

Mosquitoes began biting hominins 1.8 million years ago: study

Divya Gandhi

Between 1992 and 2020, a group of intrepid scientists walked deep into the forests of Sundaland, across the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, to collect mosquito larvae of 11 species to understand the evolutionary origins of anthropophily, or the affinity for humans.

In a new paper in *Scientific Reports*, the researchers have written, “can provide critical insights into

mitigating the impacts of novel diseases due to mosquito-borne pathogens.”

Every year, mosquito-borne diseases kill more than 6 lakh people worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. But this is hardly new: according to the new study, mosquitoes first began to ‘feed’ on humans, thus transferring disease-causing microbes into their blood in exchange, in the Pleistocene epoch around 1.8 million years ago in

Southeast Asia.

Today, several species of mosquitoes are highly anthropophilic as well as very efficient vectors of human malaria parasites.

The malaria-causing mosquito group, including the important vector *Anopheles leucosphyrus*, encompasses around 20 species in South and Southeast Asia, including in Northeast India, and each species has different host preferences. While some feed on non-human

animals in forest canopies, such as monkeys, gibbons, and orangutans, others feed on humans on the ground, and some on both, according to the study paper. “The establishment of anthropophily in multiple species of the ... group could be attributed to the trait evolving independently multiple times following the arrival of anatomically modern humans in [South-east] Asia 76,000-63,000 years ago,” the paper read. “Alternatively, anthro-

pophily may have evolved once in an ancestral species, possibly in response to the colonisation of Southeast Asia by early hominins. Conservative estimates place *Homo erectus* in China at least 1.6-1.7 million years ago (Mya), and possibly as long ago as 2.4 Mya. However, the timeline of hominin colonisation southwards into Southeast Asia remains contentious.”

Later in the Pliocene epoch, open forests transi-

tioned to savannah, forcing terrestrial mammals to adapt to new habitats. Now, the abundance of ground-dwelling host species could have triggered an “adaptive evolutionary innovation” in the way mosquitoes sought their hosts – and this shift, per the paper, could have paved the way to ‘feed’ on humans. The researchers used phylogenomic tools to analyse the evolution of mosquitoes and their preferred hosts.

SNAPSHOTS



Radio whistles are first clear sign of Mars lightning

Scientists have reported the first clear evidence of lightning on Mars. Using data from NASA's MAVEN mission, they detected a type of radio wave called a whistler. On earth, whistlers are created by lightning strikes and get their name because they sound like a descending whistle as they travel through particles in the atmosphere. The study says a similar electric discharge occurred near the Martian surface, likely generated by electrically charged dust grains during a storm.

A small piece of RNA copies itself, hinting at how life began

Scientists have reported the first evidence of a small RNA molecule that can make copies of itself; the molecule, dubbed QT45, strengthens RNAs case to be the earth's first genetic material, but doesn't prove it

Arun Panchapakesan

In a 1953 experiment, two scientists named Stanley Miller and Harold Urey attempted to recreate the conditions of the early earth long before life existed. They showed that organic molecules such as amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, could form spontaneously in the conditions that prevailed on a primitive earth, 3.5-4 billion years ago.

While the experiment was revolutionary, it did not settle the question of life's origins. Critics pointed out that while amino acids could form, there was still no sign of genetic material, i.e. neither DNA nor RNA. Living organisms don't merely contain proteins: they rely on genetic information encoded in DNA or RNA to build them. Demonstrating that proteins could arise was therefore only part of the story.

Importantly, life must be able to produce more life. For that, a primitive system would need genetic information and also a way to copy that information. This created a problem. Usually, DNA or RNA stores instructions to make proteins called polymerases. These polymerases then copy the DNA or RNA so that, when a cell divides, each new cell receives a complete set of genetic information. It was and remains a classic chicken-or-egg problem.

Then, in the early 1980s,



An illustration of the hammerhead ribozyme; QT45 is also a ribozyme
WILLIAM G. SCOTT (CC BY-SA)

From matter to life

QT45 suggests self-replicating RNAs could be the way life first began on the earth

- The Miller-Urey experiment in 1953 showed that amino acids can form naturally but it didn't explain heredity

- Life needs a way to store and copy information, but scientists aren't sure which came first: genes or proteins

- Scientists have also found that RNA can do simple

chemical reactions, suggesting RNA could be the earliest genetic material

- Scientists also know that some RNA enzymes can copy other RNAs, but couldn't help RNAs make copies of themselves

- A new study in *Science* has found a short RNA called QT45 that can self-replicate, albeit very slowly

- QT45 is also imperfect, which means natural selection can act on it and help it 'evolve'

scientists discovered that RNA itself could perform simple chemical reactions, including being able to cut and paste pieces of itself. This discovery strongly shifted scientists' thinking towards the possibility that RNA could have been the earliest genetic material on the primitive earth. If a single molecule could both store information and carry out chemical reactions, it could bypass the chicken-and-egg problem of needing proteins to copy genetic material.

However, while scientists have already developed RNA molecules that could build other RNA molecules, they still lack an RNA that could copy the information contained within itself. The difficulty was structural: the RNA enzymes capable of copying other RNA were large and complex – between 150-

300 nucleotides – and in trying to fold into their functional shapes they could not easily serve as templates for their own replication. In other words, RNA could help other proteins replicate but couldn't self-replicate.

Now, however, in a paper in *Science*, scientists from the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in the U.K. have reported that they have generated a self-replicating RNA molecule. Specifically, the researchers produced a small RNA molecule, just 45 nucleotides long, that could copy its own genetic information.

To do this, they first sifted through enormous pools of RNA, building on earlier work with much larger RNA enzymes, and repeatedly selected those rare sequences that showed even faint signs of

replication. This led to the development of QT45, which is, according to the researchers, the world's first RNA molecule that can make copies of itself.

However, while the QT45 RNA can do this, its process of self-replication was extraordinarily slow and required special conditions. Producing a single full-length copy took weeks. In contrast, modern cellular polymerases can copy 45 nucleotides in less than a second.

Though the difference is dramatic, primitive earth had millions of years, so even QT45's stringent and slow copying conditions could realistically have occurred and been sustained.

Also, modern enzymes add nucleotides one at a time, reading the template, and making a new chain of complementary nucleo-

ides. QT45 used short three-nucleotide building blocks, even if it also followed the same logic: it first assembled a complementary negative strand, then used that as the template to reproduce the original copy.

However, the most striking, and in many ways the most beautiful, feature of the QT45 RNA was that it was imperfect. Its copying accuracy was only about 92-94%. This means it makes mistakes when replicating the genetic information, a property at the core of a true copying system. Every mistake creates variation, and variations are the raw material upon which natural selection can act.

While the development of the QT45 RNA is indeed a breakthrough, it is important to remember that while it strengthens RNA's case as the first genetic material, it doesn't prove it. QT45 merely shows that self-replicating RNA can exist and that that could be the way in which life on the earth first began.

The exact manner in which life originated may remain lost to history forever, but discoveries like QT45 show that inert matter can sometimes begin to behave like life. At the heart of it, it's just chemistry, slowly learning to remember itself.

Arun Panchapakesan is an assistant professor at the Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education, Chennai.



Rice grains' unusual response inspires 'smart' material

While most granular materials like sand become harder to compress when squeezed fast, rice grains do the opposite. This is due to the friction between rice grains dropping at high speeds, causing them to slip past one another. Using this discovery, researchers built a material combining a chamber of rice with one of sand, which bends in opposite directions depending on the speed of the applied force. Such materials can help engineers design better protective gear.



Protein in blood could be 'universal' ageing marker

A protein in the blood called neurofilament light chain (NfL) could be a universal marker for ageing, scientists have found. NfL 'leaks' from nerve cells into the blood as the body ages. Blood samples from humans, mice, cats, dogs, and horses all had NfL levels consistently rising with age in these species. Longer-lived species also had lower starting NfL levels. The find suggests a blood test could be used to check how fast an individual is ageing.

The Inverse Law of AI: how capital rises as responsibility falls



John Xavier

If one were to map the trajectory of global AI governance, the geographic markers would tell a story of diminishing caution. When I covered the Responsible AI in Military (REAM) summit in The Hague in 2023, it was a gathering defined by a sombre gravity, where nations convened to discuss the military applications of artificial intelligence and the urgent need for a “responsible” framework. The mood was one of containment. Since then, the diplomatic caravan has moved through Bletchley Park, Seoul, and Paris, finally arriving recently at the AI Impact Summit in India.

But something fundamental has shifted along the route. I'd like to map this shift through an Index that I'll call the “Responsibility Index” – a measure

of how much weight safety and ethics carry versus speed and scale. On this index, safety is declining, and big money is on the rise. The recent proceedings in India confirm this distinct transition: the era of wondering if we should build certain things has been definitively replaced by the race to see how fast we can fund them.

The India summit serves as a microcosm for this global pivot. While the rhetoric of “safety” is still included in press releases, the atmosphere has changed. The conversation has moved from the philosophical concerns of researchers to the logistical demands of industrialists. In The Hague, the stars of the show were ethicists, diplomats, and military strategists concerned with the laws of war. In the current cycle, the spotlight has been hijacked by the check-writers. The “big money” has effectively eclipsed the “deep talent.”

This overshadowing of talent by capital is a crucial



The summit serves as a microcosm for global pivot. REUTERS

distinction. In the early days of the generative AI wave – which feels like decades ago but was only 2022 – the power lay with the architects of the technology. The authors of the ‘Attention Is All You Need’ paper or the early teams at DeepMind held the leverage because they possessed the rare cognitive surplus required to birth these models. Today, the barrier to entry is no longer just genius; it is a GDP-sized capital expenditure. When the primary requirement for relevance shifts from brainpower to computing power, the incentives shift from scientific ri-

gour to return on investment. Nothing illustrates this commoditisation of intelligence quite like the rhetoric emerging from the industry's figureheads like Sam Altman, chief of OpenAI and the face of this AI revolution. On the sidelines of India's AI summit, Mr. Altman compared the energy use of massive data centres to the cost of training a single human being for twenty years. Such a comparison should have stopped the industry in its tracks, yet it barely registered a blip.

His statement is profound, and it suggests a worldview where biologi-

cal intelligence and synthetic intelligence are merely competing line items on a balance sheet. If a data centre can produce an equivalent cognitive output for a fraction of the time and money it takes to raise, educate, and train a human, the market will inevitably choose the silicon option. When human development is viewed as an inefficient trade-off compared to GPU clusters, the “responsibility” to protect human-centric systems naturally erodes. The goal ceases to be augmenting human capability and shifts toward rendering the “expensive” human obsolete for the sake of margin.

This is why the Responsibility Index is falling. Responsibility is expensive. It requires friction, audits, pauses, and the occasional decision to not release a product. In the frantic atmosphere of the India summit, and the preceding summits in Paris and Seoul, friction is the enemy. The focus has turned entirely to infrastructure-

energy grids, chip fabrication, and data sovereignty. The questions are no longer about the morality of the algorithm, but about the ownership of the pipe it travels through. We have officially entered the industrialisation phase of AI. Just as the industrial revolution eventually stopped worrying about the craftsmanship of the individual weaver and focused on the output of the loom, the AI revolution is moving past the “craft” of responsible coding to the brute force of scaling laws. The Hague's REAM summit felt like a warning; the summits feel like a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a runaway train.

As the heavy machinery of global capital locks into place, the voices calling for a pause or a safety check are becoming quieter, drowned out by the hum of cooling fans in billion-dollar data centres. The technology is getting smarter, but the wisdom guiding its deployment seems to be depreciating with every new summit.



Question Corner

Ring a ring o' roses

Why do so many flowers have five petals?
– Ajith Kizhakkethil

Many flowers are indeed pentamerous – but across flowering plants as a whole, the petal number varies widely. Monocots often have flower parts in threes. Eudicots have four or five. Many species have fused petals, others have several petals, and yet others lack them altogether.

In the flower bud, new organs begin as small bumps on a ring of tissue, and the eventual number is equal to the number of slots this tissue lays down in a whorl, given its size and shape and the organs' spacing needs.

Early in the evolution of angiosperms, different major clades ‘opted’ for different numbers of slots. The monocots typically evolved three slots per whorl. The eudicots opted for four to five per whorl. Importantly, the plant's genes only control the dynamics of growth. For example, if the meristem – i.e. the population of undifferentiated cells that develop into new tissues per the planet's needs – is bigger, more organs form with more parts. If an organ develops sooner, it will have more time to initiate its parts, leading to more of them. And so on.

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

PROFILES

Chronicles of a war foretold

Iran vs Israel

The rivalry between the two countries that goes back to the 1979 revolution has escalated into a full-blown war, shaking entire West Asia

Stanly Johny

In July 1977, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, sent Lt. Gen. Hassan Toufanian, his Deputy Minister of War and Armaments, to Israel to hold secret talks with the newly formed Likud government of Menachem Begin. Three months earlier, the Shah had signed six 'oil for arms' contracts with Shimon Peres, the acting Prime Minister in the previous interim government. One of the contracts, code-named 'Flower', sought Israel to modify its advanced surface-to-surface missiles and sell them to Iran. Gen. Toufanian's mission was to ensure that the change of government in Israel would not affect the deal. He met Maj. Gen. Ezer Weizman, Defence Minister in the Begin government, and both of them agreed to build a military co-production line – Israel was to provide the technical know-how and Iran the finances and test sites. As part of it, Israel promised to supply Iran with ballistic surface-to-surface missiles with a range of 700 km that could carry nuclear warheads, writes journalist Ronen Bergman in his book, *The Secret War with Iran*.

But within two years, the relationship had turned upside down. The Shah was toppled by nationwide protests. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leading Shia cleric, arrived in Tehran in February 1979 from exile in Paris. Shia Islamists, under Khomeini's leadership, took over the reins of the country and turned it into an Islamic Republic – a semidemocratic, theocratic state. The new Iran declared "liberation" of Jerusalem one of its key objectives. At the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, 66 Americans, including diplomats and civilian personnel, were taken hostage by revolutionaries. For revolutionary Iran, America, which had orchestrated the 1953 coup against nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossaddegh and had been the principal backer of the Shah, was the "great Satan", while Israel, the occupier of Palestine, was the "little Satan".

The revolution did not just transform Iran; it was also a geopolitical earthquake. If the Shah's Iran had been one of the pillars of the U.S.-Israel alliance, Khomeini's Iran emerged as this alliance's top nemesis. Forty-seven years later, that enmity has escalated into a full-blown war, with Israel and the U.S. launching air strikes in Iran and Tehran retaliating against Israel and American bases in the region.

A new rival

The Islamic Republic was born in a region that was already witnessing new currents in Arab-Israeli relations. In 1978, Egypt became the first Arab country to recognise Israel, in return for the Sinai Peninsula which Israel had seized in the 1967 War. Arab countries, though still supportive of the Palestinian cause, were moving away from the phase of confrontation with Israel. For Shia revolutionary Iran, its support for Palestine was not only a religious duty but also a practical foreign policy move aimed at winning over the Muslim world, bridging the Shia-Sunni divide. Israel, which established conventional deterrence against Arab countries in the region, saw a new enemy emerging. The rivalry between Israel and Iran has shaped West Asia's geopolitics ever since.

With support from the U.S. and other Western partners, Israel, a nuclear-armed country, has emerged as the most powerful military in the region. On the other side, Iran, which faced American sanctions immediately after the revolution, turned to building and supporting a network of militias. In the early 1980s, Iran helped create Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia movement. And in the 1990s, it doubled down on its support for Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. When the Oslo process, which promised a two-state solution to the Palestine question, collapsed in the latter half of the 1990s, Hamas emerged as a major pillar of the Palestinian resistance. This, in turn, turned Iran



Critical hit: An incoming projectile explodes over the water in the bay of Haifa, off of the northern Israeli coastal city on Saturday. AFP

into a key player in the Israel-Palestine crisis.

In southern Lebanon, Israel found it increasingly difficult to continue its occupation amid Hezbollah's resistance. Iran provided money, training and weapons to Hezbollah through Syria, which was ruled by the Assad family. In 2000, after 18 years of occupation, Israel was forced to withdraw from southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah claimed that it was the first Arab force to defeat the Israeli army. In 2006, Israel attacked Lebanon again, but Hezbollah survived the month-long campaign.

Regional influence

This strategy of forward defence appeared to be working in Iran's favour in the early 2000s. Consider, for example, at the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Before the invasion, U.S. President George W. Bush had grouped Iran with Iraq and North Korea as part of an 'Axis of Evil'. There was much speculation that the Bush administration would turn to Iran once the Iraq war was over. But the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader who attacked Iran in 1980, removed a critical buffer between the Persian Gulf kingdoms and Iran.

When Iraq, a Shia-majority country, held elections after the fall of Saddam's regime, Shia parties with historical ties to Tehran emerged as the new ruling elite. When Iraq descended into a sectarian civil war between Sunni jihadists and Shia militias, the U.S. became deeply entangled in the conflict. Iran's influence stretched along the so-called Shia crescent, from Tehran, through Baghdad and Damascus all the way to southern Lebanon, on Israel's northern border. At home, Iran also advanced its nuclear programme. But this ascent was short-lived. Arab Spring protests, which broke out in late 2010 and shook several regimes in the region, marked the beginning of

On February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister said a deal between the U.S. and Iran was within reach; a day later, the U.S. and Israel launched a joint strike

the decline of Iran's influence.

In Syria, protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad threatened to cut short Iran's regional influence. Mr. Assad's Syria was Iran's only regional state ally. It was also a vital link between Hezbollah and Tehran. If the regime fell, it would cut off the link, weakening both Iran and Hezbollah. Iran knew what was at stake, and it did not hesitate for a moment in helping the Syrian government. Thousands of Hezbollah fighters crossed the border into Syria to fight alongside the regime forces. Iran mobilised Shia fighters from across the region and sent them to Syria. In September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to send Russian special forces and fighter jets to Syria in defence of the government. With help from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, the Assad regime turned the tide of the civil war and recaptured most of the lost territory.

Sunni countries in West Asia as well as their Western partners who initially called for Mr. Assad's departure, saw their policy backfire after the rise of the Islamic State. The Islamic State practically erased the border between Iraq and Syria and created a proto-state, stretching from Raqqa in Syria to Mosul in Iraq. For Iran, the Islamic State represented a two-way threat. Its rise threatened to unravel two of Iran's friendly states in West Asia – Iraq and Syria. Two, the extremist, sectarian Salafi-jihadist ideology, which calls Shias "rejectionists" of faith, was an existential threat. At this point, Iran and the U.S. found common ground in defeating the

Islamic State.

The most contentious issue between Iran and the U.S. was the former's nuclear programme. Iran had built a sprawling nuclear infrastructure, but maintained that its programme was peaceful. Successive U.S. governments had imposed biting sanctions on Tehran over the nuclear programme. In 2013, the U.S., under the Obama administration, started direct talks with Iran, after Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric, was elected President. In 2015, both sides, along with other world powers, agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which sought to limit Iran's nuclear programme, denying it a path towards the bomb, in return for lifting international sanctions. Almost all major powers welcomed the agreement, which was seen as a new chapter in U.S. and Iran ties. Except one – Israel.

Mr. Obama went ahead with the deal and lifted sanctions on Iran despite Israel's opposition. The reset seemed to be working. But it did not last long. The man who succeeded Mr. Obama was Donald Trump, whom Mr. Netanyahu described as the "greatest friend of Israel". The writing on the wall was clear.

Mr. Trump termed the JCPOA the "worst deal" in U.S. history. In May 2018, despite UN confirmation that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement, Mr. Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Iran then started enriching uranium to higher than the permissible limits. Israel, on its part, carried out a host of covert operations inside Iran, including the killings of the country's top nuclear scientists.

June war

Mr. Trump wanted concessions from Iran on its weapons programmes and regional activism (support for non-state actors). But Iran took a 'maximum resistance' policy to Mr. Trump's maximum pressure – it carried out attacks in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf waters and stepped up support for its proxies. In January 2020, the U.S. assassinated Qassem Soleimani, a charismatic Iranian General who oversaw the IRGC's external operations. It was a massive blow to Iran. Tehran responded by attacking an American base in Iraq, but the crisis blew over as neither side wanted an all-out war. What would change that dynamic was the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent developments in the region.

Israel declared two primary objectives – the destruction of Hamas and the release of the 251 hostages taken on October 7. But the way it fought the war suggested that it had deeper ambitions. For Israel, Hamas was only the tip of the iceberg. Its real enemy was Iran. After October 7, Israel saw an opening to wage a two-front war – the first was to crush Palestinian resistance once and for all, and the second was to dismantle Iran's axis and weaken its regional influence. Prime Minister Netanyahu wanted to build a unipolar West Asia, with Israel, backed by the U.S., being the central security player; roll back

Iran; keep Arab countries under check; and push the Palestinian question back to the margins of the region.

In Syria, the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, and the rise of Abu Mohammed al-Golani (Ahmed al-Sharaa), a former al-Qaeda jihadist, marked a tactical victory for Israel. A weakened Hezbollah was further isolated, and Iran's forward defence suddenly looked porous. Iran lay vulnerable to external threats. Then it was only a matter of time before a direct attack against Iran. Sensing danger, Iran started indirect talks with the Trump administration. Iran's message was that it was ready to cut a deal over its nuclear programme. Its political and security leaders repeatedly said it was not seeking to build a nuclear bomb. But on June 13, two days ahead of the planned sixth round of talks between Washington and Tehran, Israel started bombing Iran. A few days later, the U.S. joined the war, attacking Iran's key nuclear facilities. After 12 days of fighting, both sides agreed to a ceasefire. Mr. Trump claimed that he had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme and Mr. Netanyahu declared a "historic victory". But the crisis was far from over.

Israel wants Iran to give up its nuclear programme, end its missile production and stop supporting non-state militias in the region. In other words, Israel wants Iran's total disarmament. Iran was open to a deal on its nuclear programme but would not discuss other issues. The Trump administration's officials, including Marco Rubio, the Secretary of State, also backed the Israeli demands, saying Iran should talk about issues beyond its nuclear programme. This led to fundamental diplomatic disagreements. The only way Israel could meet these objectives is by bringing about regime change in Tehran and installing a new friendly regime.

