SCIENCE

Rocks' carbon storage capacity vastly overestimated: study

The Hindu Bureau

Many scientists and policymakers are counting on storing CO2 deep underground as an important way to fight climate change. Such known as geological carbon storage involves capturing CO2 from sources like power plants or directly from the air and injecting it into rock formations, where it can remain for centuries. However, so far, most discussions have treated underground storage as if it were limitless.

A new study in Nature

has challenged this assumption, warning that the earth can only safely hold about 1,460 billion tonnes of CO2 underground. If countries design climate strategies without knowing how much storage is really available, they may rely too heavily on an option that can't deliver. Setting a limit forces governments to plan more carefully, reduce emissions faster, and carbon storage as a scarce resource, and acknowledge the need for a more realistic response.

To calculate this limit,

the researchers, from Europe, the UK, and the US, built a global map of sedimentary basins, which are large rock formations most suitable for CO2 storage. Then they systematically ruled out areas where storage would be too risky, e.g. basins near earthquake zones, in polar regions, and in biodiversity hotspots. Finally, the team considered practical constraints like storage depth and offshore drilling limits.

By adding up what re-

mained, they found that

only a tenth of the pre-

viously estimated global capacity, of around 11,800 billion tonnes, suitable.

Nearly every climate scenario that aims to keep global warming below 2° C assumes large amounts of CO2 will be stored underground. But at today's pace, storage use would grow so rapidly that this new planetary limit could be crossed by 2200. The study also showed that countries don't share this capacity equally: it's higher in Russia, the US, and Saudi Arabia and lower in

India and many European countries.

The study also capped the maximum possible temperature reversal through storage to about 0.7° C, meaning underground storage alone can't fix global warming. Second, treating storage as a finite resource raises questions about whether it should be used to keep burning fossil fuels a little longer or to remove carbon from the air to benefit future generations.

Finally, the study is clear that emission cuts re-

main the most viable way forward. Carbon storage may help but it won't replace faster transitions to renewable energy, changes in industry, and conservation of natural carbon sinks.

A press note issued by Nature clarified: "The authors note that a key limitation of this analysis is not accounting for the obstacles of scaling up carbon capture and storage technology or considering any other technologies that might be developed in the future."

How RNA, amino acids may have linked up on early earth

By showing amino acids latch directly onto RNA without enzymes, researchers have provided striking evidence that life's essential partnership between genes and proteins might have begun in ordinary ponds or frozen pools billions of years ago

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

ife depends on a partnership bet-RNA, which stores instructions, and proteins, which do the work of building and running cells. But how this partnership began has long puzzled scientists. To make a protein, constituent amino acids must be linked in the order encoded by RNA. Today, a complex biological machine called the ribosome handles this task but only after each amino acid is first "loaded" onto an RNA adapter. The catch is that the enzymes responsible for this loading are themselves proteins, creating a chicken-and-egg puzzle that has intrigued chemists for decades.

A new study in *Nature* offers a glimpse of how this riddle might have been resolved. Researchers at University College London found that simple molecules called aminoacylthiols can link amino acids to RNA without enzymes.

Think of amino acids as beads and RNA as the thread. In cells today, enzymes act as skilled hands to string them together. The team showed that, in the right conditions, with aminoacyl-thiols the beads can fasten themselves to the thread in plain water, much like on the early earth.

More strikingly, this aminoacyl-thiol chemistry favours RNA over other. more reactive molecules, which is an unexpected seSurprise chemistry Chemistry reveals RNA and amino acids linked directly at life's dawn ■ Scientists remain intrigued by how RNA and proteins first partnered to enable life's first cellular processes

■ Researchers at University College London have found aminoacyl-thiols can link amino acids to RNA without involving enzymes

■ Laboratory experiments showed amino acids attaching directly to RNA in water, resembling plausible early earth conditions

■ This chemistry revealed astonishing selectivity, consistently favouring RNA over more reactive molecules, surprising many chemists ■ A chemical switch separated RNA-charging from pep-

tide-linking, mimicking distinct sequential stages of modern protein synthesis ■ The findings suggest such reactions occurred in primordial ponds or frozen pools, initiating primitive coded

lectivity that has astonished chemists.

peptide synthesis

"It's remarkable that RNA, which is relatively unreactive, undergoes aminoacylation in water despite the presence of more reactive species," said Tom Sheppard, a chemist at UCL not involved in the study.

He added that the che mistry appears robust across many amino acids and simple enough that other labs should be able to reproduce it. By giving RNA a clear chemical advantage, aminoacyl-thiols may have paved the way for the first steps of protein synthesis.

For scientists who study life's beginnings, the discovery is more than a clever bit of chemistry: it's a breakthrough that ties two of life's building blocks together in conditions that could have existed billions

"Previous research often looked at either how peptides (chains of amino acids) could form or how nucleotides could form, but rarely how the two might interact," Sheppard said. "What makes this work significant is that it shows RNA and amino acids talking to each other without any directly, intermediary."

"This opens a lot of exciting directions to investigate the origins and evolution of protein translation," Matthew Powner, who led the work, said.

Selectivity, surprises

What struck the researchers the most was not just that the reaction worked but that it showed such uncanny precision. The amino acids latched onto RNA ends in a way that reflects how life does to this day.

Powner said the reactivity was the heart of the discovery: "If I had to pick only one thing that was the most astounding, it would be the unexpected reactivity between aminoacylthiols and RNA that led to unprecedented selectivity at neutral pH."

Sheppard pointed out nother interesting facet. Thioesters were once thought to be simple precursors to peptides, but the study found that they are not good at making peptides directly. "Instead," he said, "they may have played a different role: guiding amino acids onto RNA."

Even more intriguingly, the team discovered that a simple chemical switch could separate two key stages of modern protein synthesis. With thioesters, amino acids preferentially attach to RNA. But when those same molecules are converted into thioacids, the chemistry flips, favouring the formation of peptide bonds instead. That means the two steps of protein building - RNAcharging and peptide-linking - can be carried out in the same solution but under distinct chemical modes of activation.

The team did not stop there. They also explored where these aminoacylthiols might have come from.

Their experiments suggested they could form from simple precursors such as nitriles and thiols, even under frigid conditions that concentrated the ingredients and sped up

reactions. This implies the chemistry linking amino acids to RNA may not have required rare settings: it could have unfolded in the ponds or frozen pools of a young earth.

Both Powner and Sheppard agreed that this chemistry is just a starting point. The peptides made so far are very short, and figuring out how to extend them will be the next challenge.

"One can imagine a gradual evolution of complexity in the aminoacylation reaction," Sheppard said, "leading to increasing levels of control by RNA over the peptides that could be formed, and hence the development of a primitive coded peptide synthesis." (Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from



Nails played a crucial role in rodent diversity

By surveying over 400 genera, researchers have found that most rodents today have thumbnails rather than claws. Nails were linked with using the hands to manipulate food at the mouth; however, rodents that only used their mouths to eat often lost the thumbnail while those that lived underground tended to evolve claws on the thumb for digging. These patterns arose independently multiple times. The findings show the thumbnail wasn't a useless remnant but an adaptation that supported feeding efficiency.



North America affects monsoon rain over India

Scientists using climate models have found that North America plays a role in strengthening monsoon rainfall over both South Asia. By warming during summer, North America alters global air circulation, boosting the North Pacific high-pressure system and shifting the Hadley circulation. These changes drive winds that carry more moisture towards Asia, enhancing rainfall. For Indian monsoon, North America's role can even outweigh Tibet's. South America, Australia, and Antarctica experience smaller impacts.



Türkiye earthquakes affected land 1,000 km away

The February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye disturbed the West Caspian region more than 1,000 km away. Using satellite radar, GPS, and seismic data, researchers observed eruptions or deformation at 56 mud volcanoes and slips along seven faults. The fault movement unfolded silently, releasing energy equivalent to a magnitude 6.1 event. Many affected areas were close to hydrocarbon fields, suggesting a link between crust fluids and fault behaviour.

On the move with green hydrogen



D. Balasubramanian

The Indian Railways recently announced that a hydrogen-powered train, developed at the Integral Coach Factory in Chennai, has successfully completed all tests. This is a welcome sign of progress for the National Green Hydrogen Mission, which aims to produce at least five million metric tonnes of green hydrogen per year by the year 2030, a milestone on the way to achieving nationwide net zero emissions by 2070.

The train will soon be carrying passengers between Jind and Sonipat on an 89-km route in Haryana. This project will rely on hydrogen produced in Jind by a 1-MW polymer electrolyte membrane electrolyser that produces 430 kg of hydrogen every day. The hydrogen will refill fuel tanks on the train, where fuel cells will convert the hydrogen to electricity that runs the train's electric motors. The principle is quite

simple. An electrolyser splits a water molecule into oxygen, protons, and electrons. In an electrochemical reaction at the negative electrode (called the anode), molecular oxygen is released, and the electrons liberated are conducted to the cathode via an external circuit. The polymer electrolyte membrane between the cathode and the anode is selective and only allows protons to pass through to the cathode, where they unite with the electrons to form hydrogen molecules. These rise as a gas and are

collected, compressed,

and stored. The mem-



A facility in Jind will soon produce green hydrogen to be used as fuel for a locomotive. MIGUEL BAIXAULI/UNSPLASH

brane, typically a fluoropolymer such as Nafion (related to Teflon) is an excellent insulator, and electrons will not pass. The hydrogen and oxygen formed are clearly separated.

In the locomotive, as in a hydrogen-powered automobile, the above reaction is reversed in the hydrogen fuel cell. Hydrogen is brought to the anode, where each molecule is catalytically split into two protons and two electrons. The protons pass through trons that are brought

the membrane to the cathode, where they meet oxygen in air and the elec-

through an external circuit from the anode. Water is formed. The electrons flowing through the external circuit constitute the electric current that powers the locomotive. There is a key difference

To produce green hydrogen, the electricity for the electrolysers has to come from renewable sources, such as solar panels or wind turbines. New sources of renewable energy will be needed to meet the goals of the National Green Hydrogen Mission. Also under way are exciting attempts to produce hydrogen in microbial electrolytic cells, where electrochemically active

between the chemical

reactions in the fuel cell

and in the electrolyser.

The chemistry between

hydrogen and oxygen is

spontaneous, a reaction

waiting to happen. Water,

however, will not split into

the two elements by itself.

Electrical current must be

supplied to provide the

energy for this electro-

chemical reaction.

microbes grow on anodes and oxidize organic matter agricultural residues, even wastewater - and

pass the electrons generated to the anode (Current Science, vol. 128, p. 133, 2025). The catalysis steps re-

quire expensive materials such as platinum, iridium, etc. Ongoing research is aimed at replacing these with inexpensive nickel, cobalt, or even iron. In early work towards cheap hydrogen generation, the group of C.N.R. Rao at the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research designed nickelnickel hydroxide-graphite electrodes with a watersplitting capability comparable to platinum electrodes (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci., USA, vol. 114, 2017). Combining such developments with solar and microbe-driven processes can produce a fuel that is both green inexpensive.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani)

Question Corner

Blood moon

Why is a blood moon called so?

