

SCIENCE

Digital fossil-mining reveals origin of squids hidden inside rocks

The Hindu Bureau

Squids are some of the smartest and most agile animals in today’s oceans, but their evolutionary history has been hard to figure out because their soft bodies don’t fossilise well. A new study has changed this using a method called digital fossil-mining to uncover fossils that were hidden inside rocks. Instead of using traditional tools, which often damage fragile rocks,

scientists from Japan created a machine that slowly grinds a rock while taking detailed photographs of each layer. These images were stitched together to form a 3D model of everything inside the rock, including fossils. The method enabled the team to detect and digitally extract small squid beaks, the hard, chitin-based mouthparts all squids have. By combining cutting-edge imaging with careful analysis of ancient

rocks, the study has filled a big gap in the story of squid evolution. It was published in *Science*. The team collected hard, round carbonate concretions from Cretaceous-era deposits in Japan dated 110-70 million years ago. These rocks were already known to preserve fossils well. From there, the team scanned and reconstructed 263 lower beaks from squids for further analysis. The team found that the

fossil beaks came from at least 40 squid species, divided among 23 genera and five families. This is a major discovery because previously only one fossil squid beak was known. The newfound squids belonged to two modern groups: deep-sea squids (*Oegopsida*) and coastal squids (*Myopsida*). It meant both groups existed as early as 100 million years ago, which is about 30 million years earlier than previously thought.

The earliest squids already had many different forms. Within only 6 million years, most known squid families had evolved, suggesting squids diversified very quickly once they appeared. By the Late Cretaceous, squids had become so abundant that their fossils outnumbered those of ammonites and bony fish. The findings suggest squids became important players in marine ecosystems long before the mass

extinction 66 million years ago that wiped out dinosaurs and many marine species. In fact, squids were already replacing shelled cephalopods like belemnites and ammonites by then. The authors have also suggested that thanks to their rise before marine mammals, squids were early pioneers of contemporary ocean life: composed of fast, intelligent animals like modern fish, whales, and dolphins.

SNAPSHOTS



Computer vision research fed surveillance technologies

Researchers who scanned 19,000+ papers and 23,000 patents found that since the 1990s, the fraction of papers used in surveillance-enabling patents jumped from 53% to 78%. The trend wasn’t restricted to a few bad apples: most major universities, tech firms, countries, and research subfields produced work that ultimately powered surveillance tools. The study argued that modern computer-vision research has become a pipeline feeding surveillance, and that changing course will require conscious, ethical interventions.



New tool can rewrite single letters in mitochondrial DNA

Dutch scientists have tested a base-editor that can rewrite single letters in mitochondrial DNA, a place that CRISPR-based tools haven’t been able to access. They were able to use it to correct a harmful mutation in skin cells from a patient. Cells with roughly 80% correction regained normal membrane potential, a sign of healthier energy output. To move towards therapy, the team delivered the editors as mRNA wrapped in lipid nanoparticles, boosting the editor’s efficacy while causing fewer off-target changes.



Process makes lactic acid from ‘solar’ methanol

Industrial production of L-lactic acid banks on food feedstock. New research could change this. Scientists used CO2, water, and green energy to make methanol, from which a photocatalyst removed hydrogen to yield formaldehyde. An organocatalyst attached it to dihydroxyacetone, which an engineered yeast fermented into L-lactic acid with a 99% conversion ratio. The team estimated the process’s energy efficiency was 7x higher than photosynthesis.

Large genetic map of Indians flags hidden disease risks

Using mutations as genetic clocks, the study also confirmed that present-day Indians descend primarily from a single out-of-Africa migration around 50,000 years ago

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

India’s vast linguistic, cultural, and social diversity has long been evident, but only now are scientists beginning to uncover the genetic richness underpinning it. In a new study in *Cell*, researchers reported sequencing the genomes of 2,762 Indians from 23 States and Union Territories. The data captured variation across caste, tribal groups, language, geography, and rural-to-urban settings, offering the most comprehensive genomic map of India to date. The findings are striking. The study reaffirmed the three primary sources of Indian ancestry and explored how this layered history, along with entrenched social practices, continues to shape health and disease risk today.

Using mutations as genetic clocks, the study confirmed that present-day Indians descend primarily from a single out-of-Africa migration around 50,000 years ago. Although archaeology suggests earlier human presence in the subcontinent, “those populations may not have survived or left lasting genetic traces,” said Elise Kerdoncuff, the study’s first author. The researchers modelled Indian ancestry as a blend of three ancient populations: indigenous hunter-gatherers known as Ancient Ancestral South Indians; Iranian-related Neolithic farmers, best represented by fourth millennium BCE herders from Sarazm in present-day Tajikistan; and Eurasian

Past continuous

India’s deep genetic past is still shaping contemporary Indians’ health

■ Scientists sequenced the genomes of 2,762 Indians in 23 regions, revealing a detailed genetic map of India

■ Most Indians mix hunter-gatherer, Iranian farmer, and Steppe herder roots, with eastern groups adding East Asian ancestry

■ Strict marriage within communities increases shared genes, boosting chances of recessive diseases like dangerous anaesthetic reactions

■ Indian genomes hold diverse Neanderthal and Denisovan segments, including a chromosome 3 piece that raises COVID-19 risk



■ Researchers discovered 2.6 crore new variants, many altering proteins and tied to thalassemia, deafness, and metabolic disorders

■ Scientists call for bigger, more community-focused studies so precision medicine fairly serves India’s immense genetic diversity

Steppe pastoralists, who arrived around 2000 BCE and are associated with the spread of Indo-European languages. While most Indians fall along a genetic spectrum reflecting different proportions of this admixture, individuals from East and Northeast India, and a subset from Central India, carry East Asian-related ancestry, with levels reaching up to 5% in West Bengal. This likely entered around 520 CE, after the Gupta Empire’s decline or with an earlier spread of rice farming. India’s population structure reflects long-standing practices of marriage within communities. This has produced strong founder effects, where a small ancestral gene pool gets amplified over generations. As a result, Indians, especially in South India, have 2-9x more homozygosity than Europeans or East Asians,

making them more likely to inherit the same version of a gene from both parents. Every individual in the study had at least one genetic relative, indicating levels of relatedness far exceeding those seen elsewhere. This tight-knit structure may make recessive disorders caused by inheriting faulty copies of the same gene from both parents more common than currently recognised. One example is a pathogenic *BCHE* variant linked to severe anaesthetic reactions found enriched in Telangana. Like all non-Africans, Indians carry traces of ancient interbreeding with other hominins, with Neanderthal or Denisovan segments covering up to 1.5% of the genome in some Indians. They also have the widest variety of Neanderthal segments. “Multiple waves of migration, fol-

lowed by caste-based endogamy, likely fixed archaic segments within specific groups, contributing to this high diversity,” Lomous Kumar, population geneticist at the Centre for Anthropobiology and Genomics of Toulouse, France, said. Neanderthal-derived sequences are enriched in immune system genes. A region on chromosome 3 (linked to severe COVID-19) is especially common in East and Northeast India. Denisovan variants appear in immune-related pathways and regions such as the MHC, a key genomic region involved in detecting and fighting infections. “Enrichments in *TRIM* and *BTNL2*, involved in mounting immune responses to viruses, suggests that some variants were retained because they conferred an adaptive advantage,” Dr. Kerdoncuff said. “As humans moved into new envi-

ronments, inheriting these variations from archaic populations likely helped them adapt to unfamiliar pathogens.” The researchers uncovered 2.6 crore undocumented genetic variants. Of these, over 1.6 lakh were protein-altering variants absent from global databases and about 7% were linked to thalassemia, congenital deafness, cystic fibrosis, and metabolic disorders. “This highlights how neglected Indians are in genomic surveys,” Dr. Kerdoncuff said, “limiting scientific discovery and reducing the accuracy of risk predictions. The promise of precision medicine for underrepresented populations ultimately suffers.” Dr. Kumar added: “Within India as well, population-specific rare and unique variants continue to make the scenario complex,” emphasising localised efforts are also imperative. To help close this gap, Dr. Kerdoncuff said, the team is expanding the study to include more genetically isolated communities. They’re also studying proteins and metabolism to better understand how genes influence health outcomes. In parallel, they’re developing new tools to trace the origins of disease-linked genes in Indian populations. To make medicine truly inclusive, India’s vast genetic diversity must be central to global research and matched by deeper, community-level efforts at home. (Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from Delhi)

The greening of our chemical industries



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Deepening concerns over the warming of our planet have made “green” and “sustainable” popular words. ‘Going green’ means taking steps to lessen harm to the environment. Sustainability aims for changes that balance environmental concerns with economic realities. Whatever term you use, the shared goal of minimising or eliminating environmental hazards points us towards green chemistry. And this field leads us away from toxicity and pollution. The 12 Principles of Green Chemistry, introduced by Paul Anastas and John Warner in 1998, focus

on basics, such as the adoption of safer solvents and reagents in chemical processes; designing energy-efficient methods that lead to safer chemicals that are as nontoxic as possible and also do not linger for too long in the environment; and preventing waste (so that you don’t have anything to clean up). An illustration of how green chemistry can be put to work comes from the production of biodiesel. The Indian Oil Corporation, as part of a green fuels mission, produces biodiesel from non-edible oil seeds such as Jatropha (jamal ghota in Hindi and kattukotai in Tamil). The seeds have over 30% oil content, and the tree grows in lands with little rainfall and poor soils. Biodiesel is produced from a transesterification reaction, where the seed oil is



A jatropha demonstration plot developed by Labland Biodiesel, a Mysuru-based company, near Mysuru. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

reacted with methanol to yield biodiesel and the by-product glycerol, which is commercially useful. For reducing the carbon footprint, the methanol must be derived from biomass. Chemical reactions are sped up by catalysts. Biodiesel production is facilitated by an alkali. Sodium hydroxide is often used, but washing it away generates wastewater, which has

to be treated before it is released into the environment. Calcium oxide is a greener alternative because it is a solid, and 95% of it can be recovered after each production cycle. Very toxic substances are used in the manufacture of pharma products as well. In the vicinity of some of these factories, the air has a strong smell that reminds you of nail-

polish: the solvent toluene is widely used in the synthesis or extraction of paracetamol and many other drugs. It is a neurotoxin. Green initiatives have led to a slow replacement of such volatile organic compounds with alternatives that are less toxic, biodegradable, and can be produced from biomass sources like sugarcane. Another tenet of green chemistry that chemists love to work towards is the atom economy. The aim is to incorporate as many atoms present in the input mixture into the desirable product. In the biodiesel production process described above, green chemistry results in an atom economy of 90%. It is not 100% because of the atoms that are ‘taken away’ in the byproduct, glycerol. But then, in a sustainable initiative, the glycerol would

itself serve as an input for making polymers, cosmetics, etc. Attention to atom economy is even more critical in industries where the by-products are very toxic. A fine example of green chemistry’s superiority has come from chemists at the Hyderabad campus of the Birla Institute of Science-Pilani. Their green method for pharmaceutical production of the anti-cancer drug Tamoxifen and related drug candidates has 100% atom economy while being cost-effective and capable of making these drugs in large quantities (Tanmay Chatterjee and colleagues, *Green Chem.*, 2023, Vol. 25, 779). Such methods hold the promise of reduced impact on our surroundings. (Jointly written with Sushil Chandani, a molecular modeler)



Question Corner

Cramped muscles

What are muscle cramps?

A cramp is a sudden, involuntary tightening of a muscle or a group of muscles that a person can’t immediately relax. Because the muscle locks up all at once, it often feels like a sharp knot and can hurt for a while. Muscle cramps occur in parts of the legs or hands as a result of dehydration, exercise or low potassium or magnesium levels. Menstrual cramps in the uterus are hormone-driven contractions to expel the uterine lining. Stomach cramps occur due to gas, infections and/or in people with irritable bowel syndrome.

In all cases, a cramp occurs when muscle cells have become stressed and start to misfire. People are at greater risk of cramped muscles if they have diabetes, thyroid problems or kidney disease or if they’re taking particular drugs. To relieve a cramped muscle, doctors have advised pausing the stress-causing activity and gently stretching the muscle, massaging the area, applying heat to relax the tightness, and drinking lots of water. It also helps to warm up before the activity to prepare the muscles.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

Where does India lag in gender metrics?

What is India's standing in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 2025?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:
India dropped two places in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 2025, slipping to the 131st rank out of 148 countries. While the gender gap has narrowed or remained stable in the case of three categories – economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival – it has worsened in the case of political empowerment. At a time when rising numbers of women are voting in elections, the number of women in the highest halls of power remain stubbornly low. This is set to change in 2029, when mandatory 33% reservation for women in State and national legislatures is set to kick in, but steps need to be taken to ensure the benefits of this law extend to the long term.