Road to chaos

In January 2026, when protests broke out in Iran over a falling currency, Mr. Trump quickly offered his support for the protesters. He said the U.S. was "locked and loaded". Protests and riots spread across Iranian provinces in the first half of January. Iranian authorities blamed foreign agents for triggering "riots and terrorism". Mossad, Israel's intelligence unit, also claimed that its agents were "on the field" in Iran. On January 8-9, Iranian authorities crushed the rebellion. At least 3,000 people were killed. A tense calm prevailed in Iran after the crackdown, but external threats mounted.

Mr. Trump started building America's largest military presence in the region since the 2003 Iraq war, while diplomats from both sides met at least three times. Iran claimed progress after each meeting, but the U.S. said gaps remained. On February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister Hamad Al Busaidi told CBC that a deal was within reach. He said Iran agreed not to make a nuclear weapon and not to stockpile nuclear material. "If the ultimate objective is to ensure forever that Iran cannot have a nuclear bomb, I think we have cracked that problem through these negotiations by agreeing [on] a very important breakthrough that has never been achieved anytime before," Al Busaidi said.

A few hours later, Israel and the U.S. started bombing Iran, targeting the country's top leadership as well as government and military installations. Israel called it a "pre-emptive strike" and said it "would continue as long as necessary". Mr. Trump, indicating that regime change was his goal, told Iranians: "The hour of your freedom is at hand". Iran, which rapidly retaliated by firing ballistic missiles at Israel and at least five American bases in the region, said, "This is a national struggle imposed on us". This attack, Iran's Foreign Ministry said, "could mark the beginning of the end for international institutions and norms." America and Israel seek regime change and a permanent shift in the balance of power in West Asia. For the Islamic Republic, this is a war of survival.

THE GIST

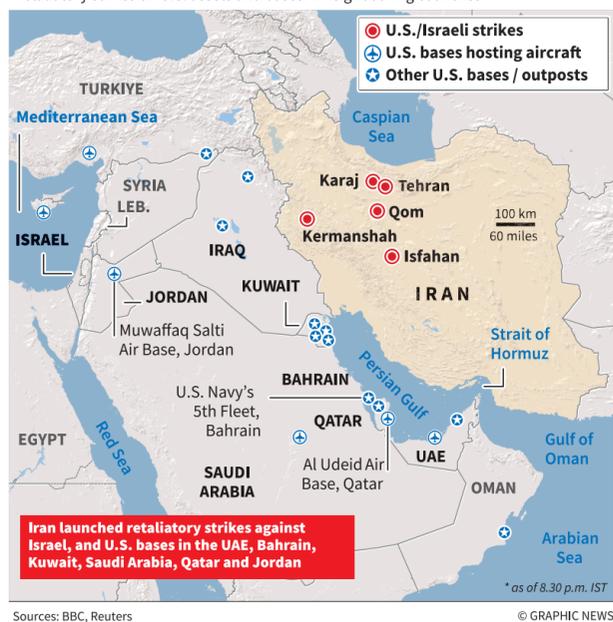
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The strike and retaliation

The United States and Israel carried out a joint attack on Iran. Tehran responded with retaliatory strikes on U.S. assets and bases in neighbouring countries*



Brace for a roller-coaster ride



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump was apoplectic in his reaction to the judgment of the US Supreme Court striking down the 'reciprocal' tariffs that he had imposed on April 2, 2025 under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). He abused the justices of the US Supreme Court (an act that would have immediately attracted the contempt jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of India), but the US swears by the First Amendment; and the justices are unflappable.

Mr Trump did not stop at abuse. He lost no time in imposing more or less the same tariffs using other extant laws:

- Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974 (which the President invoked);
- Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act, 1962;
- Section 301 of the Trade Act, 1974 (which the President cited and threatened to launch investigation into several countries' exports); and
- Section 338 of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, 1930.

ment, the tariff on nearly all goods is at 15 per cent (instead of the 18 per cent tariff announced on February 2, 2026). Under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act, the tariff on steel, aluminum, semi-conductors and certain auto-components is at 50 per cent. The tariffs are still high and will affect India's exports. The government of India said it was examining the situation post-judgment. However, the immediate fallout of the judgment was that both sides agreed that the talks to finalise the text and sign the Interim Agreement may be deferred — without a date being specified!

All are helpless

Meanwhile multiple voices have emerged out of the US Congress. Until the US Supreme Court intervened and quashed the IEEPA tariffs, the Congress was helpless against the Executive's grab of taxation powers. Even after the judgment, the Congress is helpless because Mr Trump will not go to Congress to ask for authorisation. He believes that he already has the authority from Congress. Besides, there are enough laws on the statute book to sustain the 'reciprocal' tariff rates. Many experts believe that the post-judgment tariffs imposed by President Trump may face litigation but they do not need the support of legislation.

The trading partners of the US who entered into agreements recently (mostly to avoid the reciprocal tariffs) are helpless too. India, which signed a Joint Statement on February 2, is also helpless. Mr Jamieson Greer, the USTR, has already made overtures to other countries by saying that 'no

The domestic developments could weaken Mr Trump and he may face electoral setbacks in November 2026. The Republicans may lose control of one or both Houses of Congress. That will render Mr Trump's administration a 'lame-duck' with two more years to go

one has met him and suggested that his country would like to walk away from the agreement'. In effect, Mr Greer certified that all countries who had signed trade agreements with the United States were 'good boys' — and implied that they should remain 'good boys'. On his part, Mr Trump warned twice that any country that broke a deal will face harsh tariffs. In effect, if the good boys turned bad boys, they will face retribution. The warning cannot be dismissed as bluff or bluster because Mr Trump acts on his whims and prejudices. He regards tariffs as not mere taxes, but as weapons.

Trade in disarray

Thanks to the Marrakesh Agreement (that replaced GATT) and the birth of the World Trade Organization (WTO) the countries of the world were obliged to follow a regime of rules-based trade. There were disagreements and disputes, but the WTO provided a credible platform for resolution of disputes. WTO ushered in an unprecedented expansion of world trade since January 1, 1995. All that is in disarray, thanks mainly to Mr Trump. Under the threat of harsh reciprocal tariffs, many countries entered into trade agreements with the United States, made huge commitments and gained partial tariff reliefs. Reciprocal tariffs may have gone but the *same* tariffs have been brought in through other laws and orders. Effectively, therefore, the tariff reliefs secured by other countries have gone up in smoke but the huge commitments made by them remain in place.

President 'Lula' de Silva of Brazil was spot on when he said that countries of the world have to band together and stand up to the United States. That is sensible advice, because no country (with the possible exception of China) can alone defy the United States. It is an unequal world and the leader of the most powerful economy is erratic and unpredictable. India has indeed bowed to the will of President Trump; so have many other countries including developed countries like Japan and South Korea.

Domestic Developments

President Trump is unpopular in the United States. His 'approval' rating has collapsed to 40 per cent or less. Jobs are scarce. Consumer prices are considered 'unaffordable'. Inflation is rising. Mr Trump's anti-immigration plank is popular in the US but it has created a huge backlash because the plank ruthlessly sweeps aside human rights, children's rights, states' autonomy and the due process of law. Many Americans opposed to illegal immigration are mortified due to the federal government's — especially ICE's — excesses.

The domestic developments could weaken Mr Trump and he may face electoral setbacks in November 2026. The Republicans may lose control of one or both Houses of Congress. That will render Mr Trump's administration a 'lame-duck' with two more years to go. Mr Trump and his Administration may return to the path of rules-based trade and respect for global institutions. Until then, with no feasible options for India, prepare for a roller-coaster ride.

Judges must accept that real justice is needed



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

LET ME begin by agreeing with the Supreme Court that it is a bad idea for Indian schoolchildren to grow up believing that our justice system is corrupt. They may have seen those pictures of floor to ceiling piles of cash, some half-burned, that were found last year in a judge's garden shed in Delhi and asked their parents questions. And their parents may have prevaricated. Some truths are too harsh for innocent minds. When they are older, they will deal more maturely with the realities of our justice system but to put these things into textbooks is a transgression. At least in the eyes of the Supreme Court. Who are we to question the 'majesty' of justice and the men who deliver it?

Rarely have I seen our honorable judges respond with as much fury as they did last week when this newspaper drew attention to a new textbook that in a section on 'corruption in the judiciary' said bad things about judges. The textbook has now been removed from school curriculums, and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has been severely rapped on the knuckles, so the Chief Justice need no longer worry about the 'sanctity of the judicial office' eroding in the eyes of the public.

The Supreme Court has other things to worry about. Of these the two most important in my ever-humble opinion is the impossibility for ordinary Indians to seek justice, even when grievous harm has been done, because of the prohibitive cost of going to court. I have now and then tried to approach a court to get justice and have been defeated by how much it costs just to hire a lawyer. Once I had no choice as I was trying to help street people in Mumbai get bail. When the lawyer handed me his bill for that single appearance in court, I nearly fainted.

The second thing that the Supreme Court needs to worry about is the bullock cart pace at which the justice system trudges along. Every time a new Chief Justice is appointed, he gives long interviews about the reforms that he plans to bring to make justice speedier and more affordable, but things never seem to change. The result is a backlog of 5.4 crore cases in Indian courts of which 92,000 are stuck in the Supreme Court itself. But it is in the lower courts that the real rot can be seen with district courts accounting for nearly ninety percent of the backlog.

At the risk of angering the Supreme Court even more, may I point out, honorable sirs, that our lower courts look terrible. Every time I have had the misfortune to go into one of them, I have been horrified by the decay, dirt and disorder in every corner making the 'majesty of justice' seem totally devoid of majesty. In lesser courts in rural places, I have run into stray cattle, dogs and cats. Why is this? Why are fine old British buildings that house some of our higher courts being allowed to fall to pieces? Why are repairs so difficult?

At the start of my career in journalism, I worked in a small afternoon newspaper in an ugly little town outside London. Covering proceedings in the magistrates' court was one of my first assignments. To my Indian eyes this court in a town of little consequence was dazzling in its cleanliness, order and efficiency. Nowhere did I see those piles of dusty files that are the defining motif of most Indian courts. Why do our courts look so bad? Why does justice move so slowly that rapists, murderers and terrorists can sometimes remain unpunished for as long as ten years? Why do we do nothing, your revered lordships, about the horrible condition of our prisons in which more than seventy percent of prisoners are undertrials?

Last week Arvind Kejriwal burst into tears when he was told, after doing jail time as chief minister, that the corruption case against him was so fragile that it did not hold up in court. The government's immediate response was that it would appeal this judgment. Of course it will. It always does. This is why more than half the cases that clog our courts have the government as litigant. Officials do not pay for the endless litigations they initiate. We taxpayers do even when we ourselves cannot afford to go to court.

The Supreme Court has succeeded in getting rid of a textbook that said bad things about our justice system, but when will it have the courage to admit that too little has been done to bring reforms that should have happened decades ago? Something so basic as cutting down the endless and completely unnecessary paperwork in this time of computers and AI has not been addressed. If only the Chief Justice could get as enraged about these things as he did about the offensive textbook. If only he could demand that 'heads must roll'. If only he could demand 'accountability' and a 'deeper probe', there might be a glimmer of hope that sometime soon there will be change.

That textbook is now banned but the children it sought to influence will become adults one day and discover the truth. It is only in Hindi movies that the Indian justice system works perfectly and that trials take place in fine, orderly, dignified courtrooms.



HOW TO RAISE A BOY
BY PIYA SRINIVASAN

Through my son, I live and see this world differently

IS THERE any trouble at home?" My son's nursery teacher asked me. He hadn't said a word in school for weeks. During break, he would focus all his attention on the movement of caterpillars across the playground. But when he spoke, he expressed himself uniquely.

This beautiful boy, ours to love and cherish, reframed how I live in this world.

During his first years in Kolkata, he went to an inclusive school that championed values over pedigree (few NCR schools yield such inclusion through access and affordability). As a preschooler, it was hard for him to follow instructions, maintain eye contact, and endure loud noises. At the same time, his specific interests ran so deep they could be a subterranean river, carrying mineral-rich, life-affirming ways of seeing.

A pattern emerged. A reluctance to engage with peers. Hours spent striking marbles and observing their patterns of dispersal, as if decoding a complex life mystery. A need for perfect silence during meals. No mixing of textures.

These initially manifested as problems. So many parenting challenges are grounded in a failure to observe. It took us years to get to the root of his unease in the world.

We have grown through occupational therapy, psychological counselling, classroom breaks, and a dearly defended idea of leisure. Through years of advocating, he is a secure, grounded child. That advocacy can look like a hundred emails to teachers, repeated phone calls to counsellors, frequent appointments with them, walks in nature, shunning noisy environments, and always looking for conducive ways of living.

Neurodiversity often shows up as heightened observation: Seeing details others gloss over; connecting a smell to its first memory; meeting everything with intensity. Look closer, and it yields a deep appreciation of the ordinary, often understood only after years of being knocked around by life. My son has taught me to live with bravery, depth and determination.

As a habit of affixing. He creates words that didn't exist before. This suggests new ways of living in relation to things, and not distinct from them. How he thinks is something that is being erased in the Anthropocene: Of being human as a continuum of stone, rock, earth, tree, insect, creature. A still chastises me for stepping on a snail four years ago. An acknowledgement of the right of all life forms to exist is a lesson for our times.

It is expected that children are naturally social beings, that without markers of a conventional childhood, they will not flourish. Acclimatising people across institutions to the needs of a neurodiverse child is a lifetime's work. Helping them self-advocate with the right tools that put forward their needs is the best armour for the future.

People have sometimes attributed my son's neurodivergence to my being a working mother. This tells me how much harder we must work to mainstream any understanding of difference. Deviating from prescribed social scripts makes people uncomfortable.

My biggest parenting joys are when I step back. To witness and celebrate the wisdom through which children engage with life is one of the biggest acts of service a parent can perform.

Raising a neurodivergent boy involves braiding: Taking wisps of preferences and weaving them into a symphony that is light on its feet. It has involved massive dollops of unlearning. I've learnt not to make a big deal about birthdays. That eating dinners together — that prized family ritual — often causes sensory overload. That not all kids play in the park.

I've taught him to lean into his intuition and stand his ground about his core beliefs. He faces the challenges all 10-year-olds do at a time filled with instant gratification, violence and depravity. To read the tug of the undercurrents that radiate through him, to reinvent myself to relate, I learn about Minecraft servers, Skibidi toilet, Obunga and brain rot.

The only way to raise your boy in a world whose foundation has turned on itself is to learn the language of his inner world, tease out what he feels, how he mediates what he absorbs. And underneath it all: love, acceptance, radical empathy.

The writer, a researcher and communications specialist, works at the Ashoka Centre for a People-centric Energy Transition, Ashoka University

55 years ago, when Parliament erupted over India-China book



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

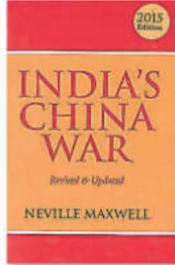
THE RECENT uproar over Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi quoting from former Army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane's unpublished memoir has echoes of another storm that broke out in Parliament over another book on India-China relations.

In 1970, Australian journalist Neville Maxwell, then the New Delhi correspondent for *The Times*, published India's China War, a book that questioned the role of the Nehru-led political leadership during the 1962 war with China.

Even before Maxwell's book came out, there were three prominent books already in the market — *The Untold Story* (1967, by Lt Gen BM Kaul), *The Guilty Men of 1962* (1967, by veteran journalist DR Mankekar) and *Himalayan Blunder: The Curtain-Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962* (1969, by Brigadier JP Dalvi) — all critical of the role of the political and military leadership during the war. But unlike the others, Maxwell's book quoted excerpts from a classified document: the Henderson Brooks Report prepared by the Operations Review Committee set up by the Army after India's loss to China in the 1962 war.

The report was authored in 1963 by Lt Gen T B Henderson Brooks and Brigadier Premindra Singh Bhagat. Henderson Brooks, who was born in Burma, was commissioned into the British Indian Army in 1929 as a King's Commissioned Indian Officer. During the 1962 war, he commanded the Army's Jalandhar-based XI Corps. After he retired from the Indian Army in March 1964, he migrated to Australia where he died in January 1997. Brigadier Bhagat later became Lt General.

Their report was submitted to then acting Army Chief J N Chaudhury in 1963. But since it was not a parliamentary or judicial commission, but an internal operational



T B Henderson Brooks (left), who co-authored the 1963 report on the 1962 war; Neville Maxwell's book carried excerpts from the report

review ordered by the Army, it was never tabled in Parliament — and never made public. Which is why Maxwell created a stir when he quoted from the report.

On November 9, 1970, four months after Maxwell's book hit the stands, two MPs of the Praja Socialist Party, Nath Bapu Pai and Hem Barua, and CPI MP H N Mukherjee asked a combined question in Lok Sabha, "Whether Mr Neville Maxwell... obtained permission to reproduce extracts from the Henderson Brooks report on NEFA reverses; and if not, what action has been taken against the author for publication of these extracts?"

Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram replied, denying that Maxwell had approached the Government for permission to reproduce extracts from the Henderson report or that any such permission was given.

But Pai wasn't assuaged and moved a privilege motion against the Defence Minister. As other members supported Pai, Jagjivan Ram said, "If... it is found that anybody has supplied any classified document to any unauthorised person, action under the Official Secrets Act will be taken..."

But the matter didn't end there.

On December 16, 1970, two days before the Winter Session was to be adjourned sine die, Jagjivan Ram made a statement before the House, announcing a CBI probe into Maxwell "having direct or indirect access to classified papers" and the possibility of a breach of the Official Secrets Act.

Several MPs from the ruling and Opposition benches joined the discussion. Pai again asked how many copies of the Henderson Brooks report were available, to which the Defence Minister said, "Only one." When pressed further, the minister said it was with the Cabinet Secretariat. To which, Hem

Barua said, "If I say, sir, that the Cabinet Secretary sold the copy to Mr Maxwell, can you dislodge me from that position?"

It was a long day at work for the MPs. Pai's privilege motion was rejected by the Speaker, who said that the government had ordered a CBI inquiry and that any further discussion should be only after the report came out.

But if the Henderson Brooks report was never made public, the conclusion of the CBI inquiry into the leak of the report isn't known either.

On June 7, 1971, in reply to a Lok Sabha question by Atal Bihari Vajpayee on the status of the CBI inquiry, Jagjivan Ram said it was "yet to be concluded".

On April 6, 1976, another MP, HM Patel, again raised the issue of the results of the CBI inquiry not being made public. "Surely, there is nothing very terrible in it that prevents you from telling us. This secretiveness should not be carried too far. As a matter of fact, it may indicate where your weakness lay..." he said.

Since then, Maxwell's book and the Henderson Brooks report have periodically come up in the political discourse. In 2014, Maxwell posted a part of the report on his website. He died in 2019 in Sydney.

On July 8, 2014, in reply to Rajya Sabha member H K Dua's question on Maxwell posting the report on his website, Defence Minister Arun Jaitley replied, "This [Henderson Brooks Report] is a Top Secret document and has not been declassified so far. Further, release of this report, fully or partially or disclosure of any information related to this report would not be in national interest."

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express

Imran in my bubble

CRICKET LEGENDS Sunil Gavaskar and Kapil Dev have pleaded for the humanitarian treatment of their former colleague and Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan in jail. As he faces corruption charges, the petition is a reminder that the man was once an icon and bigger than the sum of his smaller, frail, unlikeable parts. Maybe 50 shades of grey.

Devilishly handsome, charismatic playboy, a perennial bachelor (he married at 42), desirably urbane, the rakish Pathan became much like the Marlboro Man for women across every border. Yes, he had his escapades, publicly said he was "no saint", and would have checked every box of toxic masculinity. But before Instagram, he was the "thirst trap" that made commercial sense.

Nobody understood this better than socialite and the first lady of India's leading corporate house, Parmeshwar Godrej, who cast him in the iconic Godrej Cinthol soap advertisement in 1987. Shot in slow motion, it captured Khan during the run-up to the crease,

almost stallion-like, delivering his trademark inswinger. Then it showed him freshening up with the soap and striding out in a casual green T-shirt. The tagline, "Imran's freshness soap", came scrawled with his signature and a booming voiceover describing Cinthol as the secret of the "Irresistible Khan."

The ad created a mini-revolution among women everywhere. Kolkata was no exception. As a teen, I was moon-eyed. Since parents generally discouraged filmstar posters, Italian footballer Roberto Baggio was the only poster boy in my cupboard. Till Khan blew him like a gust of wind. So, when he led his team to play an ODI at the Eden Gardens in 1987, we were determined to see him up close. A classmate's sister managed the front desk at the Oberoi Grand where the teams were staying. She sneaked in information a night before that the hotel had booked a car for a certain VIP to step out at a certain hour. If we could accidentally hang around in the porch area, we might get a glimpse of him.

In school, we told the stentorian nuns



SHE SAID
BY RINKU GHOSH

that we needed to be excused for two classes to prepare for an intra-school project that they had thankfully chosen us for. Post-lunch, we sneaked out and assembled at the Oberoi arcade. Turned out a crowd of fan-girls had spoiled our chances at the gates.

And just when the weight of expectation was almost wearing us out, there he was, in a suit and black shades, zooming out in a chauffeur-driven car, waving his hand and flashing a killer smile. For all our convent-bred sense of propriety, we squealed, whooped, died. What we didn't know was that the guard had snatched about "girls in school uniform" to the manager, who had in turn reported us to Mother Superior about acting totally out of line with what our uniform represented. A phone call went to dad.

Meanwhile, there were small changes at home. Cinthol replaced Mysore Sandal as the soap of choice. Dad wondered why the women in the house were reading *Sportstar* inside out. Or why we weren't missing any cricket game being telecast (the ads came in

between). My aunt visited us one afternoon and recorded the Cinthol ad on a video cassette recorder (VCR), wiping out an entire episode of the BBC's *Yes Minister*. That afternoon, my mother and my aunt gave me confidence that there was nothing wrong with having a female gaze. Or fancy. My mother subscribed to *Femina*, which advertised a cover story for the next issue, an interview with Imran Khan. Guess what? It had a photo of him in a white bathrobe, hair tousled and wet. The vendor ran out of issues by Day 2.