Sky gazers in India and in other parts of the world will be able to witness a blood moon on September 7 during a total lunar eclipse. The moon will take on a dark red-copper hue. This is the result of a physical effect called Rayleigh scattering. During a total lunar eclipse, the earth comes between the sun and the moon, blocking direct sunlight from striking the lunar surface. However, not all sunlight is blocked. Only the bluer light is filtered out; the redder light is scattered by the earth's atmosphere, giving the moon its striking

is called Rayleigh scattering. When light interacts with particles smaller than its wavelength, the intensity of the scattered light is inversely proportional to its wavelength. This is why earthsky appears blue: it has the shortest wavelength in visible light. During a blood moon, however, the bluer light is absorbed by the earth's atmosphere while the redder light is refracted towards the moon. The precise hue depends on dust and smoke levels in the atmosphere.

colour. This phenomenon

Readers may send their questions /

THE HINDU

How much is spent on children's education in India?

What does a recent report by the National Sample Survey show? Why is there a divide between girls and boys?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

espite a recent drop in the World Economic Forum's gender gap rankings, partly due to the education category, India has made steady progress in recent years in terms of enrolling more girls in school, with government data showing that girls now make up 48% of the school population. In higher education, in fact, the gross enrolment ratio for women is slightly higher than that of men. However, data collected as part of the National Sample Survey earlier this summer show a more insidious gender gap that remains in education – the differing amounts of money that families spend on their sons as opposed to their daughters for their education.

What are the differences in expenditure?

The recent report on the Comprehensive Modular Survey on education, which collected nationwide data between April and June as part of the 80th round of the NSS, shows that the per-student expenditure on girls is lower than on boys during all stages of school education, from pre-primary to higher secondary, as well as across the rural-urban divide. The survey covered 52,085 households in 2,384 villages and 1,982 urban blocks across the country, with education-related information collected for 57,742 students currently enrolled in school.

In States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, boys and girls go to government and private schools in almost equal ratios In rural India, families spent ₹1,373 or 18% more on boys than girls in terms of course fees, textbooks, and stationery, uniforms, and transportation to school. In urban

India, the per-student expenditure on girls was ₹2,791 less than on boys. In urban India, by the time students are in higher secondary school, there is almost 30% more being spent on education for boys than girls. When course fees alone are considered, the gap widens, with families paying on average 21.5% more on fees for boys than for girls across the country.

This prioritising of boys' education is also clear in the type of schools that Indian families choose for their children. About 58.4% of girls are enrolled in government schools, which are usually free of cost in terms of course fees, with only 29.5% of them having access to more expensive private school education. However, 34% of boys are enrolled in private unaided schools. The gap goes beyond the school sroom, and extends to private tuitions tha many families consider essential for a quality education. Tuition classes now supplement school teaching at all stages of education, and overall, 26% of girls and 27.8% of boys are enrolled in such classes. When it comes to expenditure, however, the gap widens, especially in higher classes. By the higher secondary level, families are spending on average 22% more in terms of tuition fees on their boys in comparison to girls.

How does this vary by State?

States differ widely in terms of the gender gap in education. When it comes to enrolment of girls and boys in government schools versus private schools for instance, the biggest gaps can be seen in States/UTs such as Delhi, where almost 54% of boys go to government schools, compared to more than 65% of girls. On the other hand, almost 38.8% of boys go to more expensive private schools, compared to 26.6% of girls. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab also have gender gaps of more than 10 percentage points. In Gujarat, the gender gap is striking in urban areas, but narrower in rural areas. In States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, boys and girls go to government and private schools in almost equal ratios, while several northeastern States have flipped the script, sending more girls to private schools. Expenditures are more nuanced, especially in the higher classes. In higher secondary education, for instance, families in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal spend vastly more on boys than girls, though they spent more on girls at the secondary level. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the average education expenditure on girls at the secondary level is ₹23,796 compared to ₹22,593 on boys. In higher secondary, however, the expenditure on boys in the State has shot up to ₹35,973, compared to just ₹19,412 for girls. Part of this can be attributed to girls dropping out at that stage, though subsidies for girl students could also account for some of the difference. States like Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala also spend more on higher secondary girls, especially in urban India, where data shows that transport costs become a major factor, with parents intent on safety of the girl.

Expenditure on private coaching also varied by State, especially at the higher secondary level. In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, there was a stark gap between the ₹9,813 spent per boy student in higher secondary school enrolled for private tuition in comparison to the ₹1,550 spent per girl. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu were among other States which showed significant gender gaps in this regard.

Will the GST rate cuts boost the economy?

Which sectors will benefit from the sweeping changes? Which sectors are disgruntled about the change? How long has the rationalisation process been going on? Did the imposition of 50% U.S. tariffs weigh on the decision? What about revenue implications? What lies ahead?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

n September 3, the GST Council authorised a new paradigm in the indirect tax regime. There will be fewer rates, and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on most items have been reduced. While this has been welcomed by most sectors, there are some which are somewhat disgruntled. There are also concerns over the revenue implications.

What prompted these changes?

The rationalisation of the multiple rates in GST has been on the anvil for a long time. The Council had in September 2021 constituted a Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into rate rationalisation. This GoM began its work, but seemingly little progress was made. The GoM was composed entirely of representatives from the States, with no representative from the Centre. So, in order to nudge it in the direction it wanted, the Union government had to make a proposal to the GoM. The Ministry of Finance on August 15, 2025, announced that it had submitted its proposal to the GoM. Earlier that same day, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced that these "next-generation" GST reforms would be a Deepavali gift to the nation.

By August 21, 2025, the GoM – following a briefing by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman – had accepted the proposals and forwarded them to the GST Council. The Council then deliberated on these proposals on September 3 during a 10.5-hour-long meeting, following which it announced its decisions.

What are the changes?

The existing GST structure has multiple rates,



Much relief: The BJP celebrating new rates, in Bengaluru, on September 5. PTI

The States
will have to
look for
their own
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even when considering only the main ones. The main rates comprise 0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, 28%, and a compensation cess over and above the 28% slab. This has been reduced to main slabs of 0%, 5%, 18% and 40%. The compensation cess for most items has been removed. It is still levied on tobacco products, but even that will be removed by the end of this calendar year, when the Centre pays back the loan it took to compensate States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from this, many items have been moved to lower tax slabs. According to an analysis by the State Bank of India's economics research wing, of the 453 items that saw a change in their GST rate, 413 (or a little more than 91%) saw rates being cut, while 40 items saw rates increasing. The bulk of the rate reductions - 257 items, mostly common use products - were from the 12% to the 5% slab. Out of the 40 items that saw their rates increase, 17 were moved from the 28% slab to 40%. Here, it is important to note that the actual tax incidence might not have increased. For example, once the compensation cess is added, the effective tax rate on luxury cars and SUVs is 45-50%. That will go down to 40%.

Why were they necessary?

There are several reasons why the GST rate cuts make sense now. The first is that the legal period for the GST compensation cess will likely be coming to an end this calendar year. It can be levied up to March 31, 2026 or till when the Centre pays off its loans, whichever is earlier. Ms. Sitharaman said she expects the loans to be repaid this calendar year. The removal of this cess, without raising the base rates on tobacco products, would mean that these 'sin' goods would have suddenly become significantly cheaper. This is something the Union government could not be seen to be condoning. That set a time limit by when the new rates had to be implemented. The other reason is that the government expects some sort of detrimental impact from the 50% tariff imposed by the U.S. on imports from India. This is clear from the fact that, despite a strong 7.8% GDP growth in Q1 of this financial year, the government has not changed its 6.3%-6.8% growth estimate for the full year, implying it expects growth in the subsequent quarters to be significantly slower. The boost from the GST rate cuts is expected to offset this hit. The government, however, has officially denied any such connection, saying the GST changes were part of an overall reforms push and not related to the tariffs.

Which sectors were happy with the reforms? The healthcare industry voiced its approval of

the changes, saying the decision to reduce GST in the sector from 12% to 5% on a wide range of medical products would directly benefit patients. The renewable energy sector, too, praised the decision to reduce taxes on renewable energy components from 12% to 5%, saying this was a progressive step towards accelerating India's clean energy transition. Consumer appliance makers were also upbeat about the cuts, saying it would boost demand, especially in the run-up to the festive season.

The real estate sector said that bringing down the GST rate on cement from 28% to 18%, and on other building materials such as granite slabs, would reduce costs for the sector and be a big boost. Auto manufacturers said the reduction of GST on cars and non-luxury bikes from 28% to 18% would spur demand.

Which sectors voiced reservations?

The textile industry welcomed the downward revision of GST rates for both man-made fibre and cotton sectors to 5%, but also voiced its disappointment over the 18% duty for garments priced above ₹2,500 each. They said that woollens, wedding apparel, and traditional Indian wear would become more expensive.

While auto manufacturers welcomed the rate rationalisation, dealers voiced some worries about consumers postponing their purchases until September 22, when the new rates come into force. They also called for greater clarity on what happens to the cess on vehicles they have bought from manufacturers but not yet sold.

The insurance sector will likely also see a mixed picture from the GST rate cuts. The exemption of personal life and health insurance from GST will increase insurance penetration, but the simultaneous removal of input tax credits might increase costs for insurers, thereby eating into their profits.

Airlines have collectively slammed the higher GST on non-economy seats, while vegetable oil producers said the Council could have resolved the inverted duty structure on edible oils — something it did for fertilizers and man-made textiles. The increase in the GST rate for labour charges from 12% to 18% has also led to some resistance from representatives of the MSME sector, who said their costs would increase.

What is the revenue impact?

The Centre said the revenue implication would be ₹48,000 crore based on consumption patterns in 2023-24. However, the real impact will be ascertained only when new data is obtained. The SBI research team estimates it to be a much smaller ₹3,700 crore. Opposition States, however, are worried. They have voiced their demand for a cess to be levied on items in the 40% slab, the proceeds of which can be used to compensate States for the revenue hit. This was not accepted by the Council. The States will have to look for their own sources, and the 16th Finance Commission, to make up any losses.

Is a shift underway in India's foreign policy?

How productive was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit? Did a meeting between China, Russia and India at Tianjin signal a change in relations? Did U.S. moves on tariffs and sanctions prompt this? What are the leaders saying?

<u>Suhasini Haidar</u>

The story so far:

rime Minister Narendra Modi began the week in Tianjin, with a show of camaraderie with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on September 1. A photograph of the three leaders together made headlines around the world. It also seemingly irked U.S. President Donald Trump, prompting a series of sarcastic statements, even as the U.S. doubled down on 50% tariffs, sanctions on India's import of Russian oil, and asking the European Union to do the same. By the end of the week, however, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump appeared conciliatory.

What happened in Tianjin?

The week saw a series of high-level summits seen as a projection of power by China, beginning with the 10-nation SCO summit in Tianjin, where several other leaders including from Turkey, Nepal, Maldives, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Indonesia and Malaysia were invited. From there, the action moved to Beijing, where Mr. Xi led Mr. Putin and dozens of other leaders including North Korea's Kim Jong Un to a

including North Korea's Kim Jong Un to a

A restructuring: PM Modi with Russian President Mr. Putin and China's President Mr. Xi ahead of the SCO summit in Tianjin, on September 1. REUTERS

India-U.S. relations have been impacted by months of tension, but official exchanges and military exercises have not stopped

massive military parade commemorating 80 years since the end of the Second World War. The statements released included a number of counter-West elements, with Mr. Xi promoting a "Global Governance Initiative" and Mr. Modi pitching for a "civilisational dialogue" between SCO countries. The SCO declaration criticised "coercive, unilateral" economic measures, believed to be aimed at U.S. tariffs and European sanctions. During a photo-shoot for the SCO meet, Prime Minister Modi was seen purposefully leading President Putin down the red carpet to where President Xi was standing. A day before that, Mr. Xi and Mr. Modi held bilateral talks that had been cordial and possibly paved the way for the tri-leader photo.