What led to the drop?
The Index uses three indicators to assess political empowerment, with India falling in two – the percentage of women in Parliament, which dropped from 14.7% (78 MPs) in 2024 to 13.79% (74 MPs) in 2025 after the general election for the 18th Lok Sabha; and the percentage of women in ministerial positions, which dropped from an already abysmal 6.45% in 2024 to just 5.56% in 2025.

What will change after women's reservation?
The legislation for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and in State legislatures was passed after a long wait in 2023, but as it is tied to a new Census and delimitation exercise, it can only be implemented from the 2029 general election at the earliest. Women's representation

While more women may become MPs in India, it remains to be seen if ruling parties also appoint them to ministerial roles in higher numbers

in the Lok Sabha has ranged from 3.4% in 1977 to 14% in 2019. At the time of the passage of the women's reservation legislation in 2023, women accounted for only 9% of

MLAs in State Assemblies, with Chhattisgarh having the highest representation (18% women MLAs), while Himachal Pradesh had just one woman MLA and Mizoram had none. Jacking these figures up to at least 33% will give a significant boost to India's political empowerment scores.

The catch is that reservation is only valid for 15 years from the time the law passes, meaning that it is likely to be implemented in only two general election cycles, 2029 and 2034, raising concerns about the sustainability of gains women would make in this period. Also, while more women may become MPs, it remains to be seen if ruling parties also appoint them to ministerial roles in higher numbers, increasing their representation in actual governance. Despite the three-decade old 33% reservation for women at the panchayat and municipality level, which has been increased to 50% in most States, there is no clear pipeline to draw such local leaders into State-level politics.

Does the rise in women voters matter?
Back in 1952, 28 lakh women were excluded from voting in the general election as they were listed on the electoral rolls only as someone's mother or wife, with their own names missing. The gender gap among voters has narrowed speedily since then, from 17 percentage points in 1962 to less than two percentage points in 2014. In fact, in the last two general elections, women voters have actually overtaken men, though this can also be partially attributed to rising male migration for employment, leaving men unable to vote in their home States. The rising numbers of women voting has led to political parties wooing women as a votebank, with a slew of welfare schemes aimed at women, ranging from free bicycles for girls to a monthly allowance for poorer women.

How to increase women candidates?
The trend with respect to women voters, however, has not translated into an increase in women's representation. "Political parties continue to give lower representation to women candidates in so-called 'good seats', often citing a lack of winnability," says Rahul Verma, a political scientist at the Centre for Policy Research, noting that many parties field women in seats reserved for Scheduled Caste/Tribe candidates, in a bid to offset that quota. "Women voters do not automatically vote for women candidates. Gender is not like caste, where voters may vote on the basis of identity. Women are much more practical, looking for actual programmatic delivery," says Tara Krishnaswamy of Political Shakti, a non-partisan group working to improve women's representation in politics. However, she dismisses parties' excuses that women candidates are not winnable. "In every general election since 1952, women candidates have had a higher winning percentage in comparison to men. The problem is that women do not make it to the candidates list... Women candidates in the lists of recognised parties average about 8% or 9%," she says.

What are the issues around deportation?

Why is there a distinction to be made between people who are being deported and those who are being pushed back? What are the different laws that deal with immigration and foreigners in India? What is the situation on the ground in border States such as Assam and West Bengal?

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:
At least seven West Bengal residents who were pushed to Bangladesh by the Border Security Force (BSF) on suspicion of being Bangladeshis were brought back to India after the intervention of the State government. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said on June 25 that residents speaking in their native Bengali language are being branded as Bangladeshis in some Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled States. Several people who were pushed from Assam to Bangladesh also returned as they were found to be Indians or that their citizenship cases were sub-judice.

Why have matters escalated?
After the regime change in Bangladesh in August 2024, the police across the country were asked by the Union Home Ministry to detect Bangladeshis who had illegally entered the country and were living here on forged documents. The drive assumed momentum after the Pahalgam terror attack in April and the subsequent 'Operation Sindoor'. The Ministry has issued instructions to States to deport undocumented migrants but in most cases pushbacks are happening. Around 2,500 suspected Bangladeshis have been pushed back so far. On May 10, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the government has decided to implement the "pushback" mechanism to check infiltration instead of going through the legal route which is a long-drawn process. Home Minister Amit Shah has asked top intelligence officials to make an example of "infiltrators" by detecting, detaining, and deporting them. In 2022, at an Intelligence Bureau meeting, Mr. Shah had asked officials to

Assam is likely to enforce a 1950 law to identify and evict illegal foreigners

identify around 100 illegal migrants in each State, check documents and arrest and deport them. He asked them to continue with the crackdown even if neighbouring countries do not accept the undocumented migrants.

What is the difference between deportation and pushback?
Deportation is a legal process which involves detaining and arresting a foreigner suspected to be living in India without documents or who has entered the country illegally. The case is presented before a court and after exhaustion of all legal avenues, which includes conviction by the court, the country which the foreigner belongs to is contacted and the deportation takes places once the identity is confirmed. Pushbacks are not a legal procedure and there are no stated rules. They happen when a foreigner has been caught by the border security force on the international border and, depending on the intensity of the case or the discretion of the border personnel, they are either arrested, made to face the law here or pushed back. Since citizenship and foreigners are Union List subjects, it is the Home Ministry which delegates powers to deport foreigners to State governments. In 2024, the Ministry told the Jharkhand High Court that since the "Central Government does not maintain a separate federal police force exclusively dedicated to the task of detection and deportation of illegally staying foreigners, action in this regard has been entrusted to the State police."

What is the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950?
On June 9, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the State government was likely to enforce a 1950 law to identify and evict illegal foreigners, adding that under the law, district commissioners are empowered to declare individuals as illegal immigrants and initiate eviction proceedings. The 1950 Act was passed by Parliament amid communal disturbance and violence following the Partition of India in 1947 and creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) bordering West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The Act says that "it extends to the whole of India", but has Assam-specific provisions. Section 2 of the Act says that if the Union government is of the opinion that any person or class of persons, having been ordinarily resident in any place outside India are detrimental to the interests of the general public of India or any Scheduled Tribe in Assam, the Union government may by order, "direct such person or class of persons to remove himself or themselves from India or

Assam within such time and by such route as may be specified in the order"; and "give such further directions in regard to his or their removal from India or Assam as it may consider necessary or expedient".

What are the laws for foreigners?
Till April this year, matters relating to foreigners and immigration were administered through "pre-Constitution period" laws enacted during the First and Second World Wars, which were the Foreigners Act, 1946, Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000. In April, Parliament enacted the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025 repealing the old laws. Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh borders, the rules for movement of people along Nepal and Myanmar are different. Nepal has a free-border agreement with India, and a Free Movement regime (FMR), allowing movement of people residing within 10-km on either side, exists along the India-Myanmar border. Following the May 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur, the Ministry in 2024 decided to fence the entire 1,643-km Myanmar border in the next 10 years. Post the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar belonging to the Chin ethnic group who are closely related to the Mizo community crossed over to Mizoram. On March 10, 2021, the MHA sent a letter to the State governments of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Mizoram that the refugees should be identified and deported and that the State Governments have no powers to grant "refugee" status to any foreigner as India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol. The refugees continue to live here.

What is behind this recent drive?
Since the April 22 terror attack at Pahalgam, the police has intensified the drive to detect undocumented migrants. Initially, they were taken by trains to border districts and then pushed to Bangladesh by the BSF. In some instances, migrants after being up picked from Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, were flown by planes to Agartala in Tripura and transported to the Bangladesh border by BSF personnel. The police and the BSF record biometrics and photographs of the undocumented migrants. It is to be noted that the BSF has never acknowledged any of the pushbacks. The Ministry has asked the States to verify the claims of undocumented migrants who claim Indian nationality after which District Magistrates are to send a report within 30 days, failing which the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer would deport them. In 2022, the Unique Identification Authority of India was asked to maintain a "negative list" to stop undocumented migrants from procuring identity documents in the future.

What is the legality of U.S. strikes on Iran?

When can a country retaliate in self-defence under the UN Charter? Why have some nations argued that the conditions are too rigid to address contemporary security threats? What is pre-emptive self-defence? Is this allowed by international law?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:
On June 22, U.S. President Donald Trump launched military strikes on Iran, joining its ally Israel in efforts to derail Iran's nuclear programme, which both countries claim is approaching weapons production. Iran retaliated the following day with missile attacks on Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command. After nearly two weeks of escalating hostilities, Iran and Israel agreed to a ceasefire on June 24.

What is a lawful exercise of self-defence?
The UN Charter, under Article 2(4), prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, except in narrowly defined circumstances – a claim of self-defence under Article 51 or with the UN Security Council's (UNSC) authorisation. The restrictive interpretation, grounded in the text of Article 51, permits self-defence only in response to an armed attack that is already under way. A more permissive interpretation allows for self-defence in response to an armed attack that is imminent. This broader interpretation, often referred to as anticipatory self-defence, has been endorsed in several UN-affiliated reports.

'Criteria for determining an imminent threat remain highly contested'

Notably, the 2004 report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change affirmed that "a threatened State, according to long-established international law, can take military action as long as the threatened attack is imminent, no other means would deflect it, and the action is proportionate". These criteria are derived from the famous Caroline case, which established that the use of force is lawful only when the need for self-defence is "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation". Over time, many states have argued that the Caroline standard is too rigid to address contemporary security threats. This has led to attempts to reinterpret and expand the notion of imminence, giving rise to the controversial doctrine of pre-emptive self-defence. Under this doctrine, a state may use force not only in response to an attack that is imminent but also during what is perceived as the "last window of opportunity" to neutralise a threat posed by an adversary with both the intent and capability to strike. The U.S. has been a leading proponent of this doctrine, invoking it to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. "Pre-emptive self-defence lacks the requisite state practice and *opinio juris* to qualify as customary international law. States are generally reluctant to endorse its legality, as the absence of an imminent threat renders the doctrine highly susceptible to misuse," Prabhash Ranjan, Professor at Jindal Global Law School, told *The Hindu*.

Did Iran pose an 'imminent' threat?
The U.S. has not submitted an Article 51 notification to the UNSC declaring its strikes on Iran as self-defence. However, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described them as a precision operation to neutralise "threats to national interest" and an act of "collective self-defence" of U.S. forces and its ally, Israel. Tehran has maintained that its nuclear programme is for civilian purposes and remains under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, on June 12, the UN nuclear watchdog passed a resolution accusing Iran of violating its non-proliferation obligations, while noting that inspectors have

been unable to confirm whether the programme is "exclusively peaceful". In March, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard initially told Congress that while Iran had stockpiled materials, it was not actively building a nuclear weapon. However, she later warned that Iran could do so "within weeks," after President Trump claimed Iran could develop one "within months." Dr. Ranjan noted that the criteria for determining an 'imminent threat' remain highly contested, as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has never ruled on the legality of anticipatory self-defence or pre-emptive strikes. "For the U.S. to credibly invoke pre-emptive self-defence, it must present clear evidence of both Iran's intent and capability to strike in the near future. This is a difficult threshold to meet, given that Iran does not yet possess a nuclear weapon," he said. He added that ongoing U.S.-Iran negotiations indicate that diplomatic means were still available.

What about collective self-defence?
Under Article 51 of the Charter, Israel can call on the assistance of its allies to exercise collective self-defence against an attack. "Israel's strikes on Iran, framed as pre-emptive action against perceived nuclear threats, are legally suspect. This, in turn, casts doubt on the legitimacy of any claim to collective self-defence," Dr. Ranjan said. Israel has also sought to justify its military offensive as part of an "ongoing armed conflict," citing a history of attacks by groups like Hamas and the Houthis, which it claims act as Iranian proxies. However, to legally sustain this argument, Israel must meet the "effective control" test set by the ICJ in *Nicaragua versus U.S.* (1986). This is a high threshold to meet since it requires proof that Iran exercises "overall control" over these groups beyond merely funding or arming them.

What are the implications?
Allowing states to invoke pre-emptive self-defence would effectively grant powerful nations the licence to unilaterally use force based on mere conjecture. This would further weaken the already fragile rules-based international order. It is, therefore, crucial to resist expanding legal definitions of what constitutes an imminent threat, particularly when punitive action by the UNSC against permanent members like the U.S. remains unlikely due to their veto power.



Unilateral force: Delegates attend a meeting of the UNSC, following the U.S. attack on Iran, at the UN headquarters in New York on June 24. REUTERS

PROFILES

Manhattan’s progressive man

Zohran Mamdani

The Democrat ran a grassroots campaign focusing on livelihood-based ‘bread-and-butter economic issues’ and upholding principled positions, such as his strong opposition to Israel’s ‘genocide’ in Gaza, to take lead in the New York mayoral primary

Srinivasan Ramani

In a stunning political upset that has caught the eye of political observers and could potentially upend the Democratic Party in the U.S., a new progressive star has emerged: Zohran Kwame Mamdani, the presumptive winner of the New York City mayoral primary.