So, here is my very politically incorrect take. Whatever his transgressions, the law will decide. But Khan conquered hearts effortlessly despite Indo-Pak sensitivities, blurring lines of national pride and prejudice. For that bit, he was a beautiful man in a soap bubble, sparkling and effervescent.

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

"NO FOREIGN POLICY - NO MATTER HOW
INGENIOUS - HAS ANY CHANCE OF SUCCESS IF IT
IS BORN IN THE MINDS OF A FEW AND CARRIED
IN THE HEARTS OF NONE."
— HENRY KISSINGER

PM Modi's Israel visit: A defining moment



KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI'S ISRAEL VISIT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded a historic two-day visit to Israel on February 26, 2026, marking a significant deepening of the "Special Strategic Partnership" between the two nations.

Historic Knesset Address: PM Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to address the Israeli Parliament (Knesset), receiving a standing ovation and the "Speaker of the Knesset Medal", the parliament's highest honour.

Solidarity Against Terrorism: He strongly condemned the October 7 attacks as "barbaric," stating India stands "firmly with full conviction" with Israel while referencing India's own pain from the 26/11 Mumbai attacks.

Gaza Peace Initiative: PM Modi extended full support to the Gaza Peace Plan, asserting that "humanity must never become a victim of conflict" and supporting regional stability efforts.

Defence & Technology Expansion: The two countries agreed to expand cooperation in joint development and production of military hardware, including advanced technology like the Iron Beam laser system and AI-driven security.

Economic & Digital Integration:

- An agreement was reached for the use of UPI in Israel.
- Both nations vowed to soon finalise a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to boost bilateral trade.

Humanitarian & Cultural Ties:

- PM Modi paid respects at Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to Holocaust victims.
- The visit highlighted the contribution of the Indian caregiver and construction sectors to Israel.

Strategic Alliances: Discussions touched upon the proposed "Hexagon of Alliances" (India, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, etc.) to coordinate security and economic efforts in the region.

Context: Modi's 2017 Visit
This 2026 trip built on PM Modi's first visit in July 2017, which was the first-ever by an Indian PM to Israel. Key outcomes of that visit included:

De-hyphenation Policy: Formally treating relations with Israel and Palestine separately by skipping the traditional stop in Ramallah.

Haifa Memorial: Honouring Indian soldiers who died in the 1918 Battle of Haifa.

OCI Cards: Announcing Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards for Indian-origin Jews who served in the IDF.



I begin this piece with a line that defines the moment.

"A strong mandate at home often translates into bold decisions abroad."

For decades after Independence, Indian Prime Ministers approached Jerusalem with caution, balancing regional sensitivities and historical alignments. The delay was rooted in diplomacy shaped by the Cold War and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach to Israel reflects a shift powered by political confidence. With a decisive majority, the government signalled that India can deepen ties with Israel while remaining equally close to the Arab world. The visit to Jerusalem is therefore more than symbolic - it represents a diplomacy driven by mandate, clarity, and national interest, redefining India's strategic posture in a changing Middle East.

In a visit heavy with symbolism and strategic recalibration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked a defining moment in India's foreign policy by undertaking a landmark trip to Jerusalem - a move that carries implications far beyond diplomacy. The visit reflects not only a deepening India-Israel partnership but also the assertive nationalist posture of a government operating with a parliamentary majority and political confidence unseen in decades.

For years after Independence in 1947, India maintained a cautious distance from Israel, guided by Cold War-era alignments and its leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement. Successive governments upheld a largely pro-Palestinian stance, balancing relations quietly while avoiding overt public displays of closeness with Jerusalem.

That historical hesitation was decisively set aside as Modi stepped into Jerusalem, signalling a paradigm shift in policy. At the heart of the visit was a strong strategic message: India is redefin-

ing its global partnerships based on national interest, security, and economic opportunity rather than inherited ideological positions. Addressing the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), Modi emphasised shared democratic values and mutual security concerns, receiving the Speaker's Medal - a gesture underscoring the warmth of the new phase in ties. Standing alongside Benjamin Netanyahu, Modi projected an unmistakable image of openness and solidarity. The personal rapport between the two leaders symbolized a broader transformation, from quiet engagement to public strategic partnership.

In a notable break from India's long-held diplomatic neutrality in the region, Modi strongly condemned the October 7 attacks by Hamas, offering condolences to the victims and expressing unequivocal support for Israel's fight against terrorism. The statement positioned India as a clear and vocal partner, rather than a distant observer balancing rhetoric.

Strategically, the visit places emphasis on defence cooperation, advanced technology, innovation ecosystems, water management, agriculture, and new economic corridors linking India more directly with the Mediterranean and beyond. As the Middle East undergoes rapid geopolitical shifts, India's outreach reflects a calculation that long-term national interests lie in diversified, security-oriented partnerships.

Analysts view the Jerusalem visit as emblematic of a broader foreign policy doctrine - one that aligns diplomacy with domestic political strength. Backed by a decisive electoral mandate at home, the government appears more willing to take bold positions internationally, even when they depart from decades



ASHOKE RAJ

of precedent.

More than a bilateral engagement, the visit signals a new chapter in India's post-independence trajectory: a confident nation recalibrating its global alignments, asserting its strategic autonomy, and prioritizing national interest over historical

hesitations. From non-alignment to strategic alignment, Jerusalem may well mark a turning point in India's diplomatic evolution - one that reflects both geopolitical realism abroad and political consolidation at home.

India and Israel today share a robust and multi-dimensional Strategic Partnership, reflecting a steady transformation in bilateral ties over the past decade. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's forthcoming visit will be his second to Israel in nine years, reaffirming the momentum generated during his historic July 4-6, 2017, trip - the first-ever standalone visit by an Indian Prime Minister. During that visit, the relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership, marking a decisive new chapter in bilateral engagement.

Prime Minister Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have maintained close and regular contact through reciprocal visits and frequent telephonic conversations, reflecting high-level political trust. Netanyahu visited India in January 2018, while subsequent interactions have included discussions on regional security, counter-terrorism, technological cooperation, and economic collaboration. Leaders have also exchanged calls following significant regional developments and major national milestones in both countries, underscoring the maturity of the partnership. Defence and security cooperation

remain a central pillar of ties, with Israel among India's key defence partners. In November 2025, a MoU on Defence Cooperation further institutionalised collaboration. Trade and economic relations are expanding, with both sides signing the Terms of Reference for launching Free Trade Agreement negotiations in late 2025, alongside a Bilateral Investment Agreement to deepen cross-border investments.

Science, technology, and innovation form another vibrant area of engagement, including joint R&D initiatives and the India-Israel Industrial Innovation Fund (I4F). Agricultural cooperation has led to 35 fully operational Centres of Excellence across Indian states, promoting advanced farming and water technologies.

People-to-people links are strong, with over 41,000 Indians residing in Israel. In multilateral settings, India and Israel cooperate through frameworks such as the I2U2 Group, focusing on food security, renewable energy, and infrastructure. Together, these pillars define a forward-looking partnership grounded in shared democratic values, innovation-driven growth, and strategic convergence.

From neighbourhood kirana stores to global financial hubs, India's digital payments revolution is rapidly crossing borders. In a landmark development during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Israel, both nations announced the adoption of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) within Israel's payment ecosystem - a major boost to New Delhi's expanding global fintech footprint.

The agreement will link UPI with Israel's domestic payment infrastructure, enabling Indian travellers to make seamless, QR-based payments directly from their bank accounts while in Israel. The integration will be facilitated by cooperation between NPCI International

Payments Limited and MASAV, Israel's interbank payments operator. The initiative is expected to reduce transaction friction, enhance digital interoperability, and strengthen cross-border financial connectivity between the two economies.

Widely regarded as one of the world's most advanced real-time payment platforms, UPI has already been rolled out for merchant payments in countries including the UAE, Singapore, France, Bhutan, Nepal, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Qatar. Its expansion into Israel underscores growing global confidence in India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model and its scalable, low-cost financial architecture.

Beyond fintech, the visit marked a broadening of strategic collaboration. Multiple Memorandums of Understanding were signed across artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, defence, agriculture, education, water management, fisheries, geophysical exploration, and cultural exchange. A notable highlight was the launch of a new initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, to be steered by the National Security Advisors of both nations, focusing on AI, quantum computing, semiconductors, biotechnology, and space.

The leaders also welcomed ongoing cooperation between Indian Space Research Organisation and Israel Space Agency, aiming to deepen joint research and industry participation. In cybersecurity, both sides endorsed the creation of an India-Israel Cyber Centre of Excellence in India to bolster cyber resilience, including in financial systems.

Agriculture and water management - long-standing pillars of the partnership - were reaffirmed, with 35 Centres of Excellence across India having trained over a million farmers in advanced irrigation and crop techniques, reinforcing innovation-led, sustainable growth.

The writer is an Associate Editor (Foreign Affairs) at The Pioneer. He has visited Israel on many occasions.

LEADERSHIP-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT: MODI-NETANYAHU EQUATION

The political chemistry between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu has played a defining role in strengthening bilateral ties.

July 4-6, 2017: PM Modi undertook the first-ever visit to Israel by an Indian Prime Minister, upgrading ties to a Strategic Partnership.

January 14-19, 2018: Netanyahu paid a return visit to India, consolidating defence, innovation, and business cooperation.

January 11, 2023: PM Modi congratulated Netanyahu on his election as Prime Minister for the sixth time.

August 24, 2023: Netanyahu congratulated

India on the successful Chandrayaan-3 Moon landing.

October 10, 2023: Netanyahu briefed PM Modi, following the October 7 terror attacks in Israel.

June 6, 2024: Netanyahu congratulated PM Modi on his third consecutive term as Prime Minister of India.

April 24, 2025: Netanyahu conveyed condolences following the Pahalgam terror attack.

June 13, 2025 onwards: Following the Israel-Iran conflict, both leaders held multiple conversations on regional stability.

October 9, 2025: PM Modi congratulated Netanyahu on developments under

President Trump's Gaza peace initiative. **December 10, 2025 & January 7, 2026:** The leaders reviewed regional developments and exchanged New Year greetings.

These sustained interactions highlight not merely diplomatic protocol, but active strategic consultation amid regional volatility.

FROM AGENDA COVER

Transparency or conspiracy?

I do not recall a single instance where a serious academic declined to help.

On the matter of constitutional respect, NCERT's record speaks for itself. In 2000, we requested eminent constitutional scholar Subhash C. Kashyap to write a simple book on the Constitution for teachers and common readers. Initially hesitant, he eventually produced a lucid volume explaining constitutional principles in accessible language. When we proposed translating it into Hindi, he personally rewrote it to ensure conceptual clarity. The objective was clear: generate informed respect for the Constitution and its institutions.

The Supreme Court of India is one of the most respected pillars of Indian democracy. Its role as guardian of the Constitution is unquestionable. But institutions like NCERT also serve the Republic - by nurturing informed, critical and responsible citizens who will one day occupy positions in the judiciary, executive and legislature.

Academic freedom and institutional respect are not opposing values; they are complementary. Both are essential for a healthy democracy. An episode such as the present one should lead to careful review, correction where necessary, and constructive dialogue - not erosion of trust. In the larger scheme of nation-

building, the Supreme Court safeguards constitutional morality, while NCERT prepares the minds that will uphold it in the future. Both institutions, in their respective spheres, serve the same national purpose.

Values, Responsibility and the Larger Democratic Balance

Those who argue that NCERT does not nurture constitutional values overlook the depth of its long-standing commitment to value education. The National Council of Educational Research and Training has consistently researched how ethical foundations, civic responsibility and Gandhian thought can be meaningfully integrated into school education.

For years, textbooks carried the Preamble to the Constitution. Later, the Fundamental Duties were prominently included. Equally significant was the inclusion of Gandhiji's talisman - his reminder that before taking any decision, one must think of the "last person" and ask whether that action will benefit the most vulnerable. This inclusion was made on the suggestion of D. S. Kothari, one of India's most respected educationists.

Pick up almost any NCERT textbook, and you will find at least two - often all three - of these guiding constitutional elements: the Preamble, the Fundamental Duties, and Gandhian ethical reflection. These are not ornamental additions; they reflect a conscious effort to cultivate

responsible citizenship.

The institution has also sought to promote interfaith understanding. Eminent scholars such as Maulana Wahiduddin Khan were invited to contribute perspectives on mutuality and harmony within Islam. Such writings were published and widely distributed to foster respect, dialogue and social cohesion.

Education, by its very nature, cannot be selective about reality. If textbooks teach constitutional ideals, they must also acknowledge historical truths - including Partition, social conflict, and the challenges of communal tension. Young students will grow into citizens who must navigate these realities. Shielding them entirely does not strengthen democracy; preparing them thoughtfully does.

India's development story - in science, technology, governance and global engagement - rests partly on the foundations laid in school education. NCERT has quietly contributed to this journey for decades. Its impact is not always visible, but it is undeniably significant.

This brings us to the broader question of academic autonomy and institutional respect. The Supreme Court of India is supreme in its constitutional authority. It has every right to comment, review and even criticise when it deems necessary. But with authority also comes responsibility - the responsibility to ensure that institutional critique does not inadvertently demoralise those who have worked with

integrity for decades.

Gandhi often reminded us that every right is accompanied by a duty. In a democracy, institutions must hold each other accountable - but they must also uphold each other's dignity.

There is no denying that corruption, wherever it exists, must be eradicated - whether in the executive, legislature, or judiciary. Public confidence depends on transparency and reform. If a textbook reference has caused concern, it can be reviewed. If procedures need tightening, they can be strengthened. Accountability should be fixed where necessary.

But to suggest mala fide intent or conspiracy within an institution that has built its reputation over sixty years risks undermining trust unnecessarily.

Many of my former colleagues at NCERT are deeply demoralised. They do not deserve that. They deserve recognition for their painstaking labour - the workshops, revisions, consultations and corrections that go into each textbook. They are human; errors can occur. But error is not equivalent to intent.

I would not hesitate to describe NCERT as a teacher of the nation. It shapes the intellectual and moral foundations of millions of children. Every civil servant, judge, scientist or academic who studied in India has, at some stage, been shaped by NCERT books. My own academic growth was nurtured within this institution. Its basic objective has always been to ensure that

every child grows into a thoughtful, informed and responsible citizen.

Education transforms an individual into a personality. A child enters school unaware and dependent; education equips that child with understanding, confidence and moral direction. That transformation is the quiet work NCERT performs.

If a lapse has occurred, procedures will address it. Responsibility will be determined. Corrections will be made - as they have been in the past. But the language of accusation should not overshadow decades of contribution.

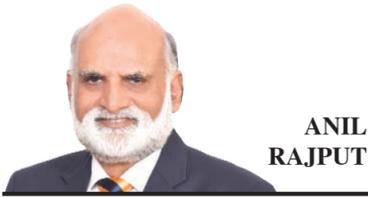
Institutional autonomy must be protected. It must be respected by governments, political parties, civil society and even constitutional authorities. Democracy thrives not when institutions weaken one another, but when they strengthen each other through constructive engagement.

The Supreme Court safeguards constitutional morality. NCERT prepares the citizens who will live by it. Both serve the Republic. Both deserve respect.

In moments of controversy, what is required is not confrontation, but conversation - not suspicion, but balance. For the sake of our institutions - and for the generations they serve - that balance must prevail.

(Based on Mr JS Rajput's interview with Gyaneswar Dayal, Sr. Editor, The Pioneer)

Colours of devotion: The sacred cuisine of Holi



ANIL
RAJPUT

The turning of the seasons across the Indian landscape is marked by the arrival of Holi, the cheerful festival that welcomes spring with colour and vitality. It is a season of abundance when mustard fields bloom and grains ripen, marking the completion of another agricultural cycle. Communities celebrate in a spirit of joyful abandon and, beneath the playful clouds of colour, reaffirm a civilisational lesson that righteousness will always prevail. In domestic kitchens, away from the public spectacle, this tradition assumes the authority of a festive cuisine that binds generations to a common culture and milieu. The traditions of Holi, celebrated on the full moon of Phalgun, have evolved over time, from Vedic rites to Puranic legends and the Bhakti movement. The story of Prahlada and the fall of Holika is a reminder that affirms the destruction of arrogance and the triumph of steadfast devotion. On the eve of Holi, ceremonial fires of Holika Dahan are lit and offerings of newly harvested grains made amid chanting of hymns and prayers. This act symbolises purification while welcoming the start of a new season. By morning, this solemnity yields to revelry with colours, representing joyfulness, blurring distinctions of status, age and background. In this playful atmosphere, kitchens anchor the festival within the home. It ensures that colour does not remain a spectacle, but becomes sustenance that binds families and communities in harmony, gratitude and generosity.

Holi arrives as the rabi harvest nears completion, when wheat, barley, and gram stand ready, reaffirming the earth's bounties. Preparations commence days in advance, when homes are cleaned, fresh flour is prepared, milk and jaggery is collected for sweets and lentils soaked for grinding. The act of cooking, thereafter, becomes an art guided by elders and their age-old recipes and aided by the younger generation and family members who learn with attention. The fragrance and flavours emerging from these kitchens resonate with the festival's exuberance unfolding outdoors.

Among the most iconic preparations of Holi is gujiya, long associated with the festival across much of north and west India. A firm dough of refined flour and warm ghee is rolled into small discs and filled with roasted khoya enriched with sugar, coconut, nuts, chironji, and cardamom, sometimes lifted by rose petals or raisins. Folded into crescents and sealed with decorative crimps, the pastries are fried slowly to achieve a crisp shell and fragrant interior. Some are lightly dipped in saffron syrup, while others are stored dry and preserved for later use. Alongside gujias, saffron-scented kesar peda, dense circular shaped sweets of condensed milk solids, offer a different flavour to be shared with family and friends.

Malpua introduces a softer indulgence to this spread. A batter of flour, semolina, thickened milk, and sometimes banana is whisked until smooth and allowed to rest so that it fries evenly. Ladles are poured into hot ghee, forming small discs with tender insides and crisp edges. These are immersed in syrup scented with fennel and saffron, and often, paired with rabri, milk simmered slowly till layers of cream form and folded back into the pot until the texture turns rich and cohesive. In certain kitchens, laung lata is prepared as well, khoya and nuts enclosed in a folded pastry secured with clove, then fried and dipped so that sweetness carries a faint spice. These are



not merely desserts but foods around which the festivities take place.

Cooling preparations balance this sweetness to enhance the menu. Shrikhand is made from strained yogurt, sweetened and flavoured with sugar, cardamom, and saffron, garnished with pistachios or almonds and sometimes served with puri as a delectable combination. Sabudana khichdi, prepared from soaked tapioca pearls tossed with roasted peanuts and cumin, introduces gentle savouriness suited to the season's warmth and remains especially valued when lighter meals are preferred. Shakarpara coated in light syrup, besan laddoos shaped from roasted gram flour and ghee, coconut barfi cut into neat diamond shapes, and til aur mawa laddoos bound with sesame, khoya, and jaggery further extend the sweet repertoire that is shared through the day, with family and guests.

As the festivities progress and colours deepen, yogurt based dishes assume greater significance. Dahi vada, prepared from urad dal soaked overnight and ground to a fluffy batter, is fried gently and immersed in seasoned yogurt cooled with roasted cumin and black salt. Tamarind chutney lends sweetness and tang, while green chutney of coriander and mint introduces freshness. Alongside this, kanji vada introduces an older tradition of fermentation. The kanji is made from water, mustard seeds, and other spices, and is fermented for a few days to develop its characteristic sour, pungent flavour. Vadas are then soaked so they absorb this infusion, and the result is valued as a digestive aid that prepares the body for seasonal transition.

Savory fare is not left far behind, because Holi meals must sustain long hours of social movement, visiting, and extended gatherings. Kachoris filled with spiced moong dal or crushed peas are sauteed with asafoetida, fennel, coriander, and dried mango powder before being enclosed in dough and fried to layered flakiness. They are paired with aloo sabzi cooked in thick tomato and turmeric gravy. Chole enjoyed with bhature appears in many northern homes, chickpeas simmered with spices and ginger, garlic, and tomatoes, while fermented dough breads puff dramatically in hot oil. In parts of Uttar Pradesh, seasonal matar nimona made from freshly ground

green peas simmered with potatoes and mild spices is served alongside puris, reflecting the arrival of spring produce. Aloo padhi chaat adds contrasting liveliness, crisp wafers layered with potatoes, chickpeas, yogurt, chutneys, onions, and sev, combining textures that mirror the festival's energy.

Stored savouries such as mathri and namakpara ensure continuity of hospitality. Flour mixed with ghee and carom seeds is rolled, cut, and fried until crisp, allowing the snack to be enjoyed long after the colours have settled. Though associated strongly with Holi, it remains beloved throughout the year, reflecting how festival foods often transcend their seasonal origins. Regional nuances enrich this spread further. In parts of western India, specially Maharashtra and Gujarat, puran poli occupies pride of place on the table. Chana dal is cooked until tender, drained carefully, and blended with jaggery, nutmeg, and cardamom into a smooth filling that is enclosed within pliant wheat dough and rolled with

patience before being roasted on a griddle with ghee. It is traditionally served alongside katachi amti, a lightly spiced lentil broth prepared from strained dal water, and tempered with mustard seeds, cumin, curry leaves, and dried red chillies. The pairing reflects a conscious balance between sweet and savoury, indulgence and restraint. Shrikhand, made from hung curd whisked with sugar and saffron, offers cooling relief suited to the warming season, while basundi prepared by slowly reducing milk into a thickened, sweetened consistency also appears in festive households. In arid regions of Rajasthan, dal baati served with spiced lentils and garlic chutney reinforces nourishment shaped by climate and terrain, while ghevar and other syrup soaked sweets occasionally mark celebratory tables as winter recedes.

