

Dawn of artificial mummification pushed back 5,000 years

study's first author, Hsiao-chun Hung, told *The Hindu*.

"It highlights their deep concern for the dead and their willingness to devote great effort to preserving the body as part of community life. This discovery changes how we understand early human culture: it shows that long before we thought, people had developed symbolic thinking, strong social bonds, and rituals that kept the living closely connected with their ancestors."

MIND-NDE

FAQ

Why is India on the U.S. blacklist on fentanyl?

What are fentanyl precursors? Why is it difficult to monitor the trade? How does the supply chain work?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far: In the latest version of the Major's List sent to the U.S. Congress, President Donald Trump listed 23 countries as being significant sources and/or sites of transit of illicit drugs – especially fentanyl – that he said threaten the U.S. The list of countries includes India, Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan.

What is the Major's List? The Major's List is compiled every year to highlight regions where geography, commerce and/or industry contribute to the flow of narcotics or their precursor chemicals into international markets. The U.S. State Department has said that a country's presence on the list doesn't necessarily reflect the strength of its counternarcotics efforts but that the designation is based on whether drugs or the chemicals used to make them are being produced or transported through that country in important quantities. This said, Afghanistan, Bolivia, Myanmar, Colombia, and Venezuela were described as having "failed demonstrably" to meet their obligations under international drug-control agreements.

What is fentanyl? Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid and the leading cause of overdose drug deaths in the U.S. It was first developed for medical use in the 1960s and is prescribed in controlled and regulated doses for patients in extreme pain. In illicit settings, however, fentanyl is about 50-times more potent than heroin. Just 2 mg can be fatal because it's

China and India play significant roles in the production of precursor chemicals, some of which are diverted to illegal channels

fentanyl binds these receptors in sufficiently high quantities, it depresses the brainstem respiratory centres that control automatic breathing and crosses the blood-brain barrier and becomes highly concentrated in the central nervous system. Ultimately, the body suffers hypoventilation and respiratory depression.

Opioid overdoses are reversed by naloxone, a competitive mu-opioid receptor antagonist that displaces opioids from the receptor and restores normal breathing. However, it needs to be administered quickly because untreated respiratory failure can lead to brain injury and death within minutes.

According to U.S. data, from August 2023 to August 2024, more than 57,000 Americans died of opioid overdose, most of them involving fentanyl. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reported in 2022 that it seized 50.6 million fentanyl-laced pills and enough powdered fentanyl to account for 379 million potentially deadly doses, an amount sufficient to kill the entire U.S. population.

Why is fentanyl hard to regulate? While heroin or cocaine are derived from plants, fentanyl is made in laboratories using compounds called its precursors. The most important of these are N-phenethyl-4-piperidone (NPP) and 4-anilino-N-phenethylpiperidine (4-ANPP). These substances have legitimate industrial and pharmaceutical uses but they can also be diverted to illicit supply chains.

In a counterfeit laboratory, the precursors are processed into fentanyl powder by chemical reactions common in organic chemistry. These reactions can be carried out with ordinary glassware, solvents, and moderate amounts of heat. As a result, once traffickers obtain the precursor compounds, they can easily turn them into fentanyl. And because only very small amounts of precursors are required to make large quantities of fentanyl and these substances can be shipped discreetly, the trade has been difficult to regulate.

How is fentanyl supplied? The international fentanyl supply chain involves multiple actors. China and India play significant roles in the production of precursor chemicals, some of which are diverted into illegal channels. Mexican cartels are central in processing these precursors into fentanyl powder. Once produced, the powder is pressed into counterfeit pills or mixed with other narcotics and smuggled into the U.S., especially through its border with Mexico. In response, the U.S. government has pursued criminal prosecutions of companies and executives, trade penalties, diplomatic pressure, and enhanced law enforcement. In January 2025, two Indian companies, Raxuter Chemicals and Athos Chemicals, were charged with conspiring to export fentanyl precursors to the U.S. and Mexico. Bhavesh Lathiya, a senior executive at Raxuter Chemicals, was arrested in New York and charged with smuggling. Following these cases, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi revoked and denied visas for certain business executives associated with trafficking fentanyl precursors.

What is the significance of Saudi-Pakistan pact?

What does a collective defence commitment mean? Why does it signal a shift in West Asia's regional order? Is Saudi Arabia willing to let Pakistan play a larger role in the Persian Gulf? Have the U.S. and Israel's recent actions influenced the formal signing of an agreement?

Stanly Johny

The story so far: Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have signed a mutual defence pact. The agreement formalises decades of informal military cooperation. Its timing, coming days after Israel's bombing of Qatar and amid doubts over U.S. security guarantees to the Gulf monarchies, signals a shifting regional order. With Israel's war in Gaza, Iran-backed Houthis flexing their military power, and America's retrenchment, Saudi Arabia is hedging its bets – and Pakistan, strapped for cash but rich in military manpower, is seizing the chance to present itself as a security provider.

What are the terms of the agreement? The official text released in Riyadh and Islamabad declares that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both." This principle of collective defence effectively commits each side to respond to threats to the other. The two countries will establish permanent coordination mechanisms, including a joint military committee, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and expanded training programmes. Pakistan has stationed military personnel in Saudi Arabia for decades. The mutual defence agreement takes the partnership into a formal treaty framework. Saudi Arabia had reportedly provided generous financial assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme. In his 2024 book *War*, American journalist Bob Woodward writes about a conversation Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had with U.S. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, which speaks of the close cooperation the countries

By turning to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is signalling to both Washington and Tel Aviv that it is diversifying its security alliances

have had. When MBS, as the Crown Prince is widely known, told Mr. Graham that Saudi Arabia planned to enrich uranium, the U.S. Senator asked whether the Saudis were planning to build a bomb with the uranium. "I don't need uranium to make a bomb. I will just buy one from Pakistan," MBS told Mr. Graham. While MBS's comments clearly show the close cooperation between the two countries, the agreement does not spell out whether Pakistan's nuclear capabilities extend to Saudi defence (though Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has said Saudi Arabia could access Pakistan's nuclear capabilities). But the symbolism is clear: Saudi Arabia is no longer satisfied with existing security ties and is letting Pakistan play a larger role in the Persian Gulf.

Why was the agreement signed now? The timing is as significant as the content. Saudi officials said talks with Pakistan had been going on for more than a year. But its announcement – barely a week after Israel attacked Qatar – underscores how the Gulf's security environment is changing. Qatar is home to the Al-Udeid airbase, the largest U.S. military base in West Asia. As such a heavily defended ally came under Israeli attack without consequence, Riyadh seems to have concluded that it cannot rely solely on U.S. security guarantees. This sense of vulnerability is not new. In 2019, when Iran's allies attacked Saudi oil installations, the U.S. looked away. The U.S. doesn't want to get entangled in West Asia's conflicts any more as its strategic focus is shifting to East Asia. Moreover, Saudi's calculus is further complicated by two other factors – the Gaza war and the Houthis. The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack in Israel, and Israel's devastating response in Gaza, derailed Saudi Arabia's plans to normalise ties with Israel under the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords. Since then, Israel's war in Gaza has spilled over into the region, deepening the insecurity of Gulf kingdoms. The Houthis in Yemen have also steadily expanded their military capabilities. Their missile and drone strikes had disrupted Saudi oil facilities and shipping in the Red Sea. While there is a tenuous ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis now, the Saudis continue to look at the Houthis as a challenge. The Saudis, the U.S. and Israel have repeatedly bombed Houthis, but they still remain a force in Yemen, controlling almost half of the country, including its capital Sanaa. Against this backdrop, Pakistan offers a practical option. It is a Muslim-majority country, and has long experience in providing security services to the kingdom. In return, Pakistan needs Saudi financial support to



Solid ties: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 17. REUTERS

Is it feasible to blend isobutanol and diesel?

When will the pilot project be completed? Why has ethanol been discarded as the possible alternative? What is the raw material? How is it produced? What are the pros and cons of using this biofuel? Will it have a bearing on ignition and better engine performance?