For an Indian progressive uninitiated in American politics, the name Zohran Kwame Mamdani will invoke references to two familiar figures. The 33-year-old is the son of noted postcolonial theorist and academic Mahmood Mamdani, who has written extensively on the legacy of colonialism in Africa, and acclaimed film director Mira Nair. His middle name is, of course, a reference to Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian Pan-Africanist revolutionary leader. But now the younger Mamdani has become a name to be reckoned with on his own accord.

By defeating a formidable establishment figure – former Governor Andrew Cuomo – in the New York City mayoral Democratic primary race, Mr. Mamdani has catalysed sharp discourse within the fractured and soul-searching Democratic Party, still reeling from stinging defeats in the presidential and Congressional races in 2024 that heralded the Trump 2.0 era. New York is largely a Democratic stronghold, and the winner of the primary typically goes on to win the mayoral race. In the November Mayoral election, Mr. Mamdani will take on the incumbent, the unpopular Eric Adams, who is expected to run as an independent.

Mr. Mamdani’s political career is relatively short – he was first elected to the New York State Assembly in 2020. In the State capital of Albany, he joined a small group of lawmakers affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a progressive and socialist organisation that was formed in 1982 but truly took flight during Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign in 2016. Since then, it has emerged as a major leftist pressure group operating both within and outside the Democratic Party. Mr. Mamdani’s victory is reminiscent of a similar

triumph in New York when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (fondly known as AOC) won a Congressional election in the city’s 14th district in 2018.

While Mr. Mamdani’s legislative record is relatively modest in terms of Bills passed, his colleagues acknowledge that his work helped shift the Assembly’s ideological emphasis to the left. If elected, Mr. Mamdani would be the city’s youngest Mayor since 1917 and the first Muslim to hold the post.

Mr. Mamdani’s victory was no mean feat. He had to overcome the challenge posed by a candidate with extensive political experience – former two-term New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo. Mr. Cuomo has deep establishment ties and was endorsed by multi-billionaire Michael Bloomberg and former U.S. President Bill Clinton, among others. He was also backed by a super Political Action Committee that raised \$25 million to bankroll his candidacy. The fact that Mr. Cuomo had resigned from his gubernatorial duties a few years ago after being embroiled in sexual harassment cases did not deter him from attempting to obscure this record while running a conventional campaign that featured attack ads targeting Mr. Mamdani’s identity and views.

Grassroots mobilisation

Mr. Mamdani overcame these challenges by relying on massive grassroots mobilisation – reportedly 50,000 volunteers organised by the DSA’s New York Chapter conducted a door-to-door campaign that reached an astounding 1.5 million doors. Focusing on one key issue – “affordability” in New York’s high-cost economy – Mr. Mamdani pledged to address this through a series of concrete measures. These included freezing rents for nearly a million New Yorkers in rent-stabilised apartments, providing free city buses (based on a pilot programme he had helped start as a lawmaker), creating city-owned grocery stores that would keep food costs low by buying wholesale and operating on city land, and providing childcare for infants and toddlers.

The focus on livelihood-based “bread-and-butter economic issues” helped his campaign build a broad



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

coalition of support, including in neighbourhoods that were won by Donald Trump in the 2024 elections. Notably, Mr. Mamdani’s message was tailored to redirect working-class frustration away from the Right’s targets – immigrants and marginalised groups – toward a different culprit: billionaires. The endorsements by the doyen of the American democratic Left, Bernie Sanders, and its key public figure, AOC, also bolstered his candidacy.

Interestingly, Mr. Mamdani managed to register a strong win while unapologetically taking a pro-Palestine position, accusing Israel of committing “apartheid and genocide in Gaza”,

supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and openly embracing his Muslim identity. This stood in sharp contrast to the Democratic Presidential campaign in 2024, where candidate Kamala Harris tacked to the right of centre, refused to halt arms sales to Israel, and did not allow a Palestinian voice to speak at the Democratic Convention. In many ways, Mr. Mamdani’s campaign – focused on welfare issues while celebrating his identity as the son of immigrant parents and a practising Muslim – represented everything the Trump administration has demonised during its current tenure.

Seen in this light, Mr. Mamdani’s

victory could possibly be the biggest win for the democratic socialist movement that has taken root in U.S. cities since Mr. Sanders’s national campaign. It offers a boost to a demoralised American Left caught between the right-wing populism of Mr. Trump (which has attracted segments of the traditional working class) and what critics see as the vapid centrism of the Democratic Party establishment that refuses to change course, particularly on foreign policy.

Inevitably, the question arises: Is Mr. Mamdani’s win a blueprint for future success for the beleaguered Democratic Party? His campaign – combining modern social media tools with traditional door-to-door campaigning – managed to generate broad support across a sprawling urban metropolis, offering lessons for other Democratic mobilisations in similar environments across the U.S. A freewheeling, accessible style is clearly a more effective approach than the carefully scripted strategy that cost Democrats in 2024.

Road ahead

Yet, challenges remain. Republicans are already working to brand Mr. Mamdani as the radical face of the Democratic Party, while the media establishment that supports the GOP has sought to use his identity to tarnish his record, with one Republican Congress representative’s fundraising appeal branding him as a “Hamas Terrorist sympathiser”. His brand of democratic socialism may indeed prove a difficult sell in the small towns and red bastions of middle America.

Ultimately, Mr. Mamdani’s victory may be less a simple blueprint to be copied and more a mirror held up to the Democratic Party. It has forced a reckoning, proving that a campaign centred on economic justice and unapologetic principles can generate a powerful movement. The question for party leadership is not whether they can perfectly replicate a New York City race, but whether they are willing to embrace the grassroots energy, class-based populism, and bold vision that this stunning victory represents. The future of the party may well depend on their answer.

THE GIST

Zohran Mamdani, 33, was first elected to the New York State Assembly in 2020. In the State capital of Albany, he joined a small group of lawmakers affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

While Mamdani’s legislative record is relatively modest in terms of Bills passed, his colleagues acknowledge that his work helped shift the Assembly’s ideological emphasis to the Left.

If elected, Mamdani, the son of postcolonial theorist Mahmood Mamdani and film director Mira Nair, would be New York’s youngest Mayor since 1917 and the first Muslim to hold the post.

Excavating the past

Keeladi

Findings at the excavation site in Sivaganga district offer compelling evidence that urban civilisation existed in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam age

B. Kolappan

Newly laid road runs through Keeladi, a village in Sivaganga district of Tamil Nadu, that has now earned a significant place on India’s political and cultural map. A steady stream of visitors, particularly students, flock to the state-of-the-art museum established by the Tamil Nadu government which showcases the findings from the Keeladi excavation site.

On the other side of the village, nestled among coconut groves, workers under the supervision of archaeologists continue to excavate land once believed to have been a thriving industrial hub. Square-shaped trenches reveal remnants of furnaces containing soot and ash, confirming that Keeladi was a centre for manufacturing beads made from quartz, carnelian, glass, agate, and other materials. Carbon dating of charcoal discovered at the site in February 2017 established that the settlement dates back to 6th century BCE. These excavations offer compelling evidence that urban civilisation existed in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam age. The findings also indicate trade and cultural exchange with the Indus Valley Civilisation.

For Tamil Nadu politicians, particularly the lead-



ers of the ruling DMK, the findings provided the much-needed grist for their political narrative. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin in January this year announced a \$1 million prize for experts or organisations that succeed in deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation, pointing out that 60% of the graffiti marks found in Tamil Nadu had parallels to the symbols found on Indus seals.

Long-standing divide

The findings also fuelled the long-standing Aryan-Dravidian divide, and some expressed reservations about accepting the findings from Keeladi. This was followed by the transfer of archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), who led the first two phases of the excavation, to Assam in 2017. The third phase was overseen by another archaeologist, P.S. Sriraman, who reported that there was no

continuity in the brick structures. Excavations resumed only after the intervention of the Madras High Court. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology also took up the project and, in its report, asserted that Keeladi was once a site of urban civilisation, a claim that remains a point of contention among archaeologists.

Those who dispute the claim of an urban settlement point to sites such as Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, and others in Gujarat, which, they argue, “bear testimony to the existence of an urban civilisation,” whereas Keeladi, they contend, is just another excavation site without sufficient evidence to qualify as an urban centre.

The return of the 982-page report by Amarnath Ramakrishna of the ASI, with instructions to provide further evidence and rewrite it, stirred yet another controversy. In Tamil Nadu, this move is perceived as indicative of the

BJP-led NDA government’s bias against discoveries emerging from the South.

The current dispensation at the Centre is seen as reluctant to accept anything projected as superior to the Indo-Aryan heritage. Given the Centre’s stance on Indian culture, language, and religion, the ASI’s directive to Mr. Ramakrishna and his subsequent transfer is viewed with suspicion – even if there is a genuine academic basis for it.

Mr. Ramakrishna, rather than pursuing the matter through academic channels, has joined the chorus of Tamil Nadu politicians, though many believe the Centre’s motives are clear for all to see. Mr. Ramakrishna, from the beginning, has been maintaining that there has been no evidence for religious worship.

What remains undisputed is the need for extensive excavation in Keeladi and surrounding areas. Madurai and its neighbouring regions along the banks of the Vaigai are undeniably ancient settlements. It is crucial to have excavations on the scale of those at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro to substantiate the claim of a flourishing urban civilisation in Tamil Nadu. The ASI has the responsibility of undertaking this effort with the support of the Tamil Nadu government.

Iran’s man at the table

Abbas Araghchi

As a fragile ceasefire between Tehran and Tel Aviv holds, Iran’s top diplomat has to strengthen ties with allies and manage relations with rivals

Suchitra Karthikeyan

It was the U.S. which betrayed diplomacy, but it is Iran which must return to the table!” questioned Iranian Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araghchi in his address to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting in Istanbul on June 22, immediately after the U.S. bombed Iran’s three nuclear facilities – Isfahan, Natanz and Fordow. Set against Israel and the U.S., his job was to tell the Islamic world how Iran was betrayed by the same powers with whom it was talking.

A former member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Mr. Araghchi rose through the ranks of Tehran’s foreign affairs between 1988 and 2013. Joining the IRGC during the 1979 resolution, Mr. Araghchi was reportedly chosen to be a part of the ‘Quds Force’, the IRGC’s external affairs branch.

While Mr. Araghchi has denied his role in the Quds Force, he was inducted into Iran’s Foreign Ministry as an expert in international affairs in 1989. He had served as Iran’s Ambassador in Finland, Estonia and Japan, before he was made the official spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry.

In 2013, Mr. Araghchi was made Iran’s chief negotiator to hold talks with



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

the ‘P5+1’ group (the U.S., China, France, Russia, the U.K and Germany) on its nuclear programme. After 20 months of talks, Mr. Araghchi was successful in getting all parties to agree to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was signed in 2015.

Iran was given relief in economic sanctions and was allowed to have a limited nuclear programme under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The U.S., however, unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018 under Donald Trump.

Israel offensive

After the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas, Iran’s then Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian asserted that Tehran had no prior knowledge of the attack. Israel expanded the conflict by attacking Iran’s ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah, and killing IRGC commanders in Syria. Houthis, Iran-backed rebels in Yemen, attacked tankers in

the Red Sea. In April 2024, in retaliation for an Israeli strike on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Tehran launched ballistic missiles at Israel. On May 19, 2024, a helicopter carrying Amir-Abdollahian and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi crashed near the Iran-Azerbaijan border and Mr. Araghchi was chosen as the country’s top diplomat in the Masoud Pezeshkian government. As Israeli airstrikes killed more Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, Iran launched its second direct attack on Israel in October that year, warning Israel to end its attack across its borders. Israel retaliated with air strikes.

After Donald Trump returned to the White House, the U.S. offered dialogue to Iran, which Tehran accepted. On April 13, 2025, Mr. Araghchi held the first round of talks with Trump officials in Oman over the nuclear programme. “It was a constructive meeting held in a very peaceful and respectful environment,”

opined Mr. Araghchi. They met five times. On June 13, two days ahead of the sixth round of talks, Israel launched a massive attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, scientists and military leaders. On June 22, the U.S. joined Israel’s war. Mr. Trump later claimed that U.S. strikes ‘obliterated’ Iran’s nuclear programme. He also announced a ceasefire on Israel and Iran, after an Iranian attack at the American base in Qatar on June 23.

“Our nuclear installations have been badly damaged,” said Mr. Araghchi, accusing the U.S. of ‘attacking the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of a UN member state’.

Leaked U.S. Intelligence reports suggest that the U.S.-Israeli attack set back Iran’s nuclear programme by a few months. Despite Mr. Trump’s claims that talks with Iran would resume, Mr. Araghchi stated that Iran has no plan to meet with the U.S. over a nuclear deal, adding, “we know our worth, value our independence, and never allow anyone else to decide our destiny”. As Iran recovers from the war, the challenge before Mr. Araghchi is to strengthen ties with the allies and manage ties with the rivals in a such a way that further external aggression would be prevented at least in the near future.