Across central India, Holi's agrarian character expresses itself with earthy robustness and layered textures. In Madhya Pradesh, mawa kachori filled with sweetened khoya and nuts is fried until crisp and dipped lightly in saffron syrup, offering richness without overwhelming sweetness. The region's dahi bada is known for exceptional softness, the yogurt gently sweetened and generously topped with tamarind chutney, cumin powder, and red chilli. Bhitte ka kees, prepared by grating tender corn and sautéing it in ghee with mustard seeds, turmeric, green chillies, and milk, brings freshly harvested produce directly to the festive table. In Bundelkhand and surrounding areas, bedmi puri with aloo ki sabzi forms a hearty morning meal, the lentil infused dough fried to fullness and served with spiced potato curry. Karhi chawal prepared from yogurt and gram flour provides restorative comfort after extended celebration. In Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, litti chokha carries particular pride. Wheat dough balls stuffed with sattu (roasted grains or pulses) mixed with mustard oil, ajwain, garlic, ginger, and lemon are baked over open coals, and eaten with chokha (mashed vegetables) of roasted eggplant, tomatoes, onions, and coriander. Dahi chura, flattened rice mixed with yogurt and jaggery, appears as a simpler preparation that reflects coexistence of restraint and abundance on the same festive table.

Through it all, thandai remains the unifying beverage of the northern and central parts of India. Almonds are ground with melon and poppy seeds, fennel, black pepper, rose petals, and cardamom, blended with chilled milk and lightly sweetened to cool the body after a meal. In Punjab and Haryana, spiced chaas tempered with roasted cumin restores balance, while in Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh, fermented mustard based kanji serves as a sharp seasonal digestive. In West Bengal and Odisha, sweetened milk infused with fennel or bel shabat offers refreshment suited to the humid spring climate. In Tamil Nadu and parts of Karnataka, panakam (a spiced drink associated with temple rituals) of jaggery, dry ginger, and cardamom is served as a traditional offering, while badam (almond) milk enriched with saffron and nuts is enjoyed in urban households across the country. Together, these beverages reflect regional diversity grounded in seasonal moderation.

In eastern India, where the festival is observed as Dol Jatra or Dol Purnima, culinary expression assumes a devotional character. Images of Krishna and Radha are placed on ornate swings and taken in procession amid kirtan and chanting. Payesh, simmered slowly in

milk and sweetened gently with sugar or jaggery, is often perfumed with bay leaf and cardamom and offered before it is consumed. Sandesh shaped from fresh chhena is moulded with restraint, sometimes lightly tinted with spring hues yet retaining simplicity. Pitha prepared from rice flour and coconut, steamed or lightly roasted, reflects agrarian reliance on rice cultivation and the closing of winter harvest cycles. In Odisha, chhena poda, a lightly caramelised cottage cheese dessert, appears in some festive homes. In Assam, til pitha and narikol laru connect sesame, coconut, and jaggery in preparations that echo agricultural continuity. These foods are less about exuberant indulgence and more about devotional offering, linking temple ritual, seasonal produce, and communal participation.

In the southern peninsula also, Holi unfolds through quieter observances rather than expansive public colour play, yet the culinary dimension remains equally meaningful. In Tamil Nadu, Kama Dahanam recalls the burning of desire and affirms restraint and renewal at the onset of spring. Paramannam prepared from rice, milk, and jaggery is offered in temples and homes before being shared among family members. Coconut based payasam simmered with cardamom and occasionally edible camphor reflects the agrarian landscape of coconut groves and paddy fields. In Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, obbatu or holige prepared from chana dal blended with jaggery and cardamom is encased in soft dough and roasted patiently with ghee, its preparation demanding steady hands and careful rolling. Medu vada from fermented urad batter provides savoury depth, while kosambari made from soaked lentils, grated coconut, green chillies, and tempered mustard seeds offers a light accompaniment suited to the rising warmth. In some regions, pulihora prepared from rice tempered with tamarind and spices appears as part of temple offerings, reinforcing balance between sour, sweet, and spice. Across this region, Holi may manifest with devotional restraint, yet its culinary nature of renewal, discipline, and sacred hospitality remains unmistakably intact.

Holi's cuisine is therefore not merely indulgence but represents gratitude and seasonal intelligence refined over generations. It nourishes not only the body, but the bonds that make celebration meaningful. Recipes differ across regions yet carry memories of past experiences, agricultural rhythms, and collective generosity. Even in contemporary times, Holi retains not only its joyfulness and mirth but serves as a remembrance of a shared cultural and spiritual heritage built around the change of seasons. I believe that in these gestures there lies an inheritance that extends beyond taste, transmitting patience, discipline, and respect for seasonal cycles that calls for recognition and appreciation.

When the colours are finally washed, what endures is not only the memory of playful revelry but an understanding of the values that give the festival its depth. Holi affirms that celebration must be anchored in gratitude and hospitality. It is my belief, therefore, that it becomes our shared responsibility to ensure that future generations inherit more than the spectacle of colour. They must understand and absorb the virtues of Prahlada, the discipline of Holika Dahan, the agricultural wisdom of seasonal cooking, and the culinary traditions that bind us together as an ancient enlightened civilisation. In preserving these practices within our homes, I believe, we preserve and celebrate the ethos that Holi represents. In kitchens across the nation, spring must continue to be welcomed not only with colour, but with understanding, continuity, and abundance prepared in togetherness.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Bhajan Clubbing and the Revival of India's Folk Soul

ANSHUMAN SHARMA

In the 26 January 2026 episode of Mann Ki Baat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the growing trend of "bhajan clubbing" in Indian cities - a cultural innovation where young people are reconnecting with devotional and folk music in urban settings. Gen Z and Millennials are driving this unexpected shift, seeking moments of calm and soulful engagement amid the constant noise and hustle of modern life. Far from being a novelty, this new form of "clubbing" is emerging as an innovative vehicle for the revival of India's fading folk traditions. What once belonged primarily to temples, family gatherings, or religious festivals is now finding expression in urban auditoriums, cafés, and even curated nightlife spaces.

When Presentation Shapes Popularity

Culture survives not merely by existing but by being presented well, especially to the young



generation. Earlier, when Bollywood and television had not deeply penetrated rural India, folk songs flourished naturally. People sang them in fields, courtyards, and village gatherings; they were not "events" but part of lived culture. Even when radio and later TV arrived, there was still space. Film songs had their slots, and folk returned in its season during appropriate occasions. But the internet, smartphones, and YouTube changed the rhythm completely. Music became instantly consumable. DJs amplified the same downloadable tracks at high volume, gradually taking over even seasonal spaces. In places like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Faag, traditionally sung from Basant Panchami to Holi, is increasingly replaced by DJ pool parties during the festival. What was once a community singing tradition is now often reduced to loud, ready-made playlists.

Why Bhajans Survived and Folk Songs Faded

Unlike many seasonal or occasion-specific folk forms, devotional music endured. Bhajans remained relevant because they are deeply intertwined with Hindu religious practice. One cannot easily separate bhajans from rituals such as Aarti, Mata ki Chauki, Hare Ram Jaap, and Sundarikaand or Ramcharitmanas Paath. They are not merely performances but participatory expressions of faith and are included in most of the auspicious events of the people.

From cassettes and television to social media platforms, devotional music has continuously adapted to new media. There is no surprise that Hanuman Chalisa is the most-played video on YouTube. Companies like T-Series, particularly through their regional channels, have recorded and circulated numerous traditional and devotional songs. Through these easily accessible platforms, many young listeners have been introduced to ballads like Alha-Udal, which narrate heroic folklore from Bundelkhand.

Simultaneously, Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities have sustained vibrant traditions of collective devotional singing. What metropolitan India now

calls "bhajan clubbing" has long existed in these towns as religious jamming sessions and community recitations.

Folk Songs: Seasonal, Social, and Nearly Forgotten

India's folk music is richly seasonal and situational. In North India alone, one finds traditions such as Faag, sung during Holi; Chaita, associated with the month of Chaitra; Biraha, expressing separation and longing; and Kajri, the melodies of the monsoon. Across the country, similar forms flourish: the Baul songs of West Bengal, Lavani of Maharashtra, Bihu songs of Assam, Mando of Goa, Pandavani of Chhattisgarh, and Maand of Rajasthan.

And who can forget the Sohar of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, sung to welcome a newborn? The recent revival of the line 'Aye Raja Ji Tahre Ta Rahal Ha Jarurat' shows that folk never truly vanishes; it simply finds new stages and new voices. Many of these forms are month-specific, festival-bound, or rooted in agrarian cycles. Urban youth, detached from these rhythms, rarely encounter them. Without exposure, interest cannot develop.

As Holi approaches, Faag gatherings offer a far better way to enjoy and celebrate one's culture than playing item songs or DJ tracks with foul lyrics at pool parties, where inappropriate behaviour and breaches of women's dignity are reported every year. The issue is not modern music itself, but the displacement of songs that once defined the festival's cultural fabric by noisy, inappropriate, and explicit tracks that were never part of the traditional celebration. Promoting Faag and other folk music serves a dual purpose: it preserves and honours our cultural heritage while creating a safe, meaningful, and joyous way for people to participate in the festival.

Bhajan Clubbing as Cultural Bridge

The rise of bhajan clubbing in metro cities offers hope. It demonstrates that young Indians are not inherently disinterested in tradition; they respond to how it is curated. When devotional



music is arranged with acoustic fusion, storytelling, subtitles, or contextual explanations, audiences engage. The lesson is clear: tradition survives when it adapts its form without surrendering its essence.

If bhajans can fill urban halls, why not kajri nights during the monsoon? Why not Faag festivals during the Holi season in universities? Storytelling sessions around Biraha or Alha-Udal, reimagined with contemporary instrumentation yet preserving lyrical integrity, could achieve the same. Today, college fests and similar platforms across India can provide an ideal stage for folk song clubbing, linking performances to local culture in a meaningful way instead of spending huge sums to bring social media influencers to their campuses.

A Response to Sonic Fatigue

There is also an aesthetic factor at play. Much of contemporary commercial music, especially formula-driven film songs, can feel sonically repetitive. The lyrics have lost their meaning in

the noisy and trance-like beats. Those who are seeking freshness and more connection with music find that the rawness of folk melody and the communal energy of devotional singing offer something refreshingly participatory. Folk music invites chorus, clapping, and call and response; listeners are not lost in the loudness of beats, and it creates community rather than passive consumption. It is also seasonal, offering a variety that reflects India's festivals, weather, and changing seasons.

Revival through Relevance

Bhajan clubbing is not merely about religion; it is about reclaiming participatory music culture. This evolving form opens space for folk traditions to re-enter mainstream cultural life. India's cultural heritage has never truly vanished; it has merely awaited re-presentation. Young people are not passive consumers of culture; when given the right space, they become its participants. If clubbing can make space for devotion, it can certainly make space for tradition.

"IF YOU CAN WIN OVER YOUR MIND, YOU
CAN WIN OVER THE WHOLE WORLD"
— SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Colours and Emotions: Decoding the Essence of Holi

All colours arise from white, and it is only when they get all mixed up together that you can see nothing but black. When your mind is white, peaceful, happy, meditative, pure, and aware of consciousness, then from that space, many colours, many roles can emerge

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Life should be full of colours. And each colour should be seen and enjoyed separately. When colours get mixed, then all that you see is black. Similarly, the different roles we play in life should coexist peacefully and distinctly within us. We should be able to switch between them as time and situation demand. For example, when a father continues to play his role as a 'father' at work, things are bound to go for a toss.

Many entrepreneurs and company CEOs ask me about maintaining work-life balance, and this is what I tell them. In whichever situation we are in, we should play the corresponding role to the best of our capacity, whether we are the CEO or a parent at home. Then we will not have regrets. Then life is bound to become colourful. This concept was called 'varnashram' in ancient India. This meant that everyone—whether a doctor, teacher, engineer, father, brother, or son—is expected to play their roles with full enthusiasm. Mixing professions or roles can be counterproductive in our lives. For example, if a doctor wants to do business, he must run a business separately, and it should be secondary to his first profession; he should not make a business out of medicine. Keeping these 'containers' of the mind separate and distinct is the secret of a happy life, and this is what Holi teaches us.

All colours arise from white, and it is only when they get all mixed up together that you can see nothing but black. When your mind is white, peaceful, happy, meditative, pure, and aware of consciousness, then from that space, many colours, many roles can emerge. You gain the strength to play each role with total sincerity because you are rooted in the backdrop of this vast awareness.

Life asks us to play many parts. But between one role and another, you must return to rest. Just as white contains all colours, silence contains all expressions. When you take deep rest in meditation, you come back to your source. From there, you can step into any role fully and gracefully, without being burdened by it.

Make friends even with the enemy

One of the messages of Holi is to make friends even with the enemy. Yudhishthira was called *Ajatsatru*, that is, one who has no enemies. Why is an enemy born? When we carry animosity within, then an enemy is born. If we have no animosity left in us, then we would have no enemies either. We shouldn't mind if someone else considers us an enemy, but we shouldn't perceive animosity on our end. Just know, those who trouble or harm others are actually suffering themselves and are hurt or wounded in some way. A happy and content person will never trouble anyone else. Knowing this dissolves the animosity within you.

All specimens are needed on this planet; they



"NATURE HAS ALL COLOURS, AND SO DOES YOUR MIND. YOU FEEL HAPPY, UNHAPPY, ANGRY, JEALOUS, COMPASSIONATE, GENEROUS... ALL THESE COLOURS OF EMOTIONS ARISE"
— GURUDEV

make the world more colourful. They push certain buttons in you and evoke certain emotions, and see how you act or react to them. If you find some people are negative, you can keep some distance. Know that they will not be like that forever, and with time, they will change. You can tell yourself, 'Okay, let them be. They are going to bring out better skills and patience from within me.' If you can educate them, do so with compassion and pray that their lives become better.

The battle between greed and bliss

We have all heard Prahlad's story. It carries enormous spiritual depth.

What does 'Prahlad' mean? 'Ahlad' means happiness and contentment. Hiranyakashyap — one who sees only gold — is the symbol of ego and greed. He thinks of money all the time, and he kills happiness. Even if there is happiness in someone's house, it is greed that kills it. When the little boy, Prahlad, was asked, 'Where is God?', he said, "My Lord is in *tran*

(grass), in a pot, and in *stambh* (pillar) — everywhere." *Tran* cannot be seen; an egoist cannot see anything small, but *stambh* can be seen. When he attacked the *stambh*, infinite energy and light came out. That light destroyed the ego. There is a *stambh* of ego in you that thinks, 'I am different'. Dismantling this ego, infinite energy comes out, and that energy is *Narasimha*. Inside every human, there is a *stambh* of ego. When his stubbornness breaks, then another kind of zeal arises in you.

There is a zeal that comes from wisdom, and there is a zeal that comes from ego. The zeal of a wise person comes from knowing and from confidence in what has been truly achieved. It is like a lion. There is strength in it, but it is natural and effortless. The zeal of the ego never gives happiness to anyone. It may look like confidence, but it is only a show. When the ego breaks, real self-confidence arises. That self-confidence is like a lion.

There are two kinds of confidence. One arises from the ego, and the other arises from

wisdom. The confidence that comes from wisdom is steady and fulfilling. The one that comes from ego appears strong outwardly, but inside, there is unhappiness and instability. An egoistic person and a wise person may both seem strong. Yet one is shaken within, while the other is soft, peaceful, and happy inside.

When Hiranyakashyap was killed, it signified that the ego was destroyed and a powerful energy emerged. Within you, too, such a spark is hidden. When you pray with the innocence of Prahlad, the energy of Narasimha awakens within and tears through the ego.

The colours within

Lights of different colours glow within each person. In some, the lamp of anger glows; in some, it is the lamp of jealousy. Each emotion is associated with a colour—anger with red, jealousy with green, vibrancy and happiness with yellow, love with pink, vastness with blue, peace with white, sacrifice with saffron, and knowledge with violet. Each person is a fountain of colours that keep changing.

All thoughts and emotions emerge from the self, which is like the space inside and outside the body. This space rules your life. The difficulty with human beings is that we seldom take time to look at our own emotions or thought



ALL COLOURS ARISE FROM WHITE, AND IT IS ONLY WHEN THEY GET ALL MIXED UP TOGETHER THAT YOU CAN SEE NOTHING BUT BLACK. WHEN YOUR MIND IS WHITE, PEACEFUL, HAPPY, MEDITATIVE, PURE, AND AWARE OF CONSCIOUSNESS, THEN FROM THAT SPACE, MANY COLOURS, MANY ROLES CAN EMERGE. YOU GAIN THE STRENGTH TO PLAY EACH ROLE WITH TOTAL SINCERITY BECAUSE YOU ARE ROOTED IN THE BACKDROP OF THIS VAST AWARENESS

patterns. We act before thinking; before even resolving our feelings. Inner peace is just like the watchman, but the emotions are the owners of the home. When the owner barges in, the doorkeeper just gives way.

Nature has all colours, and so does your mind. You feel happy, unhappy, angry, jealous, compassionate, generous... all these colours of emotions arise. But when you know you are not these colours or moods, then you can truly enjoy these colours. You become a witness to all the mind games that go on inside you. What troubles you most is not someone else but your own mind. When you identify yourself with those emotions and think that is you, then you are in trouble. Meditation is the way to move into this witness state.

Recreating the legacy of eternal statesman

TEAM AGENDA

In the ever-expanding archive of books on modern Indian politics, Vijay Goel's latest coffee-table book "Atal Bihari Vajpayee: The Eternal Statesman" emerges as a work of rare intimacy and historical depth. Dedicated to the life and legacy of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee, this 312-page coffee-table volume is not merely a tribute, it is a visual and emotional chronicle of a leader who redefined the grammar of democratic conduct in India.

Richly illustrated, elegantly designed, and personally narrated in parts by Vijay Goel - who shared a five-decade association with Vajpayee - the book reads as both tribute and testimony.

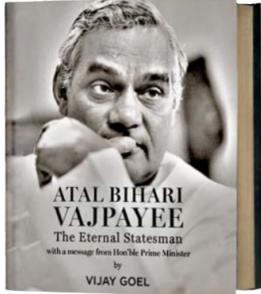
Published by Heritage India Foundation and priced at ₹4,000, the book is available on Amazon and stands out as perhaps the first and one of its kind comprehensive pictorial biography of Vajpayee, combining rare archival material, personal reminiscence and political documentation.

A Message from the Prime Minister

The volume opens with a message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who underscores Vajpayee's transformative leadership in areas ranging from infrastructure and telecommunications to strategic policy and coalition governance. The Prime Minister's words situate Vajpayee not merely as a leader of his time but as an enduring institutional influence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlights Vajpayee's transformative contributions in areas such as information technology, infrastructure, telecommunications, and modern communication, noting that his policies unlocked new opportunities for India's youth.

Reflection of a Fifty-Year Association

What distinguishes this book from conventional political biographies is the author's proximity to his subject. Vijay Goel shared a fifty-year association with Vajpayee. He witnessed Atal ji from his college days as an electrifying orator to his tenure as Prime



Title: Atal Bihari Vajpayee: The Eternal Statesman
Author: Vijay Goel
MRP: ₹4000
Publisher: Heritage India Foundation



Minister commanding global respect. Goel worked with him in multiple capacities such as a BJP worker, as a party office-bearer, as a Member of Parliament, as a Minister, and eventually as Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office. Vajpayee shared close familial ties with Goel's family, and it was this trust and confidence that led him to choose Goel to work in the PMO. The book traces Vajpayee's journey from his birth in Gwalior in 1924 to his emergence as a parliamentarian of rare eloquence and eventually a three-time Prime Minister. The early chapters on his upbringing, education at Victoria College and DAV College, and his formative association with the RSS are particularly illuminating. They reveal a young man shaped as much by intellectual discipline as by ideological conviction.

Goel's narrative captures Vajpayee's early rise in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh under the mentorship of Syama Prasad Mukherjee and Deendayal Upadhyaya. The images from the Calicut session, the Kanpur conference, and the protests of

the 1960s and 70s bring alive a political era when ideology was debated fiercely but articulated with civility.

The Smiling Prime Minister

One of the most striking features of the book is the recurring smiling face of Atal ji across its pages. Whether in Parliament, at party meetings, or at international summits, the warmth and smile in Vajpayee's expression remains constant.

Memories through Rare Photographs

With steadfast patience and perseverance, Vijay Goel has brought together rare and unique photographs, many not usually seen in the public domain. Some come from his personal collection; others have been sourced from archives and associates over the last four years into making this coffee-table book. These images document not just public milestones but private moments such as laughter, reflection, camaraderie. They show Vajpayee the poet, the administrator, the coalition-builder, the parliamentarian, the journalist, but above all, the human being.

A Tribute worth Preserving

Atal Bihari Vajpayee: The Eternal Statesman is more than a commemorative coffee-table book. It is a moral archive of an era brought out evocatively and vividly. As a coffee-table book, the production quality is impressive. Captions are detailed, contextualizing events in a storyline format, such as the cow protection rallies, the East Pakistan crisis, the bullock-cart protest against fuel price rise, and student movements of ronological structure - from Early Life to Sadaiv Atal - ensures clarity, while the index enhances research value. For historians of post-Independence India, the volume doubles as a visual archive of opposition politics, coalition era dynamics, and the ideological evolution from Jana Sangh to BJP.

In chronicling the life of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Vijay Goel has offered not just a book, but a memory preserved in print - steadfast, reflective, and, in every sense, Atal.

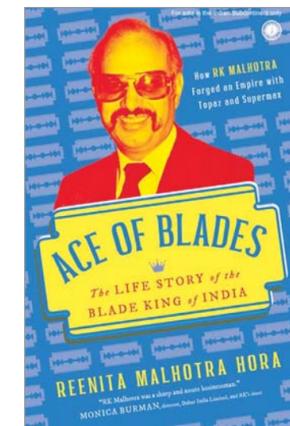
A thousand cuts of silent conflict

BALAJI VITTAL

Who isn't family? The Munjals of the Hero group, the Mittals of the Bharti group, Aniljit Singh of the Max group, the Ambanis of the Reliance group — are all family-controlled businesses. How do these families run their companies? In her book *Ace of Blades*, Reenita Malhotra Hora chronicles the life journey of Rajinder Kumar (RK) Malhotra, the baron of the Malhotra group that ruled the shaving blade market in the consumer segment for decades. He was also Reenita's father.