Saptaparno Ghosh

The story so far: On September 11, Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari said the Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI) was exploring the possibility of blending isobutanol with diesel. Isobutanol is an alcoholic compound with inflammable properties and is used as a solvent in several industries, including painting. Mr. Gadkari said ARAI was studying the possibility of blending isobutanol with diesel, after efforts to blend ethanol with diesel was unsuccessful.

Is isobutanol better suited for diesel? The discussion on the potential use of isobutanol primarily stems from the assumption that the alcoholic compound blends better with diesel, and after the blending experiment with diesel and ethanol failed. Ethanol, however, is available in surplus; as a biofuel, it is being seen as an important contributor to the government's objective of scaling the net zero emission target by 2070. At the annual conclave of the India Sugar and Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA), Reji Mathai, director of ARAI, explained how isobutanol blended better with diesel



New formulations: Workers harvest sugarcane in Kolhapur district in Maharashtra in 2023. REUTERS

compared with ethanol. "There was no need to add any complement [for efficiency], and isobutanol's properties are better than ethanol for blending diesel. This is one [area] where studies are to be taken up," he said. More importantly, as Mr. Mathai pointed out, the flash point, or the lowest temperature at which isobutanol yields a vapour igniting a momentary flash, is higher than ethanol. A lower flash point was among the reasons that ethanol was not considered ideal for blending with diesel. Fuels with lower flash points are more volatile and entail a higher risk of catching fire. The other aspect relates to diverting some of the raw material required to produce ethanol to make isobutanol, as there is already a surplus of ethanol. According to an ISMA note, even after catering for industrial use in different States, the potential for ethanol supply is "more than 50% of the requirement" for the one-fifth blending with petrol. In addition to this, the sugar manufacturers' association has also urged the government to revise the procurement prices for ethanol produced from cane juice/syrup or B-heavy molasses. The prices have not been changed since Ethanol Supply Year (ESY) 2022-23, while the Fair and Remunerative prices (FRP), or the minimum price sugar mills are required to pay farmers for sugarcane has increased by 16.5% during the period. "This imbalance has eroded economic viability, discouraged ethanol production and risked a build-up of surplus sugar in the domestic market," it stated. Thus, the proposed blending also opens another avenue for the surplus production to be used.

How economical is it to make isobutanol? Isobutanol can be produced from the same feedstock required to produce ethanol, such as sugarcane syrup and molasses and grains, among others. ISMA's Director General Deepak Ballani explained the process to *The Hindu*, "Natural sugars are fermented by specially designed microbes under sterile conditions, unlike conventional yeast that produces ethanol; these engineered microbes are tuned to produce isobutanol." On the aspect of costs, Mr. Ballani, taking the example of a sugar refinery, pointed

stabilise its battered economy.

What about West Asia's security landscape? The U.S.'s pre-October 7 plan was to bring Israel and the Gulf kingdoms closer. But Israel's attacks in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran and Qatar have alarmed Arab states. Post-October 7, Riyadh has said it would normalise ties with Israel only if Tel Aviv commits itself to the creation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 border. Israel, on the other hand, says there won't be a Palestinian state. This means that the further expansion of the Abraham Accords is in doubt. By turning to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is signalling to both Washington and Tel Aviv that it is diversifying its security alliances. The risks, however, are substantial. Pakistan could be dragged into Saudi Arabia's regional rivalries with Iran or into the conflict in Yemen. For Saudi Arabia, the deal could entangle it in South Asian instability, particularly if tensions between India and Pakistan flare up again. The pact does not resolve Riyadh's core vulnerabilities, such as Iranian missile strikes or Houthi drones, but it does provide a hedge at a time when America's reliability is under doubt and Israel's behaviour is destabilising the region.

How does India view the pact? For India, the Saudi-Pakistan defence pact introduces complications on multiple fronts. Over the past decade, New Delhi has invested heavily in its relations with Riyadh, deepening energy ties, expanding trade, and securing cooperation on counter-terrorism. Roughly 2.6 million Indian expatriates work in the kingdom. India has also sought to balance these ties with its growing strategic partnership with Israel. But Indian policy in West Asia clearly has a pro-Israeli tilt. Now that Israeli-Saudi normalisation is not happening and Israel's unchecked militarism poses security threats to Gulf kingdoms, Saudi Arabia seems to have overlooked India's concerns by formalising the defence pact with Pakistan. If India can have a pro-Israel tilt, Riyadh can have a pro-Pakistan tilt is what the Saudis seem to be conveying. As Arab monarchies diversify their alliances, they may be less sensitive to India's concerns. If Pakistan successfully positions itself as a credible security provider to the Gulf, India's influence in the region could come under question. At the same time, New Delhi must reckon with the broader structural shift: U.S. dominance in West Asia is no longer assured. Regional powers are recalibrating, and security arrangements once taken for granted are being reconfigured. India's interests – ensuring energy security, protecting its diaspora, and preventing extremist spillovers – are best served by stability and balance in the Gulf. New Delhi's best course lies in maintaining balance – deepening economic and political ties with Riyadh, while continuing to engage with other Gulf states, Iran, and beyond.

out that producing isobutanol from biomass would require retrofitting a fermentation tank, and a distillation tank to separate ethanol from isobutanol. "A plant with a production capacity of 150 kilo litres per day (klp/d) can easily produce 125 klp/d of ethanol and 20 klp/d of isobutanol without a lot of changes to the overall infrastructure," he stated.

What are some of the issues to consider? Mathew Abraham, an automobile consultant and researcher who has previously worked with blending fuel types, noted two potential concerns emanating from isobutanol's significantly lower cetane number compared with diesel, and about flash points. At the foremost, according to Mr. Abraham, isobutanol and diesel may have issues on miscibility (ability of two substances to mix to form a homogenous mixture) though it can be sorted out by mixing biodiesel to the blend. The latter refers to the fuel manufactured from non-edible vegetable oils, used cooking oil and/or animal fat. Further, another point to note is the impact of the blend on the cetane number, which is a measure of combustion quality. An ideal combustion translates to rapid ignition and the fuel combusting completely to produce the necessary energy. Mr. Abraham notes the alcoholic compound's significantly lower cetane number compared with the base fuel, diesel, would reduce the blend's overall cetane number. Also, a lower cetane number raises concerns about 'diesel' knock' which can result in reduced power and can potentially damage engines. 'Knocking' occurs when the fuel burns unevenly and/or prematurely in the vehicle's fuel cylinder, also generating an audible sound. However, Mr. Abraham added that the cetane value can be restored through proper additives which would entail incremental costs. Mr. Abraham further stated that the proposed blend would have an impact on reducing emission and help with import substitution, but the riders must be addressed, and proper studies should be initiated encompassing varied vehicle classes and types. More importantly, he emphasised, "No more than 10% blending [of isobutanol] should be considered, else it could have an impact on engines." The blending paradigm is still being studied and the pilot project would take about 18 months to complete, according to Mr. Mathai. If successful, India would be the first country to have blended isobutanol with diesel.

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

UN@80: Reforms essential for continued relevance

The reform of the Security Council — the UN’s lynchpin for international peace and security — must remain front and centre. Though now it may seem implausible, there is no avoiding this

September 23, 2025 — this should have been a milestone to write home about. Eighty years of the United Nations — eight decades since 1945 — ought to have produced a moment that feels consequential, not merely ceremonial. A standout deliverable, not just a commemorative logo. The leaders will show up. The numbers and the spectacle will be there. But will the substance match the stage? The reality is pragmatic, even mundane: Internal administrative reform to make the UN more coherent, effective, and better equipped to serve “we the peoples”. The UN80 Initiative explicitly urges change in how the organisation works — with belt-tightening as the burning platform. As secretary-general António Guterres warned in May 2025, “The United Nations’ resources have been shrinking because member-States are not all paying their dues, some not paying on time, contributing to what many describe as a liquidity crisis.” That’s welcome and long overdue. For years, the UN has suffered from unrealistic mandates, siloed structures, overlapping duties, and bureaucratic drag. It needs to streamline, rationalise, optimise. That could mean trimming overlapping mandates between peacebuilding and development agencies, consolidating back-office functions across the UN system, or enforcing stricter budget accountability.