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Clearing the fog on the state of India-US relations

Notwithstanding the game of political catch between outlandish tweets and measured official responses, the vision laid out by Prime Minister Modi and President Trump in a joint statement in February, guides the different contours of the relationship at the functional level

The administration is bullish on India' is how a senior US official put it to me last week in Washington D.C. This sentiment would seem at odds with the broader reporting on the US-India relationship. In a *Financial Times* newsletter on India, one writer argued that the Indian Prime Minister (PM) "made the mistake of counting on his warm personal connection with Trump". The general assertion being that the Indian government has mortgaged this crucial relationship to "personal friendships" alone. Others suggest that the US President's recent luncheon with Asim Munir, the recently decorated Pakistani Field Marshal, and his "sneaky attempt" to bring PM Narendra Modi and Munir into the same room in the White House is "threatening the future of US-India partnership".

Between social media and popular reporting, it would seem as though this relationship has been iced. Yet, in meetings with over 30 officials, experts, think tank-

ers, and industry representatives last week, the story that emerged was diametrically opposed to the one that has been paraphrased above.

Modi's engagements with Trump matter more than it is perhaps realised. It clearly provides a political basis of what can be achieved between the two countries, even at this time of shrinking administrative capacities in the US, and the many unplanned shifts in the bureaucratic body politic.

To be sure, you could start the week with a meeting with official X and end up receiving a phone call from his/her successor the next day. Yet, what was clear to me was that the vision laid out by the two leaders in a lengthy joint statement following PM Modi's meeting with President Trump in February, guides the different contours of the relationship at the functional level. Notwithstanding the game of political catch between outlandish tweets and measured official responses, the guidelines for those moving the relationship across government and the private sector are more or less clear.

First, there is a concerted effort to realise outcomes in the strategic technology partnership between the two sides. Under the banner of TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology), the administrative State and technology companies between the two countries are working towards outcomes to do more on pharmaceuticals with the view to de-risk the production of key ingredients from China; fuse infrastructure partnerships between firms invested in the present and the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI); and actively looking for ways to coop-

erate on extracting and processing critical minerals. The latter needs work, but the zest to find the right compact is real.

Second, American private sector actors are preparing the ground to sell different kinds of reactors to meet India's nuclear energy needs. They are, at this time, hoping that the proposed legislative changes to the Indian Civil Nuclear Liability Act 2010 streamline liability clauses in consonance with global standards — delinking liabilities on suppliers and operators.

Further, they remain hopeful that changes to India's Atomic Energy Act would allow private sector participation to meet India's nuclear energy needs.

This is a top priority for the White House and the US President. This was made clear in several exchanges. This is "unfinished business" following the conclusion of the 2008 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement, as one Washington insider put it. My

own sense is that progress on this front is almost as important as the conclusion of the first tranche of the trade deal between the two countries. The first tranche of this deal needs to be completed by July 9, when the US President's 90-day pause on "reciprocal tariffs" ends. Officials suggested that there is a fair chance that the first tranche of the deal with India will be completed by this deadline. "The trickier parts will come later," they made plain.

Third, efforts across bureaucracies in Washington D.C. that deal with India are almost uniformly focussed on the Quad Leader's Summit in October or November, which provides an opportunity for another bilateral between the two leaders. "Deliverables" is the name of the game. Yet, at least



Rudra Chaudhuri



Structures like TRUST were created for top political leaders to monitor progress on crucial initiatives.

REUTERS

some of the deliverables need to be real. The ongoing process is less about padding a joint statement and more about searching for right-sized deals. There is a fire in the system to make something happen by the time the leaders meet, including a considerable push to realise new AI infrastructure partnerships. "India and Brazil are the two most important countries for the US when it comes to data centres," as one technocrat stated. "We need to get this right on both sides", the official made plain.

In the US, this would mean producing revised rules for export controls that make it easier to access chips from the US into India. In turn, India will possibly need to negotiate certain guarantees to make sure

that the chips are not off-shored. Moreover, there is a significant push to deregulate the data centre market in India, and streamline processes to encourage the expansion of AI infrastructure in India. None of this will be easy. Deregulation takes time. Negotiating guarantees can be cumbersome and is a process that cuts across several administrative buildings in and across New Delhi and other Indian states.

If Indian officials conclude that data centre investments are an advantage for India, this is the bureaucratic work that will be required to realise this unique moment. It is exactly why structures like TRUST were created, for top political leaders to monitor progress on crucial initiatives.

The enthusiasm for investments and partnerships will not last long. This also might be kept in mind. This is a zero-sum play.

In sum, while there is little doubt that Munir, Pakistan, Twitter exchanges, and the politics that shape these expressions and incidents to an extent inform the current state of US-India ties, at times exercising officials on both sides, it is also plainly clear that the functional relationship — which produces material results — is one that is working to produce outcomes, and not without the direction of the political leadership.

Rudra Chaudhuri is director, Carnegie India. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Saving Veeraswamy, a British institution

Next year Veeraswamy, the oldest surviving Indian restaurant in Britain — actually, its owners claim it could be the oldest surviving Indian restaurant in the world — will be a 100 years old. Alas, that could also be the precise moment it ceases to exist. So, what is intended as a celebration could end up a wake.

Veeraswamy is perhaps one of the best-known landmarks on London's Regent Street. Not so long ago it had Austin Reed on its left and Aquascutum in front. Both of those legendary clothiers have disappeared. They have passed into history. Is that what might happen to Veeraswamy?

If it does, its owners, Ranjit Mathrani and Namita Panjabi, believe it would be "cultural philistinism". Not many would disagree.

It was way back in 1926 that Veeraswamy was founded by Edward Palmer, the great-grandson of General William Palmer and the Moghul Princess Faisan

Nissa Begum. The restaurant is named after his grandmother Veera. In 1937 it became the first establishment outside India to install a tandoor oven. In the 1940s, it survived the blitz, its diners allegedly undeterred by German bombs.

The truth is Veeraswamy has always been one of the favourite eating spots for some of the most famous residents of London. The Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) dined there so frequently that his coat of arms used to adorn the entrance.

In fact, in the early 1930s, the Crown Prince of Denmark couldn't resist the place. He was not just a regular. It was one of his favourite haunts. The Goan-style duck vindaloo was his preferred dish. In gratitude, he took to sending a cask of Carlsberg to the restaurant every Christmas. Perhaps this is the origin of the British passion for beer and Indian food, which today is the mainstay of people who roll out of pubs hungry and tipsy

around 11 pm every night.

Veeraswamy has also been very popular with Indians. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and VK Krishna Menon were frequent visitors. So too Winston Churchill, the Kings of Sweden and Jordan, Marlon Brando, Laurence Olivier, Pierce Brosnan, Princess Anne, and David Cameron. In 1948, it catered to the Indian Olympic team. In 2017, Queen Elizabeth asked Veeraswamy to cater for the visiting President of India.

The problem threatening Veeraswamy is that the building where it's housed on Regent Street is part of the Crown Estate, the institution that runs King Charles's properties. They've decided not to renew the lease when it expires in April next year.

Instead, they want to take over the 11 square metre ground floor entrance to the restaurant so they can extend the reception for the offices on the building's upper floors. "I think they have come to the view that it's too tiresome having a restaurant there. They want it to be all offices," Mathrani recently told *The Times*.

Veeraswamy has, of course, gone to court but the case is still to be heard. They have also organised a petition that tens of thousands have signed and which will, in due course, be presented to the King.

But if none of that works then, as Mathrani bluntly puts it, "We'll have to close down and then seek to revive in a new site after whatever period of time with all the implications for loss of business (and) potential redundancies". And then, he

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ruefully adds, this might "effectively destroy a major London institution".

That would be truly tragic. It's not just Veeraswamy's place in history that should be protected and preserved. It's also a rather good restaurant. In 2016, it was awarded a Michelin star, which it holds to this day. There aren't many other Indian restaurants that can make a similar boast.

So, will King Charles intercede and prevent Veeraswamy's closure? It's the only hope left. But just in case he doesn't, I shall, on my next visit to London, make a point of dining there if only, sadly, to bid a fond adieu. Why don't you consider doing the same?

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

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Transgender rights & transforming society

The school years were hell, Kalki Subramaniam remembers. Labelled a boy at birth, she didn't "fit into her body" and just looking at herself in the mirror was an ordeal. In addition, there was relentless bullying by the other kids because she was too "feminine". Just going to the boys' loo was torture.

And, yet, says Kalki, she was one of the lucky ones who didn't have to run away from home, who didn't have to turn to begging or sex work and risk getting HIV/AIDS. She made a pact with her family to transition only after her two sisters were married. And she continued her education — a Masters' degree through distance education — and is today the author of four books, two in Tamil and two in English; the latest out this past week.

To read *We Will Not Be Erased: The Courage to Rise Above Hate*, a collection of Kalki's poems, notes, illustrations and what she calls, "very short stories", is to ride alongside a journey of despair and discovery, rejection and redemption. "I have my own dark moments," she said at an audience interaction organised by Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy and the Keshav Suri Foundation in New Delhi. "But if I give up, it will affect not only my family, but my community." And so, she chooses hope.

The book comes at a time when transgender rights globally are under threat. US President Donald Trump's government now recognises only two genders, male and female. Transwomen athletes cannot participate in women's sport. And this past week, the conservative-majority Supreme Court upheld a ban on gender-affirming medical care for minors. The UK Supreme Court has ruled there are only two genders for the purposes of the Equality Act. Hungary has banned the Pride Parade. Russia has banned legal gender change. And, in February this year, Argentinian president Javier Milei barred access to legal gender recognition for minors.

India has its silver linings. The 2014

NALSA judgment recognised a third gender. Every citizen has the right to self-identify with whichever gender is best suited to them. Recent rulings from various high courts have generally been progressive — the right to be known as parents rather than father and mother on their child's birth certificate (Kerala), the right of a transgender woman to file a complaint of cruelty against her husband and in-laws (Andhra Pradesh), and the right to form a chosen family (Madras).

And, yet, even the Supreme Court fell short on issues like adoption and marriage rights for the LGBTQ+ community. Other disparities are glaring. For instance, the punishment for raping a transgender person is at most two years. And a Supreme Court recommendation for equal opportunities for education and employment remains largely on paper.

Even something as basic as a head count of transgender citizens is fuzzy. Census 2011's calculation of 4.88 lakh is believed to be a gross underestimation. All of these are challenges, but for Kalki, the biggest is visibility. So little is known about gender identity, and so much is feared through tropes (no, transgender people do not go about kidnapping transgender children). "Our education system does not teach us to empathise with people beyond religion, caste and borders," she tells me on the phone from Chennai. And, so, we fear what we do not know. Perhaps because it's Pride Month, there has been greater space for transgender issues. On Amazon Prime, *In Transit*, directed by Ayesha Sood and produced by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti documents the lives of transgender and non-binary people through questions of identity, love, acceptance and belonging. Like Kalki's book, it is a story of hope. Like the book, it gives the transgender community a voice — one that we need to hear.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

In birth centenary year, a new Satish Gujral work

In his birth centenary year, a significant and previously undocumented, unexhibited conte drawing titled *The Condemned* (1957) from the Cyrus and Ruth Praver Jhabvala family collection, now adds to Satish Gujral's oeuvre. Compositionally similar to the oil painting of the same name, which was also made in 1957, this work ranks among Gujral's finest condemnations of the effects of war and forced migration, with the kind of seething, tragic intensity that set Gujral apart from his peers. With a major exhibition of his works poised for later in the year, this work may be the newest inclusion in a positive reassessment of Gujral's position among independent India's modernists.

Satish Gujral returned to India in 1955 in a blaze of glory after an apprenticeship for two years in Mexico under David Siqueiros. Training under the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros against the backdrop of Mexico's response to the years of revolution, Gujral developed a temper for the nation as subject, as well as broad, free, open-handed strokes that he adapted to both his drawings as well as his paintings. As an apprentice to Siqueiros, the most politically radical of Los Tres Grandes (the three greats, Siqueiros, Rivera and José Clemente Orozco), and greatly influenced by the murals of Orozco, Gujral's own inclination was to adopt themes of social realism. The decade of 1947-57 became for Gujral a foundational

expression of his response to the violence that he witnessed during the chaos of Partition.

In the midst of Partition violence, he had driven a truck bearing refugees from Jhelum to Indian Punjab, and witnessed the barbarity of a brutal conflict as it played out. Gujral's work has often been likened to his own condition, but to attribute the power of his early works to his hearing disability would

be doing the artist a disservice. He painted the charming reflective portrait titled *My Sister* (1951) but also the agonised Partition paintings, of roiling rage, and the enactment of violence, all executed with a powerful monumental quality. Writer and art critic John Berger reviewed his exhibition in London in *The New Statesman*. Berger wrote: "He is as single minded as Picasso... I am certain that his exhibition should provoke both humanly and artistically as many people as possible."