The story starts in Oct 2020 in Buckingham Gate, the London home of RK Malhotra and his wife Veena for the past decade. With the world ravaged by COVID and octogenarian RK fast losing his cognitive memory, Reenita hastened to London to interview her father for his story. RK's father HL Malhotra had migrated to Calcutta in the 1940s. Starting out as a hotelier at the Oberoi Grand, in 1950 he zeroed in on the business of razor blades for shaving.

A young RK completed his Mechanical Engineering abroad, but in a twist as predictable as those in Hindi films, was told to come back home and handle the expanding family business. And the narrative surfs through various ups and downs of their razor blade business across decades and how they navigated storms riding on efficiency, instinct, and shifty values. Sibling rivalry between RK and his two brothers that almost came down to physical assault only made things worse for themselves. There was no meritocracy, only family hierarchy, in which Ved Prakash (VP), the most incompetent and malicious one, was vested with unbridled authority to veto anything merely by virtue of his being the eldest sibling. Their on-ship and treachery harmed their own enterprise the most. Evidently, the Malhotras made no attempt to emulate respected industry peers like the Tatas, the Oberois (whom they were related to), the Burmans (related through matrimony), or Wipro. The book hardly makes mention of the Malhotra group's employee welfare schemes, talent development, or corporate governance. There are cited instances of even the London-educated RK 'barking' at his head of sales or calling another senior employee 'bugger'. They had, it appears, only two



Title: Ace of Blades
Author: Reenita Malhotra Hora
MRP: ₹899
Publisher: Jaico Publishing House

means to get results — incentive or coercion. They could buy out people but could rarely get buy-ins. Maybe it was the overpowering market dominance that gave them this swagger. Poetic justice, perhaps, that the story should end with RK's company getting bought out by a Private Equity firm and RK getting packed off. For all his 'vision' and the claim to be a 'Rambo', RK hadn't realised that he had opened the doors to his own ouster.

Through startling incidents, Reenita also bares to her readers the toxic misogyny in the family that she says typified traditional Punjabi culture. Her mother's promising academic career was throttled by the Malhotras, and she

was relegated to just another "Mrs Malhotra" of the family and an accessory to her husband. Not surprising, one reckons.

Editing — The disclaimer "Some scenes and dialogues have been fictionalised" notwithstanding, the narrative of the book itself reads like the script of a TV soap. Episode after episode, the same characters float in and out, with each episode (chapter, in this case) bringing out an incremental degree of what we already know about them. Also, if by design it was meant to read like fiction, then the editorial should have let the situations and dialogues flesh out characters. Instead, those little 'voiceovers' like "RK's strategic mind worked at a different level" appear redundant. The overdose of adverbs and adjectives, and repetitive use of phrases like 'tapestry', come in the way of fluid storytelling too. On page 277, an entire sentence has been practically repeated — "Here he had come to mend relationships despite being plagued by the domestic situation that had arisen in his nuclear family, yet VP had completely turned the conversation to favour his business position". The very next sentence is almost identical. This book suffers from rather ordinary editing.

But credit must be given to Reenita for her exceptional boldness and honesty in being the voice of people like her. Escaping the dynastic prison that was her father's home, she found liberation, and therefore the platform to speak out and restore her mother's dignity. *Ace of Blades* is evidently her catharsis, worthy of being read.

(The book reviewer is National Award-winning author of Bollywood books, a columnist, a public speaker, a book reviewer and a Bollywood commentator)

Reimagining life through artificial biology

TV VENKATESWARAN

IMAGINE this, a decade from now. You walk into your office at a biotech firm. The orders are in. A startup needs an artificial human liver for organ replacement. The city council is asking whether you can create a microbe that turns greywater drinkable. The space agency is toying with developing humans who can survive the harsh conditions of Mars, now that we have colonised it. Detailing such tantalising possibilities is the central theme of biologist Adrian Woolfson's book, 'On the Future of Species: Authoring Life by Means of Artificial Biological Intelligence'.

Watching her mother read a book is pure magic for a toddler. The pictures make some sense, but only Amma can magically decipher the words. This is exactly where humanity stood when genetics first began. We had figured out the alphabet of life, A, T, G, C, the biochemical letters written into our DNA. We knew these letters held the instructions for everything biological, but what the sentences actually meant was a mystery.

As Amma reads the book multiple times, the baby starts recognising a word here, a word there. In kindergarten come the first real steps: learning the letters, sounding them out, and writing simple words. In 1967, the biochemist Arthur Kornberg and his team at Stanford accomplished something very much like this. They isolated an

enzyme called DNA polymerase and used it to chemically synthesise the entire genome of the virus phi-X174 from scratch.

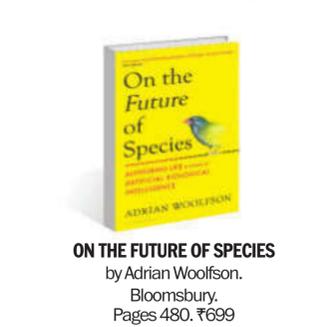
The synthetic DNA they created was an exact copy of what nature had already made. It meant we had moved from recognising the alphabet to writing our first sentences.

This breakthrough opened the door to gene therapy. These days, scientists routinely make synthetic DNA sequences and hitch them to harmless viruses, using the viruses as delivery vehicles to carry the genetic material into the nuclei of cells with faulty DNA. Once inside, the synthetic DNA steps in to correct the inherited defect. This is not science fiction anymore. The FDA has already approved over 43 cell and gene therapies, tackling everything from leukaemia and lymphoma to spinal muscular atrophy and sickle cell disease.

But here is the catch: most of these genetic defects are basically single-letter errors. Correcting them is like fixing a spelling mistake. Most genetic diseases are polygenic, meaning multiple genes are involved, interacting in complex ways we barely understand.

Learning to climb one rung is all it takes to start climbing a ladder. But not every problem is that straightforward. As a child grows, the task shifts from writing 'mom' and 'dad' to reading complex passages and, eventually, expressing herself in written text. That leap takes years of learning.

Woolfson proposes a way to shortcut that



ON THE FUTURE OF SPECIES
by Adrian Woolfson.
Bloomsbury.
Pages 480. ₹699

long, slow climb. His radical idea: use AI to make sense of the mind-boggling complexity. Through his company Genyry, he is working on developing the technical methods needed not just to read and understand genomic language, but eventually to synthesise designer genomes. These could create species tailored to our desires.

Gene therapy, as we know it, has a modest aim: to swap faulty genes for correct ones and help patients recover from debilitating diseases. But Woolfson's vision reaches further: not just fixing what is broken, but building something more.

Woolfson writes, "Biology now stands at the threshold of transitioning from a largely descriptive science into a generative one. In the future, we won't just catalogue species,

we will create them." Consider the human spine. He calls it a "design disaster". It evolved in quadrupeds and is hopelessly ill-suited for an animal with two legs. If only we could improve it, he suggests, life could be "guided into uncharted landscapes, endowed with entirely new properties that would reinvent the way organisms function".

Yet Woolfson is no starry-eyed futurist. He readily acknowledges that the complexity of the human genome might impose severe constraints on how much we can engineer it: much of the behaviour of biological machines emerges from dense, overlapping networks that resist simple tinkering.

Still, scientists have moved beyond merely fixing genetic errors. They are now writing enhanced versions of the genome itself.

In 2016, scientists created a minimalist strain of *Mycoplasma mycoides*. While the normal had 985 genes, the designer one had just 473. Soon after, they fused 16 yeast chromosomes into two, and the yeast remained viable. By 2023, a Synthetic Yeast Genome Project had built all 16 yeast chromosomes from scratch. More recently, Caltech's Sidewinder method has made DNA construction easier. These milestones suggest we are beginning to learn the alphabet of life.

Nobel laureate Jacques Monod famously said, "What is true for *E. coli* is true for the elephant." He meant that the fundamental machinery of life—DNA replication, protein synthesis, and genetic regulation—is uni-

versal. But here is the catch. Biological systems often behave in ways where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This is where Woolfson waves his magic wand: artificial biological intelligence, or ABI. Just as large language models like ChatGPT have learned to converse fluently, biological foundation models such as Evo 2, Google DeepMind's AlphaGenome are becoming fluent in the 'language of life'.

He says that with ABI, we can soon learn to predict how changes in the genome will ripple through the organism. Woolfson calls this emerging era a 'second Genesis'. But his book is also a wake-up call. The benefits, he cautions, come with lurking dangers.

Think of human-made pathogens that could become new weapons of mass destruction. Imagine an inadvertently modified bacterium escaping into the ocean and destabilising the carbon cycle. And then there are the profound ethical questions as we begin tinkering more and more with mammalian genomes, including human.

Woolfson argues that closing our eyes to these possibilities will not make them go away. While he opposes designer babies and parentless humans, he insists that the potential benefits are simply too great to apply the brakes to the science. Instead, he offers a manifesto on the ethical quandaries.

His book is essential reading.

—The reviewer is Visiting Professor, IISER, Mohali

Politics, literature & Dalits

ARUN PRAKASH RAJ N

WHILE the link between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu is widely acknowledged, the equally intimate relationship between literature and politics has not received comparable attention. Since the early 20th century, writers aligned with diverse political traditions — Indian nationalism, the Dravidian movement and communism — have turned to fiction and poetry as extensions of their political engagement. Yet much of this writing has often been dismissed as propaganda, presumed to lack aesthetic depth or enduring literary value. Such a view overlooks an important truth: some of the most celebrated figures of modern Tamil literature, including Subramania Bharati and Jayakanthan, were shaped by their political commitments. Their works demonstrate that political conviction need not diminish literary merit; rather, it can sharpen and intensify artistic expression.

In this light, 'An Ocean in a Well', a collection of 10 short stories by D Ravikumar — MP and general secretary of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), a party "committed to Dalit rights" — may be read as a significant contribution by a political activist to the corpus of modern Tamil literature. Translated into English by V Ramakrishnan, the volume brings Ravikumar's political sensibility to a wider readership without reducing his fiction to mere ideological assertion.

Stories such as 'Fact Finding' and 'A Death and Some More' document the violence inflicted upon Dalits in contemporary Tamil Nadu by dominant caste groups as well as state institutions, including the police. These stories do more than record

atrocities. They also capture a deeply unsettling sense of helplessness — witnessing brutality without always being able to prevent it. By highlighting the emotional and ethical strain borne by the activist-observer, Ravikumar underscores the psychological toll of documentation and activism itself.

In the preface, Ravikumar notes that Dalit literature is often narrowly understood as writing concerned solely with caste oppression and violence. Challenging this reductive expectation, several stories explore the varied textures of Dalit life. His innovation lies not only in the subject matter but also in form: the narrative strategies and genres are strikingly original.

A compelling example is 'Zha: The Unique Letter', a dystopian satire that imagines a future in which the state undertakes bizarre measures to impose Sanskrit while systematically erasing Tamil. Resistance to Hindi imposition has historically cut across caste and religious divisions in Tamil Nadu, and Dalits participated in significant numbers in the major anti-Hindi agitations of the 20th century.

Not all the stories are overtly political. Some turn instead to the intricacies of human relationships. 'Un-Timely' centres on a man mysteriously granted an opportunity to reunite with his childhood love after death. In 'Thambi', a fleeting act of deceit against a kind stranger gives rise to lingering guilt. The title story, 'An Ocean in a Well', portrays a man who having lost his mother — his last emotional anchor — contemplates ending his life, only to rediscover meaning through an unexpected encounter.

The anthology insists that Dalit writing is not merely a literature of protest, but also of imagination, memory, longing and moral reflection. Ravikumar reminds us that when politics enters literature with honesty and craft, it does not diminish art — it deepens it.

—The reviewer is a PhD scholar at School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi

Supernatural, naturally

CHARU AHLUWALIA

THIS collection of 19 short stories is rooted firmly in the landscapes of Shimla, Dharamsala and Kullu. One of its most striking merits is the authenticity with which the author recreates the hills — the colonial heritage and whispered local legends. The customs and everyday rhythms of mountain life lend credibility to the supernatural occurrences. Readers already attuned to the region's natural and cultural nuances will readily recognise this ambience and the less connected ones will still perceive the terrain through sensory images. The hills are not merely a backdrop but shape the stories' emotional and narrative contours.

Thematically, the collection is unified by its persistent return to death and memory. Almost all the stories circle back to the dead as spirits, lingering presences or unresolved histories. But a few stories, such as 'The Snowman', offer a thematic variation. Dramatic climaxes characterise most of the writing, sustaining suspense and reinforcing the motif of loss. Particularly effective is 'The Caller Does Not Exist', where the nauseating smell of decaying flesh evokes palpable dread. In such moments, Aditya Kant succeeds in generating genuine goosebumps.

The true resonance of the collection lies in the memories it awakens. Readers may find comfort not in the spectacle of haunting, but in the recollection of their own childhood encounters with tales of spirits and loss. The stories subtly prompt a return to personal memories of elders, of departed loved ones, of landscapes and childhood fears.

The author appears less interested in connecting readers to the spirits than to the place that houses them. The mountains become repositories of memory, of a shared legacy of place and ancestry. The supernatural thus functions as a bridge between the present-past and living-dead.

The epilogue stands out as a thoughtful

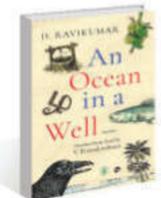
justification of Kant's thematic vision. The assertion that "in the mountains, everything echoes" encapsulates the spirit of the book. Just as sounds reverberate across valleys, so do memories of the departed. The stories create a bond between us and those who came before us, suggesting that haunting is not merely a matter of fear but of remembrance.

However, the collection is not without limitations. Some stories, such as 'Revenge of the Hills' and 'The Shroud Thief', may seem implausible to contemporary minds. Moreover, certain descriptions — "growling voice", "nails hooking onto his skull", "the air was thick", "face twitched" — represent familiar clichés of haunted tales. The visuals become theatrical and fear operates mechanically instead of emerging organically from the characters' inner turmoil.

The stories also rely on external shocks rather than internalisation of dread. On a metaphorical level, the narratives seldom venture into symbolic terrain and fear is devoid of any psychological resonance.

Nonetheless, 'Ghosts, Horror and Hills' remains a regionally grounded horror fiction with an authentic setting and dramatic storytelling. A dash of symbolic complexity and psychological depth could have elevated it to literary heights.

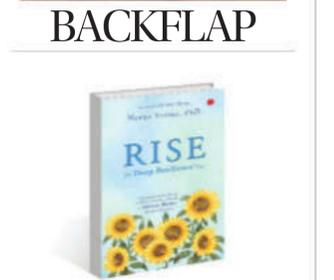
—The reviewer teaches at Government College, Kullu



AN OCEAN IN A WELL
by D Ravikumar. Translated by V Ramakrishnan.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 144.
₹399



GHOSTS, HORROR AND HILLS
by Aditya Kant.
Vistata Publishing.
Pages 158.
₹395



RISE: THE 'DEEP RESILIENCE' WAY
by Neena Verma.
Rupa.
Pages 278.
₹395

Life is a mosaic of misery and meaningfulness — it offers both rainstorms and rainbows. While it tests us with setbacks, turbulence, loss, and trauma, it also blesses us with the gift of resilience. Often, when fear, chaos, and despair take over, we forget to invoke this inherent capacity to rise. Neena Verma, a seasoned practitioner, coach, and educator in leadership, resilience, wellbeing, grief, post-traumatic growth, and therapeutic writing, redefines resilience beyond the clichéd notion of 'bouncing back'. She guides readers to explore the deep, restorative, generative, supple, and expansive dimensions of resilience. The book introduces two original constructs — 'Resilience Mindset' and 'Deep Resilience' — derived from Neena's extensive practice, research, and lived wisdom. It serves as a comprehensive guide to recognising, kindling, cultivating, practising, embodying, and nourishing your inner resilience.

Fashion as assertion by a rebel and an insider

PRASAD BIDAPA

PRABAL GURUNG'S 'Walk Like a Girl' arrives not merely as a memoir, but as a cultural document. It charts the journey of a boy from Nepal — shaped by India, sharpened by New York — who dares to believe in his own becoming. Yet what makes this book compelling is not the glamour of the destination, but the psychology of survival that fuels the ascent.

The arc is familiar, and therein lies its universality. A queer child in the subcontinent. A fiercely protective mother. A distant, emotionally unreachable father. A society that polices difference with cruelty disguised as conformity. The bullying from classmates. The humiliation from extended family. The thinly veiled hostility of teachers and strangers. For thousands of young gay men growing up in South Asia, this is not narrative — it is lived reality.

And yet Gurung's response to this hostility is what distinguishes him. His self-belief is almost architectural. It does not tremble. It does not negotiate. It does not

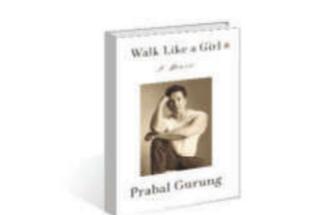
seek permission. Through shame and exclusion, what emerges most strikingly is his steely resolve — a quality shared by those who not only survive systems, but eventually bend them.

The memoir traces his professional evolution with clarity: from his formative years at Bill Blass to the founding of his own label, where he begins to articulate a distinct vocabulary — feminine, political, elegant, unapologetic. His commitment to making women feel seen is not cosmetic branding; it is central philosophy. For Gurung, fashion is not adornment. It is assertion.

There are luminous moments. Michelle Obama. Oprah Winfrey. Anna Wintour. The Met Gala table hosted for women of colour — from Deepika Padukone to Alia Bhatt — an image loaded with symbolism. From Thamel to the Met. It is the kind of metaphor writers dream of.

Yet the book is most interesting when it is conflicted.

Gurung speaks of discrimination in America — the subtle and overt hierarchies of white patriarchy and white matriarchy within fashion's gilded corridors. Gurung



WALK LIKE A GIRL
by Prabal Gurung.
HarperCollins.
Pages 320.
₹799

speaks of dismissive buyers, indifferent editors, systemic gatekeeping. But he also acknowledges, sometimes implicitly, that he has become part of the very establishment he critiques. This tension — between a rebel and an insider — is one of the memoir's most intellectually engaging threads.

There are doors that open for him that do not open for most immigrants. There are accelerations that are atypical. He recognises

es this, but perhaps does not interrogate it as deeply as one might wish. At moments, one senses that as much is concealed as revealed. The emotional candour is present — particularly in passages about his mother; the book's emotional anchor — but there are spaces where one feels he pulls back just before the abyss.

His mother, Durga Rana, is the soul of this book. Her unwavering love is not sentimentalised; it is positioned as the structural foundation of his courage. His siblings appear as a quiet chorus of belief. His father remains the unresolved chord — a relationship never quite reconciled, never fully bridged. That unfinished dialogue lingers long after the last page.

What I found particularly telling is Gurung's awareness of power. He rages at the system. He fights for women's visibility. He champions inclusivity. And then, almost in a moment of reckoning, he realises he has himself acquired power within that system. That evolution — from an outsider to a participant — is one of the memoir's most mature recognitions.

This is not a scandal-driven memoir. It is

Lows of higher education



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

THE huge brouhaha that has exploded over the recent AI event held in Delhi really shook up the capital. First, there was utter chaos on the roads leading up to Bharat Mandapam — the worst traffic mess I have ever seen in Delhi. The rush of delegates, visitors and the forever-roving crowd of those who go to such places only to make reels for posterity and their family, were just left to fend for themselves on the first few days. Then came the shameful episode of Galgotias University and the Chinese robotic dog that a ‘Communications’ person from the university was unable to explain, and last but not least, the demonstration by the Youth Congress volunteers that brought the house down (to say nothing of their clothes).

Enough *masala* to provide hours of *tu-tu, main-main* TV debates, so let me not repeat all that. My concern is with what we have made of the concept of a university, or education in general. The first modern Indian university was set up in 1858 in Calcutta. Years later, Lord Curzon initiated education reforms though he is now remembered for all the wrong reasons — the partition of Bengal, the loot from India and the precious jewels and artefacts he took with him to England. However, we often forget that he established the Archaeological Survey of India (that predates the Royal Architectural Society of England, by the way) and ordered restoration of several historical sites (including Akbar’s tomb at Sikandra vandalised by a Jat ruler).

Calcutta was followed by universities in Madras and Bombay and later, by Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi, to name a few. A special kind of architecture (broadly Indo-Saracenic) with tow-

ers, turrets, huge campuses with buildings marked for science and humanities, impressive libraries, senate halls with stained glass windows and balconies, gardens, hostels for girls and boys — all these follow a similar architecture.

From my memories of my alma mater in Allahabad, I can recall wide *verandahs* where students roamed to lofty tutorial and staff rooms. Humanities were then the most popular courses and entire generations of the civil service were filled with alumni from Allahabad, also then known as the Oxford of the East.

Similarly, Bombay became the hub of legal studies, and its advocates, jurists and constitutional experts (many Muslim and Parsi names) were legends known for their distinguished careers. Jinnah, Nanavati, Palkhiwala, Seervai, Tyabji are some names that come readily to mind. I am not so familiar with Madras but even Lucknow university had a renowned centre for botany in the years gone by. Medical education

humanities to science and engineering. Students who graduated from there went abroad, earned huge salaries and never came back.

Our brightest and best started the brain drain that is responsible for a dumbing down now visible at every level of education. English-medium education acquired an aspirational pull and with the mushrooming of so-called convent schools and English medium schools even in villages, the local government-run schools became passe.

Something else also followed these changes: a dialogue between science education and the humanities was slowly lost. So, we had brilliant scientists who never regarded history or literature with respect, and on the other hand, our historians, political scientists and sociologists looked down on those who were unaware of the exciting developments in these areas. This hiatus was sought to be bridged by those who then set up private universities that only provided faculties of humanities, but were mildly contemptuous of artificial intelligence and such areas of frontier research.

Today, this hiatus is becoming dangerous, for the ethical and moral dimensions of a scientific temperament are now debated by academics who belong to one ideological stream or another. Private universities are also wary of confronting the stifling rules that the government is placing on higher education because many of the trustees-run businesses cannot afford to rouse the government’s ire. Debate, discussion and criticism — the bedrock of higher education — are artfully avoided if not openly discouraged.