Now, the core question. With rising conflicts, climate change accelerating, new technologies outpacing regulations, and inequality soaring, is the UN fit for purpose? Can it really serve us for the next 80 years? Secretary-general Guterres warned on September 18, 2024, that “without fundamental reform, we risk sleepwalking into irrelevance”.

The recently adopted Pact for the Future, a 42-page agreement with 56 specific commitments on peace, climate, development, security council reform, digital governance and inequality, is one attempt to answer those questions, but implementation will be the test. Germany’s presidency has already singled out building on the Pact and ensuring its delivery as a key priority this year.

Take the Security Council. Its meeting schedule is intense — 10,000 meetings and counting — but its impact tells a different story. Conflicts like those in Ukraine and Gaza grind on. Despite its promise, the Council often lacks the unity, the teeth, or both, to enforce peace. This erodes public trust in the UN, even as its many specialist programmes, funds, and agencies continue important work.

But is this new? Have we not been here before? Multilateralism has always contended with headwinds. The push and pull of 193 nations carries within it the seeds of frustration: Five members remain “more equal than others,” fortified by the veto, while national interests often trump global cooperation.

The Cold War was the UN’s first great stress test. From Korea and Hungary to Berlin and Cuba, the Security Council was paralysed by vetoes wielded by Washington and Moscow, and the institution was denied for inertia. The 1990s offered respite, even a so-called golden era. A cascade of treaties and agreements followed — the UN Framework Convention on

Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, the creation of the WTO, and the Millennium Development Goals. One could almost believe in the rhetoric: “We’re all in this together.” Yet even then, Rwanda and Srebrenica exposed the UN’s inability to protect civilians, reminding us that failure does not always stem from vetoes alone.

The post-2000 period brought renewed turbulence. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2014 campaign against ISIS bypassed the UN altogether. This inability to keep the peace spurred reform debates. In 2003, then secretary-general Kofi Annan convened a high-level panel on “Threats, Challenges and Change.” Its

report recommended strengthening peacekeeping, peacebuilding, counterterrorism, human rights, and development. Some ideas bore fruit, notably the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission. Not all talk, then, but talk that led to action.

The lesson: the UN has weathered crises before. Today’s polycrisis may feel unprecedented, but the cycle of doubt, reinvention, and survival is part of its DNA.

Speaking in Davos earlier this year, secretary-general Guterres had sounded the alarm saying, “We are living in an increasingly ruderless world... We face widening geopolitical divisions, rising inequalities and an assault on human rights... On every front, our systems of governance are often ill-equipped to deal with these challenges. Many were built for a different era, a different economy, a different world.”

So, what’s the way forward? The reform of the Security Council — the UN’s lynchpin for international peace and security — must remain front and centre. Though now it may seem implausible, there is no avoiding this. Of course, the P5 will resist — reform threat-



Ruchira Kamboj



For all its flaws, the United Nations remains unparalleled. The global public goods it delivers — peacekeeping, humanitarian coordination, norm-setting, development platforms — are not optional extras.

GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP

ens entrenched privilege. A 2025 study on Security Council reform suggests that radical proposals will meet the strongest resistance, while gradual change remains more feasible. Delaying, however, is not an option either — it only raises the costs in lives and credibility.

And it is not for lack of proposals. The G4, the L-69, the African Union, and the United for Consensus — coalitions within the UN — all tabled plans during the intergovernmental negotiations at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly.

The real choice lies between comprehensive reform, which commands broad support, and quick-fix expansion limited to elected seats. Despite passionate debate, no headway has been made — but stalemate should not be mistaken for surrender.

This is not an optional debate for better times; it is existential now. Delay will mean

more wars, more displacement, and further erosion of trust.

Because we must remember: The UN was not born in perfection, but has grown thought by thought, drop by drop, through contributions of the best minds from every nation. A mammoth of humanity we created — and one we cannot afford to replace with cynicism or breakdown.

For all its flaws, the UN remains unparalleled. Its global public goods — peacekeeping, humanitarian coordination, norm-setting, development platforms — are not optional extras. If they weaken, the world grows more dangerous faster than any environmental disaster. Its specialised agencies, funds, and programmes — from World Health Organisation and Food and Agriculture Organisation to Unicef, UNHCR and UNEP — are lifelines for millions. If this goes, we are truly heading for

destruction.

We are living in a changed world. Old metrics no longer suffice. Emerging powers, rising populations, new challenges — those realities demand a UN whose structure reflects them. More democratic, more diverse, more responsive. Global South representation among permanent members is now a prerequisite for any expanded Security Council.

As the president of the UN General Assembly, Annalena Baerbock reminded us in her media briefing ahead of UNGA80, the UN must “adapt and evolve to carry us through the next eight decades to show eight billion people why this Organization still matters”. That is the bottom line.

Ruchira Kamboj is former permanent representative of India to the UN, New York. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Living in the grey zone: Peter Mandelson’s story

Unless you’re an avid reader of British news you won’t know who Peter Mandelson is. He’s the only politician I know who has on three separate occasions held high office of State but been forced to resign in disgrace or summarily sacked. The most recent was his dismissal as Britain’s ambassador to the US on September 11. As he once again tumbles down the ladder of success, which he has so successfully climbed on several occasions, I can’t help but think of him. Once upon a time, he was a good friend.

His most recent denouement was a result of his close friendship with Jeffrey Epstein, the sex offender. It seems Peter did not reveal the details of his friendship when he was appointed ambassador. What was unknown is that in 2008, after Epstein was convicted for soliciting prostitution from someone under 18, Mandelson wrote to his “best pal” in July of that year. “I think the world of you and I feel hopeless and furious about what has hap-

pened. I can still barely understand it,” the letter said. “Your friends stay with you and love you.”

This was more than Keir Starmer, the British prime minister, had bargained for when he appointed Peter. Within hours he dispensed with him.

This was the third time misfortune felled Mandelson. The first was in December 1998, when he was Tony Blair’s secretary of state for trade and industry. After it became known he had taken an unsecured loan of £373,000 from Geoffrey Robinson, the paymaster general, whose business affairs were under investigation by Mandelson’s own department, Blair forced his resignation to stem the scandal.

Two years later, he was back in high office but misfortune was once again waiting in the wings. Appointed secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Mandelson was forced to resign in January 2001, following accusations that he used his position to influence Srichand Hinduja’s attempt to acquire British citizenship.

However, such bad luck has never ended Peter’s career. He went on to serve as one of Britain’s commissioners at the European Union before returning to government as Gordon Brown’s secretary of state for business. He was even promoted to first secretary of state. It would seem he has both God’s blessings and Satan’s curse. The former elevates him, the latter invariably drags him down.

Of course, none of this was apparent in the years I knew him. That was in the 1980s and he would have been in his thirties. We were television producers at London Weekend Television, working on what was probably Britain’s best-known current affairs programme, *Weekend World*. The legendary Brian Walden was the anchor.

In those days he was tall, slim with a debonaire if patrician air. Everyone knew his grandfather was Herbert Morrison, a member of Clement Attlee’s fabled cabinet. Some people thought him arrogant but that was probably because he was taciturn. Certainly, he didn’t make friends easily. He kept most people at arm’s length.

If I remember the story correctly, with a grand sweep of his right hand, as he was excitedly explaining some obscure detail, Peter knocked a cup of coffee all over the script I was writing for that week’s show. It was a monumental disaster. We were barely 24 hours from “on air” and the final version of the script was sopping wet.

Peter was instantly apologetic. His face

HIS MOST RECENT DENOUEMENT WAS A RESULT OF HIS CLOSE FRIENDSHIP WITH JEFFREY EPSTEIN, THE SEX OFFENDER. IT SEEMS PETER DID NOT REVEAL THE DETAILS OF HIS FRIENDSHIP WHEN HE WAS APPOINTED AMBASSADOR

turned crimson, either with embarrassment or anger at himself. He immediately offered to retype it. It took him a couple of hours and it went on till well past midnight.