The drawing mentioned at the beginning of this article, however, was made after his return to India and has its own interesting history. Cyrus Jhabvala, an eminent architect who also headed the School of Architecture in Delhi, was very active when the capital city was in the throes of intense building activity immediately after Independence. With his firm AAJ, Jhabvala not only designed public buildings like Kirori Mal College, Max Mueller Bhavan and Telecom Building, but also the sprawling Kurukshetra University, which was realised over 10



Among all of his peers who witnessed Partition in Punjab and Bengal, Gujral's works are the most visceral

years. Jhabvala was also enthusiastic about commissioning art works for the buildings. One of the artists he chose to work with was the young Satish Gujral, who was growing a reputation for rugged originality. Gujral did not disappoint. He designed murals in relief in ceramic, painted wood, and with tiles. The actual forms drew from primitive shapes and toys, even as he imbued them with a particular grandeur. While Gujral would continue to enjoy the patronage of Jawaharlal Nehru, and made murals for important State buildings like Punjab Agricultural University, Gandhi Bhavan and the Secretariat, in Chandigarh, Jhabvala openly disagreed with Nehru on the design of Ashoka Hotel, and did not take on any government commis-

sions during Nehru's lifetime.

Jhabvala, who also acquired two small works from MF Husain, probably bought *The Condemned* in this phase of Gujral's career. An artist himself, Jhabvala was fascinated with the simultaneous histories that Delhi inhabits. Many of his drawings are exquisitely rendered panoramic views of the grandeur of historic monuments and the chaos of ordinary street life, as in his work, *Fakhr-ul Masjid*, Old Delhi. James Ivory, collaborator with Ruth Praver Jhabvala on his films, commented that "Jhabvala's record is highly personal and subjective and at times, very precise — as precise as the 19th century photographs taken of the same are before and after the Indian Mutiny of 1857".

Among all of his peers who witnessed Partition in Punjab and Bengal, Gujral's works are the most visceral. While he is often placed alongside the Bombay Progressives who also graduated from the JJ School in Mumbai, or the Delhi Shilpi Chakra artists who had migrated from West Punjab, Gujral probably is more akin in spirit to Somnath Hore and Chittaprosad in his reading of the catastrophic event. More muted than his oil paintings, his drawings on the subject, such as *Days of Glory* (1954) powerfully depict women in mourning. In *The Condemned*, the solitary figure, probably the victim of rape, her body taut with pain and mortification, fills the frame. In contrast to the flowing lines of the figure, Gujral added hard-edged abstract elements to the fringes of this work, thereby enhancing the sense of pervasive violence. In his centenary year, Gujral will be celebrated as much for the depth of his broad-based practice — as architect, sculptor, painter and muralist — as for his passionate depiction of the human condition.

Gayatri Sinha is a curator and art historian. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Losing caste in the Caribbean

This is with reference to 'Spotting Purvanchal of the 1800s in the Caribbean' by Abhishek Asthana (June 22). It is interesting how caste met its end in distant Trinidad even as the diaspora retained much of their culture. Castelessness, even if under duress (inter-marriage in Caribbean), is a desirable end.

Mandhaar Chadha

Taliban and women's rights

This is with reference to 'India must press Taliban to uphold women's rights' by Lalita Panicker (June 22). The article rightly highlights the grim plight of Afghan women under Taliban rule. It is heartbreaking to see education, dignity, and basic freedoms stripped away, while the world looks elsewhere.

Sanjay Chopra

II.

The Taliban is doing injustice to Afghanistan women by depriving them of education and work. Nations across the globe should intervene and press the Taliban to give basic rights and liberty to Afghan women.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter @Pchidambaram_IN

The GST laws have added to the burdens of business. The high and multiple rates of GST are per se bad. The rules, regulations, notifications, forms and compliances under the GST laws are worse. Together with the manner in which the laws are *interpreted* and *applied* by the Income-tax, Customs, DGFT and GST departments, it is a nightmare for any business. The CBI, ED, DRI, GST enforcement and SFIO seem to regard every businessperson as a suspect, every chartered accountant and lawyer as an accomplice

inside
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COOMIKAPOOR



PLANE TRUTHS?

THE CONFLICTING versions of US President Donald Trump and India as to what abruptly brought the India-Pakistan four-day war to an end is better understood in the context of a report from well-placed Western diplomatic sources and military strategists. It is claimed that during the course of Operation Sindoor, Indian drones and missiles hit the Nur Khan Base, where many US-made planes, including F-16s, supplied to Pakistan since the 1990s under strict end-use conditions, meant only for counter-terrorism operations, are parked. Alarmed by possible damage to the planes, the US Department of Defence is believed to have alerted the US State Department that this may draw the US into the conflict. Secretary of State Marco Rubio conveyed the concerns to his Indian counterparts. Before hostilities came to a standstill, the IAF made a last blitzkrieg attack on Pakistan on May 10, resulting in more damage to its airbases. Trump, conscious of Pakistan's pliability and its geostrategic importance, was reportedly unhappy with India taking its own time in halting strikes and then publicly snubbing his claims of having mediated the ceasefire. Is that the reason why Trump has cooled towards India, once singled out as a favourite?

PRESIDENTIAL PAUSE

BJP president JPNadda's term ended six months back, but his successor has yet to be appointed, indicating a possible tussle between the RSS and the BJP. The BJP high command's preferred choices are believed to be Bhupender Yadav and Dharmendra Pradhan, both relatively young with proven organisational skills in polls, including the recent Haryana and Maharashtra elections. The RSS would prefer a more senior figure, like former MP CM Shivraj Chouhan, who has sufficient standing in his own right, to convey more firmly the RSS line to PM Modi, something the Sangh believes that Nadda, BLSanthosh, the party national general secretary (organisation), and Arun Kumar, who liaises between the Sangh and BJP, failed to do effectively. RSS office-bearers are believed to have also suggested the names of M L Khattar, Devendra Fadnavis

On the
LOOSE

LEHER KALA

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WHILE AVIATION investigators are still trying to figure out what caused the tragic crash of Air India-171 in Ahmedabad, a litany of other embarrassing blunders have emerged, not least of which was the CEO's condolence message that was almost identical to an American Airlines statement made after a plane went down in Washington five months ago. In the June 12 video, the CEO of Air India appeared looking stiff, his bland platitudes of a "difficult time" and "doing everything we can" falling flat in the immediate aftermath of heartrending sorrow. Though Air India did not address

MoF: Accept or reject, don't ignore

ON JUNE 19, 2025, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) convened a rare meeting of the Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Finance. I think it was the first meeting since the constitution of the 18th Lok Sabha in June 2024. The members are MPs of both Houses representing all parties nominated to the Committee. It is a *useful* mechanism if the government intends to use it. The finance minister (FM) presides over the meeting.

The meeting on June 19 was formal — in fact, too formal and stiff. The chief economic adviser (CEA) made a 19-slide power point presentation (PPT), members were invited to make their comments and observations, the finance secretary summarized — literally encapsulated — the comments but offered no answers or clarifications, and the FM made her closing remarks. On no issue was there a *consultation*.

Fortunately, in the 19th slide of his PPT, the CEA requested suggestions from members on four issues:

- For further improving farm productivity;
- Agenda for deregulation to reduce compliance burdens esp. for industry;
- Adapting our skilling programmes to AI and tech-driven disruptions; and
- How to accelerate formalization of the economy.

I did not wish to make off-the-cuff suggestions at the meeting. I have since thought about the four issues and here are my suggestions:

Crop	India average /best	Global Avg (Kg per hectare)	Best in the World
Wheat	3,559 /5,045	3,548	EU/Egypt 6,500-7,700
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Cotton	443/602	1,040	China 2,252

There is another metric of productivity: productivity per farmer/farm worker. 58 per cent of the Indian population (as against 22 per cent in China) depends on agriculture and agriculture-related activities. Hence, the productivity per farmer is very low in India, and the average farmer is not only poor but is also burdened by debt.

The way to accelerate productivity per farmer is to create non-farm jobs *and* to wean millions away from agriculture into non-farm jobs. However, because of high urban unemployment and the lamentable state of the manufacturing sector, that process has been in a start-stop mode; actually, there is data that in recent years labour has moved back to the agriculture sector.

Suggestion: Accelerate the growth

rate and expansion of the manufacturing sector.

AGENDA FOR DEREGULATION TO REDUCE COMPLIANCE BURDENS ESP. FOR INDUSTRY

After 2014-15, the Modi government has re-established more control. RBI, SEBI, Ministry of Company Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, the Income-tax department, UGC and every other Ministry or arm of government have made hundreds of pages of rules and regulations. The old control regime has come back as 'regulations'. Government authorities exert power and control through dispute and litigation. Doing business in India means challenging regulations and orders, and seeking redress in courts and tribunals.

The GST laws have added to the burdens of business. The high and multiple rates of GST are per se bad. The rules, regulations, notifications, forms and compliances under the GST laws are worse. Together with the manner in which the laws are *interpreted* and *applied* by the Income-tax, Customs, DGFT and GST departments, it is a nightmare for any business. The CBI, ED, DRI, GST enforcement and SFIO seem to regard every businessperson as a suspect and every chartered accountant and lawyer as an accomplice. If trade and industry have to be the prime drivers of the economy, the suffocating environment in which they find themselves must be removed.

Suggestion: Light a bonfire every quarter, there is enough rubbish to burn.

ADAPTING OUR SKILLING PROGRAMMES TO AI AND TECH-DRIVEN DISRUPTIONS

Read the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). The appalling levels of reading, writing and arithmetic skills of school children virtually rule out a technologically-empowered society. The triumvirate of UGC, NTA and NAAC have robbed the Universities of the essential character of a University — autonomy, inquiry and strive for excellence. They have driven serious teachers, scholars and researchers to foreign lands. The central and state governments have tied Universities hand and foot by starving them of funds. Thousands of *teaching posts* in Universities are vacant. According to a reply in Parliament, as on October 31, 2024, there were 5,182 *teaching posts* in *central* universities that were unfilled. I am afraid the way forward on this vexed issue lies far outside the ambit of MoF.

Suggestion: CEA may delete this issue from his to-do list.

HOW TO ACCELERATE FORMALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY

What does the CEA mean by 'formalization of the economy'? Does he want more economic activities that are carried on in the 'informal' economy (e.g. part-time maid services in middle class homes) formalized?

Suggestion: Absent clarity, I have none.

Please *accept* the suggestions; or *reject* them; do not *ignore* them.

and Nitin Gadkari, the latter two are Nagpur boys, but both have indicated they are not interested. Recently, Rajnath Singh's name was proposed, but he too has expressed reluctance. Incidentally, he has been called in to fill the breach on three occasions in the past. He took over as party president when LK Advani had to step down after his Jinnah remark, and after Gadkari resigned because of a corruption charge that has not been proven to date. Even when Kalyan Singh resigned as UP CM after differences with A B Vajpayee, Rajnath took his place.

NEW BESTIES

After five years of bickering, Sachin Pilot and Ashok Gehlot smoked the peace pipe, with the ex-CM attending an event on Rajesh Pilot's 25th death anniversary this month. Although there is still no love lost between the two, their ambitions no longer conflict. Gehlot is keen to protect son Vaibhav's interests in Rajasthan as he realises there is no future for him in the state after defying the party high command. News of the Gehlot-Pilot get-together has had an immediate impact on Rajasthan Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra and party leader in the Assembly Tika Ram Jolly. The relationship between the two was uneasy, but suddenly, they have become best buddies and arrived together in Delhi last fortnight. Significantly, the PCC president's term ends next month. Asked by a journalist about their togetherness, in contrast to the warring predecessors, they said the difference was that they were humble workers, whereas Gehlot and Pilot are leaders. The elevation of little-known MLA Bhajan Lal Sharma as party CM by the BJP appears to have been an inspiration for all parties.

MY ID POOF

Sometimes the right hand of the government does not know what the left is doing. For years, we were told that the Aadhaar is the most authentic proof of identity. To my shock, recently, at a South Delhi Sub-Registrar's office, I was told I would have to produce some other ID, like a driving licence or voter ID, as the system (whatever exactly that means) was not accepting Aadhaars. I had to rush home and collect my passport. A week later, I returned for another transaction (let me clarify, I was selling a flat to buy another) and learnt that my password was no longer acceptable. From clerks to touts and lawyers, no one seemed to have an explanation for the strange order. Some claimed it was to weed out Bangladeshis. Surely, an illegal migrant would find it easier to get a driving licence than an Aadhaar!

History
HEADLINE

GULUEZEKIEL



CONSIDERING THE current dire relations between India and Pakistan, it's hard to believe that not too long back, in 1996, a combined India-Pakistan cricket XI faced Sri Lanka in Colombo in a show of Asian sporting solidarity. Seventy years before that, a Hindu-Muslim team took on the mighty MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club) in Bombay during a historical tour of India.

The possibility now of a bilateral cricket series in the future is well-nigh impossible. But it wasn't always like that.


The first major step back was after the November 2008 terror attack on Mumbai, which resulted in 178 fatalities. Months earlier, in the inaugural season of the IPL, Pakistani cricketers had been warmly received by their franchise fans across India. The horrors of 26/11, however, meant they would never again be seen in the world's most popular T20 franchise league. The last time India and Pakistan met in a Test match was at Bengaluru in December 2007.

