist Danny Setaiawan is famous for his reproductions of masterpieces by Van Gogh and

Dali, on human bodies. Michel Platnic, the French Israeli artist, places painted models within three-dimensional movie sets for his videos and photographs, thereby creating 'living paintings'. Similarly, Australian artist Emma Hack's photographs have naked painted human bodies that merge with the patterns on the background wall. Peruvian artist Cecilia Paredes is also known to paint her own body, blending herself with landscapes in the background. A gallery solely dedicated to fine art body painting was even founded in 2006 in the US.

Self expression can never be bound by rules or restricted to traditional mediums. Humans have always carried marks of individuality on their bodies and art offers these temporary tattoos as a means to do so. So be adventurous and colour your thoughts on skin for a change!

CHENNAI DIGEST



Vyasa Vidyalaya hosted exhibition

Vyasa Vidyalaya school hosted an exhibition — this year's theme revolved around integrating the timeless values of *Thirukkural* with modern life. The event was graced by two distinguished chief guests — Kalyanaraman, principal of Presidency College, 'Senthamizh Semmal' M Padikaramu, Chairman S Velladurai Pandian, managing director V Vellathai, S Raghu, lecturer of Presidency College, and Journalist Tirumavelan participated. The day began with a grand welcome by principal S Sundar and vice principal Prakasavalli Sundar.



Inauguration of the New IVF Lab and OT

The new IVF Lab and Operation Theatre (OT) at the Institute of Reproductive Medicine & Women's Health was inaugurated, marking a significant milestone for The Madras Medical Mission. The inauguration ceremony was graced by the presence of Joseph Abraham, vice president of MMM. The dedication prayers were led by Abey M Chacko, chaplain of MMM. Christopher Roy, director of The Madras Medical Mission, welcomed the gathering.

Stella Maris organised Hackathon 2025

Hackathon 2025 was organised by the Celeste Student Union in collaboration with the Office of the Deans of Student Affairs with the Department of Computer Science, Stella Maris. The event brought together around 25 enthusiastic teams from various Engineering and Arts and Science Colleges, all competing to solve real-world problems using Artificial Intelligence. The hackathon focused on how AI could revolutionise learning. The first-place winners were awarded a cash prize of ₹5,000. The second-place team earned ₹3,000, while the third-place team took home ₹2,000.