What happened at the bilateral meeting? This was Mr. Modi's first visit to China since

This was Mr. Modi's first visit to China since 2018, and his first meeting with President Xi not in a third country since the military standoff and Galwan clashes in 2020, where both sides agreed to normalise ties. China appeared conciliatory, with Mr. Xi referring to India and China as "partners not rivals", while India appears to have climbed down from an insistence that the LAC situation be normalised before a resumption of ties in other spheres. They agreed to let the border situation be discussed between Special Representatives Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Besides revival of flights, visa facilitation and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, they agreed to resolve the trade issues between them.

How did the U.S. view the meetings?

In Washington, the photograph of the Tianjin "troika", as well as subsequent images of the leaders of Russia, China, North Korea, Central Asian states, Iran, Pakistan and others, were seen as a challenge to the Western order, as well as proof that India had now "switched sides".

On social media, Mr. Trump posted a photo from the SCO summit saying that it looked like the U.S. had "lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China". The White House Trade Adviser Peter Navarro, seen as one of the officials driving tariffs against India, said it was a "shame" that

India as a democracy was getting closer to Russia and China. There were a number of other comments criticising the Modi government, including calling the Ukraine conflict "Modi's war", which the Ministry of External Affairs rejected as "inaccurate and misleading". India will also participate in a BRICS online summit chaired by Brazil on September 8 to discuss a common response to the U.S. tariffs, which may send up more red flags.

Delhi-Washington ties have been fraught over many issues, including visa, immigration and trade policies, and Mr. Trump's repeated assertions of mediating the ceasefire in Operation Sindoor. But amid the tension, came yet another turnaround. Mr. Trump on Friday said that India and the U.S. have a "special relationship" and that he would "always be great friends with PM Modi". Mr. Modi, who had not responded to any of the statements thus far, welcomed them and said he shared Mr. Trump's "positive assessment" of the partnership.

What lies ahead?

While many foreign policy observers may have faced whiplash from the perception that Indian policy had shifted from the "west to the east" and possibly back to the west, the shifts are less perceptible if you consider India's decades-old policy of strategic autonomy and balance. The visit to China for the SCO had been expected for months, after the Xi-Modi meeting in Kazan on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in October 2024 had restarted ties. While India had put SCO on the backburner for the past two years and PM Modi skipped the Summit in Astana last year, the visit to China was considered important. In that sense, the Modi-Xi meeting was simply an attempt to normalise ties after years of serious tensions, and the Modi-Xi-Putin chat, would have been more significant if followed by a revival of formal Russia-India-China talks.

India-U.S. relations have no doubt been impacted by months of tensions on a range of issues, but official exchanges and military exercises have not stopped. Much will depend on whether the U.S. and India can find a compromise over demands to cancel Russian oil imports or for India to open its agricultural and dairy sectors, and whether the U.S. reconsiders its 50% tariff on India. With Mr. Jaishankar headed to the U.S. for the UN General Assembly this month, talks about scheduling the Quad summit, where Mr. Trump is due to visit India later this year, will be closely watched.

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A flashpoint in the Palk Strait

Katchatheevu

Half a century since New Delhi gave up its claim to the barren island and recognised Sri Lanka's sovereignty over it, politicians in India periodically rake up the issue, triggering tensions in ties between the friendly countries

Meera Srinivasan

ri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent visit to Katchatheevu, said to be the first by a head of state, drew attention on both sides of the Palk Strait.

Attired in smart casuals - his trademark double-pocket shirt – the 56-year-old leftist leader, elected to office a year ago, is seen on a naval boat, flanked by Fisheries Minister and Jaffna MP Ramalingam Chandrasekar and other officials. He smiles gently before setting foot on the tiny, uninhabited island, 33 nautical miles off the Jaffna peninsula, on September 1. Seated in the shade of palm trees, Mr. Dissanayake listens intently while a Naval officer describes the 1.15 sq. km outcrop, pointing to a map.

Walking around briskly with officials in tow, Mr. Dissanayake pays respects at the St. Anthony's Catholic Shrine, the only permanent structure there, before returning to Jaffna, where at a public meeting earlier that day he pledged to safeguard Sri Lankan territory, resisting any "external force". The symbolism of the visit, with the accompanying visuals and messaging played well in Sri Lanka, comes days after Tamil actor-politician Vijay's demand in a political rally that India must retrieve Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka. The government subsequently announced it is also exploring the tourism potential of Katchatheevu, by making it more accessible from nearby Delft island, one of Jaffna's off-track tourist destinations

The competing claims made from India [Madras Presidency, specifically] and Ceylon to Katchatheevu date back to the 1920s, during British colonial times. The neighbours settled the matter some five decades later, through two bilateral agreements signed in 1974 and 1976, delineating an International Maritime Boundary Line, whereby Katchatheevu is firmly on the Sri Lankan side. In return, New Delhi got sovereign rights over Wadge Bank, located near Kanniyakumari, known





Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, centre, in Katchatheevu on September 1. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

for its rich resources.

Katchatheevu is a barren island, with no drinking water or sanitation. Every March, Sri Lanka waives visa controls to allow fishermen from India to worship along with their Sri Lankan counterparts at the St. Anthony's festival. Around the annual two-day event, mobile toilets and drinking water booths are put up for pilgrims.

Political calculation

Bizarrely, though, half a century since India gave up its claim to Katchatheevu and recognised Sri Lanka's sovereignty over it, politicians in India periodically rake up the issue. The political calculation driving the frequent call is the assumption that it could boost voter support if pitched as a solution to the enduring fisheries conflict affecting Tamil Nadu's fishermen, a sizeable electoral constituency.

The fact that the Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) were in power, respectively at the Centre and in Tamil Nadu, in the 1970s

has offered political ammunition to their rivals, especially on the eve of State polls next year. Ahead of general elections last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress of "callously giving away" the island to Sri Lanka. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar swiftly amplified this by blaming the two BJP rivals for compromising Indian fishermen's rights in the Palk Strait.

Both Dravidian parties [DMK and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or AIADMK], have demanded its retrieval. In 2008, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Jayalalithaa, as General Secretary of the AIADMK, petitioned the Supreme Court seeking a declaration that the 1974 and 1976 agreements were unconstitutional. Ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in April 2025, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution, urging the Union government to take steps to retrieve the Katchatheevu island. Subsequently, Chief Minister

M.K. Stalin said the island's retrieval was "the only permanent solution" to the issues faced by the fishermen in the State.

INDIA

Rameswaran

Nagapattinam •

Bay of

Everyone calling for the island's retrieval in India must know well that it is a far-fetched ask from a mostly friendly neighbour. In 2013, the Union government informed the Supreme Court that the question of gaining Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka did not arise, as "no territory belonging to India was ceded nor sovereignty relinquished since the area in question was in dispute and had never been demarcated". In 2014, then Attorney-General Mukul Rohatgi submitted before the Supreme Court that if India had to retrieve an island belonging to Sri Lanka, "we have to go to war". The factors that keep the issue alive, despite diplomatic and legal resolution, are chiefly political, and in fact to do with the political economy of a depleting catch in a narrow stretch of

Fishermen of south India and

northern Sri Lanka rely heavily on the resource-rich Palk Strait. However, with Tamil Nadu fishermen relentlessly resorting to bottom-trawling, a destructive fishing method that scoops out the seabed to maximise the catch and profits, this has severely affected the marine ecosystem. With the catch on the Indian side of the International Maritime Boundary Line diminishing over time, the Tamil Nadu fishing boats ventured into the Sri Lankan side, targeting a heavier net. Daily wage fishermen, working for wealthy boat owners in Tamil Nadu, periodically court arrest by the Sri Lankan Navy - over 230 arrests so far this year – a risk they take to secure

Bottom-trawling

their day's earnings.

Tamil fishermen in northern Sri Lanka, still reeling from the impact of the civil war that ended 16 years ago, contend they have no real chance of rebuilding their destroyed livelihoods, unless their counterparts across the Palk Strait give up bottom-trawling – a practice banned in Sri Lanka.

In bilateral talks with fisher leaders through the years, or petitions to politicians in India and Sri Lanka, all they have been asking their fellow, Tamil-speaking brothers is that they stop the practice. In ministerial level talks between India and Sri Lanka in 2016, New Delhi acknowledged this and agreed to expedite the transition towards ending the practice of bottom trawling "at the earliest". But the practice continues.

Decades ago, fishermen from both sides used Katchatheevu as a resting point and a spot to dry out their nets. But in recent history, most arrests of Indian fishermen are made well past Katchatheevu, very close to Sri Lanka's northern shores. Policymakers on the Indian side know where the problem lies. And politicians know that Katchatheevu offers no real solution to it. But unwilling to confront a key electorate with a difficult question, they habitually invoke it to divert attention from their own failure to resolve the festering fisheries conflict.

THE GIST

The competing claims made from India [Madras Presidency, specifically] and Ceylon to Katchatheevu date back to the 1920s, during British colonial times

The neighbours settled the matter some five decades later, through two bilateral agreements signed in 1974 and 1976, delineating an International Maritime Boundary Line, whereby Katchatheevu is firmly on the Sri Lankan side

In return, New Delhi got sovereign rights over Wadge Bank, located near Kanniyakumari, known for its rich resources

Saffron guard

Rajendra Arlekar

The Kerala Governor, a former functionary of the BJP, faces criticism for 'saffronising' education and violating constitutional propriety

Sarath Babu George

hen Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar assumed charge as the 23rd Governor of Kerala on January 2, 2025, few were surprised by what followed. A steadfast Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) lovalist and former Governor of Bihar and Himachal Pradesh, Mr. Arlekar's appointment was widely seen as a continuation, if not escalation. of the ideological and administrative friction that had marked the tenure of his predecessor, Arif Mohammed Khan.

A member of the RSS from a young age and later associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 1989, Mr. Arlekar is a seasoned political leader from Goa. He served twice as a Member of the Goa Legislative Assembly. He held the post of Speaker from 2012 to 2015, and was Minister of Forest and Environment and Panchayati Raj from 2015 to 2017. He also led the BJP in the southwestern State for four years.

If Mr. Khan had redrawn the boundaries of gubernatorial conduct by repeatedly locking horns with the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, Mr. Arlekar has wasted no time in sharpening the same edges, particularly in the contentious domain of higher education.

universities Kerala's have long been battlegrounds for political in-



fluence. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]-led LDF and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) have traditionally dominated academic bodies. However, the BJP made significant inroads during Mr. Khan's tenure by securing entry into the Senates and Syndicates of major institutions such as Kerala and Calicut

Mr. Arlekar picked up where Mr. Khan left off in asserting the Governor's authority over State-run universities, and insisting that he holds the "final say" in higher education matters. His assertion, backed by University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines and some court verdicts, has clashed headon with the LDF government's stance that State governments must retain control over publicly funded educational institutions. The impasse has led to a near-paralysis in university administration. Of the 14 State universities, 13

remain without regular

some positions lying va-

Vice-Chancellors,

cant since October 2022. Interim appointments made by the Governor have often been met with non-cooperation from CPI (M)-dominated Syndicates.