But it was the combined administrative and financial clout of the Indian and Pakistani cricket boards in 1987 and 1996 (plus Sri Lanka that year) that pulled the rug from under the feet of the "Big Two" of world cricket: England and Australia. After hosting the first three World Cups in England (1975, 1979, 1983), the power centre moved to the subcontinent, and subsequently, exclusively to India.

That the Indian and Pakistan cricket boards joined hands to host the 1987 (Reliance) World Cup and the 1996 (Wills) World Cup, with Sri Lanka as well, was a triumph of cricket diplomacy. On the eve of the 1996 World Cup, Colombo, which was to host many matches, was hit by a massive bomb blast that killed over 80 people. This spooked the Australian and West Indian teams, who boycotted their matches in Colombo and forfeited their points.

To show that it was safe, the PILCOM (Pak-Indo-Lanka Joint Management Committee) organised a match in Colombo against the hosts. But the team was no ordinary one. It was a joint India-Pakistan team (named Wills XI after the sponsors) captained by India's Azharuddin and including Sachin Tendulkar and Wasim Akram. It had six Pakistanis and five Indians, with Anil Kumble winning the Man of the Match award for his spell of four for 12.

A forgotten cricketing bond between India & Pakistan



An aerial view of Brabourne stadium in Mumbai.
Express Archive

The team was met with enthusiasm not only by Sri Lankan fans, who warmly appreciated the gesture of South Asian solidarity, but also by the cricket fraternities of both India and Pakistan.

There was a similar match 70 years earlier, in pre-Partition India, at the Bombay Gymkhana, between the MCC, which toured India in the 1926-27 season, and "Hindus and Muslims", which ended in a draw in December 1926. While English teams had been touring India since 1889-90, this was the first which had an official stamp, MCC being a huge voice in world cricket. Captained by Arthur Gilligan, the idea behind the tour was to gauge India's eligibility for Test status, which was duly granted in 1929. India played its first Test match at Lord's in 1932.

The joint team had seven Hindus and four Muslims, and was captained by Palwankar Vithal, the brother of the celebrated left-arm spinner Palwankar Baloo, who had been the lone bright spot with 100 wickets on the disastrous 1911 All-India tour of England. The failure of that 1911 team set back by many years India's chances of gaining official Test status, but Baloo's inclusion was remarkable in that he was a Dalit and one of Dr B R Ambedkar's early heroes. Vithal captaining the joint team against the MCC was another sign that Indian cricket was able to rise above caste considerations.

There had been two earlier matches played by the combined Hindus and Muslims team, in 1917 and 1922, both at the Bombay Gymkhana and both against a joint Europeans and Parsis team, the latter being

the first community to take to cricket in India. But neither was as high-profile as the 1926 match. Long before the IPL captured the imagination of Indian cricket fans, the tournament in Bombay between 1892-93 and 1945-46 had a huge following.

What was unusual about this tournament, which grew from a match-up between the Europeans and the Parsis to the Pentangular with five teams competing, was that it was fought between the various religious communities of India — Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Europeans and the Rest (comprising Indian Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs and the occasional Jew). Such tournaments on religious grounds were also held in Sindh and Lahore, pre-Partition. But the 'Bombay Tournament' had the biggest names and drew huge crowds, first, at the Gymkhana and then, at the Brabourne Stadium from the late 1930s.

It was this high-profile tournament that attracted the attention and ire of Mahatma Gandhi, who led a campaign for its abolishment as he felt a sporting event held on communal grounds sent the wrong signals at a time that he had launched his Quit India movement. Though his campaign was ultimately successful, players from both sides and spectators too always attested to the fact that there was never any ill-feeling between the players and the fans on opposing sides. If anything, it brought the communities closer together. Such a sporting event has never been staged before or after.

The writer's latest book, What If...? Indian Cricket's Counter-Factual History, was released in April

A copy-paste apology signals unreliability

the plagiarism claim, it acknowledged it had drawn examples from other crashes.

To be sure, at the time, nothing anyone said could have provided solace. However, when netizens pointed out the striking similarities between the two notes and accusations of plagiarism began trending online, it struck at every cynical Indian's heart like a cruel joke. It's not merely the lack of originality that's offensive, rather, the bitter realisation that even at such a disastrous moment, leaders can't be relied on to speak the plain truth or display sincere empathy.

It's a toss up on what's worse — speculation that ChatGPT wrote that message or somebody from the airline actually dug out the American Airlines statement and handed it to the CEO to read out. There's a

thought floating around that in today's litigious, social media-driven world, an adherence to protocol even during a desperate crisis, comes first. Indeed, circumspection is required when dealing with a distressed public and facts remain unknown; in which case, borrowing heavily from other post-accident scenarios and then getting caught out makes no sense at all. The most under-undersentences in the English language are "I am sorry" and "I don't know". Our fears are rarely assuaged by phony assurances or hatchet jobs to contain a situation. During terrible events, people have a heightened instinct for sussing out inaccuracies — a policy of complete transparency is a step towards rebuilding trust in institutions.

Hours after the twin towers fell in New

York on September 11, 2001, then Mayor Rudy Giuliani had to answer the inevitable question: how many were lost? He appeared to brace himself before quietly replying that the number of casualties "will be more than any of us can bear". His spare words didn't gloss over peoples' sufferings. Yet, he conveyed his tireless support. Over the next few weeks, he attended five funerals a day. The world also remembers Jacinda Ardern, then PM of New Zealand, for the exemplary compassion she showed after the horrific Christchurch mosque massacre. Leadership during tragedy is a mixture of relentlessly working a way back to stability, while participating in the rites we live by.

It's impossible to look at the randomness of this airline crash and not realise how

tenuous our foothold on earth really is. Intellectually, we may know loss is omnipresent. A twist in fate means some unlucky people are forced to confront this reality in discombobulating ways. What do we glean from the sidelines when lives are brutally cut short this way? That devastation always lurks frighteningly close; the dreams we have, the paths we take are all relatively transient. Quite innocently, we trust in the uncertain, it's the only choice to live with some measure of happiness. Whatever eventually emerges about the final minutes of the crash, the last fortnight has revealed those in charge don't have the luxury of reflecting on it in isolation. A tragedy of this scale involves us all.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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In praise of Democracy

IN THE week gone by, this newspaper has paid special attention to the Emergency. Long articles have been written by politicians and journalists who remember what happened during those 19 months 50 years ago, when democracy was replaced by dictatorship. As someone who got my first job in an Indian newspaper barely a month before Indira Gandhi imposed press censorship, I value those 'dark days of the Emergency' because it was that time that taught me to revere democracy. It disturbed me last week that so many Congress leaders tried to defend the indefensible, in their puzzling compulsion to please their ruling family. What this revealed for everyone to see was the pathetic sycophancy of senior Congress party leaders. They should be ashamed.

The Emergency cannot and must not be defended because it caused lasting damage to our democracy. The pillars that are supposed to hold up democracy were all weakened, and it was then that the practice of turning political parties into family businesses began. This very bad idea has flourished since then and the more it has flourished, the weaker it has made our political parties and Parliament.

As a country we should have achieved a lot more than we have in our 75 years of existence as a modern nation. We have failed to provide our citizens with such basic things as clean water to drink and clean air to breathe. Our cities look like filthy, sprawling slums and our villages look worse. We have failed to build halfway decent schools and hospitals for those who cannot afford to pay for private services. But what shines amid these many failures is that we have managed against all odds to keep democracy alive in a neighbourhood of military dictatorships and theocracies.

Speaking of theocracies, it saddens me that the United States and Israel ended their war in Iran without a regime change. Since he became Supreme Leader in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has presided over a ruthless theocracy that has spread jihadist terrorism across the world and terrorised Iran's own people. The Ayatollah's regime has tortured thousands of women for the crime of not wearing a hijab 'properly' and his prisons are filled with thousands of people who have raised their voices against his brutal policies. Some have languished in jail cells for decades. Others have been hanged.

In between our borders and Iran is a country that is like Iran but led by military men instead of priests, and unlike Iran already has nuclear weapons. The Generals who are Pakistan's real rulers crush dissidence with violence and have used their army to spread jihadist terrorism, with India being the main target of their evil efforts. When you look at India on this wider canvas, you see how good we look and the reason for this is our democracy. This is why it is worrying that there are so many politicians, both on the Left and the Right, who believe that democracy is what has held India back.

In the 40 years that this column has existed, I have had the dubious pleasure of interviewing many political leaders. Conversations with Leftist Congress leaders have gone something like this — "You see we cannot develop our infrastructure and our services in the way China can because we are a democracy, and this has often been a stumbling block." On the Right, there are voices in the BJP that express similar misgivings about democracy and many secretly admire Indira Gandhi, whatever they might say publicly about the Emergency. As for ordinary Indians, it shames me to admit that I have talked to far too many people who believe that what we need is a 'benevolent dictator'. This is nonsense but I am willing to bet that you have met as many Indians who believe this as I have.

By an odd coincidence, on the day that I was writing this column, I happened to see on social media a clip of the famous 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech by John F Kennedy on June 26, 1963, in West Berlin. This was nearly two years after the Berlin Wall was built by the Soviet Union to make sure that the people of East Berlin did not flee to the West. It is one of the finest speeches about democracy that any politician ever made. Kennedy says, "Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving."

It is a speech that should be compulsory reading for Indian politicians. As for me, if there is one thing that I truly believe, it is that if India had not been a democracy, however flawed our institutions have become because of the Emergency, we may not have survived as a nation. If we have not fragmented in the way the Islamist Republic next door has long hoped we would, it is because democracy has been the glue that has held us together.

Far from being the obstacle to progress that some of our politicians believe it has been, it is because of our democracy that India exists. We may not be the 'Mother of democracy' as our Prime Minister likes to tell the world, but in modern times, we have been a democratic republic, and this is something we should all be proud of. Democracy is something that we must cherish.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 29, 2025



India's Jasprit Bumrah appeals for the wicket of England's Zak Crawley during the Test match between England & India at Headingley in Leeds, England AP/PTI

Not much between India and England after first Test

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

SO, INDIA LOST the Headingley Test, a result that seemed highly improbable at various stages of the game. It's not every day that two ends up being greater than five, as the two hundreds scored by England batsmen ended up being more decisive than the five managed by the Indians. But what it does confirm is that it's a team game where the contribution of every individual in the eleven matters. Apart from the five hundreds, the highest score by an Indian across the two innings was 42 by KL Rahul in the first essay.

In contrast, apart from the hundred by Ollie Pope and the match-winning century by Ben Duckett on the final day, there were four half-centuries from England's side, including a 99 by Harry Brook in the first dig. Add to that, Jamie Smith's composed unbeaten knock of 44 on the fifth afternoon and one has the recipe for a team effort overcoming stellar efforts from a handful of players.

Alot has been said about India's over-reliance on Jasprit Bumrah in the bid to take 20 wickets in a match. But the first Test showed that the team often had nowhere else to go to even keep the opposition batsmen in check. Rookie skipper Shubman Gill seemed lost for ideas, especially on the fifth day, and had to bring on his trump card far more regularly than he would have liked, and the England batsmen had the option of seeing him off and making hay against the others while putting miles into Bumrah's system, that could prove decisive as the five-match series moves on.

It hasn't been long since the Indian pace battery was considered to be the envy of the cricketing world with Bumrah, Mohammed Shami and Mohammed Siraj forming a potent trio with an assembly line of youngsters providing hope for the future. But the fitness issues plaguing Bumrah and Shami, allied with Siraj's inconsistency, have pricked the balloon.

That England had a shot at an unlikely win on the last day had a lot to do with India's collapses in both innings. The visitors' camp must have been cock-a-hoop after the first day, but when a team loses its last seven wickets for 41 runs, what could have been a huge score ends up being just a decent one, while handing the bowling team a shot in the arm and all the momentum.

It wasn't a one-off as India lost their last six wickets for just 31 in the second innings, meaning a potential victory target of around 450 was reduced to 371, which England considered well within their reach. The highest individual score for Nos 8-11 across the two innings was Shardul Thakur's 4 in the second.

Chalk and cheese

Compare it to the contributions from the lower order in the England first innings – Chris Woakes (38), Brydon Carse (22) and Josh Tongue (11). The hosts were almost 50 runs behind the follow-on target when they lost their fourth wicket, but their last six wickets put on 240 runs, more than doubling the score. Even in the fourth innings, England needed 69 runs to win when

they lost their fifth wicket, but the nerveless Smith more than held his own in the partnership with Root.

The bottom order cannot always be relied upon to get a lot of runs, and they would be more adept in familiar conditions. But what would disappoint the Indian think tank is that the tail-enders got out trying extravagant shots when there was a competent batsman at the other end – Ravindra Jadeja on both occasions.