Prime land is generously granted to promoters of dodgy educational backgrounds (I can’t say whether any university named after a sweetmeat seller, or after a daughter/wife was done so with a high purpose in mind). The UGC and the Medical Association of India are more taken up with opening universities and colleges to prove how they are promoting the government’s commitment to education for all. What is the faculty that runs these centres? How many can afford such an education and how many use it?

Many questions need answers.

— *The writer is a social commentator*

Debate, discussion and criticism are artfully avoided if not openly discouraged

was provided by some outstanding colleges that have largely kept their reputations intact. Punjab University, partitioned into two campuses in 1947, held its own for decades.

The short point that I wish to make is that there was a grand tradition of higher education funded and run by the State. In addition, there were individual institutions (such as the BHU, the AMU) where generous donors and philanthropists created impressive centres of higher learning. However, it is with the establishment of the IITs that this landscape changed radically. Gone were the sprawling spaces with dreamy towers and turrets and in their place came gleaming concrete and glass buildings with state-of-the-art labs, as the focus moved from the

Epstein Files & the *desi* connection



AVAY SHUKLA

EVERY era produces its own prophets, who inscribe their wisdom on our digital walls; the year 1 AE (After Epstein) is no different. A friend has just forwarded to me this priceless diagnosis of what ails us: when faced with temptation, wise people abstain. The others Epstein. This single-digit sentence explains what the Epstein Files are all about, and why a paedophile, sex-trafficking celebrity, long dead, is causing so much churning in the capitals of the neoliberal world (and in India, which is neither neo nor liberal). Here are the tidbits which I have gleaned so far from this affair.

One hears that Mr Vivek Agnihotri, the film director so beloved of the BJP, is a very angry and worried man these days. He has lost his IPR and franchise of the word ‘Files’; his ‘Kashmir Files’, ‘Bengal Files’ had an authoritative ring about them, for are files not the repository of truth within the government? But he can no longer use this word, for it has been hijacked by Epstein and Pam Bondi and henceforth will convey not pseudo-nationalism and Islamophobia, but sex, sleaze and betrayal — a more exciting batter, I agree, but not one which can garner votes.

Mr Agnihotri will now have to look for a new word for ‘Files’: may I suggest ‘Lies’ or ‘Fakery’ or ‘Fibs’?

The world’s glitterati — the Davos types, politicians, marquee actors and singers, the fixers, fashionistas, sheikhs and sultans — who cannot bear to be out of news for even a day, are faced with a horrific quandary. And that is worse — being mentioned in the Epstein Files or not being mentioned in them? (Remember Oscar Wilde: *The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about?*) The former can lead to social disapprobation, dismissal, law suits and even worse; the latter would be akin to a living death, for it would be final proof that they are non-entities, that they never mattered, were not important enough to be honey-trapped.

For some, the wretched choice has already been made — Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, Lord Mandelson, the president of the WEF, the Swedish chief of UNHCR, an ex-chief of the CIA. The elite in India too are holding their breath, poring over every new list of emails through their Cartier or Maybach glasses to see if their names are there. But the common man — i.e. 99 per cent of India — is not bothered: he’s busy fulltime in checking if his name is on the voters’ list. This is Mr Gyanesh Kumar’s stellar contribution to limiting the impact of the Epstein story within our shores! Thank you, sir.

But we have two shining stars (or potential asteroids for Mr Modi) from India who have the distinction of having made it to the Epstein shortlist: one a minister who has anger management issues, the other a captain of industry who, to continue with the cricketing analogy, has a weakness for

the fine leg, especially if it is attached to a tall, blonde Norwegian of the opposite sex (if the emails are correct). Right now, they are being pilloried by Rahul Gandhi in Parliament, quite unjustly, in my view. For, one was promoting Digital India (even before it was conceived!) and the other building our Vishwaguru status globally, all undercover (or covers), of course. If the price of these laudable objectives involved enjoying the hospitality of a convicted sex predator, so be it. It was all for King and country, wasn’t it, in the finest traditions of Lawrence of Arabia, Kim Philby, Mata Hari and James Bond, to mention just a few. Methinks, a Padma Bhushan or two would be in order here.

Finally, it must be said the Epstein Files is no respecter of reputations. One mail mentions our very own globally acclaimed wellness guru, Deepak Chopra, who dispenses advice (at very steep rates) to CEOs about how to view life. But, as per one released mail, he has reserved his most penetrating observation for Mr Epstein: “God is a construct, cute girls are real.”

The elite are holding their breath, poring over every new list. But the common man is not bothered: he’s busy fulltime in checking if his name is on the voters’ list

In other words, what you see (in that Manhattan flat or Virgin Islands resort) is what you get, so grab it (or her). Forget about God! No wonder the man has made millions.

Even His Holiness the Dalai Lama appears to have been dragged into this controversy needlessly, with the Chinese social media alleging that he had met Epstein, in an apparent attempt to discredit him after his Grammy win last month. The Dalai Lama’s office has issued a strong contradiction and condemnation of these planted posts. I am sure no sane person would believe this Chinese canard. But it must have been a close call for His Holiness’ advisers, and a difficult choice — should they ignore this Chinese slander, or should they condemn it? This is what I would call being on the horns of a *dalailama*.

And while heads of government all over the world are speaking on the Files, ordering inquiries and sacking people, in India there is total silence. The Prime Minister only speaks during election times, his hangers-on cannot speak of anything except Rahul Gandhi’s ancestors, and the media is still fighting the Sinoor war with Pakistan and discussing the bisexuality of Babur.

The country has become one vast black hole from which no light can emerge. But if you listen carefully, you’ll hear a protesting voice emanating from that hole: “What! Me resign? But I was ambushed!”

We are like this only, folks. *Satyameva Jayate.*

— *The writer is a retired IAS officer*

Vishnu’s art of attracting fortune

IN Indian mythology, Vishnu is described as the beloved of Lakshmi. His names are Sri-vallabha, beloved of fortune, and Sri-nivasa, abode of fortune. In art, the goddess is shown residing in his heart, or seated by his side. When he reclines, she is at his feet. This pairing is a metaphor. It explains why some leaders naturally attract opportunities while others struggle. Lakshmi follows Vishnu because Vishnu embodies the qualities that fortune favours.

The first quality is balance. Vishnu reclines on a serpent and rides an eagle. The snake represents the ground reality, the tactical view, the daily struggle. The eagle represents the strategic view, the big picture, the long horizon. Most leaders fall into one camp — either overly tactical or overly strategic. Vishnu holds both. He can see the forest and the tree. Lakshmi gravitates to those who can manage both detail and vision. The serpent and the eagle are natural enemies. Those who think tactically usually fail to see the strategy and those who think long-term forget short-term goals. Vishnu balances both.

The second quality is adaptability. In different eras, Vishnu appears as Ram or Krishna. Ram is in Treta Yuga and Krishna in Dwapara Yuga. Ram’s era is more stable than Krishna’s. Ram has to deal with enemies who break rules while Krishna has to deal with people who manipulate the system and pretend to follow rules. Ram follows rules, upholds order, and flourishes in a stable market where consistency matters. Krishna bends rules, navigates chaos, and thrives in a volatile market where innovation is essential. Leaders who cling to one style often fail when



UNIVERSE

DEVUTT PATTANAİK

circumstances shift. Vishnu adapts, and Lakshmi flows towards those who adapt with intelligence rather than panic.

The third quality is integration. Vishnu unites rivals. He gets the Devas and the Asuras to churn the ocean of milk for its treasures. The Devas do not share the treasures and so get trapped in an endless cycle of war. In his imagery, the serpent and eagle — natural enemies — coexist. This symbolises the ability to make competing interests collaborate. In any

A leader who thinks like Vishnu becomes the chosen companion of Lakshmi

organisation, departments fight for budgets, teams compete for credit, and egos clash. The leader who can get rivals to work together becomes a magnet for opportunity. Lakshmi follows unity, not conflict. A good leader is able to harness the tension between competing groups, get them to help rather than hurt each other.

The fourth quality rests in Vishnu’s four hands, which represent four leadership actions. The *shankh*, or conch, stands for communication. A leader must speak clearly and repeatedly so that the team knows what to do. The *chakra* stands for review — constant monitoring and feedback. The *gada* stands for discipline — enforcing standards and consequences. The lotus stands for appreciation — recognising good work. Two actions are pleasant, two are painful, but all are necessary. Leaders who practice all four hold Lakshmi close.

The fifth quality is resilience. Vishnu lies on the ocean during *pralaya*, the cosmic flood. He rests even when the world collapses. This symbolises calm in crisis. Leaders who remain steady, who do not lose their mind when circumstances deteriorate, inspire confidence. Lakshmi prefers calm seas, not choppy waters.

Vishnu does not chase Lakshmi. He attracts her. Through balance, adaptability, integration, discipline, communication and appreciation, he becomes her natural home. In the corporate world, titles and designations do not bring fortune; temperament and behaviour do. A leader who thinks like Vishnu becomes the chosen companion of Lakshmi.

— *The writer is an acclaimed mythologist*

Realist to the core, a crusader first and always



GN DEVY

THE ashes of Mahasweta Devi are laid in a memorial I created for her at the Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh in Gujarat. The plaque has her immortal words inscribed on it: “Every dream has the right to live.” She had often expressed her desire to live there forever. On January 14 this year, she would have been hundred.

Born in 1926, she had passed through the fervour of the freedom struggle. Schooled at Santiniketan, she had seen Gurudev and been through the cultural strands in the environs there. Married to Bijon Bhattacharya — an avowed Communist — she had known the entire IPTA range and knew what Communism meant. In her more mature years, she

had been involved in various movements in Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, Rajasthan and Manipur; but it was difficult for any of these movements and trends of thought to keep her ideologically straight-jacketed.

Mahasweta Devi chose when to act, and she acted out of her own analysis of what justice was in a given case. Her analysis was quite often driven by a deep compassion for the silenced, the marginalised.

All through her turbulent times, she retained peculiar traits. She had an unsettling sense of humour. It was not any black humour. Rather, she would let out a comment with the seeming gentleness of a Victorian lady, which could get the listener simply floored. She had in her the innocence of a teenage village girl, a naivety that was difficult to diagnose. She also had a temper impossible to match, and impatience with snobbery which quickly unmasked even the most reputed ones. And, finally, she had an incurable fondness for the old Khurshid songs. It was difficult to say when she would break out singing and render a number like “*Mere balpan ke saathi, bhul naa jaana*”.

It was impossible to predict when in the



Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016)

middle of the most polite conversation with persons she had not previously met, she would curtly dismiss civility and tell the person that he was a fraud. The social standing and position of a person did not deter her. But, it was her innocence that stood out the most; and it brought tears to one’s eyes.

She was one of the most remarkable writers of the 20th century. Apart from Tagore, I am not aware of any other Indian author whose complete works were picked up for translation in Italian, German, French and several other languages. Major films were

made based on her stories by some of the greats in Indian cinema. But, she had her own assessment of her literary works; and never asked for praise. She deeply detested if anyone tried to praise her writings. If at all she had to listen to any praise, she used to remain completely silent and just kept staring at the speaker with a mix of a smile and a ‘not me’ sort of self-effacing gesture.

The desire to live forever was for fighting injustice. There was no instance of injustice that did not leave her infuriated. Her activism did not spring from ideological positions. Though profoundly political, she did not swear by any known political philosophy or movement. Her activism sprang out of an instinct that is difficult to pinpoint.

There was something strange about her ability to use the spoken word. Often she addressed audiences outside Bengal in Hindi. If one went by the rules of grammar, most of her sentences could be faulted. Yet, she managed to mesmerise audiences. She combined in her lectures a self-effacing humility and a steely determination, simplicity of words and complexity of ideas, leaving those who listened to her completely changed.

She had a strange appeal like Mahatma Gandhi had. It changed you altogether by a nameless force beyond words.

I met her when she was 72, already a legend in India and beyond, with a Magsaysay, a Jnanpith and a Padma Shri. Yet, as we came closer, as she developed the practice of spending a week or 10 days in Baroda, staying with my wife and me, we realised how difficult her life had been and still was. For instance, even at the age of 75, Mahasweta Devi did not have a house of her own. She continued to stay in a rented house near the Ballygunj station and had to climb the flight of winding stairs to get into her flat. Her marriage had not been easy, and her relationship with her son, a remarkably gifted poet, had not exactly been what it could be.

When she was with us, in the anonymity and privacy of her new-found home in Baroda, she came across as a lonely and a hugely misunderstood woman, much sinned against. Yet, she did not succumb to self-pity, nostalgia or fantasy.

She was a realist to the core, and a crusader first and a crusader forever.

— *GN Devy is a writer and cultural activist*

Safety challenge of charter flights

Deadly air crashes in the recent past have shifted focus from isolated failures to glaring systemic gaps

SHEKHAR SINGH

INDIA'S aviation safety record carries a visible contrast. Scheduled commercial airlines have maintained a relatively stable and consistent performance over the years, but the same assurance has not always extended to the non-scheduled and small aircraft segment, where lapses continue to surface with uncomfortable frequency. As the country emerges as the world's third-largest domestic aviation market, this divergence is becoming harder to ignore.

When two deadly crashes involving charter aircraft occur within a month, followed by another serious incident within hours, the focus shifts from isolated failures to the system itself and whether oversight has kept pace with expansion.

On January 28, a Learjet 45 crashed while attempting to land in Baramati, killing Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and four others. Less than a month later, on February 23, a Beechcraft King Air C90 air ambulance flying from Ranchi to Delhi crashed in Jharkhand's Chatra district, leaving all seven persons on board dead. Within a day, a helicopter operated by Pawan Hans ditched short of a helipad in the Andamans, though all passengers survived.

The pattern is difficult to ignore. While scheduled airline operations remain tightly regulated and largely stable, inconsistencies in safety practices among non-scheduled operator permit (NSOP) holders, including charter flights, private jets and air ambulances, have surfaced repeatedly.

The scale of the sector makes this divergence more consequential. The country today handles more than 300 million domestic passengers annually, while hundreds of non-scheduled aircraft operate across charter, corporate and medical services, often beyond the ecosystem of large airports.

The difference lies in how these systems function. Airlines operate on fixed routes, under layered supervision, with standardised procedures and infrastructure support. Non-scheduled operations are built for flexibility. Flights are often arranged at short notice, routes vary, and operational environments can shift significantly from one mission to the next.

In many cases, these flights operate into uncontrolled or minimally staffed airfields, where air traffic services are limited and real-time weather inputs may not always be available with the same reliability as major airports. Such conditions narrow operational margins and increase dependence on pilot judgment and procedural discipline.

Over time, this flexibility has exposed structural gaps. Aviation safety experts have pointed to inconsistencies in maintenance practices, gaps in crew training, and uneven risk assessment across operators. In certain cases, operational decisions may also be influenced by commercial pressures, particularly when flights involve urgent timelines or high-profile passengers.

As per industry experts, the imbalance is not incidental, it is structural. The recent sequence of incidents has also drawn attention to regulatory capacity. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), responsible for aviation safety oversight, has been operating with a significant shortage of technical personnel.

According to the latest data placed before Parliament, 787 posts remain vacant out of a sanctioned strength of 1,630, leaving the regulator to function at roughly half its intended capacity. Internal data has also pointed to gaps within critical divisions, including vacancies in the air safety wing and surveillance functions that are central to oversight.

The issue extends beyond a single agency. Data presented to Parliament shows that the Bureau of Civil Aviation



Security (BCAS) and air traffic control systems under the Airports Authority of India are also operating with substantial vacancies, pointing to wider capacity constraints across aviation safety and regulation.

This creates a clear systemic contradiction. India is expanding aviation infrastructure at speed, adding airports, routes and aircraft but the regulatory and safety architecture meant to oversee this growth is operating with limited capacity. The issue has been flagged repeatedly. A Parliamentary Standing Committee led by Sanjay Jha observed that aviation growth was outpacing oversight capacity, noting that the regulator was often overburdened and functioning in a reactive mode rather than a preventive one.

Institutional processes add another layer to the challenge. The DGCA functions under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, and recruitment for specialised roles is largely routed through the Union Public Service Commission, a process that can be slow for a sector requiring rapid scaling of technical expertise.

The result is uneven surveillance. With limited manpower, regulatory attention

tends to remain focused on scheduled airlines, where operations are larger and more visible. Smaller operators, despite operating in more variable and sometimes risk-prone environments, may not always receive the same level of continuous oversight.

The recent air ambulance crash has also highlighted limitations in onboard monitoring. Several smaller aircraft, with a maximum takeoff weight below 5,700 kg, are not mandated to carry advanced flight data or cockpit voice recorders, constraining both real-time monitoring and the depth of post-incident investigation.

In response to the recent incidents, the DGCA has moved to tighten oversight of non-scheduled operations. The regulator has ordered stricter audits, enhanced surveillance, and closer scrutiny of operators with past safety concerns. The warning follows back-to-back incidents, with officials indicating that non-compliance could lead to suspension or cancellation of permits, signalling a more immediate enforcement stance.

At the same time, investigations by the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) are underway into the recent crash-

es. These probes are expected to determine technical causes and assign accountability, while DGCA audits continue in parallel to identify systemic gaps.

Industry bodies have also advised operators to strengthen internal safety checks and reinforce standard operating procedures, particularly as operations expand into more demanding environments.

India's aviation sector is growing rapidly, but the recent sequence of incidents suggests that expansion, particularly in the non-scheduled segment, may not have been matched by a corresponding strengthening of oversight capacity. The numbers placed before Parliament make that gap difficult to overlook.

A regulator functioning with nearly half its sanctioned strength, alongside broader staffing shortages across safety systems, is expected to oversee an increasingly complex aviation network. It raises questions on whether oversight systems will evolve fast enough to match that shift, or continue to respond after incidents rather than staying ahead of them. The warning signs are no longer isolated, they are repeating.

A Learjet 45 crashed in Baramati on January 28, killing Maharashtra Deputy CM Ajit Pawar and four others.

REUTERS



A Beechcraft King Air C90 air ambulance crashed in Jharkhand on February 23, leaving all seven persons on board dead. PTI

Once the only Central undertaking manufacturing life-saving vaccines, the Himachal institute had its licence revoked for not meeting WHO norms in 2008. Its recent rollout of an indigenously developed vaccine shows its potential, and limitations

Ups and downs of Kasauli CRI

AMBIKA SHARMA

TWENTY years after the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended that countries should transition from the Tetanus Toxoid (TT) vaccine to the Tetanus and Adult Diphtheria (Td) vaccine, the Kasauli-based Central Research Institute (CRI) rolled out this indigenously developed vaccine on February 21. The development also put the spotlight on the institute — founded by David Semple, a British army officer and bacteriologist in 1905 — and its fluctuating fortunes.

Diphtheria is a potentially fatal upper-respiratory tract infection caused by the toxigenic strains of gram-positive *bacillus Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. Likewise, tetanus is also a major public health concern in India, having a high morbidity and mortality rate, prompting the government to launch this vaccine.

The National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has recommended replacing the TT vaccine with the Td vaccine in India's immunisation programme for all age groups, including pregnant women. "This transition is aimed at extending and strengthening protection against diphtheria in addition to tetanus, while sustaining the gains achieved in maternal and neonatal tetanus elimination and routine immunisation activities," an official of the CRI said.

The Kasauli institute started developing this vaccine in 2019. It successfully completed developmental studies, obtained a test licence, secured waivers for preclinical studies and Phase I, II, and III clinical trials, received marketing authorisation and licence for manufacture and sale, initiated commercial manufacturing, and obtained release from the Central Drugs Laboratory, Kasauli.

"Since it is a combination of existing components which are in use, comprising tetanus toxoid and a reduced dose of diphtheria toxoid, a waiver was sought for the clinical trials from the scientific committee as the trial itself takes years," said an official.

"The institute will supply 55 lakh doses to the universal immunisation programme (UIP) by April, with production expected to scale up progressively in subse-



The Central Research Institute in Kasauli has been a cornerstone of India's public health system, but the lack of adequate funding has stalled its progress over the years. TRIBUNE PHOTO

quent years," observed Dr Dimple Kasana, Director, CRI. This achievement, she said, marks a major milestone in advancing India's vaccine self-reliance "as this vaccine will play a critical role in protecting people against tetanus and diphtheria — both of which are serious yet preventable diseases".

Even though CRI is a key institute contributing to the national UIP, which aims at reducing under-5 mortality by providing free vaccinations, the lack of finances and the abysmally slow process to upgrade to the latest technologies have marred its development.

Considering the need to keep pace with advances in regulatory requirements and technological developments, CRI upgraded to the current-Good Manufacturing Practices (c-GMP) protocols leading to the production of the Diphtheria, Tetanus and Pertussis (DPT) group of vaccines in 2016. This was the last upgrade the institute could achieve.

Even as CRI prides itself as being the first Central Government institute to fulfil this stipulation, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare made adherence to the Revised Schedule M mandatory in December 2023. While transition to a higher technology or new product is abysmally slow at the institute, limited resources and other procedural hassles have stalled its plans on more than one occasion.

The institute now manufactures DPT vaccines for

the UIP but states are opting for the primary Pentavalent vaccine, which is a '5-in-1' injection protecting infants against five diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), Hepatitis B, and Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib).

The institute was supposed to supply the bulk of DPT vaccine components for HLL Biotech Limited (HBL), Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, to manufacture the integrated Pentavalent vaccines.

The project, conceived after CRI's revival in 2010, however, did not take off and the institute ended up supplying DPT vaccines as a booster dose for the UIP. It has manufactured 4.61 crore doses since 2019 and was unable to cater to the entire requirement. Plans to switch over to Pentavalent are yet again riddled with official red tape. "Since vaccines manufactured for the UIP are made available to the government at a much lower price than its manufacturing cost, the institute's financial distress continues to escalate," said an official.

For more than a century, CRI-Kasauli has been a cornerstone of India's public health system. The institute has been delivering life-saving vaccines, strengthening infectious disease surveillance, providing critical antisera for snakebite, rabies and diphtheria, and supplying DPT, TT and Japanese Encephalitis vaccines for national health programmes.