Judicial intervention

The judiciary has often stepped in to break such deadlocks. The Supreme Court recently adopted crucial steps by appointing former Supreme Court judge Sudhanshu Dhulia to head the search-cum-selection committees for Vice-Chancellor appointments in APJ Abdul Kalam Technological University and Digital University

Tensions between Raj Bhavan and the Kerala government have not been limited to education. Symbolism, too, has become a flashpoint. A portrait of 'Bharat Mata', depicted holding a saffron flag before a lion and the map of 'Akhand Bharat', has been prominently displayed during official functions at the Kerala Raj Bhavan, drawing sharp rebuke from both the LDF and the UDF.

Mr. Arlekar defended the image as a symbol of the nation. But the critics viewed its use, closely tied to RSS iconography, as an affront to constitutional propriety. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote formally to the Governor, warning against the display of politically or religiously charged imagery at State functions. Mr. Arlekar's ideological moorings run deep. A vocal admirer of Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar, he is perceived as a key BJP emissary tasked with expanding the party's ideological footprint in a State long considered hostile to it.

Both the LDF and UDF accuse him of seeking to "saffronise" campuses under the pretext of reform.

At its core, the ongoing confrontation is a clash of two visions: one rooted in the federal autonomy of elected governments, and the other in a centralised, ideologically driven reimagination of institutions.

As the LDF government nears the end of its term, the Governor's withholding of assent to key Bills, including those seeking to reuniversity governance and allow private universities, has further strained the already brittle relationship.

In Mr. Arlekar, Kerala may have received a new Governor some months ago, but the old battles continue, perhaps with even sharper ideological

Activist behind bars

Umar Khalid

The former JNU student has been languishing in jail without trial and bail since 2020 for his alleged involvement in Delhi riots, a charge he denies vehemently

Ishita Mishra

hether it was writing speech for his next rally or preparing pamphlets for an upcoming protest, Umar Khalid was always restless to do it systematically and methodically. He probably never imagined that life would make him slow down in the most unprecedented way, by keeping him behind bars for years, say his friends.

A former student of modern history at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Mr. Khalid was booked by police for being one of the key conspirators in the north-east Delhi riots that broke out in February 2020, amid countrywide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The riots had left 53 people dead and hundreds displaced. Arrested in September 2020, Mr. Khalid has been languishing inside the maximum security Tihar Jail since then.

No bail

Over the past five years, Mr. Khalid approached multiple courts, seeking bail, which the Supreme Court on several occasions has held as a 'rule' even applicable to offences under special statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The 38-year-old, who pleaded not guilty for the crime he was accused of, says he only took part in peaceful



protests related to the CAA, many of them were as far as 1,000 km from the national capital, where the riots took place.

Born to a mother who practised Unani medicine and a father who worked as an Urdu journalist, who later joined the Welfare Party of India, Umar Khalid is the eldest of six siblings. Raised in Jamia Nagar, a Muslim-majority locality in Delhi, he grew up questioning the way his community was treated.

"From a very tender age, he started noticing how his parents were worried of his security. It used to bother him how even when they can afford to stay in better areas of Delhi, they never moved out of Jamia Naagar, which is termed a Muslim ghetto," says Anirban Bhattacharya, Mr. Khalid's friend from JNU. "He was concerned about religious discrimination. After reaching JNU, he found that tribals and other downtrodden sections of society are also living the same life in India

"Contesting claims and

as him," he adds.

contingencies of the rule on Adivasis of Jharkhand," was the title of Mr. Khalid's PhD thesis. Associated with the Democratic Students Union (DSU), a farleft group, at JNU, he used

to call himself a 'non-prac-

Sedition charges

tising Muslim'.

Mr. Bhattacharya and Mr. Khalid were charged for sedition in 2016 for organising a protest at the university over the hanging of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri man convicted for his involvement in the 2001 Parliament attack. This was the same incident that brought fame to Kanhaiya Kumar, another JNU student leader, who is cur-

rently in the Congress. Mr. Khalid also participated in protests in solidarity with Najeeb Ahmed, another JNU student, who went missing from his hostel on the university campus under suspicious circumstances on October 15, 2016. His whereabouts are still unknown. Mr. Khalid was booked for giving 'provocative' speeches during the Bhima Koregaon vio-

lence that left one dead

and several injured. "He became the victim of the injustice that he always fought against," says Banojyotsna Lahiri, Mr. Khalid's partner. She says she is in "disbelief" over his long incarnation, without a trial, in a democracy that he used to celebrate.

"The irony is that those who tried to kill him are out on bail and he, who was fighting for the rights of others, is languishing in jail," says Ms. Lahiri, an eyewitness of an attack on Mr. Khalid in 2018 outside the Constitution Club in Delhi. Police arrested two persons for the attack, who, in a video, claimed that "by attacking Khalid we wanted to give a gift to the people on the occasion of Independence Day".

Mr. Bhattacharya, who met Mr. Khalid days before the Delhi High Court, on September 3, refused him and nine others, bail in the conspiracy case pertaining to Delhi riots, recalls his words in which he shared how five years of confinement impacted him.

"The limited information flow behind the prison walls slows down your life as you are away from the mad rush of the outside world, which is accelerated by social media," Mr. Bhattacharya quoted him as saying. 'He doesn't get swayed by things happening on an everyday basis, any more," says Mr. Bhattacharya. "He knows he has to play a role."

HT TO THE REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Trumpian jolt to India is debilitating, but not fatal

India's destiny is not a function of the anger of one great power or the indulgence of another. It is rooted in our history and civilisation, in the values espoused by our founding fathers, in our championing of great causes

ny serious jolt in an individual's life should ideally lead to a period of reflection, a reassessment of one's capabilities and limitations, a meditation on the way ahead. So it is for nations. In recent years, a close India-US relationship had become the central tenet of India's foreign policy. The jolt delivered to that perception by US President Donald Trump's irrational aggression is a serious one. It ranks right up with some memorable jolts of similar voltage: the Chinese betrayal and aggression in 1962, the US Seventh Fleet sailing into the Bay of Bengal in 1971, and the furious landslide of "a ton of bricks" in the shape of sanctions post the 1998 nuclear tests.

But those episodes, however unacceptable, could be explained: An overly idealistic reading of China's intentions in 1962, America's desperation to create an opening to China in 1971, and Clinton's anger at the body blow delivered by India in 1998 to the inherently discriminatory nuclear non-proliferation

But Trump's despatch of the wrecking ball to the steadily rising edifice of India-US relations is woefully bereft of not only reason but even decency. More so since, unlike the other

situations, the attack is on a relationship that was in a particularly good place, having been nurtured by leaders on both sides, including Trump, for the last quarter century.

A crisis shows up things in bold relief, like several of our assumptions that got the veneer of established fact. Space permits us to mention three.

The first was the belief that India had the measure of Donald Trump — that having dealt with him with reasonable success in his first term, we would continue to coast on his safe side during the second by a judicious mix of cajoling, flattery, blandishments, and per-

ceived chemistry.
The second assumption was that Trump would follow the strategic logic of his recent predecessors and see India as a crucial lynchpin of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: a democratic, economically strong partner against an increasingly muscular

That logic had facilitated the Indo-US nuclear deal, a closer defence partnership and the revival

of Quad, the last on Trump's watch. Encouraged by this US strategy, and impelled by Chinese aggression in 2020, India shed some of its demureness in Quad and took clearer postures on defence exercises and maritime domain awareness. The third assumption was that India had a fifth column in the US in its five-million-strong diaspora; increasingly politically active and visible, the diaspora was assumed to be a strong supporting pillar of the relationship.

These assumptions have been largely belied by the current crisis and an honest reassessment is useful.

First, the playbook of Trump 1.0 was outdated. He is a different force in his second coming: uninhibited, unguided, and vengeful. His advisors are primarily loyalists. Strategically inexperienced, none of them has emerged as a champion for the India-US relationship; the sycophancy of the Washington court would make Kim Jong Un envious. There are countries that pay tribute with gifts, Nobel Prize recommendations, crypto deals and real estate franchises, all a sort of high-level hafta or protection money. We have done our bit, but his ego proved to be larger than the rallies we organised. Indian corporates may buy more or invest more if that helps, but more patently transactional offers, personal blandishment, or ego massa-

ges would be demeaning and against India's dignity. In any case, there is no guarantee that this would work.

Second, making common cause against China is not critical for Trump. Chances are that he would blithely go over our heads, given the opportunity, to cut a beautiful deal with President Xi Jinping; after all, Xi's military parade has proved to be

Navtei

brilliantly superior to the rag-tag walk-along that Pete Hegseth organised in Washington on Trump's birthday. Our democracy too doesn't mean a thing for Trump, even less than America's does. Our China+1 possibilities will be happily sacrificed: Remember his admonishment of Apple's Tim Cook (Trump had called him Tim Apple in his first term as President) for daring to manufacture iPhones

And third, our approach to the diaspora needs a rethink. The majority of Indian-Americans pursue their dreams, their comfortable lives, and their successful careers: some occasionally dabble in politics by funding Congressmen. We should wish them well



Making common cause against China is not critical for Trump. Chances are that he would blithely go over our heads, given the opportunity to cut a beautiful deal with President Xi Jinping. AFP PHOTO / INDIAN PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU (PIB)

and welcome their attachment to India. When the going is good, they also serve, to borrow from TS Eliot, to "swell a progress, start a scene or two," and this makes for good optics. But a fifth pillar they are not. What has been disappointing is the near total silence of the Indian Americans in positions of power — in the Trump administration, the US Congress, the India Caucus, the top tech industry. Here too there lies a cautionary tale.

Let us stop going to absurd levels every time an Indian name rises in America. There is no reason to perform havans, or search out long lost uncles and long forgotten chitthis in our towns and villages and drag them before television cameras. When the chips are down, none of this means a thing. By celebrating these Americans as "sons, daughters, or sons-in-law" of India we actually handicap them, open them up to charges of split loyal-

The Trumpian jolt has been debilitating

but not fatal. Yet more pain in the shape of tariffs or restrictions on legal migration may come. It is true that trust — that ephemeral colouring of the safflower — has crumbled, but the relationship with the US is too consequential to give up on.

Tuning down our expectations, discarding our assumptions, we need to approach it realistically through hard-nosed, patient and professional diplomacy. Get the best trade deal we can, blunt Trump's aggression with tact and dignity, and continue with processdriven engagement. Develop champions for the relationship, find whisperers in high places and nurture constituencies in the US Congress, media, and universities. It may not take long for the wheel to turn.