In the process, he added a few flourishes of his own which certainly embellished the outcome.

I imagine that after success has elevated him to the stratosphere, few people get to see this endearing side of Peter. But it’s definitely how I prefer to remember him.

I’m confident he’ll bounce back. He always does. Yet at this moment that’s slender consolation. I wish Peter luck and hope our paths might cross sometime soon.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil’s Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Political parties have to be safe spaces for women

Political parties are not workplaces, the Supreme Court has determined, and so do not come under the protection of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, or to use its catchy acronym, POSH. To bring political parties under POSH would make it a “tool for blackmail”, India’s top court observed while dismissing a special leave petition.

The Supreme Court’s literal interpretation of a workplace ignores the reality of modern politics which, you could argue, for many is now a profession with the perks of power including free housing, medical benefits, and other allowances. Even if you go only by nomenclature, parties have offices, office-bearers and employees who are paid salaries. There is a hierarchy of subordinates and seniors. There is fund-collection, bank accounts and organised activity such as protests and rallies. “To not call them workplaces defies logic,” said senior advocate Shobha Gupta who appeared for the petitioner, MG Yogamaya in the Supreme Court.

Sexual harassment is rampant in political parties, said Yogamaya, an advocate and a member of the Congress legal cell who was appearing in her personal capacity. “Most cases go unreported due to fear of backlash and loss of opportunities,” she said. “The power imbalance and culture of silence worsen the problem.”

Research backs this claim. In 2014, UN Women and the Centre for Social Research (CSR) found 58% of women politicians surveyed said the perpetrators of violence against them were party colleagues. Apart from the everyday sexism that women in public life are subjected to, it is “well known that politicians ask for sexual favours,” said Ranjana Kumari, director, Centre for Social Research.

POSH was intended to be a generous law. It protects domestic workers employed in homes as well as women in the unorganised sector. It covers “aggrieved women” and not

just employees. Its definition of sexual harassment is deliberately broad. It gives women the option of filing complaints within their work spaces, rather than taking recourse to criminal complaints. Of course, they can choose to do both. But the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) is structured to give both sides a fair, and quick, hearing. Now, said Gupta, “You are consciously keeping out a very big and powerful sector of the workplace known as political party offices.”

The narrowing of a law intended to make workplaces safer and thereby, enable greater participation by women in public life is unfortunate. The use of words like blackmail reflects a growing judicial suspicion of women who assert their rights. In the recent past, women who have sought maintenance in divorce cases have been told to get a job. Rape survivors are counselled to tie *rakhi* or even marry their rapists. Section 498A that recognised violence by a husband and his relatives is now mired with judicial observations about disgruntled housewives.

Sexual harassment is the manifestation of an asymmetric hierarchy, where power lies in the hands of a few men over subordinate women (and men, though POSH is not gender neutral). The Supreme Court’s observation offers no solutions. It is time for political parties to pick up the slack and signal their good intentions. Of the 2,764 registered political parties, just one — the CPI (M) — has an ICC, the petition avers. Nothing stops the others from following suit.

Political parties must recognise how integral they are to nation-building. Women’s empowerment, a term so loved by all of them, goes beyond cash transfers and women-friendly schemes. It begins at home, at the party office where women workers can function with dignity, without fear in an environment free of sexual harassment.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

Our roads as mirrors of our lack of civic sense

Nobody cares for the feelings of a road. With each pothole on the highways, every single traffic jam in the city, and every has-been trail-like shadow in the hills, a road gets cursed and vilified. An angry “*yeh wala road hi kharaab hai*” (this road itself is bad) outburst is the most benign of them.

What if the road isn’t the villain, but the tragic hero in our collective drama of dysfunction? After all, the road doesn’t spit *paan*. It doesn’t jump red lights or double park in the neatly encroached space outside houses. The potholed, chaotic, crime-infested, rage-inducing mess isn’t the fault of a surface. It’s perhaps a symptom of a deeper national malaise: A chronic, criminal and unapologetic lack of civic sense.

A young IPS trainee recently asked my advice — no, I did nothing to deserve this honour — on one thing that India needed fixed urgently for its dream drive to development. Between the bites of croissant, I could only mumble, “Roads. Fix our roads”.

A 2022 study by the National Academies in Washington DC, on pedestrian behaviour in India revealed that around “44.6% of pedestrians arriving during red light, violate it” owing to long wait times, impatience, perceived low risk, and low adherence to enforcement.

In the same year, a Kerala-centric study published in *Heritage and Society* reinforced the Broken Windows theory by suggesting

that people are more likely to misuse or show less care towards neglected public spaces. Welcome to the Indian version of nihilism. If the world is already meaningless and ruined, what’s one more empty packet of chips clogging the drains and causing the “inevitable” floods?

Another study conducted in Chennai suggested that people apparently intend not to litter, but then do it anyway. In Delhi, the author recently witnessed the shaming of a woman who accosted a litterer. The latter and her companion kept jeering at the brave woman who didn’t think it was “normal” to throw a banana peel out of the ladies’ compartment, hoping it would miraculously reach a dustbin.

Clearly, we revel in the shared cultural belief that public space is someone else’s responsibility. The road is not “ours”. It’s the government’s. It’s the municipality’s. It’s *karma*’s. Anyone’s but ours. And roads, we don’t even treat them as public infrastructure. They are our unpaid interns, to be exploited and rewarded, if at all, only with platitudes and empty graces.

Our roads are blessed year-round with a variety of divine benedictions. Roads are the site of religious processions and events, and even weekly prayers and *darshans*. They gallantly receive the offerings — flowers, food, festoons — and never complain about the pegged tents right in their middle. Yet, there is no deliverance in sight for them. They stay condemned.



Indians revel in the shared cultural belief that public space is someone else’s responsibility. The road is not “ours”. It’s the government’s. It’s *karma*’s. HT PHOTO

What we lack in civic sense, we make up for in improvisational chaos. Crossing an Indian road is not so much an act of transportation as it is performance art — a cosmic dance of auto-rickshaws, cows, bicycles, that one guy who always walks diagonally while talking loudly on his phone, and another who’s shadowing him to snatch the same phone. Or a gold chain.

The pandemonium of honking, jaywalking, sexual harassment, and whatnot gets blamed on the poor road. As if the road dug its own pothole, which is not the bequest of a corrupt contractor. As if the speed breaker was put there by the devil himself, not by an urban planner who spent college years doing everything but learning how to construct good roads. Cities and roads are supposed to be soulmates, but our roads resemble the acid burns left on a woman’s face by a jilted lover. Every new flyover is a case

study in urban Darwinism. We must either adapt or die.

Traffic fatalities get talked about only when the aim is to bring a politician or party down. The Global Road Safety Facility (GRSF) under the World Bank has found that in low- and middle-income countries, road traffic injuries and fatalities cost the GDP between 2 and 6%. Another study suggests low governance quality combined with certain cultural traits (e.g. higher “hierarchy”, “mastery” and lesser “intellectual autonomy”) tends to result in higher traffic fatality rates.

Maybe, then, an Indian road is not a flaw but a mirror. God made Man in His own image; we make and remake roads in ours: Punishing, dramatic, and full of garbage.

Nishtha Gautam is an author and academician. The views expressed are personal



Nishtha Gautam



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Approachable health care at a call

This is with reference to “Impact of floods on women’s health care” by Lalita Panicker (September 14). Floods this year have put life out of gear, posing a risk to women’s health especially. Health camps, mobile health clinics, and teleconsultation can prove to be a boon for pregnant women in flooded areas.

Abhilasha Gupta

Protect the Himalayas, protect life

This is with reference to “Towards a new paradigm of urbanism in Himalayas” by Dikshu C Kukreja (September 14). The Supreme Court’s concern over illegal tree-felling in the hills comes at a when floods and landslides are ravaging northern India. Protecting the Himalayas is vital for livelihoods and life itself.