Its role in training microbiologists and supporting

national reference laboratories has been shaping India's scientific and public health landscape. It has 385 employees on its rolls at present.

The institute was originally established with a mandate of research work in the field of medical and public health, manufacturing of vaccines and antisera, human resource development, and to act as a national referral centre for public health problems.

CRI was once the lone public sector institute that manufactured yellow fever (YF) and Japanese Encephalitis (JE) vaccines before its manufacturing licence was suspended in 2008. A Ramadoss, the then Union Health and Family Welfare Minister, had suspended its licence along with that of public sector institutes like BCG Vaccine Laboratory and Pasteur Institute of India, Coonoor, on the grounds that they did not comply with WHO's norms of good manufacturing practices.

This was a key turning point in the history of CRI. Two years later, the Union government, exercising its powers under sub rules (3) of Rule 85 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945, ordered revocation of the suspension in February 2010. These institutes were directed to upgrade to the WHO standards within three years. The upgrade, however, was much delayed for want of adequate funds and this eliminated their market, which was captured by the private sector.

The production of vaccine for yellow fever, an acute mosquito-borne viral disease found in the tropical areas of Africa and South America, was suspended in 2011. Though the institute made efforts to revive its production, it failed to secure requisite funds.

It produced 35,000-40,000 doses as against the national annual demand of about 1.2 lakh doses before its production was halted. India now imports the entire stock. This vaccine is recommended for people going to Africa and South America. Since a large number of armed forces personnel, labourers and animal safari enthusiasts visit these countries, they have to get vaccinated before leaving the country.

The institute also manufactured the Japanese Encephalitis vaccine earlier in view of the hundreds of deaths reported annually from Uttar Pradesh and Assam. Its production was also halted due to glitches in the redundant machinery.

The first ever National Vaccine Policy 2011 strongly advocated the need for making the country self-reliant and self-sufficient in the development and manufacture of vaccines listed under UIP. With adequate funding and timely upgrade, the institute — credited with immunisation of troops during the Second World War — is confident that it can once again reach its prime and contribute optimally to the nation's healthcare.

Forex kitty drops \$2bn

■ **MUMBAI:** India's forex reserves dropped by \$2.119 billion to \$723.60 billion during the week ended February 20, the RBI said on Friday. In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had jumped by \$8.66 billion to a new all-time high of \$725.72 billion. PTI

Sebi-Canada meet

■ **NEW DELHI:** Sebi chief Tuhin Kanta Pandey met Canada's minister of finance Francois-Philippe Champagne to discuss ways to facilitate greater institutional investments and strengthen regulatory collaboration. PTI

Rare earth mining

■ **NEW DELHI:** Andhra Pradesh plans to open up its mineral-rich coastline for large-scale rare earth and titanium-bearing beach sand mining, in a strategic move aimed at reducing India's dependence on Chinese imports and building a domestic value chain for critical minerals. PTI

SpaceX IPO

■ **MEXICO CITY:** Elon Musk's SpaceX is aiming to file confidentially for an initial public offering that could value the rocket and satellite company at more than \$1.75 trillion, Bloomberg News reported on Friday. The filing could come as soon as March. Reuters

BOTTOM LINERS



"It's our new interactive robotic toy dog...instead of biting the mailman, it delivers a mild electroshock that he won't forget."

“ We don't need it, we don't want it, and will not do business with them again!

US President Donald Trump on cutting ties with Anthropic



Amodei reluctant to cross 'red lines'

US agencies set to blacklist Anthropic

Washington: US President Donald Trump said on Friday he is directing the government to stop work with Anthropic, and the Pentagon said it would declare the start-up a supply-chain risk, dealing a major blow to the artificial intelligence lab after a showdown about technology guardrails.

Trump added there would be a six-month phase-out for the Defence Department and other agencies that use the company's products. If Anthropic does not help with the transition, Trump said, he would use "the Full Power of the Presidency to make them comply, with major civil and criminal consequences".

The actions mark an extraordinary rebuke by the US against one of the premier companies that has kept it in the lead on national security-critical AI, threatening to give Anthropic a pariah status that Washington until now had reserved for enemy suppliers.

The moves further set a precedent that US law alone would constrain how AI is deployed on the battlefield.

Dario Amodei, in an interview with CBS News, said that Anthropic sought to draw "red lines" in the government's use of its technology because "we believe that crossing those lines is contrary to American values, and we wanted to stand up for American values".

Anthropic laid out these "red lines" as involvement in autonomous kinetic operations in which AI tools make final military targeting deci-



Dario Amodei in Bengaluru earlier this month. (Reuters)

sions without human intervention, and the use of Anthropic tools for mass domestic surveillance constitutes another red line, the source said.

Anthropic said it would challenge any risk designation in court by the Department of Defence, which the Trump administration has renamed the Department of War.

Late on Friday, rival OpenAI, which is backed by Microsoft, Amazon and others, announced its own deal to deploy technology in the Defence Department's classified network. CEO Sam Altman on X said the Pentagon shared its principles for human responsibility over weapon systems and for having no mass US surveillance.

"We put them into our agreement," Altman said of the points. "We also will build technical safeguards to ensure our models behave as they should, which the DoW also wanted."

It was not immediately clear whether these contractual details differed from the red lines proposed by Anthropic.

Silicon Valley backs AI firm

SHEERA FRENKEL, CADE METZ AND JULIAN E. BARNES

San Francisco: More than 100 employees at Google signed a petition this week calling on Anthropic to "refuse to comply" with the Pentagon on some uses of artificial intelligence in military operations.

Employees at Amazon, Google and Microsoft urged their leaders in a separate open letter on Thursday to "hold the line" against the Pentagon.

And technologists at companies across Silicon Valley said that AI should not be used for purposes such as mass surveillance of Americans.

Anthropic, Google, OpenAI and xAI have been working with the Pentagon in a pilot programme to bring AI to the Defence Department. As the Pentagon ramped up its threats against Anthropic, other Silicon Valley workers saw how the situation could apply to them. If Anthropic was cut off from government business for not capitulating to the Pentagon's demands, the same tactics could be used on them.

Employees at large AI companies pointed out that if the Pentagon carried out its threat, nothing was stopping it from using the same tactics to force other companies to work with it. New York Times News Service

Strait of Hormuz in chokehold

OUR BUREAU

Calcutta: The strategic Strait of Hormuz has snapped sharply into focus after US President Donald Trump followed through on his threat to strike Iran when talks failed to produce an agreement to curb Tehran's nuclear programme, raising fears of disruption to global oil flows and renewed risks for energy-importing countries such as India.

The risk is already beginning to affect shipping patterns. A number of oil tankers are avoiding the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow shipping lane linking the oil-rich Persian Gulf to the open seas — with some shipowners adopting a caution-first approach after the US and Israel bombed Iran.

While the waterway remains open and some vessels continue to transit the route, tankers are piling up both inside and outside the entrance, according to vessel-tracking data compiled by Bloomberg. Tankers hauled about 16.7 million barrels a day of crude and condensate through the strait in 2025.



An oil tanker passing through the Strait of Hormuz. (Reuters)

An official from the European Union's naval mission Aspidos told Reuters on Saturday that vessels have been receiving VHF transmission from Iran's Revolutionary Guards saying "no ship is allowed to pass the Strait of Hormuz". Iran, however, has not formally confirmed any such order.

Tehran has for years threatened to block the narrow waterway in retaliation for any attack on the Islamic Republic. For Tehran, one possible response to the strikes could be an attempt to block or effectively shut the Strait that carries about a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade. Any disruption to the passage used

by tankers transporting crude and liquefied natural gas from West Asia to China, Europe, the US and other major consumers could trigger a sharp spike in oil prices and destabilise the global economy.

A prolonged closure of the waterway would represent a worst-case scenario for energy markets. Muyu Xu, senior crude analyst at Kpler Ltd., had earlier estimated that even a one-day disruption could push oil prices to between \$120 and \$150 a barrel. Brent crude, the global benchmark, was trading at around \$73 a barrel on Saturday.

However, any move to close the Strait would also hurt Iran's own economy by restricting its petroleum exports. A disruption to oil flows from the region could also strain Tehran's ties with China, one of the largest buyers of Iranian crude.

Risk for India

India's oil supply chain faces renewed uncertainty following the developments in West Asia with analysts estimating that

a blockade of the Strait could affect as much as 50 per cent of India's monthly crude imports.

"A disruption at the Strait of Hormuz would have immediate and significant implications for both India and global oil markets, as roughly 2.6 million barrels per day of India's crude imports transit the Strait, primarily from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait," said Sumit Ritolia, lead research analyst for refining and modelling at Kpler, told Moneycontrol.

Kpler data show that about 50 per cent of India's monthly crude imports passed through the Strait during January-February, up from about 40 per cent in November-December 2025.

Industry sources said that in the event of a Hormuz blockade, India could seek supplies routed through bypass infrastructure such as Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline to the Red Sea and the UAE's Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline to Fujairah. However, Ritolia cautioned that limited capacity and producer priorities would only partially offset disruptions.

Iran strife to spark metal rally

OUR BUREAU

Calcutta: Gold and silver prices are gearing up to reach their January highs, bolstered by recent geopolitical events as Iran, and Israel and the US on the other side, exchange missile attacks.

Reports, citing strategic analysts, pinned the focus on Iran's nuclear programme, with both US and Israeli leaders confronting Iran's expanding military and nuclear capabilities, which boosted the risk premium in precious metals.

According to Vandana

Bharti, AVP, commodity research at SMC Global Securities, MCX futures gold can touch ₹1.70 lakh per 10 grams of 24-carat purity, and silver at ₹3 lakh in the short term.

On Comex, spot silver was up 7.85 per cent to 93.82 per ounce, and gold at \$5,296 per ounce.

Bharti reasons that gold tends to rise quickly as it is seen as a store of value when the world feels unstable. Silver follows, though its moves can be a bit more volatile because it has both investment and industrial demand



SAVE HAVEN DEMAND

"In the short term, prices often spike as headlines break and traders rush to hedge risk. Over time, however, markets settle, and prices may pull back if tensions ease. So the impact is often sharp and emotional at first, driven by fear and protec-

tion, before fundamentals and broader economic factors take back control," said Bharti.

Market analysts in India are keeping a close watch on developments in West Asia.

"We would expect the ongoing rally in oil, gold and silver to extend. For India, the impact is typically magnified: higher crude oil prices widen the current account deficit, stoke domestic inflation, pressure the rupee, and could lead to FII outflows as global investors reduce risk exposure," said Nachiketa Sawrikar, fund manager, Artha Bharat Global Multiplier Fund.

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ROGUE FIRE

For the second time in eight months, Israel and the United States of America bombed Iran even as diplomatic negotiations were going on, triggering a fierce response from Tehran that threatens to set all of the Middle East on fire. The missiles fired by Israel and the US hit multiple Iranian cities, including several leadership sites in Tehran. The US president, Donald Trump, said his aim was to eliminate the alleged threat posed by Iran to America, its troops, and its allies. But he did not stop there and went on to indicate that the campaign was also targeted at decapitating the leadership of the Islamic republic. When the bombs stop, the people of Iran, Mr Trump said, would be able to reclaim their government from the current leaders. Iran appears to have interpreted Mr Trump's words as a call for regime change and unleashed its own fury on a scale never seen before. Within minutes, Iranian missiles had hit Israel and a series of countries that host US bases — Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — killing at least one person in Abu Dhabi.

While robust missile defence systems have so far limited the damage caused by Iranian missiles in the broader region, the extent of damage and death in Iran itself from the American and Israeli bombardment is unclear. What is evident is that this is not a repetition of the June conflict that involved these three countries. Unsurprisingly, if Iran believes that the very existence of the Islamic re-

public is at stake, it will not hold back. With multiple countries now pulled into the conflict, it is unclear who can mediate between them — and how. If Iran decides to mine or block the Strait of Hormuz, that could send global oil prices soaring. This will be of particular concern for oil-importing nations such as India. Meanwhile, hundreds of flights have been cancelled as the Middle East's airspace was shut entirely on Saturday, leaving thousands of passengers stranded.

Mr Trump claimed that his bombing campaign against Iran in June 2025 had decimated the country's nuclear capabilities.

The attack on Iran by the US and Israel and Tehran's response threaten to ignite the Middle East

Yet on Saturday, he claimed his new war was aimed at stopping Iran from building a nuclear bomb. Both of the claims cannot be true. Oman, the principal mediator between the US and Iran, has said that Tehran had agreed to dilute its enriched uranium to levels comparable with natural uranium and that it would not again build a stockpile of uranium. These are major concessions that go well beyond anything Iran has previously accepted. That the US still attacked will raise questions about whether the negotiations were just an act of deceit. The attacks coming less than 48 hours after Prime Minister Narendra Modi left Israel will raise questions about whether Israel's leadership had forewarned him about the impending attack. What is not in doubt is that an already volatile region has been pushed off the edge because the US wanted to do so. That is power. It is also a crime.

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SCRIPSI

'The worm probably knows that if it comes apart, both halves will start growing separately. Space. But we don't know how much it hurts. And we don't know, either, if the worm is afraid it's going to hurt. But anyway, it does have a feeling that something sharp is getting closer and closer all the time. This is instinct. And I can tell you this much, it's not fair to say it's too little, or it only has a digestive canal, and so that's why it doesn't hurt. I am sure it does hurt, but maybe only for a second.'

TOVE JANSSON

India's growth story will be tested by a new world order

Economic muscle

RUDRA CHATTERJEE

We achieved freedom through moral authority. A generation of our countrymen sacrificed careers, comfort, and even their lives to restore to our nation its dignity. But sovereignty must be reinforced by economic authority.

In a world riven by great power rivalry, strong nations steer outcomes. National strength is built on a productive economy. The capacity to produce and innovate, and to supply goods and services the world demands at scale and at competitive cost, is at the heart of sovereignty. Without it, nations are reduced to markets to be competed over.

Since 1991, India has made remarkable progress. Our economy has grown from about \$300 billion to nearly \$4 trillion. Poverty has fallen. Infrastructure has improved. A large, middle-income, consumer class has emerged. India now negotiates as the world's fourth-largest economy. This transformation cannot be taken for granted. At Independence, our literacy was below 20% and life expectancy was barely thirty years. After nearly two centuries of colonial rule, during which India's share of global output fell sharply and income growth stagnated, the foundations of a modern economy had to be built almost from scratch. To start from those conditions and become the world's fastest growing economy reflects both the ambition of the State and the steady determination of hundreds of millions of citizens who chose work over despair.

Yet that progress now meets a changed global environment. After the Second World War, the world saw two grand economic experiments. The centrally-planned model promised equality but failed to deliver sustained prosperity. The alternative, constructed through the GATT and, later, the WTO, encouraged rules-based trade and gradual integration into global markets. Many countries that embraced this system sustained growth of 7% or more, doubling their economies within a decade. Living standards rose across much of the world.

That architecture is now under strain. WTO norms have weakened. Trade relationships are being renegotiated. Industrial policy has returned as a central tool of national strategy. India enters this moment stronger than before, but we no longer enjoy

Rudra Chatterjee is Chairman of Obeete, Managing Director of Luxmi Tea, and writes on finance and economic issues

the latitude once given to low-income countries. Higher Indian tariffs are being challenged, and asymmetries are narrowing. We are now a major economy that must compete on efficiency.

Recent free trade agreements with OECD economies opened access to large markets and facilitated deeper supply chain integration. But they are only a gift for the prepared. When trade barriers fall, investment flows to countries that combine price, quality, reliability, and scale. India must navigate these headwinds to grow.

India's wages are low relative to developed economies. This creates scope for labour-intensive manufacturing. But competitiveness depends on value added per worker, not wage levels alone. In textiles, labour productivity in Bangladesh exceeds that of many Indian units, reflecting stronger production discipline. In furniture, Vietnam's higher mechanisation and tighter workflows generate greater value per employee. In both these labour-intensive sectors, skill depth and process capability remain our challenges.

Beyond labour, every manufactured product accumulates the factor costs of land and capital, and that of energy and logistics, compounding from the factory gate to the shipping container.

Industrial land remains costly and difficult to assemble at scale. Even building a factory requires steel and cement. Their prices, influenced by tariff structures and limited competition, raise the cost of industrial buildings and warehousing. The fixed cost of establishing production is therefore higher.

Cheap and stable energy is the bedrock of manufacturing. To secure supply, Coal India Limited was formed in 1975 as a State-owned monopoly. It grew into the world's largest coal producer and generated substantial profits. Yet, insulation from competition led to inefficient pricing. Electricity pricing compounded this. Long-standing cross-subsidisation, with manufacturing paying higher tariffs to support agriculture and households, keeps industrial power costs elevated relative to several export-oriented economies.

Access to affordable capital is equally vital. Bank nationalisation in 1969 sought to widen credit access and direct capital toward development priorities with uneven outcomes. More recently, recognition of non-performing assets and recapitalisation of public sector banks strengthened balance sheets and restored credit disci-



pline. Lending portfolios are healthier today. Yet long-term industrial finance remains largely confined to large enterprises, and the cost of capital still exceeds what manufacturers pay in competing countries.

India has taken genuine strides in physical infrastructure. Freight corridors, port modernisation, and highway expansion have reduced transit times and improved connectivity. But infrastructure gains are fully realised only when capital is available to use them.

Upstream industries, those supplying industrial inputs, determine competitiveness as much as any other factor. An apparel exporter competing globally carries the cost of protected inputs in every shipment, often paying more at home than rivals pay abroad. National champions play a vital role in industrialisation, but that role carries obligations. POSCO in Korea supplies steel at globally competitive prices while investing deeply in materials technology. BASF in Germany drives chemical innovation that lowers costs across its *Mittelstand* industrial base. TSMC in Taiwan turned semiconductor into a source of national advantage rather than a burden on downstream producers.

Protection must be contingent on performance: competing globally, investing in research and development, and strengthening industries that depend on them. When upstream firms treat the domestic market as captive, every exporter bears the cost.

India has long grappled with upstream industries. In the 1940s, industrialists including Tata, Birla, and Bajaj collaborated on the Bombay Plan, a remarkable document where leading capitalists invited the State to control the commanding heights of the economy. The reasoning was pragmatic: private capital alone could not build foundational industries at the required scale. The State stepped in and built steel, coal, chemicals, and capital goods under public ownership. Capacity expanded without the efficiency that competition imposes.

P.C. Mahalanobis deepened this approach in the Second Five-Year

Plan. Using input-output analysis, he placed capital goods and heavy industry at the centre of development strategy. The logic was coherent: build the machines that make machines. What followed, however, was a protected industrial structure that grew without being benchmarked against global standards.

More recently, the Production Linked Incentive Scheme and Make in India have linked support to output and investment rather than ownership alone. These are meaningful departures. Yet private sector research and development spending remain below those of leading manufacturing nations. As automation and digital systems expand, technology intensity will matter enormously.

Other countries pursued different paths. South Korea, through institutions such as the Korea Development Bank, directed credit to favoured industries and built powerful *chaebols*, conglomerate groups that were not without contradictions but became formidable export engines. Japan's ministry of international trade and industry coordinated capital, technology licensing, and sectoral priorities with discipline. In both cases, State support was tied to export performance. Protection was the means, not the end.

India followed a different course. Protection focused on self-sufficiency and import substitution rather than building industries able to compete unaided in global markets. The State often acted as proprietor rather than strategist, and export discipline was not the condition of support.

Countries that have turned comparative advantage into sustained prosperity treated upstream competitiveness not as entitlement but as discipline. That is the standard India's next phase of industrial policy must meet.

Trade agreements create opportunity. They do not guarantee success. In a world where preferences are narrowing and competition is intensifying, countries that improve productivity and cost discipline will determine the terms of trade. Those that do not will find the terms decided for them.

In Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Athenians observe that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. India's founders rejected that logic through moral authority. Our generation must reject it through economic strength, not by protecting industries from competition but by building industries capable of winning it. That was the dream of our freedom fighters: not merely sovereignty, but the capacity to determine our own terms.

DELHI DIARIES

Clean chit

The discharge of the former Delhi chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal, and his deputy, Manish Sisodia, in the excise policy case coincided with a significant development in Maharashtra. A special court in Mumbai accepted a closure report in the alleged Rs 25,000-crore cooperative bank case involving the Maharashtra deputy CM, Sunetra Pawar, her late husband, Ajit Pawar, and companies linked to them. While in Delhi it was a trial court that discharged the Aam Aadmi Party leaders, in Maharashtra, the state's economic offences wing itself filed the closure report, stating that no criminal offence was made out. The probe pertained to allegations that cooperative banks had sanctioned large loans to sugar factories without government guarantees or adequate collateral security. The acceptance of the closure report lent fresh ammunition to Opposition parties, which have frequently accused the Bharatiya Janata Party of operating a political 'washing machine'. The BJP had earlier mounted sharp attacks on Ajit Pawar, branding him a "corrupt" leader back in 2019. However, the BJP fell silent after Pawar split the Nationalist Congress Party in 2023 and joined the BJP-led Mahayuti. The development comes as a major relief for Sunetra Pawar. Political observers believe the reprieve could further consolidate her alignment with the BJP-led coalition.

New role

The recent nomination of Gaurav Gogoi, the deputy leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha and Assam PCC president, as the president of the parliamentary team to engage with the Philippines by the Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, seems to have caught the BJP and Assam CM, Himanta Biswa Sarma, off guard. It has all but taken the heat off Gogoi which had been generated with the "he is a Pakistani agent" narrative. A few days ahead of the nomination, the CM had announced plans to hand over the case to the Union ministry for further investigation. A special in-

vestigation team of the police had investigated the case. The CM, the junior foreign minister, Pabitra Margherita, and state BJP leadership have tried to dismiss Gogoi's selection to head a parliamentary group as nothing out of the ordinary. For the Opposition Congress, Gogoi's inclusion in one of the 64 parliamentary teams has come as a huge relief, especially for the grassroots workers fighting the 'Pak agent' narrative since the *panchayat* poll held last year. Congress insiders say that the nomination was like an 'out of syllabus' question for the BJP given their muted counter.