Meanwhile, as Tianjin has shown, there are other partners on the dance floor. But they too hide a stiletto or exchange side glances. Dance we must, but the floor is getting ever smaller and the atmosphere increasingly

antagonistic: Trump has already consigned us, along with Russia, to the camp of "deepest, darkest, China"; his subsequent positive overture, to which we have correctly responded politely, only serves to highlight the need to insure ourselves against his pendulum like mood swings. India's destiny is not a function of the anger of one great power or the indulgence of another. It is rooted in our history and civilisation, in the values espoused by our founding fathers, in our championing of global concerns. Let us take comfort in that belief and reach out to constituencies that need us as a beacon and a voice for their causes: The Global South awaits. India needs to play to its strengths and not to its ambitions; the invitations to the

Navtej Sarna is a former ambassador of India to the United States. The views expressed are personal

high table will come.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Monsoon in Delhi, summer in London

have decided to write about an odd subject this Sunday. It's not political, but it is topical and it is certainly clouds by tea time and prolonged steady rain at night.

But I wasn't always like this. I used to important. More than anything else it fascinates me. And, truth be told, we all spend a lot of time talking about it. In fact, it is usually the core of our casual comments. Most of us refer to it unthinkingly. Now have you guessed what I'm referring to? Probably not. Here's the answer: The weather!

It has taken me decades to realise how my attitude to the weather has changed not just as I've grown older but also as I've changed countries. This monsoon I love the sound of the falling rain. I find it comforting, re-assuring and calming. Bright sunny days in July and August have disconcerted me. Dark clouds presaging a downpour have eased the tension. And I breathe an audible sigh of relief when blue skies at breakfast convert to grey

be a very different sort of person. Just a decade ago the arrival of the monsoon would depress me. I'd miss the blistering heat of May and June, the clear blue sl and the hot loo. I'm a child of summer, I'd say to myself, in explanation. In summer you're free to do what you want. The monsoon incapacitates, restricts and constraints. My spirits would sink right through July and August. Not till the restored sunshine of October would the world feel right.

The explanation for this was simple. I'd returned to India after decades in Britain where grev skies and the constant pitterpatter of rain is depressing. A blue sky over London is a blessing you often don't see. When you do, it's thrilling. Rain and cold wintery clouds are the norm and all

you want to do is stay in bed. But you can't and I would resent getting wet walking to work, shoes squelching and glasses

When I returned to India thirty years ago, I brought with me my attitude to the weather. It was misplaced. It belonged to another continent. But it was difficult to shake off. Instead, it made me think of India's weather in alien and, even, ridicu-

My response this year is so different. For me it's the surest sign I've changed. I'm not the person I was when I returned to Delhi in the 1990s. I've become a different being. Maybe a better one too? Of that, funnily enough, I am not so sure.

The paradox is London has changed too. This year, summer temperatures have rivalled Delhi's, often making Lonenced five separate heat waves since June. How different was the London I remember. A surprise heatwave in 1976, whilst I was at Cambridge, led to a series of severe measures. First, the use of garden hoses was strictly banned even if that threatened "England's green and pleasant land". More quixotically, my barber forbade his wife a second cuppa! That freak summer was talked about for years. There hadn't been anything like that in living memory. Now it seems commonplace. Who knows heat waves in summer could be the new

So this December will the winter rains

THE PARADOX IS LONDON HAS CHANGED. THIS YEAR, SUMMER TEMPERATURES HAVE RIVALLED DELHI'S, OFTEN MAKING LONDON HOTTER. THE BBC SAYS LONDON HAS SEEN FIVE SEPARATE HEAT WAVES

in Britain be welcomed rather than resented? I doubt it. Attitudes don't change so easily and quickly. But if summers like that of 2025 repeat themselves for a decade I'm sure that could be the

SINCE JUNE

The "truth" I want to leave you with is, perhaps, already apparent. We are, no doubt, creatures of habit but those habits are often conditioned by the weather. We little realise it and often fail to give it credit, but the weather determines how we view the world and our own state of happiness within it.

Oh well, ho-hum. So much for my wisdom. Enjoy the monsoon whilst it lasts!

> Karan Thapar is the author of Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story The views expressed are personal

Namita Bhandare

{ ANOTHER DAY }



Why India's judiciary needs more women

inally, the Supreme Court is working at its full strength of 34 judges. Only one of them, Justice BV Nagarathna is a woman. It's as good a time as any to remember that the last time a woman was appointed to the apex court was August 31, but three. Hima Kohli Bela Trivedi and Nagarathna were sworn-in on the same day. In the four years since that

"historic" day, not another woman. Earlier this week, 14 new judges were appointed to the Bombay High Court. Just one is a woman. As of March this year, 105 of the 779 high court judges across the country were women, according to the Centre for Law and Policy Research (CLPR).

Justice is blind, you could argue, so what's the big deal if it's also gender-blind? Yet, it can hardly be a coincidence that India's top-performing high courts, Telangana, Sikkim and Manipur are also our most gender-representative ones, finds CLPR. In Telangana, 10 of the 30 judges in March 2025 were women. And if vou count the number of women in the lower iudiciary, then Telangana has managed. incredibly 50% female representation.

In Sikkim, ranked second, 33.3% of the judges are women. Third-ranked Manipur has 25%. In case you're wondering, the worstranked — Meghalaya, Tripura, and Uttarakhand — had no women judges as of March 2025. We are a long way from 1937 when Justice Anna Chandy became India's first woman judge, appointed to the district court of Kerala. By now, women should have been more evenly represented in the higher judiciary, bringing their lived and diverse experiences into the adjudication process.

Representation matters not necessarily because women are progressive and feminist and men are not. In fact, in some cases, the reverse has proven to be true. But it matters because judges from diverse backgrounds apply their lived experiences to cases, says senior advocate and CLPR executive director Javna Kothari. "It leads to a better set of judicial outcomes," she said. India's male, dominant-caste, upper-class,

majority-religion dominated Supreme Court has been adjudicating on some of the most significant gender issues of our time, from marriage equality to the criminal marital rape. Surely, these judicial pronouncements must be more reflective of the women of this country.

"All democratic institutions must respect the diversity of the country," says senior advocate Indira Jaising. And, while "representation is an end in itself, women bring to the table the unique experience of being historically excluded which gives them empathy with others similarly situated.'

In the 75 years since the Supreme Court came into existence, it cannot be anybody's case that there are no capable women to fill its bench. But, says Kothari, women are judged by a different standard. When the name of Sunanda Bhandare, incidentally my mother-in-law, was proposed for elevation from the bar to the Delhi High Court in 1984, then chief justice Yeshwant Chandrachud objected on the grounds that, at 42, she was "too young". And yet, Chandrachud was even younger when he was elevated to the Bombay high court at 40.

Perhaps it's time to rattle a few cages and adopt a quota system — as Parliament finally did with the women's reservation Bill. Sharing power does not come naturally to men; we need an institutional policy that actively mandates that women be elevated to the higher iudiciary, says Kothari. And then there's Ruth Bader Ginsburg's famous reply to when there would be enough women judges on the ninejudge US Supreme Court bench: "When there are nine." Maybe, it is time for women in India to echo that and ask for all 34

> Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

leaders' foreign visits hese days, India-China relations the plane. I was walking with Mani, but he are dominating headlines. But behind the headlines that emerge

Pavan K

Varma

Behind the scenes of

from every international summit. there are days of intense planning and preparation, and inevitably, some interesting and humorous anecdotes destined to remain unknown. I was involved with two path-breaking visits to China, one by Prime Minister (PM) Rajiv Gan-

dhi in 1988, and the other by President R Venkatraman in Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in

1988 was the first after Jawaharlal Nehru's in 1954. I went to China as part of the team tasked with preparing for it, and then again as part of his delegation. At the time of PM's departure from the Technical Area in Delhi, I found

that one suitcase had been conspicuously kept aside and not loaded. According to security instructions all checked-in baggage had to be deposited unlocked for screening. The locked suitcase belonged to foreign

minister PV Narasimha Rao. The director Special Protection Group in charge of PM's security, a fine officer, politely but firmly informed Rao's aide that on the PM's plane there is only one VVIP. Either the key should be procured quickly or the baggage would not go. I also recall that as we were boarding, a

senior Cabinet minister, who had come to see off the PM, kept calling out to Mani Shankar Aiyar, who was walking towards

instructed me, "Keep walking. Don't look At that time, Mani was part of the pow-

erful inner coterie of Rajiv Gandhi. His

power was far beyond that of his actual rank, and he could afford to ignore a Cabinet minister. Narasimha Rao's baggage was finally loaded because the key came in the nick of time. A few years

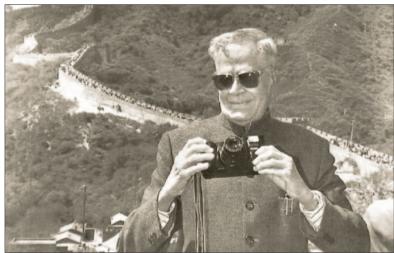
later, Rao as PM became the only VVIP on his own plane. Such is the wheel of time. Rajiv Gandhi took a media team of over 60 top journalists for the visit, many of whom had egos larger than life. On the visit

to the Great Wall of China, three prominent journos wandered off on their own. By the time they returned, the PM's convoy had moved. In a VVIP visit, getting separated from the convov is a nightmare. The unnamed trio, used to throwing their

weight around, managed to reach the

hotel hungry and weary only late at night! President Venkataraman was the first head of State from India to visit China in 1992. I was his press secretary. Venkataraman was meticulous, highly intelligent, and a master of his brief, but his valet messed up big time. He forgot to pack the black sherwani he wanted to wear at the main banquet given by his counterpart. This was a crisis, and Venkataraman was

in a foul mood. Next to his suite, foreign secretary JN



President Venkataraman's valet forgot to pack the black sherwani he wanted to wear at the main banquet given by his Chinese counterpart, during his 1992 visit to China. The Indian embassy in Beijing came to the rescue.

Dixit, our ambassador Salman Haider. and I were discussing what to do. Just then, H Viswanathan, counsellor in the embassy, walked in. He was wearing a black sherwani and was about the same height and built as the President.

Salman Haider kept looking at him, and then peremptorily said, "Take off vour *sherwani*." A shocked Viswanathan complied. Haider then took the sherwani to the President. It fitted him as if it was his own! Venkataraman beamed. The crisis was over.

Another 'crisis' took place after the President's visit to Xian. I bought there a small clay replica of a statue that is part of the life-sized, hand-moulded Terracotta Army buried with China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang.

On returning to the hotel, the First Lady, Mrs Venkataraman, asked to see my

souvenir, to which I naturally agreed. However, I was unprepared for what happened next. Salman Haider stormed into my room and asked me angrily why I created problems for him. Seeing my blank face, he expostulated, "Now Mrs Venkataraman wants me to procure the same statue for her too. Where, in God's name. do I get it?" I immediately offered that she could take mine, "Of course, I said that," he said exasperatedly, "but she refused." "She wants another one exactly like vours!'

Ambassadors, during VVIP visits, have a tough job and I don't know how he resolved this one. But, such 'glitches' apart, the visit was a great success.

Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Solidarity to save the Earth

This is with the reference to, 'Saving the climate action in the age of global fragmentation' by Arunabha Ghosh (August 31). In this fractured epoch, climate action languishes, hostage to geopolitical rivalries. Only through solidarity and equitable responsibility can we salvage our fragile home

Aditya Shekhar

Silence of the expats

This is with reference to 'It is no more about trade; peoples' ties are at risk too' by Karan Thapar (August 31). Trump's trade game is surely worrying. The imposition of astronomical tariffs baffles but the silence of Indian expats in US is very worrying.