Sanjay Chopra

II

Since we have not taken any proactive action on climate, we will have to do damage control. We have to have real-time weather monitoring in the Himalayas and community involvement in disaster management.

Bal Govind

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter @Pchidambaram_IN

The best estimates of 2025 place the Muslim community at 202 million and the Christian community at 32 million of India's population. While Hinduism is the oldest religion, Christianity and Islam have the largest following in the world. We may believe that we are secular and tolerant, but the world will view India through the prism of India's laws, government actions, and the people's social behaviour. The passage of the Waqf (Amendment) Act has diminished India in the eyes of the world

inside
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



BABU'S BABUS

Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu is caught in the middle of a stand-off between his IAS officers and TDP MPs. When Naidu came to Delhi for the Vice-President's swearing-in ceremony, an altercation took place between MP Byreddy Shabari and the CM's aide Kartikeya Misra at Naidu's residence. Misra allegedly rudely ordered the woman MP to step aside. When Shabari suggested that Misra show more respect, the officer launched a tirade and she broke down in tears. Her fellow MPs comforted her and senior MP Vemireddy Prabhakar Reddy recalled that the same officer had allegedly once slammed a door in his face. He had earlier quit the YSR Congress because of similar arrogant behaviour. TDP MPs complained to the CM, who asked his official for an explanation. Instead of an apology, at a Collectors' meet at Amravati last week, IAS officers backed their colleague. It was even suggested that the MP deny the incident, news of which appeared in the media. With both sides incensed, Naidu is caught between a rock and a hard place.

MOTHER MARY'S PLAY

Award-winning author Arundhati Roy's latest book, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, recalls an old quarrel between BJP's K J Alphons, and the author and her mother Mary Roy. Arundhati writes that Alphons, then the Collector of Kottayam, had banned the production of the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Roy's school hours before it was to be staged. Arundhati suggests that Alphons acted out of pique because her mother, the school's principal and founder, had refused to admit two students he had recommended without an entrance test. Alphons, however, claims the ban had nothing to do with Roy turning down the applications of two poor farmers' children, but because he feared a law and order problem in the district. He personally had nothing against Andrew Lloyd Webber's play, which he had directed as a student at Shillong University. It was because he had received a complaint in Kottayam, the heartland of the Syrian Christian community, signed by 3,000 people. He had requested Roy to attend a meeting to clear up the misunderstanding that Mary Magdalene's song in the musical was blasphemous. But the "impossible" Roy had refused to meet Alphons and, instead, approached the courts, questioning

On the
LOOSE

LEHER KALA

leherkala@gmail.com



A STUDENT, 22, shot dead a popular, far-Right commentator in America. Said Conservative was notorious for his bigoted views, infuriating millions with his racist opinions. Mercifully, guns aren't as easily available in India, so politicians are at the receiving end of considerably milder ire, like hurled slippers and exploding vegetables. Footwear was thrown at the PM's convoy in 2024 and former Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik was pelted with mango kernels while campaigning in 2001. His close aide was attacked with tomatoes last year. Irrespective of where one stands on the ideological spectrum — and God knows people everywhere have reason to be angry — there's something

Rendering interim justice

WHEN THE Supreme Court or a High Court strikes down a single provision of an Act passed by Parliament, it is, at the least, a *rap on the knuckles* of the government and parliamentarians. When a Bill is opposed on the ground that provisions of the Bill are violative of the provisions of the Constitution, yet the government pushes through the Bill in Parliament, and it is eventually struck down, it is nothing less than a *slap on the face* of the government. Consider a worse scenario: the Bill is opposed when it is introduced in Parliament and it is referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee; several members of the JPC write a dissent note arguing, among other grounds, that Parliament is not competent to pass such a Bill; yet the government brushes aside all objections and passes the Bill; and, later, provisions of the Act are struck down or stayed by a Court. It is the *worst humiliation* for the government and a reflection on the Ministry of Law.

NOT ABOVE CONSTITUTION

That is the story of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025. On September 15, 2025, the Supreme Court *stayed* key provisions of the Act. Yet the government put on a brave face and congratulated itself that the Court had endorsed its attempts to 'reform' an integral part of the Muslim personal law.

Please see my column *Malice Toward Muslims* (*Indian Express*, April 6, 2025). I had referred to several questions raised in Parliament. There were no answers from the government, only obstinate defence of the clauses of the Bill. Thankfully, the Supreme Court has given the interim answers to our questions:

1. Under the Act, a person creating a waqf must demonstrate that he has practised Islam for *at least five years*. We asked how does a person 'demonstrate' that he is practising Islam? The Supreme Court *stayed* a part of clause (r) of Section 3 until the rules are framed by the State governments for providing a mechanism for determining the question whether a person has been practising Islam for at least five years. (There is no similar provision in the personal laws of any other religion.)
2. If the property dedicated to a waqf is claimed as 'government' property, the question will be determined by an officer of the government; until he so determined, the property shall not be treated as waqf property; and if he determined that it is 'government' property, he shall make corrections in the revenue records. We asked will it not be a case of the government being a judge in its own cause? The Supreme Court *stayed* the proviso to sub-section (2), sub-section (3) and sub-section (4) of Section 3C.
3. Once the revenue records are 'corrected', the waqf will lose its title to the property. We asked will it not amount to appropriating (actually, expropriating) waqf property through executive action. The Supreme Court directed that until the issue is *finally* decided by a judicial appellate Tribunal and the High Court concerned, the records *will not be corrected* and the waqf *will not be disposed* of the property, and no third party rights will be created.
4. The Amendment Act provided — in my view, mischievously — that non-Muslims may be appointed to the State Board of Waqfs and the Central Waqf Council, and even as the chief executive officer. We asked will similar provisions be incorporated in laws governing the institutions of other religions? Will Muslims or Christians be appointed to Hindu religious and charitable institutions? The Supreme Court did not stay the entirety of the offending provisions but limited the interim order to 'not more than 4 non-Muslims out of 22 members of the Central Waqf Council' and 'not more than 3 non-Muslims out of 11 members of the State Board of Waqfs', and 'every effort must be made to appoint a Muslim as the chief executive officer'.

HUMBLED, BUT NOT HUMBLE

The Supreme Court heard arguments for three days on the application for interim stay of the Waqf (Amendment) Act as a whole or, at least, the key provisions. It was unusual for the Court to devote

three days to a stay application. Further submissions will be heard when the case is listed for final arguments. In the meanwhile, knowing the character of this government, it will nurse its wounds and plot further assaults on minorities in pursuance of its Hindutva agenda.

Malice is writ large on the face of the Waqf (Amendment) Act. If the government were to observe Article 26 of the Constitution scrupulously,

'every religious denomination or any section thereof shall have the right — to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes; to manage its own affairs in matters of religion...'

Any person truly interested in preserving and protecting the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of the country — especially the Hindus — should fight *against* the Waqf (Amendment) Act.

INDIA DIMINISHED

The best estimates of 2025 place the Muslim community at 202 million and the Christian community at 32 million of India's population. While Hinduism is the oldest religion, Christianity and Islam have the largest following in the world. We may believe that we are secular and tolerant, but the world will view India through the prism of India's laws, government actions, and the people's social behaviour. The passage of the Waqf (Amendment) Act has diminished India in the eyes of the world.

how a play performed all over the world could be dubbed as blasphemous. A decade on, the SC allowed the school to perform it.