The fielding was also some of the shoddiest seen in recent years. Not only were seven catches dropped – Yashasvi Jaiswal the guilty party on four occasions – but the Indians were unusually sloppy on the ground as well. Granted that the Headingley outfield was not in pristine state, but the effort was not of Test class.

Test cricket is played over five days, but small passages can exert disproportionate influence on the final outcome. That's why it demands sustained intensity and fitness – mental and physical – over a long period. Little things add up to make an impact on the game, that's why it pays to never give up. It would have been easy for Ben Stokes and his team to believe, at various stages, that the game was beyond them and focus on damage limitation. But they never stopped trying to win the game.

Their decision at the toss was roundly criticised, but as Stokes said after the game, "it's good that a Test match is played over five days".

All to play for

So, the hosts are 1-0 up without playing their best cricket. India would feel that it was a close game – it's rare for a Test these days to go into the final session of the fifth day – and it wouldn't have taken a lot to reverse the result.

Looking ahead to Birmingham, India would do well to pick their best six batsmen and five best bowlers, subject to Bumrah's involvement. There's not much merit in picking a bowler who may not be the most penetrative, but is more likely to get some runs down the order. Thakur may have got two lucky wickets – off successive deliveries – with indifferent offerings on the fifth day, but left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav is a more potent threat any day of the week.

Having said that, the late order has to pull its weight with the bat as every little contribution counts. Better fielding would help too. The top and middle order largely did their job, but if they are not scoring hundreds, they need to ensure that they are involved in significant partnerships so that collapses can be avoided.

England have included speedster Jofra Archer in their squad, but whether he plays his first Test in four years remains to be seen. That India managed to keep their bowling attack under pressure for a long time in Leeds would give the visitors hope. It's now a question of doing the good work for longer. A long series allows a team to make a comeback after a poor start. Gill would have gone through the whole gamut of emotions in his first match as India captain – first the ecstasy of scoring a hundred in his first innings as skipper, and then watching helplessly as England made a mockery of, what seemed on paper, a mountain to climb.

Gill and the coaching staff now need to convince the team that it's still early days in the series.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

The GST laws have added to the burdens of business. The high and multiple rates of GST are per se bad. The rules, regulations, notifications, forms and compliances under the GST laws are worse. Together with the manner in which the laws are interpreted and applied by the Income-tax, Customs, DGFT and GST departments, it is a nightmare for any business. The CBI, ED, DRI, GST enforcement and SFIO seem to regard every businessperson as a suspect, every chartered accountant and lawyer as an accomplice

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I did not wish to make off-the-cuff suggestions at the meeting. I have since thought about the four issues and here are my suggestions:

For further improving farm productivity

One of the slides mentioned MSP, PM-Kisan, PM-Fasal Bima, KCC, e-NAM and Food Parks: these are intended to increase *efficiency* and consequently boost *productivity*. In another slide on 'empowering farmers', the data on *increase in yield per acre* for major crops has been given. In each major crop, the increase in yield per hectare between 2013-14 and 2023-24 has been in double-digits. In fact, we have been on the right path since the days of the green revolution beginning

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Plane truths?

The conflicting versions of US President Donald Trump and India as to what abruptly brought the India-Pakistan four-day war to an end is better understood in the context of a report from well-placed Western diplomatic sources and military strategists. It is claimed that during the course of Operation Sindoor, Indian drones and missiles hit the Nur Khan Base, where many US-made planes, including F-16s, supplied to Pakistan since the 1990s under strict end-use conditions, meant only for counter-terrorism operations, are parked. Alarmed by possible damage to the planes, the US Department of Defence is believed to have alerted the US State Department that this may draw the US into the conflict. Secretary of State Marco Rubio conveyed the concerns to his Indian counterparts. Before hostilities came to a standstill, the IAF made a last blitzkrieg attack on Pakistan on May 10, resulting in more damage to its



Over 58% of the Indian population depends on agriculture and agriculture-related activities. The productivity per farmer is very low in India, and the average farmer is not only poor but is also burdened by debt ANI

MoF: Accept or reject, don't ignore

1965 and not only since 2013-14. However, productivity must be measured against world standards:

There is another metric of productivity:

Crop	India average/best	Global Avg (Kg per hectare)	Best in the World
Wheat	3,559 / 5,045	3,548	EU/ Egypt 6,500-7,700
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productivity per farmer/farm worker. 58% of the Indian population (as against 22% in China) depends on agriculture and agriculture-related activities. Hence, the productivity per farmer is very low in India, and the average farmer is not only poor but is also burdened by debt.

The way to accelerate productivity per farmer is to create non-farm jobs *and* to wean millions away from agriculture into non-farm jobs. However, because of high urban unemployment and the lamentable state of the manufacturing sector, that process has been in a start-stop mode; actually, there is data that in recent years labour has moved back to the agriculture sector.

air bases. Trump, conscious of Pakistan's pliability and its geostrategic importance, was reportedly unhappy with India taking its own time in halting strikes and then publicly snubbing his claims of having mediated the ceasefire. Is that the reason why Trump has cooled towards India, once singled out as a favourite?

Presidential pause

BJP president J P Nadda's term ended six months back, but his successor has yet to be appointed, indicating a possible tussle between the RSS and the BJP. The BJP high command's preferred choices are believed to be Bhupender Yadav and Dharmendra Pradhan, both relatively young with proven organisational skills in polls, including the recent Haryana and Maharashtra elections. The RSS would prefer a more senior figure, like former MP CM Shivraj Chouhan, who has sufficient standing in his own right, to convey more firmly the RSS line to PM Modi, something the Sangh believes that Nadda, B L Santhosh, the party national general secretary (organisation), and Arun Kumar, who liaises between the Sangh and BJP, failed to do effectively. RSS office-bearers are believed to have also suggested the names of M L Khattar, Devendra Fadnavis and Nitin Gadkari, the

Suggestion: Accelerate the growth rate and expansion of the manufacturing sector.

Agenda for deregulation to reduce compliance burdens esp. for industry

After 2014-15, the Modi government has re-established more control. RBI, SEBI, Ministry of Company Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, the Income-tax department, UGC and every other Ministry or arm of government have made hundreds of pages of rules and regulations. The old control regime has come back as 'regulations'. Government authorities exert power and control through dispute and litigation. Doing business in India means challenging regulations and orders, and seeking redress in courts and tribunals.

The GST laws have added to the burdens of business. The high and multiple rates of GST are per se bad. The rules, regulations, notifications, forms and compliances under the GST laws are worse. Together with the manner in which the laws are *interpreted* and *applied* by the Income-tax, Customs, DGFT and GST departments, it is a nightmare for any business. The CBI, ED, DRI, GST enforcement and SFIO seem to regard every businessperson as a suspect and every chartered accountant and lawyer as an accomplice. If trade and industry have to be the prime drivers of the economy, the suffocating environment in which they find themselves must be removed.

Suggestion: Light a bonfire every quarter, there is enough rubbish to burn.

Adapting our skilling programmes to ai and tech-driven disruptions

Read the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). The appalling levels of reading, writing and arithmetic skills of school children virtually rule out a technologically-empowered society. The triumvirate of UGC, NTA and NAAC have robbed the Universities of the essential character of a University – autonomy, inquiry and strive for excellence. They have driven serious teachers, scholars and researchers to foreign lands. The central and state governments have tied Universities hand and foot by starving them of funds. Thousands of *teaching posts* in Universities are vacant. According to a reply in Parliament, as on October 31, 2024, there were 5,182 *teaching posts* in *central* universities that were unfilled. I am afraid the way forward on this vexed issue lies far outside the ambit of MoF.

Suggestion: CEA may delete this issue from his to-do list.

How to accelerate formalisation of the economy

What does the CEA mean by 'formalisation of the economy'? Does he want more economic activities that are carried on in the 'informal' economy (e.g. part-time maid services in middle class homes) formalised?

Suggestion: Absent clarity, I have none. Please *accept* the suggestions; or *reject* them; do not *ignore* them.

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arrived together in Delhi last fortnight. Significantly, the PCC president's term ends next month. Asked by a journalist about their togetherness, in contrast to the warring predecessors, they said the difference was that they were humble workers, whereas Gehlot and Pilot are leaders. The elevation of little-known MLA Bhajan Lal Sharma as party CM by the BJP appears to have been an inspiration for all parties.

My ID poof

Sometimes the right hand of the government does not know what the left is doing. For years, we were told that the Aadhaar is the most authentic proof of identity. To my shock, recently, at a South Delhi Sub-Registrar's office, I was told I would have to produce some other ID, like a driving licence or voter ID, as the system (whatever exactly that means) was not accepting Aadhaars. I had to rush home and collect my passport. A week later, I returned for another transaction (let me clarify, I was selling a flat to buy another) and learnt that my password was no longer acceptable. From clerks to touts and lawyers, no one seemed to have an explanation for the strange order. Some claimed it was to weed out Bangladeshis. Surely, an illegal migrant would find it easier to get a driving licence than an Aadhaar!

MARKETS WRESTLE METHOD & MADNESS OF TRUMPONOMICS

OPTIMISM held sway till headlines spooked the bulls. Global indices flirted with or shot past 52-week highs as the news flow propped bullish sentiments. The US benchmark S&P500 touched a new high of 6,187, tech tracker Nasdaq shot past 20,311, Japanese Nikkei 225 hovered at 40,267, Korean Kospi touched 3,093, and India's Nifty50 surged past 25,650 towards its all-time high, while in London the FTSE100 nudged 8,798.

Donald J Trump was talking up trade deals. A deal with China signalled business as usual for markets even though little is known beyond access to rare earth minerals and magnets discussed at the London *détente*. A deal with India—"a big one which would open up India," in Trump's words—was on the anvil, Vietnam was moving ahead and the European Union was edging closer to a deal, prompting the US to scrap the "revenge tax".

The whiplash of headlines followed soon enough. Just as punters settled for siesta, DJT declared, "We are hereby terminating ALL discussions on trade with Canada, effective immediately." The reason: Canada's move to implement a digital services tax of 3 percent. Predictably, the Canadian S&P TSX slid, as did S&P500 and Nasdaq before recovering at close. Tremors and shocks are a constant cause of volatility since Trump took office. Traders who coined the term TACO (Trump always chickens out) believe Trump's love for a buoyant stock market will save the day.

You could say the bets are on the madness and the method of Trumponomics. There is a conviction that Trump will wield executive power to protect his image. Soon after the attack on nuclear sites in Iran, as crude oil prices spiralled to \$80 per barrel, Trump warned derivative players with capital letters and exclamation marks: "Everyone, keep oil prices down, I'm watching! Don't do it!" At the Nato summit, when Spain dissented on raising defence spending, Trump threatened higher tariffs. Trump has also repeatedly asserted (despite denials) that he used trade deals to force India and Pakistan to a ceasefire.

The idea of Make America Great Again rests on Trump's belief that the heft of the US economy and military must be leveraged to make allies pay for protection and an entry fee charged from others for the privilege of participating in the \$29-trillion economy's markets. However, the MAGA dream is haunted by US debt and deficits. In 2024, it ran a trade deficit of \$918 billion, federal deficit of \$1.83 trillion, and a total debt of \$36.2 trillion or 123 percent of the GDP. It is getting worse as the new 'Big Beautiful Bill', as per the non-profit Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, will add \$3.5-4.2 trillion of debt by 2034.

There is a method to the madness of Trumponomics. As a solution, Trump has invested in an assembly of disparate ideas—stranded between claims and counter claims—to lift the US economy out. DJT believes tariffs will achieve multiple objectives—it is already garnering revenue of around \$30 billion a month, and will bring down trade deficits and force onshoring of output. The foundation rests on cutting taxes and regulation to spur investment, some of which is manifest in the White House's 'running list' of investment declarations by Softbank, OpenAI, Meta, Apple, Nvidia, Micron and others. Trump's trip to the West Asia was geared for geo-economics. He has claimed this has brought over \$2 trillion in investments.

Last year, the US spent \$881 billion on interest costs; this year, it is expected to spend \$3 billion a day on it. The DOGE experiment is yet to pay out and welfare costs are mounting. Trump has introduced a tax on remittances and his \$5-million Trump Card visa scheme already has over 75,000 applicants. The targeting of Fed chair Jerome Powell on interest rates is aimed at lowering borrowing costs. Foreigners own \$9 trillion of US debt and the depreciation of the dollar—reflected in the DXY index's 10 percent slide since January—could be dubbed as stealth management of debt.

His interventions in geopolitics—whether on Ukraine or Congo-Rwanda—are laced with the goal of extracting minerals rights and making commercial gains. This week, Nato members agreed to hike defence spending from 2 percent to 5 percent of their national GDPs. Trump was triumphant at the promise. In 2024, the US exported arms worth \$314 billion, which is expected to rise to \$447 billion by 2033. Europe accounts for 35 percent of US arms sales and higher defence spends would filter into American arms companies; the UK, for one, is buying a dozen F35A jets. Unsurprisingly, the valuations of arms companies have shot up.