Need to crack down on dowry

This is with reference to "How the wedding market perpetuates dowry culture" by Nishtha Gautam (August 31). Holding extravagant weddings for the sake of grandeur and meeting dowry demands is a waste of money. It's time to eradicate dowry.

Abhilasha Gupta

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It is clear that Mr Modi is not calling the tune anywhere. He is caught between India's largest export destination (USA) and largest import country-of-origin (China). He is caught between tariff threats and trade dependence. He is caught between QUAD and SCO/RIC. Mr Modi, like Mr Trump, believes his political instincts are *always* right

Who is singing, who is dancing?

TWO PEOPLE are preparing to dance. There are faint sounds of music. The singer is not visible yet, but from the outlines it is clear that the singer is not India's prime minister.

Mr Narendra Modi has come a long way since Mahabalipuram, the gentle sway of the *jhoola* that he shared with China's President Xi Jin Ping, the clash between PLA and the Indian Army at Galwan on June 15, 2020, the death of 20 Indian jawans, and Mr Modi's famous clean-chit at the All-party meeting on June 19, "No outsider has intruded into *Indian territory nor is any outsider inside Indian territory*".

MINISTERS CONTRADICT PM

Within weeks, the defence minister and the foreign minister contradicted the prime minister and laid down the red lines: any unilateral attempt to change the status quo was unacceptable, and 'peace on the border' and restoration of the *status quo ante* are the pre-conditions for normal ties with China. In commanders' level talks, India spelt out a threestep process: disengagement, de-escalation and demobilisation. China engaged India in the talks, and disengaged, but brushed aside de-escalation and demobilisation. All the evidence, including satellite images, point to the opposite: heavy mobilisation of soldiers and military equipment on the border, installation of 5G network, air strips, new roads and new settlements for troops and common people. China has most certainly changed the status quo.

Galwan is not the sole friction point. Depsang and Demchok have not been resolved. According to The Hindu, the Chinese military remains on India's side of the LAC at these points. As recently as December 2024, India's foreign minister said, "Our ties have been abnormal since 2020.

The worst blow was during the fourday war between India and Pakistan in June this year. Chinese aircraft (J-10) and Chinese missiles (PL-15) were allowed by China to be deployed by Pakistan. There was evidence that the PLA strategised for Pakistan and guided the Pakistan armed forces in the conduct of the war.

ATTACK & COUNTER **ATTACK**

The Indian government talked about 'decoupling' from China, but it is proving difficult. India's merchandise trade deficit with China has mounted year after year and in 2024-25, the deficit stood at USD 100 billion. India is almost wholly dependent on China for several key goods. 174 Chinese companies are registered in India. 3,560 Indian companies have Chinese directors on their Boards (source: Lok Sabha Q & A, 12-12-2022).

After the India-Pakistan war, India banned over 200 Chinese mobile apps like TikTok. It imposed restrictions on investments from China (as a country

'sharing land borders with India') and stalled investments by Chinese companies. Non-tariff barriers were raised. Chinese participation in Delhi-Meerut RRTS and some road and power sector tenders were cancelled. On its part, China stopped the export of critical minerals and fertilisers. It also severely disrupted the supply of intermediate goods that are required by solar, EV and other manufacturers.

Mr Xi has invested vast political capital in Shanghai Co-operation Organization. At SCO summits in-person mode (2019, 2022 and 2024), there was no bilateral meeting between Mr Modi and Mr Xi. Hence, the bilateral meeting at the 2025 summit in Tianjin was historic. Going forward, it is unlikely there will be a breakthrough on the border conflict, but progress could be made on differences in trade and investment that have been aggravated by both sides in recent months. If that happens, it will be a Uturn for both India and China.

ON THE REBOUND

We must carefully analyse the causes and reasons why both countries seem inclined to turn around. India got a bitter lesson in bilateral relations when President Trump rebuffed Mr Modi despite Mr Modi's over-the-top dosti with MrTrump. It learned a brutal lesson from a transactional President whose private commercial interests and narrow political interests prevailed over sound economics, and he imposed the *highest* tariffs on India (and Brazil).

India is on the rebound like a rejected lover and seeks to find comfort in mending its relations with China. Likewise, China wants to do business in the world's largest market for both trade and investment that is undoubtedly India. It also wants to expand its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region and will therefore do a few things to humour its sole rival. But the reality check is that China will never yield on its claims on the India-China border or on Pakistan which is its Belt and Road Initiative partner and large purchaser of military hardware. Recall that Mr Xi cleverly avoided the two issues that Mr Modi emphasised in the bilateral meeting at Tianjin — trade and terrorism.

At present, Russia alone seems to be in a safe space. President Putin can continue to sell oil and gas to India, China and Europe, and sell military equipment to India. He can continue his war against Ukraine with the help of North Korean soldiers.

It is clear that Mr Modi is not calling the tune anywhere. He is caught between India's largest export destination (USA) and largest import country-of-origin (China). He is caught between tariff threats and trade dependence. He is caught between QUAD and SCO/RIC. Mr Modi, like Mr Trump, believes his political instincts are *always* right. Hence, his style of personal diplomacy. After suffering setbacks, he should abandon dosti diplomacy, hugs and hand-in-hand strolls, and heed the advice of the Indian Foreign Service and seasoned diplomats.

Fifth **COLUMN TAVLEEN SINGH** Twitter@tavleen_singh

A parade of political princes

THE PARADE of political princes we saw travel through Bihar in the past two weeks made a compelling spectacle. I found it both mesmerising and a reminder that democratic feudalism goes from strength to strength. The first two princes on parade were Rahul Gandhi and Tejashwi Yadav and soon, they were joined by Akhilesh Yadav and Stalin. They stood together in an open jeep and drove through the narrow streets of small towns lined with cheering supporters, who joined happily in the slogan of the moment, 'Vote chor, gaddi chhod'. Stealer of votes, step down. The words do not rhyme in English, but have resonance on account of the angry campaign to discredit the Election Commission that the heir to our most famous political dynasty has led.

This yatra, like the others, was about Narendra Modi. In the exercise to malign him, a mystery man appeared at a public rally and used a famous word of abuse that has mother in it. The Prime Minister responded in churlish and childish tones. His dead mother was being insulted, he complained, and the complaint was taken up by BJP cadres and amplified. This overreaction left me feeling that perhaps the BJP and its fellow travellers (this time) are worried that there is real anti-incumbency against Nitish Kumar's endless reign in Bihar. But, to benefit, the Opposition is going to need to offer a convincing new narrative instead of catchy slogans, insults and lies.

Rahul Gandhi was liar-in-chief. He said that first it was people's votes that would be stolen, then their ration cards would be taken away and their land. There is not the slightest sign that any of this is going to happen. But if you can accuse Modi of having stolen elections right from 2014, then why not throw everything at him.

Especially at a time when he has been humiliated internationally by his ex-best friend, Donald Trump, forcing him to scurry off to that coalition of despots and warmongers that constitutes the membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Mercifully, Modi had the good sense to leave before the military parade in Beijing. On the home front, his personal image has been tarnished by the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which seems to have the singular objective of weeding out Muslims, Dalits and

some of Bihar's poorest citizens. It is not a matter of dispute that these have not been 'acche din' for Modi, but the hurdles that his main challenger faces remain huge. By coincidence the *India Today* Mood of the Nation issue arrived on my desk as the Voter Adhikar Yatra was ending. This poll showed that 52% of Indian voters see Modi as the best man to lead India. Rahul Gandhi came in second with 25% of those polled seeing him as an alternative prime minister. In September last year this poll showed him in a slightly better position at 29%.

This should worry him and the Congress party. It means that he remains unable to convince the electorate that he is a serious contender for prime minister with a real political message. This worries me personally because as a dedicated liberal democrat, I would love to see liberal democracy win against the birdbrained ideas we hear too often from Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. A recent example came from the RSS chief's lectures in Delhi to commemorate the centenary of the Sangh. Shri Mohan Bhagwat advised Indian women to all have at least three children, but no more than three. It came as a reminder that the mothership of the BJP will never accept that it has no right at all to tell people what they should eat and drink or who they should marry

and how many children they should have. There is no question that the Congress party wasted the many decades they had in power on economic policies that failed to bring mass prosperity to our ancient land. There is no question that the party's claims to being secular became suspect because of the thousands of Muslims killed in riots under Congress prime ministers. And the more than 3,000 Sikhs killed in the 1984 pogrom organised by the

Congress party.

But there is also no question that the Congress party did stand for the kind of inclusive, liberal democratic policies that India needs now more than ever. As someone who remembers well those old days when we were so proud that India was not a Hindu version of Pakistan, it has saddened me to see India change in the past ten years into that Hindu version of Pakistan. If a political party emerged that could base its political ideas on liberal democracy and its economic ideas on free markets, I have no doubt at all that it would be able to take on Modi's BIP.

only Opposition party today with a national footprint, it should shame the Congress party that after three lost Lok Sabha elections it is still unable to rebuild its organisation. Rahul Gandhi has become very skilled at wandering about on yatras and showing himself as a prince who has the common touch. But when the yatra ends, it leaves nothing behind because party workers seem to believe their only job is to burnish the image of the prince, and then go home and rest till the next yatra comes along.

As our oldest political party and the

inside **COOMIKAPOOR**

EVOLVING RSS

The RSS's changing ethos was very visible at its centenary celebrations in Delhi. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat fielded questions from journalists for nearly three hours. His media team, modelled on corporate lines, invited both Indian and foreign journalists. Unfortunately, beat reporters who cover the Sangh daily were relegated to the back and foreign correspondents were seated in front. Translations of speeches into English, Spanish and French were available on headphones. Some 50 representatives from the diplomatic corps attended, including the ambassadors of China, Israel and Switzerland. In the last century, RSS supremos kept a low profile, with major ideological statements mostly limited to stray remarks on Vijayadashami. It was K Sudarshan who, during A B Vajpayee's tenure, broke with tradition by appearing at the swearing-in ceremony of Vajpayee's first Cabinet and reportedly influenced the choice of finance minister. While sleepy Nagpur still remains the Sangh's official headquarters, most RSS key functionaries have started moving to the huge new complex in Delhi, with security checks and high-tech gadgets. Last year, the ban on government officers joining the RSS, never enforced except during the Emergency was formally lifted. Bhagwat's main message was to counter the narrative of the RSS's detractors, that it is anti-minority and regressive in thought, an image that has harmed the BJP government in the Middle East and the West. Bhagwat stressed the RSS's inclusive nature, and said caste and religion were not barriers, adding that he did not object if people preferred to speak in English. Muslims too were Indians who deserved respect, but he was against conversion, he said. Interestingly, a day later, US President Donald Trump's hatchet man Peter Navarro tweeted a photograph of PM Narendra Modi taken during his 2024 campaign in Kanyakumari, meditating as a seer in saffron robes, with vibhuti and tilak smeared on his forehead, as if to reinforce an image of Hinduism as retrogressive. Navarro's mischievous propaganda continued with him referring to New Delhi's ruling elite as Brahmins.