OUT IN OPEN

Unlike previous BJP politicians who sought to politely distance themselves from the RSS in public perception, PM Narendra Modi has gone out of his way to emphasise the strong bonds between the party and the Sangh, even if it means upsetting liberal and anti-Hindutva elements. Modi congratulated the RSS on its centenary year from the ramparts of Red Fort on Independence Day and published an article praising RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on his 75th birthday. A pragmatist, Modi realises that he needs to keep the RSS on board if the BJP requires the services of its cadres at election time. After Bhagwat's recent denial that he had ever suggested the norm for retirement at 75, a potential point of difference between the two men was cleared. But consensus has yet to be reached on the choice for the next party president, a post that is significant not just for controlling the organisation, but also influencing the eventual line of party succession. The latest name floated as a probable presidential candidate is Nirmala Sitharaman, a rumour that gained currency with some people noticing major renovations at her residence. In fact, the PWD work afoot is simply long overdue repairs, as Sitharaman moved to her Safdarjung Road bungalow in 2017. Her advantages as a woman and representing the south are outweighed by the fact that she is not from the RSS, has little organisational knowledge and that the PM is happy with her handling of the finance portfolio.

EMULATE GANDHI

Intolerance for healthy criticism and suppressing legitimate reporting is regrettably a growing trend worldwide. A Delhi court last week issued a blanket restraining order against journalists from writing about the Adani industrial empire. The I&B Ministry recently ordered YouTube and Instagram to remove 138 links and 38 posts respectively. In the US, President Donald Trump slapped \$15 billion defamation suits against the *New York Times* and Penguin Random House. Comedian Jimmy Kimmel's late night show on ABC TV has been abruptly terminated. In this context, it is worth recalling a letter written by Mahatma Gandhi, dated August 10, 1929, to A C Chatterji of the *Associated Press* (AP) wire service, which reveals a contrast in tolerance and liberality that is worth emulating. In his letter, auctioned by Sotheby's last year, the Mahatma brushed aside the newsman's apologies declaring, "I know enough of journalism to appreciate that errors are at times inevitable."

History
HEADLINE

VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN



ON AUGUST 23, President Donald Trump announced on "Truth Social" that he was appointing his "close aide" Sergio Gor as the US ambassador to India and Special Envoy for South and Central Asian Affairs. He added that he needed someone whom he could fully trust "to deliver on his agenda to the most populous region in the world and help make America great again".

However, on September 11, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, while introducing Gor to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that India is at the core of the Indo-Pacific region and in the 21st century, "the story is going to be written in the Indo-Pacific". Rubio also said that it was President Trump who had renamed "US Pacific Command" as "Indo-Pacific Command" and laid down the US strategy on the Indo-Pacific region. He added that the appointment of Gor with "direct access to the Oval Office, to the President" was critically important.

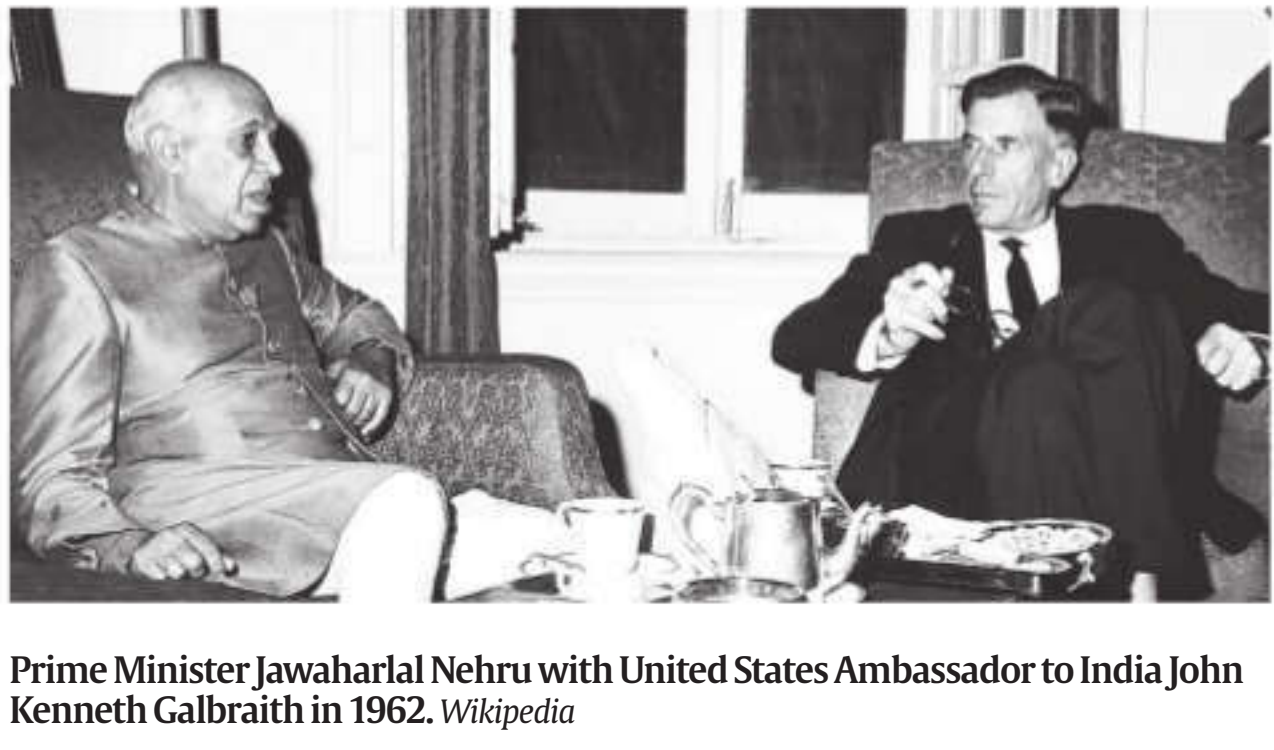
This would mean that Sergio Gor, for the first time in American history, would have an unprecedented expanse of area to supervise. As of now, the US Indo-Pacific strategy is implemented by the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (13 countries), and by East Asian and Pacific Affairs (33 countries). Since most of these states already have ambassadors, it would mean that Sergio Gor would be a "Super Ambassador" executing the President's strategies, which means supervising these 46 embassies.

This is a marked departure from the existing system of "ambassadors at large", which started in 1949 under Article II, Section 2 of the US Constitution for specific foreign policy issues, irrespective of jurisdiction. It is also not in conformity with the system of ambassadors accredited to more than one country, which started in 1882.

Published literature reveals that the only time an American ambassador was asked to manage portfolios beyond his accredited country was in 1962, when John F Kennedy was the president. Kennedy wanted his ambassador, Professor John Kenneth Galbraith (1961-1963), to consult Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the working of the International Commission for Supervision and Control on Vietnam, of which India was the co-chair.

Historically, it was not President Trump who coined the term "Indo-Pacific" or underlined its importance by

'Super Ambassador' Gor and Indo-Pacific challenge



linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Veteran Indian diplomat-historian Sardar KM Panikkar had pointed out in his book *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945) that German general-geographer-academic Karl Haushofer had conceived the Indo-Pacific concept in the 1920s, and his treatise *Geopolitik of the Pacific Ocean* was adopted as "a virtual textbook for Nippon's naval strategy" in the 1920s.

Panikkar wrote this book on the eve of India's Independence to guide our leaders into diversified strategic thinking, citing the importance of seas in our future security architecture. He said that till the middle of the 13th century, control of Indian waters was entirely in Indian hands. Even the Arabs, "who succeeded to the supremacy of the sea, after the breakdown of Chola naval power, were only commercial navigators" and did not pose any security threats.

Karl Haushofer's ideas on the strategic importance of the Pacific Ocean had crystallised during his tenure as the German military attaché in Japan during 1909-10. Haushofer stayed in India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) for 10 weeks during his sojourn, which convinced him that the "monsoon countries" such as India, Ceylon and China constituted a geopolitical unit. He also saw the then developments in the Indian Ocean Rim, especially in China, Japan and the Pacific, as an opportunity to spread German influence over the region and throw out colonial rule.

Haushofer's 1924 paper *Building Blocks of Geopolitics, Geopolitics of Pan-Ideas, and*

German Cultural Politics in the Indo-Pacific Space envisaged the Indo-Pacific as "an organic and integral space primed for political consciousness" based on an oceanographic foundation, "with novel evidence in marine sciences, ethnography, and philology, but also legitimated it as a social and political space".