Cardinal Jules Mazarin, a French statesman, said the question to ask of a general is not is he skilful, but is he lucky. Trump is his own lucky general. His 2024 victory gave him the trifecta of power—majorities in the Senate, the House and the Supreme Court. For a lethal combo, add his uncanny knack to occupy attention. Whether it is attacking Iran or cracking down on law firms, universities and illegal immigration, Trump backs himself. He has threatened to railroad dissenters at party primaries to deliver his campaign promise via the Big Beautiful Bill.

A maximalist approach is in play—the art of the deal is accompanied by the art of the delay. It is an indisputably risky gambit with long-term implications for sovereign balance sheets and the rule-based world order. The markets—at times mocking, and at others wrestling with the method and the madness of Trumponomics—can at best keep singing 'Kumbaya'.

NEED A REGULATOR FOR FLYING COFFINS



POWER & POLITICS

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WELCOME aboard India's booming aviation sector. Please fasten your seatbelts, stow your illusions, and brace for impact. Indians are flying blind. On June 12, 230 passengers boarded Air India Flight 171 in Ahmedabad. Thirty seconds after takeoff, the Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner plunged into a medical college hostel. It wasn't just a crash—it was a massacre, and one that could have been prevented. And like so many others in India's increasingly dystopian aviation landscape, it exposed not just the condition of the aircraft but the rot at the very heart of our aviation ecosystem.

In any functioning democracy, such a tragedy would be a moment of reckoning. But not in India. Instead, distraught relatives ran from morgue to morgue, clutching photographs of burnt bodies and unanswered questions. For days, there were no officials with answers. There was no crisis response team. Hardly a responsive centralised helpline, which should have been mandatory.

The main crisis that allows airlines to get away with murder is that there is no regulator fixing accountability. Symptom without empathy is a sign of apathy. Add indifference at the helm, and the picture is complete: four senior executives threw an official party days after the crash. Thankfully, they were sacked. And the conscience cancelled perceived callousness, with the Tatas setting up a foundation with a huge ₹500-crore corpus to look after the interests of the victims.

Let's drop the polite fiction. This wasn't a tragedy. This was premedi-

tated negligence dressed up as routine incompetence. India's aviation sector isn't flying high—it's spiralling into a tailspin of regulatory cowardice, corporate greed, and political indifference. And the blood is everywhere: on the tarmac, in the air, and on the hands of those who allowed it.

India's duopoly airlines sector doesn't run airlines; in the public eye, it runs extortion rackets at 35,000 feet. Between them, the two main airline groups control 88.5 percent of the Indian skies. Fares have turned surreal: ₹8,500 for a 50-minute Delhi-Chandigarh hop, ₹10,200 for Chennai-Coimbatore. IndiGo flew 118 million passengers last year and walked away with ₹7,258 crore in profit. Air India plays coy with its books but flexes its power with a 470-aircraft mega order.

After Go First's death and SpiceJet's gasping 4 percent market share, there's no competition—just cartel capitalism. And the regulator? Oh wait, India doesn't have one. It has the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), which is to civil aviation what a toothpick is to a knife fight.

India's so-called aviation watchdog is a bureaucratic zombie—underfunded, undermanned, and under political leash. With 53 percent vacancies and a 91 percent capital outlay cut, it operates more like a confused HR department than a regulator. When it finally emerged from its slumber last week, its June 24 inspection report read like a horror novel: unserviceable baggage trolleys, defect logs not filled, improperly secured life vests, maintenance protocols ignored, and repeated technical glitches shrugged off like indigestion. What did the DGCA do with this damning data? Issued a press release, patted itself on the back and curled back into hibernation.

India is one of the only major aviation markets without a statutory, independent regulator. Countries like the UK, Brazil, South Africa and neighbouring Nepal have bodies that don't report to ministries and have powers to ground aircraft, fine carriers, enforce passenger rights, and even jail executives. The US Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) has 45,000 employees and a \$20-billion budget. India's DGCA can barely file accident reports on time.

Other nations reacted to aviation tragedies by reforming. After the 2008 SpanAir crash, the EU mandated safety management systems. After the 737 MAX disasters of 2018-19, the FAA grounded Boeing jets for 20 months and forced design changes. After engine issues in 2023, Australia's CASA cracked down on Qantas. Japan's JTSB responded to its 2025 Tokyo runway collision within days. In India, the DGCA waited two weeks after the Ahmedabad crash to investigate pilot fatigue and rostering issues. The only thing that moves quickly in Indian aviation is the fare meter. Without a regulator, airlines have been taking choice-starved passengers for a ride. But yes, we have a regulator for airport quality—because runway tiles seemingly matter more than human lives.

Meanwhile, in March 2025, as a Kolkata-Delhi IndiGo flight was diverted to Jaipur for "weather", one Priya Sharma missed her father's funeral. When a woman fainted mid-flight on a ₹7,500-a-pop Bengaluru-Hyderabad flight, the crew at first ignored her; her daughter wept: "She's my mother!" Last month, an IndiGo flight on a Guwahati-Chennai run sent out a May Day call for fuel. A Delhi-Srinagar aircraft was battered by hail. Ahmedabad saw 462 bird strikes in one year.

What India needs is not murmurs of sympathy; it needs a wrecking ball.



AFP

TALKING LOCAL, THINKING NATIONAL



OPINION

GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN

Former bureaucrat and author, most recently of *The Spell of the Rain Tree*

ANY years ago, during the early years of the IT boom, I spotted a signage in a Bengaluru medical shop that offered a 1 percent discount for those speaking Kannada. It struck me as a small nudge to learn the language of a city that had begun welcoming a large migrant population. Since then, the voices on either side of the linguistic divide have become more strident and uncompromising.

It is indisputable that job seekers who move across the country contribute to the economy of the state they move to. The cross-country migrant population comprises both unskilled and highly qualified workers. In this milieu, publicised language disputes often involve educated employees pitted against locals providing basic services. Incidents of violence and demands of job reservation for locals are the fallout. It is also true that for the vocal few who refuse to learn a new language, there are several professionals, students and homemakers who

acquire proficiency in the language of the region where they work and live. Ultimately, a willingness to use the local language makes it easier to do business.

More than ignorance of a local language, it is the recalcitrant attitude to bridging the linguistic gap that is galling. It's a sad commentary that prejudice and bias against people based on language and region thrive even among the educated classes. Languages sharing a common genealogy often suffer from bouts of sibling rivalry. While linguists theorise about the origin of languages based on historical evidence, unverifiable claims and counter-claims on superiority add to the political buzz. One of the objectives of the linguistic division of states was to promote and preserve the unique cultural identity of distinctive groups. However, this has also given rise to insularity and language vigilantism.

There are in fact effective solutions to overcome the barrier that language could create. Many employers provide language learning opportunities for those from outside the state. Basic conversational skills can smoothen social transactions and can be learnt in informal settings. Tech tools that offer on-the-fly translation services are available at the click of an icon. There was a newsclip showing a techie negotiating with an auto rickshaw driver using one such app. Digital platforms can enable language learning, supplementing the role played by cinema, television shows and songs. Learning a language involves exposure and an attitude of openness.

Until a few years ago, despite their

immense computational prowess, computers could not string together a simple sentence. However, with the emergence of large language models (LLMs), machines have discovered coherence and an ability to communicate. AI's deep dive into language, the ultimate repository of human knowledge, has allowed it access to the collective resources of human thought. Multilingual AI that understands and processes different languages has found a wide range



Top tech companies have realised machines need to learn languages to access human knowledge. Indians must accept that linguistic diversity helps in cross-pollination of ideas and enriches the social fabric

of applications from business transactions to research and translation. Language services already a massive industry and is expected to grow fast.

Languages evolve through interactions and innovation. We are now witness to new usages and modifications of English by Gen Alpha, which sounds like gibberish to the older generation. It is a reminder that the language we take pride in today can morph into something unrecognisable in the future. Every language has its heroic stories, its ballads and chants handed down over genera-

tions. This is probably one reason why language becomes an emotive issue.

The stories of linguistic conflict and discord find traction thanks to social media. However, there are several positive stories that do not reach the public domain. This is about people from outside the region who integrate themselves and contribute to the literary and cultural development of the place they have adopted as their home. India has seen iconic figures including writers, film personalities and political leaders who have contributed to the growth of culture in languages of which they are not native speakers.

Groups of people speaking different languages have coexisted peacefully for decades with majority groups in many regions of the country while retaining their distinctive identity. They stand testimony to the fact that in India, a language can flourish beyond regional boundaries. Indians are adept at using one language at home, another on the street and a third at the workplace.

The weaponisation of language only serves vested interests of a few misguided elements. Linguistic pluralism is an advantage India has over others. It is necessary to appreciate that, just as biodiversity is important for the health of an ecosystem, linguistic diversity helps in cross-pollination of ideas and enriches the social fabric. Seeking common ground and keeping the conversation flowing, while respecting intrinsic differences, is the way forward. To quote the Tamil poet of the Sangam era, Kaniyan Pungundranar, "To us all towns are one, all people our kin."

QUOTE CORNER

The other shoe has dropped on executive immunity... The court's decision is nothing less than an open invitation for the government to bypass the Constitution. The executive branch can now enforce policies that flout settled law and violate countless individuals' constitutional rights, and the federal courts will be hamstrung.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor of the US Supreme Court after it limited the power of federal courts to block policies nationwide, handing Donald Trump a win

When it comes to US-Iran policy there has been a significant lack of knowledge... there's limited information about the historical and political context.

Yassamin Ansari, congresswoman from Arizona with Iranian roots

Happy that a young Indian team got you worried like this. Enjoy the win Michael, we'll be back.

Wasim Jaffer, former India cricketer, in a friendly war of words with former England player Michael Vaughan after India's loss in the Leeds Test



MAILBAG WRITE TO

Protect SMEs

Ref: *Dumping threat looms* (Jun 28). The editorial rightly captures the effect of a trade deal with the US to boost India's economic outlook. Yet, beyond tariffs and export baskets, we must also play our cards right by addressing non-tariff barriers, protecting small and medium enterprises from import shocks, and securing strategic concessions. Long-term stability demands market diversification.

Avinashiappan Myilsami, Coimbatore

Gaza approach

Ref: *Let's not forget Gaza* (Jun 28). The situation in Gaza remains dire. It is time for Western governments to reassess their approach—not just from a humanitarian standpoint, but also in light of shifting public opinion and setbacks for those uncritically supportive of Israeli actions. A more balanced stance may help save lives and restore credibility.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Limited scope

Ref: *When fighting terrorism is SCO goal, skipping it makes outcome meaningless* (Jun 28). India couldn't get the other participants to include the menace of cross-border terrorism in the SCO communiqué. But India too didn't support another member Iran at the UN on its recent war. China is an all-weather friend of Pakistan. So it's better for this group to confine itself to trade relations.

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Uphold professionalism

Ref: *Air India asks four senior employees to resign* (Jun 28). Air India SATS Airport Services' decision to seek the resignations of four senior executives reflects a commitment to upholding standards of professionalism and accountability. Prompted by concerns over workplace behaviour underscored by the tragic Ahmedabad crash, the move should enhance operational focus and precision. The group seems to have strengthened its resolve to rebuild public trust and ensure robust operations.

Ibraheem Bhadusha, Koottilangadi

Zumba zest

Ref: *More Muslim groups come out against Zumba sessions in Kerala schools* (Jun 28). The debate over introducing Zumba dance in schools as a fitness activity casts doubt on our state's claim of being progressive. The opposition to such a modern and healthy initiative reflects a mindset rooted in outdated thinking.

R Jayakrishnan, Elamakkara

Bihar's choice

Ref: *Tejaswi opposition's chief ministerial face in Bihar* (Jun 28). Tejaswi Yadav has a significant political presence in Bihar and is often projected as a chief ministerial candidate by the opposition alliance. Though he is not highly qualified educationally, he has served as the deputy chief minister twice. He seems committed to policy-driven politics and in addressing real concerns of the electorate. Ultimately, competence to be CM is a matter of public perception, political support and demonstrated ability to govern.

V K S Krishnan, Kumbakonam

Trivial pursuit

Ref: *We have Ram, Sita in film titles, why is Janaki a problem, HC asks CBFC* (Jun 28). The observations of the Kerala High Court are spot on. The censor board's objection to the name of a film is a case of much ado about nothing. While our nation takes pride in Indian women who have shattered glass ceilings, and rewritten history by overcoming obstacles through their sheer grit and determination, such weird objections by a statutory body demean the true values of womankind. It raises questions about the concept of Nari Shakti being advocated by the government.

Biju C Mathew, Thiruvananthapuram

Safer roads

Ref: *Chennai's pothole-ridden roads to get face-lift at ₹1.50 crore* (Jun 28). We are glad that the Greater Chennai Corporation has finally decided to repair potholes across the city. T.M Maistry Street has been waiting for a makeover for 4 years. There are many speed-breakers too that need clear markings.

N Mahadevan, Chennai

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