An Unusual delay

On the **LOOSE**

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Bhagwat denied a common perception,

that the RSS was responsible for the delay in the selection of a new RIP chief. Party president J P Nadda has overstayed in his post by over 1.5 years, and the buzz is that there is no consensus between the RSS and the party over the choice of his successor. The BJP high command is keen on younger ministers, with whom it has worked closely in recent elections; the RSS would prefer an older, seasoned hand who would keep the Sangh in the loop. Bhagwat, while denying any RSS involvement, confirmed that there was an unusual delay. If the RSS had to decide, "it might not have taken so long", he observed. He conceded that while the RSS office may make suggestions, the BJP makes up its own mind. He cautioned recruits that the RSS should not be looked upon as a stepping stone to the BJP. But the presence of advisers or officers with an RSS background in most Central government ministerial offices in recent years is noticeable. An RSS connection also helps for appointing governors and educational institution heads.

YO-YO POLICY

The dramatic ups and downs in our foreign policy is such that most who deplore the end of the "Namaste Trump" bonhomie years with Modi, forget that in fact China under Xi Jinping was the first foreign power to perceive the political importance of Modi, when he was still Gujarat CM and unwelcome in the West, with the US denying him a visa. In contrast, the Mayor of Shenzhen, a Chinese SEZ zone, felicitated Modi. In 2011, a reception was held in Modi's honour at the Great Hall of the People. Similarly, Xi was the first major foreign dignitary to be hosted by Modi on the banks of the Sabarmati after taking over as PM in 2014.

ROOMS WITH VIEW

The opinion of Central officers who were shifted from their old headquarters to the new lookalike six-storey Kartavya Bhavan on Kartavya Path depends on where they have been relocated from. Those working in 1960s-era buildings, such as Shastri Bhawan, see it as a change for the better, with glass windows, wide corridors and clean walls, in comparison to the deteriorating infrastructure of their old offices. But for those formerly lodged in the British-era North and South Blocks, with high ceilings, majestic staircases and a historic background that impressed visitors, it is a case of lese-majesty. The Intelligence Bureau, shifted to the top floor of Kartavya Bhavan 3, has additional handicaps. Supposedly secret sources are visible through the glass partitions and there is no space for the steel almirahs, which store crumbling paper files dating back to the Raj. The files cannot be digitised because of security concerns.





On Nehru's China trip, a shared concern: The US

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi recently visited Tianjin, China, in what was his first trip to the country in seven years. Several commentators viewed the uncertainties brought on by the Donald Trump administration as having pushed the two nations to deepen their relationship. While not the only factor, the global political context becomes difficult to ignore when countries deal with one another, even when they are neighbours.

This was witnessed even in the first official visit by an Indian Prime Minister to China, where the Communists had come to power in 1949. Amid the emergence of Cold War rivalries, India was the first non-Communist nation to accord diplomatic recognition to China in 1950. It was perhaps natural, then, for

Jawaharlal Nehru to visit Mao Zedong in China in 1954, becoming the first non-Communist foreign leader to do so. *The* New York Times then quoted Nehru as saying that he regarded the trip "as the most important foreign mission of his life".

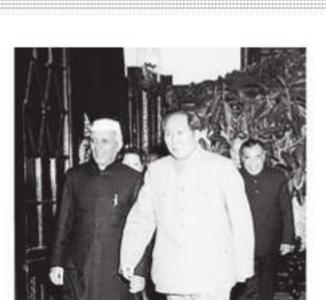
Nehru arrived in China on October 19. In his book, Nehru's Bandung, author Andrea Benvenuti wrote that Indira Gandhi also accompanied her father.

"Anxious to project an image of a peaceful, friendly and dynamic China, CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leaders rolled out the red carpet... Chinese leaders viewed Nehru's visit to China as part and parcel of their charm offensive towards the Third World," he wrote.

Mao and Nehru engaged in wide-ranging discussions about colonial rule (Britain in India, and China witnessing unequal European trade treaties and Japanese rule), Asian politics, the United States, and more.

On October 19, their first meeting was held at the Zhongnanhai, a complex in Beijing that houses government offices. Mao began by underlining their commonalities: "China was bullied by Western imperialist powers for over 100 years. Your country was bullied even longer, for more than 300 years... In spite of differences in our ideologies and social systems, we have an overriding common point, that is, all of us have to cope with imperialism.'

He noted that several problems were yet to be addressed: "Taiwan is still in the hands of the US" and "the level of our industrial development is lower than that of India...". Nehru concurred on the subject of colonisation and reiterated the need to fol-



PM Jawaharlal Nehru with Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao **Zedong in Beijing in 1954.** Wikipedia

low the Five Principles (Panchsheel) on mutual respect for sovereignty and non-aggression. The agreement had been signed just a few months before their meeting, and was also invoked in Tianjin recently.

While he had a more positive view of Europe than Mao, Nehru shared his critical assessment of the US. Mao said, "It (the US) has advanced its defence lines to South Korea, Taiwan, and Indo-China, which are so far away from the US and so close to us. This makes our sleep unsound."

Nehru said, "The US is not mature. It is very difficult for the US to understand the many things that it dislikes and, at the same time, are happening in the world."

In the meeting on October 23, another point of divergence emerged on the question of future global wars, which Mao viewed according to Communist principles: "If another war is fought, the bulk or whole of West Asia and Africa and the whole of Latin America will shake off imperialism."

Nehru argued, "Sometimes the result of a war is good, such as leading to people's liberation and testing people's capacities for endurance. But it can also cause human beings to become more brutal and thus downgraded. Therefore, on every count, war has to be avoided by every possible effort."

Finally, Mao said, "There is no tension between China and India. Our two countries do not wage psychological warfare...". The October 23 meeting was also at-

tended by VV Paranipe, who served as an interpreter during the visit and would later be appointed as an Indian diplomat. Decades later, he recalled the difficulties of the job, given the complexities of the Chinese language and his unfamiliarity with Mao's "very strong" regional accent.

During the visit, the Mayor of Shanghai held a special musical evening in Nehru's honour, where the announcer spoke of a "young and talented musician who had returned from the US".

Paranjpe wrote that the announcer referred to the musician by the Chinese third personal pronoun "Ta", which is the same word used for "he", "she" or "it". "Not knowing the musician, I translated 'ta' as 'he', but soon the curtain went up to reveal a very pretty female musician. Nehru, hardly able to contain his anger, turned to me and said, 'You have been referring to the musician as a man, actually it is a woman. What kind of Chinese do you know?'."

Paranjpe also wrote about his "most unforgettable memory" – when Mao bid Nehru farewell. "We were in Zhongnanhai... Mao escorted Nehru all the way to his car. While shaking Nehru's hand, he suddenly came out with two lines from the Chinese classical poet, Qu Yuan. Quoting him, Mao said: 'There is no greater sorrow than the sorrow of departing alive. There is no greater joy than the joy of (a) first meeting'."

"Upon Nehru's return to India it (the visit) created a cloud-burst of friendly feelings for the Chinese... During his return visit to India in 1956, (Chinese Premier) Zhou Enlai received a tumultuous welcome with skies reverberating with the lilting notes of "Hindi, Chini Bhai-Bhai". This was perhaps the golden period of India-China relations," he wrote.

It was not to last. An uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet led to the 14th Dalai Lama fleeing and seeking refuge in India in 1959, emboldening Chinese suspicions of India attempting to influence Tibet. The 1962 war further dealt a major blow, with Nehru criticised for not anticipating the threat from China. After 1954, the next visit by an Indian PM to China would only happen more than three decades later, with Nehru's grandson Rajiv Gandhi.

> The writer is Deputy Copy Editor, The Indian Express

IN THE Thursday Murder Club on Netflix, four senior citizens residing in a quintessential English (retirement) country home solve cosy murder mysteries, the kind where the camera doesn't linger on a corpse, rather, on the gold enamelled floral teapot placed nearby. The formidable cast of a former James Bond and Ben Kingsley, who played the Mahatma in Richard Attenborough's Gandhi in 1982, suggests, hearteningly, that wrinkles and gait don't matter when there's stellar acting and a good storyline. In one scene, the suave and sophisticated ex-007 Pierce Brosnan is in a water aerobics class with aged ladies, perfectly buoyant, it

seems, even about the circle of life. This de-

In defence of the lowbrow

cidedly predictable and somewhat insipid whodunnit is enjoyable because the news cycle spins out frantically depressing stories. Our complex world rarely offers satisfying explanations for the dispiriting violence all around but a mystery, Agatha Christie style, provides the comforting illusion that justice — however delayed — will not be denied.

The cosy detective novel, movie and TV show is enjoying a successful reconnaissance exactly a century after Hercule Poirot first made his debut. Timid crime minus the scary shocks, a bit of historical detail and some humour is sidelining police procedurals and psychological thrillers with gritty plots of sexual assault and mutilated bodies. In the highly entertaining *Magpie Murders*, a successful crime author is unceremoniously tossed off his roof, and the editor of

his books doubles up as the sleuth in charge. As goes with the cliches of the genre, the settings are desolate, ivy-covered cottages in a picturesque village, creaking staircases and half-a-dozen dodgy suspects in hats lurking about. What's not to love? Genre fiction gets a bad rap because of the neat endings — the detective identifies the murderer, the fantasy hero saves the kingdom and the romantic couple live happily ever after. Since this is the complete opposite of reality, those dreamily seeking perfect resolution from their entertainment are alas, disdainfully deemed lowbrow.

Currently, I've been immersed in the romanticism of 19th century Oxford's cobbled streets and libraries, evocatively described in R F Kuang's novel *Babel*, where translation students are forced to choose between pursuing scholarship and per-

epaper.indianexpress.com

forming atrocities on behalf of the Empire. Thoroughly engaging, it was time well spent, but it was with great relief that I turned my attention from the perils of colonialism to the happily formulaic British mystery next. Much as I value literary fiction, I find reading it exhausting. Undoubtedly, heart-rending stories of wars, racism and inequality can be unputdownable too but all those tragedies that keep one awake till 3 am feel less like a "transcendental experience" (a favourite term of book critics), and more, like a guarantee of crankiness the next day. I was presented The Vegetarian after Han Kang won the Nobel for literature last year. Reviews praised "her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of life". It sits unopened on my bookshelf, likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

It would be a pity to go through life without the perspective critically acclaimed books and movies have to offer because cheesy as it sounds, they can be transcendental experiences. However, there's an age to appreciate David Lean and Dickens, it's when you're young and curious for information while forming a world view. Youth means there's still some pressure to prove one's smarts; there's nothing brag-worthy about bingeing the latest Lee Child (my favourite). Ideally, in literature like in politics, a range of opinions should be continuously sought but we become jaded and more committed to leisure. Books shouldn't feel like work. In this age of distraction, anything that holds one's interest is good enough. And who knows, there's always a chance we'll end up learning something new.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

ACROSS THE AISLE, P CHIDAMBARAM



WELL BEING HOW AI IS ENHANCING DIAGNOSIS, AIDING DOCS

Al is no longer just a future promise in India's healthcare system; it's already at work Page 9 The human cost of AI

FE LINES

Digital platforms becoming more companion-like, sans regulation, can have tragic consequences Page 6

SPOTLIGHT

CRYPTO



NEW DELHI SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2025 38 Pages, ₹12 (Patna ₹12, Raipur ₹12, Srinagar ₹15)

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FINANCIAL EXPRESS ON SUNDAY READ TO LEAD

REINCARNATED How cryptocurrency is

emerging from the fringe to become mainstream Page 5

> Healthy Nibbles, and Teamwork Bites, the platform

> promises meals that fit

seamlessly into the workday, offering nearly 7 lakh items

from over 2 lakh restaurants.