This paper and his other works were widely translated into Japanese and circulated among security and academic circles, which became cornerstones of Japan's Pacific-Indian Ocean strategy before the Second World War.

What would be Sergio Gor's charter? The Trump 1.0 strategy was building collective security through a network of regional allies and partners through the Quad and allied pacts, promoting economic prosperity in that area and encouraging good governance and shared principles. This was to be achieved through increased engagement with the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Islands region and to respond more forcefully to Beijing's efforts, which were meant to undermine the US policy of safeguarding the sovereignty of Indo-Pacific partners.

True, the Trump 2.0 emphasis on tariffs with coercion and indifference has made these countries unhappy. That should have helped China to "step in". However, the "Pacific Islands Forum" meeting in Solomon Islands this month did not entirely go in favour of China.

The writer is former special secretary, cabinet secretariat. His latest book is India and China at odds in the Asian Century

The limitations of 21st century virtues

sinister about a righteous, vigilante mentality that's gone mainstream. It's fuelled and sanctioned by social media, where you're guaranteed a peculiar kind of profitable infamy for acts of heinous violence.

Sympathy for cold-blooded murderers doesn't augur well in general because, for most of history, human life has been arranged towards doing what's best for everyone. To live in a community, means, in some form, to fit in with the herd. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, a set of values for human flourishing, involved living a life of rational activity to achieve mental and physical well-being. Our society is still loosely based on these principles, part striving and part patience, the Utopian goal being an efficiently functioning system. Don't we all play various roles throughout our lives? We adjust our expectations and

demeanour based on whether we're interacting with the boss in the office or dealing with a crying child. Unknowingly, we apply practical wisdom to daily life, instinctively aware that it's the best way to get on with it. Today, self-indulgent virtues are trumping conventional ideas about right and wrong that have survived thousands of years.

A mere half hour on Instagram or LinkedIn reveals Gen-Z has moved far away from eudaemonic thought; everything is about 'authenticity'. And "vulnerability". Self care is big. Taking care of your "inner child" is bigger. Of course, other than the insufferable triteness of self-help speak, they're all worthy ideals to aim for but what does chasing #selfrealisation offer in terms of moral guidance as a whole? The grandiose sounding #mytruth should send us all into panic mode because some-

one validating their own choices while disregarding #thetruth is a recipe for disaster. No one's knocking anyone's inward turn to transcend the self, but it's worth noting, our own awakenings don't automatically translate into universal enlightenments. One can only wonder if the culture's current insistence of being "true to yourself" is precisely what motivated a 22-year-old to kill someone just for "being sick of his hate". There is an alarming premium placed on being unique and distinctive; being merely well-adjusted and law-abiding doesn't quite cut it anymore.

Examples of performative authenticity abound all around us. Standing apart means choosing sourdough over regular bread; I notice, nobody eats the Amul cheese of my youth anymore, the discerning having rejected its salty tanginess for Gouda and

Gruyère. Appropriate self-representation in the digital era also means ditching Zara for handloom, having an Indie dog not a Shih-Tzu, and there's no absolutely no point in having this richly examined life if it's not affirmed by a quietly admiring audience. Unfortunately, "being yourself" today involves a painstaking effort to project. To begin with, the idea of "authenticity" was liberating; instead of deriving purpose only from religion and tradition, we were free to find our own meaning. But too much tire-some navel gazing has led to the mistaken notion that our need to be "real" overrides our obligations to others. Perhaps it's time to rest the idea that authenticity is a God given divine right to "live your truth". And turn back, to celebrate compromise, tact and maturity instead.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter @tavleen_singh



Misplaced nostalgia?

COULD IT be because Donald Trump decided that he would rather be friends with Pakistan than India? Or because he decided that there was no difference between India's democratically elected prime minister and a military dictator who is sometimes called General Jihad? This jihadi is someone with whom Trump has broken bread more often in recent months than he has with his 'good friend' Modi? Whatever the reason, Pakistan's politicians, sportsmen and sundry other citizens have suddenly become so emboldened that they believe India needs lectures on democratic values. What annoyed me enough to write the piece you are about to read was a clip I saw from an interview with Pakistan's former foreign minister (Hina Khar of the big Hermes bag) in which she praised 'our forefathers' for having built a nuclear bomb.

Having said after Operation Sindoor that India had 'gone rogue', she said in this new clip that she used to be a liberal and believed that Pakistan should not be wasting money on building a bomb when there were urgent other things to do. But now that 'we have seen what India can do', she has changed her mind. Similar sentiments have been expressed by some of my Pakistani friends, who equate Hindutva with Nazism and Narendra Modi with Benjamin Netanyahu. They speak nostalgically about the days when India was 'secular' and liberal. The comparison with Netanyahu is obnoxious. And India has remained secular despite Hindutva, but this is something that is clearly not visible from the Islamist Republic next door.

What is puzzling is why, if India was such a shining land of secularism and democracy before Modi came along, did the leaders of Pakistan never show their respect then? If they respected India so much, why did they send terrorists to massacre innocent people in the restaurants, hotels and railway stations of Mumbai. If they respected India so much in those times, why did they send a constant relay of jihadi murderers into the Kashmir Valley? Why did they try to blow up Parliament House? Why did IC 814 get hijacked?

So what is it that they hate so much about what Narendra Modi likes to call 'new India'? What is it that inspires ordinary Pakistanis to dare suggest that what happened in Pahalgal was a 'false flag operation'? It is not a term I was familiar with, so let me explain that what this means is that there was no terrorist attack, it was just something India's 'deep state' did to find an excuse to attack Pakistan. It is an outrageous suggestion but for people who have grown up haunted by their 'deep state' it is easy to believe that India also has a deep state.

What I find truly mystifying and offensive is the suggestion that Pakistan can teach India about democracy. Have they forgotten that their most popular political leader has been rotting in jail for more than two years? Have they forgotten that another popular leader was executed after a show trial? Have they forgotten that their bonsai democracy is prevented from growing by military men who have contempt for any ideas that are remotely democratic and a hatred of India that seems to infect the very air they breathe?

There are many things wrong with India and there is no question that our democracy is flawed and sometimes fragile. But, not even in the distant future do we see signs that it could be replaced by a system of governance like that of Pakistan. Since Modi became prime minister there has been damage. One reason is the senseless targeting of Muslims. Especially when elections come around. Speaking of elections, it is worth mentioning that Rahul Gandhi seems to be very popular in Pakistan. This is because he so clearly shares the Pakistani view that India is no longer democratic. He held a press conference last week at which he declared (yet again) that democracy was dead. If it was, then he would have needed to be a lot more circumspect about his attacks on the Election Commission than he has been.

Personally, I have no idea what he was trying to say last week about voter fraud. On his platform, he introduced two people whom he said had used their cellphones to delete the names of voters who would have voted for Congress. This, he said, was done with the complicity of the Chief Election Commissioner. If you understand what this new plot is about, drop me a line.

Meanwhile, can we hope that other Indians do not subscribe to the ludicrous notion that India is no different to Pakistan. We are different. But what Modi needs to pay more attention to is why India's image has taken such a beating since he became prime minister. Introspection is needed at the highest levels of the Bharatiya Janata Party because it could result in some acknowledgement that it is the unleashing of the worst kind of Hindutva warriors that could be the reason why this has happened.

Hindutva is not Nazism or Islamism. But it becomes a very ugly ideology in the hands of those obsessed with eradicating Muslims or at the very least making them feel like they are lesser citizens of India than Hindus. It is this that has made people in many countries nostalgic about that 'old India' when Hindus and Muslims both had the same rights.

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MONITORS, DISHWASHERS, & POWER BANKS TO ALSO BE CHEAPER



WHAT'S INSIDE



SPOTLIGHT, P5

Reels on wheels

Meet women bikers who are not only setting the roads on fire, but also social media, and are monetising their passion in the process

Mid and smallcap shares continue to disappoint

MIDCAP AND SMALLCAP stocks have continued to underperform so far this year. The BSE Midcap Index is up just 0.91%, while the BSE Smallcap Index has declined 1.01% year-to-date, compared with a 5.74% gain in the Sensex. This comes

after two consecutive years of stellar performance.