What users need is to type

'office' or 'work' in the Swiggy

sionals are more time-

strapped and choice-rich than

ever before," said Deepak

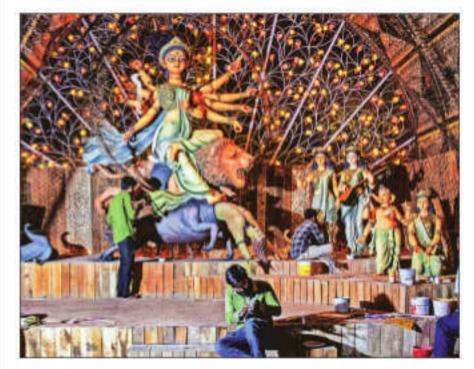
Maloo, vice-president, food

"Today's corporate profes-

app to access this offering.

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Transcending tradition

From wheelchair ramps at pandals to medical kiosks and biodegradable decorations, Durga Puja is evolving into a more inclusive celebration

■ WORDS WORTH, P4

When the machines rise

An argument for the need for humans to reinvent themselves in the age of Al



Gold returns hit 40%, highest in 25 years

WITH GOLD PRICES hitting record highs almost every day, returns from the yellow metal have surged 40% in 2025 so far—the highest in 25 years. Silver has also delivered strong gains, with returns touching a five-year high of 43.5%. On

Friday, MCX spot gold prices hit an all-time high of ₹1,05,967 per 10 gm, while MCX spot silver was at ₹1,23,238 per kg, marginally below Thursday's record of ₹1,23,335.

> Compiled by **Kishor Kadam**



2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025

What's on menu for India Inc? Food with a thought Fuel, to One hand Grabbies, **HAPPY MEALS**

Office lunch is serious biz, with tailored offerings

New Delhi, September 6 FOR YEARS, THE Indian

VAISHALI DAR

office lunch break was defined by dabba services, hurried canteen meals, or the occasional takeaway. But that landscape is rapidly transforming. With India's growing corporate workforce demanding healthier, faster, and more specifically for working professionals ■ Elior India takes Massive

■ Swiggy launches DeskEats, curated

Restaurants, which operates Farzi Cafe, launches cloud kitchen Salad Life to offer healthy eats

management company Platos to elevate institutional dining

majority stake in

tech-led cafeteria

personalised food experiences, both tech disruptors and traditional food services giants are racing to redefine

what and how professionals eat at work.

Swiggy recently launched DeskEats, a curated food

experience designed specifically for working professionals across 30 cities, spanning 7,000 tech parks and business centres. From curated collections such as Value Combos, Stress Munchies, Deadline Desserts, Sip-tastic

■ Rebel Foods leveraging

& novelty to office-goers

cloud kitchens to deliver variety

■ Razorpay partners with Manipal

Hospitals to transform employee

meals from nutritionist consultant

strategy, customer experience & new initiatives, Swiggy. Continued on Page 2

SIGNALS HOPE FOR THAW ON TRADE FRONT

Modi, Trump warm up to 'special relationship'

• Fully reciprocate positive assessment of ties by Potus: PM

FE BUREAU New Delhi, September 6

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi on Saturday reached out to US President Donald Trump through social media, their first direct contact after the much discussed phone call of June 17 that led to strained ties between the two leaders.

The PM replied to a media report on 'X' about Trump's comment on his friendship with Modi and the special relationship between India and the

NARENDRA MODI PRIME MINISTER

a very positive and forward-looking Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership

India and the US have

US. "Deeply appreciate and fully reciprocate President Trump's sentiments and positive assessment of our ties," Modi said. "India and the US have a very positive and forward-looking Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partner-

ship," the PM added.

At a White House briefing late on Friday, Trump had said,

"India and the United States have a special relationship. There is nothing to worry about." A few hours before this statement Trump had posted on

lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China. May they have a long and prosperous future together!" Following this, US commerce secretary Howard Lutnick had remarked, "So I think, yes, in a month or two months, I think India is going to be at the table and they're going to say they're sorry and they're going to try to make a deal with Donald Trump."

'Truth Social': "Looks like we've

Ties between the two countries are already stressed because of a stalled bilateral trade agreement (BTA), where India has stood its ground on protecting its farm sector.

Continued on Page 2 ■ New US tariff orders just impact \$15 mn exports: P3

Myntra

■Umbrellas: 1.6X

■ Rain suits saw

Croma

■ Water purifiers:

■35% of annual

sales in monsoon

32% during

monsoon

months

healthy growth

(Jun-Aug)

FM thanks states for GST support

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA New Delhi, September 6

UNION FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday said she had written to finance ministers of all states, expressing gratitude for their support and active role in helping implement the landmark overhaul of the goods and services tax (GST) regime.

In an interview with PTI, Sitharaman said the states presented their views on proposals to rejig tax rates, but ultimately agreed that it was for the benefit of the common man, which helped reach a unanimous decision at the GST Council meeting earlier this week.

The overhaul, effective September 22, will see price

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN **FINANCE MINISTER Ultimately** everybody came together for a good cause, and I'm truly very grateful

tember 3. The panel is headed by Sitharaman and includes representatives of all states

Adani, Druk Green Power sign ₹6k-cr hydro power deal

ADANI POWER and Bhutan's stateowned generation utility, Druk Green Power (DGPC), on Saturday

signed an agreement to set up a 570-MW hydroelectric project on the river Wangchhu. The project will see investment of about ₹6,000 crore. **■ PAGE 3**

Six dead as wire of cargo ropeway snaps in Gujarat

SIX PERSONS died after the cable wire of a cargo ropeway snapped at the renowned Pavagadh Hill

temple in Gujarat's Panchmahal district on Saturday. Rescue and relief effort are underway.

Monsoon spurs sales ahead of festive season

SUGANDHA MUKHERJEE New Delhi, September 6

ABOVE-NORMAL RAINFALL this monsoon has fuelled a sharp rise in demand for rainwear, household products, automotive accessories and water purifiers, with e-commerce platforms and retailers 2.5X reporting significant seasonal shifts in consumer spending.

Between June 1 and September 3, India received 780.8 mm of rainfall, compared with a normal of 721.1 mm, according to the India Meteorological Department. The surplus of nearly 8% has coincided with increased sales of umbrellas, raincoats, ponchos, mop sets, car covers and water purification systems.

On Flipkart's quick-commerce service, one in every

RAINING DEMAND Flipkart ■ 1 in 5 orders had monsoon products **■** Umbrellas & raincoats: 5X ■ Mop sets:

■ Rainwear: 30% YoY ■ Kids' rainwear: 35% YoY ■ Car & bike covers: 30% YoY

five orders included a monsoon-related product. The company reported umbrellas and raincoats recording a fivefold rise in sales, while mop sets grew 2.5 times.

Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai led in order volumes, with younger shoppers aged 25-35 most active.

Continued on Page 2

cuts in a wide swathe of prodand Union territories. ucts, and was agreed at a meeting of the GST Council on Sep-Continued on Page 2

Vietnamese EV maker VinFast made its debut in India with the launch of VF6 and VF7 (above) on Saturday. Prices start at ₹16.49 lakh & ₹20.89 lakh, respectively. Seen in pic: CEO Asia Pham Sanh Chau & chief engineer Vincent John Pendlebury ■ P20

M&M cuts prices before deadline

• Renault, BMW, Toyota announce revised rates

SWARAJ BAGGONKAR Mumbai, September 6

FOLLOWING THE GOODS and Services Tax (GST) rate reduction announced earlier this week, more carmakers declared price corrections on Saturday to pass on the benefit to consumers.

While most companies said the new prices will be applicable from September 22 when the new GST rates take effect, sports utility vehicle major Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) said the benefits will be available to its customers on the internal combustion engine portfolio

starting September 6. M&M claims to have passed **GST BENEFITS**

Mahindra Renault ₹96,395

BMW

₹8,90,000 ₹3,49,000 Toyota



Its Bolero/Neo, XUV3XO, Thar, Scorpio Classic, Scorpio-N, Thar Roxx and XUV700 will see the price change. Three of its models have moved to the 18% GST slab, while five others have moved to the highest GST slab of 40%.

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Master of nonchalance, Diwan Nanda dies connect consumers and brands independent of the advertising

An influential ad professional, he co-founded Rediff

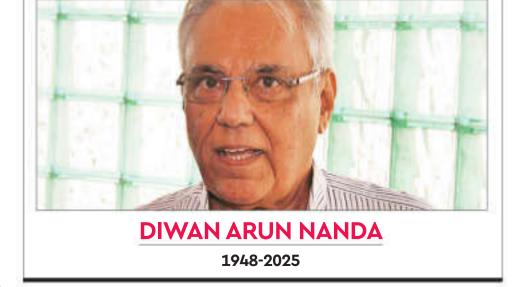
ALOKANANDA CHAKRABORTY New Delhi, September 6

ALLHELL BROKE loose because of one flippant comment from the client team. Diwan Arun Nanda told Ruchira Raina—now executive director at advertising agency Rediffusion, and a rookie servicing hand back then in the 90s—who had accompanied him for a presentation in Kolkata, to pack up. As Raina organised the huge A2 sheets of

work in her portfolio bag, Nanda told the client team, in their face, they probably didn't know what they wanted.

"You can't build relationships with unending dinners and lunches—that's an unsustainable business model," he explained some months later."It boils down to the creative product and the expertise an ad agency brings to the table."

This precept of the clientagency relationship and his respect for the creative product were to be Nanda's statement of purpose as an advertising professional. Nanda, co-founder of Rediffusion (1973), and among Indian advertising's most influential figures, passed away aged 76 on Saturday.



Born in 1948, Nanda obtained his undergraduate degree from Loyola College in Chennai, and later joined IIM Ahmedabad, where he was a gold medalist as part of the very

first batch of 1966. He began his career at Hindustan Lever in the late 1960s, when he joined the company's pioneering management trainee programme. He stood out for his ability to such as the lightning bolt for Rin detergent, which became a permanent fixture of the brand's advertising.

with simple cues or elements,

That principle of simplicity also became the hallmark of the agency he co-founded with Ajit Balakrishnan and Mohammed Khan. Rediffusion was a Camelot of advertising, say former colleagues, where talent was encouraged not by design, but the simple cultural ethos of giving a free hand. "When I joined a fledgling RediffPR in 1996 at a time when there were a handful of PR agencies and 360-communication was the

language of agencies, Rediffu-

sion allowed me to set up offices

agency," remembers Supriyo Gupta, founder & MD, Torque Communications. Nanda combined the flair of

a creative engineer and the forensic attention-to-detail of a P&L head, running the agency that would produce some glorious advertisements such as 'Gimme Red' for Eveready, 'Wheneveryou see colour, think of us'for Jenson & Nicholson and the more recent 'Isko laga dala, toh life jhingalala' for Tata Sky. He will be remembered, say

his colleagues, for representing the best of advertising culture urbane, sharp, entrepreneurial, creative, risk taker, and with an inherent pride in the work his agency produced.

on the full GST benefit to the consumer, resulting in a price correction of up to 1,56,000. New Delhi

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