Compiled by Kishor Kadam

Returns in %

Year	Sensex	BSE Midcap	BSE Smallcap
2021	21.99	39.18	62.77
2022	4.44	1.38	-1.80
2023	18.74	45.53	47.52
2024	8.17	26.07	29.31
2025*	5.74	0.91	-1.01

*up to September 19

Relative performance

Base: Dec 31, 2024 = 100

Sep 19, 2025

Sensex	105.7
BSE Midcap	100.9
BSE Smallcap	99.0

H-1B ticket to US now costs \$100K

● Trump hikes visa fee 20-fold ● Over 70% H-1B visa holders Indian ● Applicable only for new visas ● Tech most hit

URVI MALVANIA & SHUBHAJIT ROY
Mumbai/New Delhi, September 20

ANNOUNCING A SWEEPING overhaul of the H-1B visa system that, effectively, targets skilled Indians more than any other group, US President Donald Trump signed a proclamation Friday that will raise the fee for these visas to \$100,000 (₹88 lakh) annually—making it prohibitively expensive for companies to hire Indian professionals in the US.

Currently, the H-1B visa fee ranges from about \$2,000-\$5,000 depending on employer size and other costs. The visas are valid for three years and can be renewed for another three years. Companies pay to sponsor H-1B applicants.

India-born professionals are the biggest beneficiaries of these visas. Between October 2022 and September 2023, 72% of the nearly 4 lakh visas issued under the H-1B programme went to Indian nationals. During the same period, top four Indian IT majors with a presence in the US—Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro—obtained approval for around 20,000 employees to work on H-1B visas, as per the latest US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data.

A senior US administration official clarified that the new fee targets only new H-1B visa petitions, and not existing holders or renewals.

US President Donald Trump announcing the new H-1B visa fee as commerce secretary Howard Lutnick listens, alongside a poster of the Trump Gold Card at the White House

BIG IMPACT

JUMP IN H-1B visa fee
1900%, from \$5,000 to \$100,000 annually

New fees more than median annual salary of a fresh H-1B visa holder

More than 80% of the average annual salary of all H-1B visa holders

DONALD TRUMP, US PRESIDENT
They're (tech CEOs) going to be very happy... The abuse of the H-1B programme is also a national security threat

Foreign workers in US

Number of STEM workers (in mn)

2000	1.2
2019	2.5

Foreign share of workforce

2000	17.7%
2019	26.1%

Share of IT workers in H-1B programme

FY2003	32%
Past 5 FY	+65%

\$1-mn gold card

INDIVIDUALS WHO pay \$1 million to the US Treasury, or \$2 million if a corporation sponsors them, will get expedited visas and Green Card.

Cos dependent on US employees with H-1B visas

Employer name	Beneficiaries approved
Amazon Com Services	10,044
Tata Consultancy Services	5,505
Microsoft Corporation	5,189
Meta Platforms	5,123
Apple	4,202
Google	4,181

Source: USCIS

India worried about humanitarian impact

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi on Saturday said India's main adversary is its dependence on other nations as he raised the pitch for "aatmanirbharta" and called for the indigenous production of everything from (semiconductor) chips to ships. Addressing an event in Gujarat, where he laid foundation stones of projects costing ₹34,200 crore, Modi said all problems of India have only one solution, and that is self-reliance. "India is moving forward with the spirit of global brotherhood and India has no major enemy in the world today, but in true terms, India's biggest adversary is dependence on other nations," stated the Prime Minister, emphasising that this dependency must be collectively defeated.

He said greater foreign dependence leads to greater national failure.

Continued on Page 2

Goyal leaves for trade talks on Monday

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA/PTI
New Delhi, September 20

A DELEGATION LED by commerce and industries minister Piyush Goyal will visit the United States for trade talks on September 22, the commerce ministry said on Saturday. The delegation plans to take forward discussions with a view to achieve early conclusion of a mutually beneficial trade agreement, the statement said. The minister will visit New York and will be accompanied with special secretary in the ministry Rajesh Agrawal and other officials.

The visa order casts a shadow on these negotiations as India typically seeks better access to services-led developed countries under Mode 4.

Under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Mode 4 describes the supply of services through the movement of natural persons (individuals) from one World Trade Organisation's (WTO) member country to another. Mode 4 was also a key ask during negotiations for a deal with the UK, but anti-immigration protests and Brexit resulted in little access for Indian IT workers in the UK under the trade deal.

Trade deal negotiations with the US are already at a delicate stage as Indian labour-intensive sectors such as the textile, footwear and marine sectors have begun bearing the brunt of steep US tariffs.

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Retailers get ready for bumper sales this festive season

● Online expected to dominate with ₹1.15 lakh cr sales

SUGANDHA MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, September 20

E-COMMERCE SALES THIS festive season are projected to reach about ₹1.15 lakh crore (\$14 billion), a 20-25% rise year-on-year, as per Redseer Festive Season 2025 report. Quick commerce has already grown 150% in the pre-festive period, while value commerce is up 30-35%.

As per analysts, festive sales can contribute up to 40% of annual turnover of retailers in categories such as consumer electronics and jewellery.

"The overall impact is expected to be positive," said Kushal Bhatnagar, partner, Redseer. "The reduction in tax rates, coupled with planned discounts, will bring down end-consumer prices significantly, thus boosting overall demand. Appliances are expected to benefit the most. Low-ticket products such as fashion, beauty and personal care, grocery, and home and furniture will also benefit."

"Big-ticket purchases have always been popular during Diwali," said Kishore Thota, director of shopping experience at Amazon India. "With GST reductions, we expect significant jump in demand this year. We are working closely with sellers to prepare for this surge and have strengthened our supply chain."

Flipkart is also upbeat. "We are witnessing strong early momentum across mobiles, electronics, fashion, beauty and home," said Rajneesh Kumar, Flipkart's chief corporate affairs officer. "Tier-2 engagement is deepening, helped by live commerce, a clear indicator of evolving consumer behaviour. This growth is unlocking opportunities for small and medium businesses in remote regions."

Meesho is focusing on value-conscious households in smaller towns. The platform has created about 12 lakh seasonal job opportunities—70% in Tier-3 and Tier-4 regions—to cater to festive sales. "The festive season is when many Indian households place their trust in e-commerce," said Sourabh Pandey, CXO of fulfilment and experience at Meesho. "We have ensured seller readiness and seamless logistics at scale."

Tata CLiQ, another leading e-commerce platform, is seeing festive momentum across both its fashion and luxury platforms. "Typically, we witness a 50% month-on-month jump as we move from the pre-festive period into the festive shopping season," said Gopal Asthana, chief executive of Tata CLiQ.

Quick commerce is also gearing up for festive season. Bigbasket expects its Diwali sales to be 2-2.5 times higher than last year, driven not just by groceries but by electronics, gold coins, crockery and festive hampers. "We have recruited and trained delivery teams in advance to ensure service reliability during peak demand," said Seshu Kumar Tirumala, chief buying and merchandising officer. Bigbasket's edge, he argues, lies in "the depth of assortment and the quality of our own brands."

Making a bold move in competitive e-commerce space, Swiggy Instamart is holding its first large-scale festive sale from September 19-28, ahead of Amazon and Flipkart, and offering deep discounts on over 50,000 products like electronics and groceries, with 10-minute delivery in select areas.

Logistics firms are feeling the surge too.

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FEELING THE SURGE

20-25% Projected rise in e-comm sales this festive season

150% Growth of quick comm this pre-festive period

30-35% Growth of value commerce ahead of festive period

20%+ Projected growth of fashion, beauty & personal care, and home categories this festive season

5-15% Projected festive growth of mobiles & electronics categories

80-90% Projected growth of grocery, led by quick-comm, rising acceptance in Tier 2 cities

Source: Redseer Festive Season 2025 report

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