Mysterious silence

Questions are being raised over the silence of the AAP member of Parliament, Raghav Chadha, on the liquor policy case being quashed by a special court. The case was a milestone around the party's neck and



Ajit Pawar: image cleansed

to everyone's delight, instantly connecting with the people around him. A video of him relishing *gupchups* went viral. After returning from an operation in Mumbai in July last year, he had mostly confined himself to Naveen Niwas. But now he has begun stepping out and meeting people. The five-time CM is sending a clear message — he is fit and fine.

Unfiltered feedback

The one-on-one sessions that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra had with Congress MLAs and district presidents during her recent visit to poll-bound Assam as chairperson of the screening committee to select candidates for the assembly elections have ensured unfiltered feedback. "We don't know what will be the eventual outcome but she has received unfiltered feedback on what is ailing our party in Assam and what needs to be done — whether it is distribution of tickets or about the state leaders putting self before party or pre-poll alliances," one of them said.

This kind of exchange has never happened before in the common refrain where grassroots leaders have spoken without any fear. There was no holding back since the overall mood within the state unit was one of gloom after the loss in the assembly bypolls, the *panchayat* polls, floundering alliance talks and the departure of Bhupen Kumar Borah to the BJP. The impact was visible. Gandhi Vadra is ensuring that screening committee members visit all districts and meet a cross-section of leaders from across Assam to get first-hand knowledge about ticket aspirants. The Congress general-secretary has clearly hit the ground running.

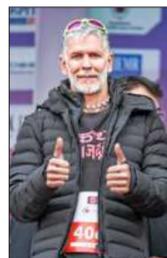
almost all its members celebrated the court's decision. Chadha, once a poster boy of the party, has remained aloof since before the Lok Sabha polls of 2024. He has another two years left in the Rajya Sabha.

Out and about

Gupchup is a delicacy that every Odia relishes, and the former CM and present leader of the Opposition in that state, Naveen Patnaik, is no exception. While attending a marriage ceremony last week, Patnaik headed straight to the *gupchup* counter and asked for only two. He enjoyed them

Footnote

The actor and fitness enthusiast, Milind Soman, was in Kerala and caught everyone unawares running 20 kilometres barefoot to show that the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board-sponsored Hill Highway is of world-class standard. A Rs 203.36 crore project, the 1,332 km-long Hill Highway between Thiruvananthapuram and Kasaragod spreads across 13 out of Kerala's 14 districts. KIIFB has claimed that its rare and eco-friendly technique enhances durability and also strengthens the condition of the road.



Historic nomination

Sir — Political parties often speak of diversity, yet representation remains limited. The decision of the Trinamool Congress to nominate Menaka Guruswamy to the Rajya Sabha signals a change. She will become the first openly queer member of Parliament in India.

This development matters because visibility influences public understanding. Section 377 once affected many citizens. Its removal by the Supreme Court was significant. A lawmaker who argued that case may help Parliament approach rights-based issues for the queer community with clarity and responsibility. The TMC must be lauded for this.

Sayantana Basu, Calcutta

Shallow efforts

Sir — The replacement of Edwin Lutyens's bust with that of Chakravarti Rajagopalachari at Rashtrapati Bhavan deserves calm reflection ("Colonial hangover", Feb 27). Rajagopalachari's contribution to the freedom struggle and his service to newly-independent India merit recognition. Yet framing the replacement of a bust as decisive decolonisation seems excessive. True decolonisation concerns how institutions function and how citizens are treated. Symbols matter, but they cannot substitute reform. Public debate should move beyond celebration and outrage and focus on whether power respects constitutional rights and democratic accountability.

O. Prasada Rao, Hyderabad

Sir — T.M. Krishna has rightly highlighted that the debate over decolonisation has become unnecessarily polarised in India. This often makes attempts at decolonisation symbolic. Recent changes in criminal law illustrate the limits of symbolic reform. The Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure were replaced by the Bharatiya

Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, respectively. But legal scholars have noted that several provisions remain substantially similar, while some raise fresh civil liberties concerns. Replacing statutes does not automat-



An effort to decolonise?

ically transform the relationship between the State and citizens. Decolonisation should strengthen safeguards, limit arbitrary power and enhance transparency in practice.

Prerona Roy, Calcutta

Guards up

Sir — Cervical cancer remains a serious public health challenge in India with one death reported every eight minutes. Most cases are linked to the human papillomavirus. The decision to provide a single dose of

Gardasil-4 to 14-year-olds through government centres is thus a welcome step. Evidence from the World Health Organization supports the effectiveness of a single dose for this age group. The priority now should be clear communication so that parents understand safety, eligibility and long-term benefits.

Ireima Imsong, Imphal, Manipur

Sir — The proposed roll out of the HPV vaccine offers a practical opportunity to reduce preventable deaths among women. Cost has long restricted access in private clinics where multiple doses are prescribed. A publicly-funded, single-dose strategy lowers this barrier. International studies indicate that high coverage benefits even those who remain unvaccinated. The immediate focus should be on ensuring that registration through the U-win portal remains simple and accessible, especially in rural and low-income areas.

K. Agarwal, Calcutta

Stay prepared

Sir — The tremors felt across Calcutta following the 5.5 magnitude earthquake near Jessore and Khulna in Bangladesh are a reminder of the region's seismic vulnerability. Even without immediate reports of casualties, the panic among residents was evident.

Romana Ahmed, Calcutta

Letters should be sent to: The Telegraph, 6 Prafulla Sarkar Street, Calcutta 700001, tedit@abp.in

الحُبُّ هُوَ ذِكَاةُ الْمَسَافَةِ
(أحلام مستغانمي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Love is about the cleverness of distances.
Ahlam Mosteghanemi
(Contemporary Algerian poet and writer)

Opinion

Diplomacy, not Netanyahu, should guide Trump on Iran

OSAMA AL-SHARIF



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The region could be days, maybe even hours, from a major conflagration — the biggest since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The third round of critical US-Iran indirect talks in Geneva on Thursday has been described as a last-ditch chance to reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear program and other issues. But despite all the warning signs that war may be imminent, there are indications that a diplomatic breakthrough is still possible.

The reality is that, despite the mixed signals and extreme rhetoric from President Donald Trump and his close aides, no one in the region has the appetite for yet another war — one that could last weeks or even months and have catastrophic consequences. No one, that is, except Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

The region has been on edge for weeks, since the US amassed a large naval flotilla in the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean

and moved more than 150 military aircraft to bases in the region. This is a markedly different situation from last June's 12-day confrontation between the US and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran on the other.

The irony is that a deal is possible — one that spares the region an open-ended war, provides guarantees that Iran's nuclear program will be monitored and that uranium enrichment will be severely curtailed. According to Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, a deal is "within reach, but only if diplomacy is given priority." That is the key to defusing the crisis.

Trump's State of the Union address this week left observers guessing. He accused Iran of working to acquire nuclear weapons and developing long-range ballistic missiles that threaten Europe and could reach the US. But he also said his preference remains a diplomatic solution.

The massive deployment of US military assets in the region is baffling, as it could

indicate that one of the White House's objectives is regime change.

There are significant legal, political and military constraints that could limit Trump's ability to wage an extended war. Unlike last June's targeted strikes, a full-scale assault seeking to decapitate the Iranian regime would require congressional approval. Iran has not declared war on the US and has provided assurances that it has no intention to develop nuclear weapons. It has hinted it would be willing to reduce enrichment activities to symbolic levels.

A protracted assault would also deplete Washington's critical supply of missiles and munitions, according to US military analysts. Meanwhile, Iran has reportedly acquired advanced Russian and Chinese radar and antimissile defense systems, making it far riskier for US and Israeli aircraft to operate as they did last June.

America's allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, have already

declared they will not allow their airspace to be used by either party in a military confrontation. Iran has threatened to target US bases, Israel and American naval assets in the Arabian Sea.

Trump has prided himself on ending wars and avoiding starting new ones. He should be wary of Netanyahu's efforts to shift US objectives from securing a deal to pursuing regime change. The Islamic Republic has a troubled, controversial history with its neighbors, but addressing those concerns requires diplomacy. The 2023 China-mediated normalization between Riyadh and Tehran demonstrated that dialogue is possible. Iran is not Venezuela and a major US-Israeli attack would trigger a chain reaction that could engulf the entire region.

Voices within the Trump administration and Congress are pushing for regime change. Their dangerous rhetoric must not drive Trump's decision. If diplomacy is his preferred option, then it must be given the space to work.

There are significant legal, political and military constraints that could limit Trump's ability to wage an extended war



Officials say policymakers want to test Europe's ability to respond to a crisis without the help of Washington

Optics of US' NATO training absence do not look good

LUKE COFFEY



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The main phase of a large-scale NATO exercise called Steadfast Dart 2026 began last week. This exercise, billed as the alliance's largest for the year, involves more than 10,000 troops from 11 NATO nations. The focus of the military exercise is Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region, an area that has become more contentious since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance.

The exercise also comes at a time when transatlantic relations have been strained over issues such as trade disputes and American calls to annex Greenland. In light of the geopolitical circumstances, there are three notable observations about this exercise that set it apart from other NATO exercises in recent years.

The first is the limited US participation in the training event. This is the first large-scale NATO training event in which there is no

sizable or significant US military presence since President Barack Obama's decision to withhold full American participation in the 2013 Steadfast Jazz exercise. At the time, this was thought to be because Obama was shifting US focus away from Europe as part of the so-called pivot to Asia, meaning he showed little interest in bolstering America's role inside NATO.

Officials say the lack of US participation in this month's exercise is because policymakers want to test Europe's ability to respond to a crisis without the help of Washington. While there is probably some truth in that, it is likely that the lack of an American military role in this year's exercise is part of what has become a repeated pattern by the second Trump administration of reducing America's role in the alliance.

For example, at the last NATO defense ministerial meeting, the US defense secretary, who normally attends, did not show up and instead delegated a more junior official. There is even talk of the US relinquishing the

role of Supreme Allied Commander Europe, a position it has held exclusively since the beginning of the Cold War.

The second observation is the outsized role played by Türkiye. It is the second-largest troop-contributing country after Germany, having sent more than 2,000 to the exercise. Notably, the Turkish navy's amphibious assault ship TCG Anadolu is playing a leading role in the maritime component of the exercise and has even sailed into the Baltic Sea, operating off the coast of Latvia. This marks the first time the Turkish navy has operated in the Baltic Sea at this scale.

What is most interesting is how Türkiye's participation is being framed.

Ankara prides itself on balancing its relations between both Ukraine and Russia within the framework of its NATO obligations. While it participates in NATO operations and exercises, it often does so quietly. This time, however, even President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly commented on

Türkiye's role in the exercise on social media, signaling a willingness to highlight Ankara's contribution.

The third observation concerns geography and logistics. Many might think that the distances across Europe may not be very far compared to traveling within other continents. However, this is a misconception. Because the focus is on the Baltic Sea, countries such as Türkiye and Spain have had to travel significant distances to participate, serving as a useful test of different European countries' ability to project power in the transatlantic region.

While the Trump administration's calls for Europe to do more without the US may have been one of the drivers behind the lack of American participation in Steadfast Dart 2026, America's absence also sends political signals, whether intended or not. In the current geopolitical environment, the optics of nonparticipation matter. And at a time when transatlantic unity is needed, the optics of America's absence do not look good.

Opinion

Development is the ultimate expression of hard power

ALEXANDER DE CROO



Alexander De Croo, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, is a former prime minister of Belgium. @ProjectSyndicate

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This year's Munich Security Conference brought plenty of talk about geopolitics, spheres of influence, the future of NATO and defense budgets. But as much as these debates matter, they no longer define the full spectrum of power. In today's fractured world, security is not just about tanks and treaties. It also depends on strong and trusted partnerships, resilient systems and functioning institutions. These are what equip societies to withstand shocks.

Understood in these terms, international development is not just a form of soft power (exerting influence through persuasion and attraction). It is hard power — and our most effective preemptive strike against future threats.

Too many leaders fail to recognize that development is foundational to security itself. They regard development assistance as charity, a luxury compared to the necessity of "real" defense work. But this mindset undermines stability by blinding policymakers to the many drivers of conflict. The longer we ignore the root causes of violence,

the more we will pay in lives, taxes and forsaken prosperity.

It costs far less to prevent crises than to manage their consequences. If we elevate fighter jets as "strategic" assets but dismiss a functioning education system as "mere aid" and if we always find money for missiles but not for water or electricity, we are not protecting our societies. We are weakening them.

Yes, defense spending matters and increased military investment is a legitimate policy response in today's world. But without parallel investment in development, it is only half a security strategy. Even if you are more concerned with realpolitik than with human welfare, the data makes this clear.

A recent analysis found that every dollar invested in development and conflict prevention could save up to \$103 in future crisis-related costs — from military operations to humanitarian responses to the effects of economic disruption. That is not soft power. It is the highest return you will find in any global security portfolio and thus the most rational investment choice that governments can make.

Whether it is military intervention,

economic fallout or emergency relief, we always pay for what we failed to prevent. Airstrikes and sanctions are not a solution to violent extremism, irregular migration or state collapse. Such problems are best contained — and ultimately prevented — when those on the front lines have a future they can look forward to. That means education for their children, reliable electricity, basic services and a job that pays enough to escape poverty.

If development remains an afterthought in our security doctrine, we will keep losing. We must stop pretending that drones can solve every problem and acknowledge the limits of traditional military force. Consider the Lake Chad Basin, where years of armed interventions failed to stop extremist violence. Military means achieved little because the jobless remained jobless, services remained broken and the state remained absent. The brush was cleared but the soil remained uncultivated. Not until development efforts accelerated could the region's thousands of displaced people return to their homes and rebuild their livelihoods.

Similarly, in parts of Iraq once gutted by

war, millions of people have returned, not just because the bullets stopped but because the electricity came back on and schools and hospitals reopened. Societies begin to heal when development efforts do not merely manage displacement but give people a reason to stay.

Likewise, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western investment in democratic institutions, infrastructure and economic resilience

helped rebuild post-communist societies and laid the foundations for a new era of prosperity. What mattered was not speed but sequencing: institutions must come before liberalization, social safety nets must accompany markets and political inclusion must come alongside economic

reform. Where that balance was respected, stability followed. Where it was ignored, vulnerability filled the gap.

Development is the ultimate expression of hard power, allowing us to prevent crises that we would otherwise need to respond to. It is our global community's first line of defense. Violence becomes far less likely when states can deliver basic services, when young people have economic prospects and when institutions are seen as legitimate.

Too many leaders regard development assistance as charity, a luxury compared to the necessity of "real" defense work

Societies begin to heal when development efforts do not merely manage displacement but give people a reason to stay

Bangladesh election could be a turning point for Rohingya

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM



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Bangladesh's 2026 election has been widely described as a democratic reset after years of political turbulence. For more than 1.1 million Rohingya refugees confined to camps around Cox's Bazar, it could also represent something else: an opportunity. Whether that opportunity is realized will depend on whether the new government treats the Rohingya as a liability to be managed or as a strategic and moral issue requiring long-term leadership.

The Rohingya have long been, as journalist Shafiqur Rahman put it, "perennial pawns in Bangladesh's politics." Across party lines, the promise of repatriation has often functioned less as a concrete plan and more as a political instrument — useful for rallying domestic audiences, appealing to donors or signaling diplomatic resolve. But elections can alter incentives. A government with a fresh mandate has more political space to innovate than one clinging on for survival.

The scale of the challenge is undeniable. More than 1.1 million Rohingya remain in Bangladesh, most having fled Myanmar's 2017 campaign of mass violence, which has been recognized by the US as genocide.

International funding has declined significantly in recent years, forcing cuts to food rations and basic services. The camps are heavily securitized, movement is restricted and formal employment remains prohibited. A generation of Rohingya children is growing up without accredited education or legal status.

In this context, repatriation remains the stated goal of all major political actors. Bangladeshi National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman recently described the crisis as "like a cancer in Bangladesh's body," requiring long-term treatment. The metaphor reflects a widely held view that the refugee situation is unsustainable. But it also underscores a deeper truth: No Bangladeshi government can indefinitely absorb a population of this size without structural consequences.

The question, then, is not whether repatriation should be pursued. It should. The Rohingya belong in Myanmar, with citizenship, rights and security. The real issue is how that objective is framed and operationalized.

The returning Bangladesh Nationalist Party has revived claims that the party's earlier governments managed repatriation successfully in the 1990s. That history is

complicated and human rights groups documented serious concerns about coercion at the time. But what matters now is not historical score-settling. What matters is whether the new administration recognizes that today's Rakhine State is profoundly different. Myanmar remains unstable. The junta continues to deny Rohingya identity in proceedings at the International Court of Justice. Meanwhile, the Arakan Army now controls much of Rakhine and has itself faced allegations of abuses.

Large-scale, rapid return under these conditions would be reckless. But that does not mean diplomacy is futile. On the contrary, Bangladesh has an opportunity to reposition itself as a regional convener. Dhaka can engage not only with Myanmar's authorities but also with emerging power centers inside Rakhine, with Association of Southeast Asian Nations states and with China and India — all of which have a stake in stability along the Bay of Bengal corridor.

Regional powers have often prioritized infrastructure and economic projects over refugee rights. Yet even Beijing and New Delhi have an interest in preventing further instability and cross-border militancy. Bangladesh can leverage this shared

interest. Rather than announcing symbolic "pilot repatriation" schemes with unclear criteria, Dhaka could push for a phased roadmap tied to measurable benchmarks: verified citizenship status, international monitoring, demilitarized zones of return and guarantees against forced displacement.

At the same time, a reset at home is equally important. Shafiqur Rahman argues that successive governments have used repatriation "not as the fulfillment of a humanitarian obligation but as political performance for their own benefit."

The new government has a chance to break that cycle. That would mean shifting from containment to capacity-building within the camps.

For the Rohingya, hope has often been deferred. But the alternative to cautious optimism is stagnation. If the new government uses its mandate to recalibrate diplomacy, invest in camp-based human development and insist on verifiable conditions for return, it can shift the trajectory of a crisis that has too often been managed tactically rather than strategically.

Bangladesh's 2026 election will not, by itself, solve the Rohingya crisis. But it could redefine how the crisis is approached.

Large-scale, rapid return under these conditions would be reckless. But that does not mean diplomacy is futile

Demonstrating a principled, rights-based refugee policy would reinforce its claim to moral leadership in South Asia

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ARAB NEWS
is a daily international newspaper published by the
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1975 by
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EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com
MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3;
India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y;
Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

L: Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 10 Rs;
Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore \$3; Syria
20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 50 P; US
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Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

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YOUR VOICE

Mexico, like Chicago, is more than just its worst headlines

By **Andy Shaw**

I spent decades covering Chicago's "wars" — political ones at City Hall and the aftermath of gang violence on the city's streets.

So when the news broke on Sunday morning that a joint Mexican-U.S. operation killed a major cartel boss, Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, nicknamed "El Mencho," not too far from our retirement enclave in Mexico, I didn't reach for the smelling salts. I reached for perspective.

Mexico is a vibrant, colorful, complicated, wounded and resilient nation of 130 million people. It's not a Netflix crime series. It's not a State Department warning label. And it's certainly not defined solely by the depravity of drug cartel men with rifles and armored SUVs.

Yes — the cartels are real. Their brutality is real. The recent killing that reverberated through parts of Jalisco, the state we winter in, is real. Violence tied to the notorious Jalisco New Generation Cartel is not something to shrug off.

When gunfire erupts and a public figure, police officer or journalist is targeted, the shock waves are felt not just locally but also internationally. Markets turn tremble. Travel plans are reconsidered. Cable news panels light up.

But here's what I've learned after decades in journalism: Reacting is easy. Understanding is hard.

We've spent the last three winters in a safe, tranquil expat retirement community on Lake Chapala, 30 minutes south of Guadalajara, a reputed cartel stronghold that feels light-years away.

I wrote about the allure of our retirement community in a Tribune op-ed last year,

blissfully unaware of the possible fallout after the killing of a major cartel boss.

So last Sunday, when the news broke, businesses started shutting their doors, and warnings went out to shelter in place, which was smart because the anticipated cartel reaction included bus, car and business torchings only a few miles away.

We hunkered down on Sunday and Monday, and early Tuesday, local government officials announced that after meetings with business leaders, the lockdown would be ending with a return to business as usual.

It almost felt scripted, but that's another story for another day.

Our experience, coincidentally, was eerily similar to our youngest daughter's two years ago when the arrest of drug kingpin Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán's son, Ovidio Guzmán Lopez, a few miles from their Mazatlan hotel sparked several days of retaliatory backlash that shut down the airport, businesses, bus service and local activities until an all-clear was declared five days later.

In both cases, we all hunkered down, stayed in touch with worried family and friends back home, and waited for the volatility to subside.

Chicagoans like us know something about living alongside violence without surrendering our civic identity. For years, national media caricatured our city as a war zone. They tallied homicides like baseball scores and ignored the neighborhoods, businesses, schools and cultural institutions that functioned every day despite the periodic nearby violence.

They never mentioned our lakefront at sunrise or the bustle of Pilsen and Bronzeville. They reduced a world-class city to a crime blotter.

Mexico gets the same treatment.

Turn on certain cable channels in the U.S., and you'd think all of Mexico is a lawless wasteland. But walk the streets of Chapala or Ajijic or our town, San Antonio Tlayacapan, on a Sunday afternoon, and you see something very different: families, entrepreneurs, retirees, artists and students, people eating, drinking, shopping and living their lives.

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Mexico is not incidental — it's foundational. Our economies are braided together through the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Supply chains run north and south every hour of every day. Chicago's own commercial vitality depends in part on what moves through Mexican ports, factories and farms.

President Donald Trump's tariffs and threats rattle the foundation, but the walls are strong.

And when violence flares, it's not just Mexico's problem. It's ours. That doesn't mean minimizing the danger. It means refusing to flatten a nation into a stereotype. Cartel power flourishes where corruption, poverty and demand intersect.

And let's be honest: America's appetite for drugs and American guns flowing south are part of that toxic equation. We are not innocent bystanders watching chaos from a safe distance. We are participants in a shared struggle.

What strikes me most, though, is the resilience of ordinary Mexicans. After an assassination or a burst of violence, there is fear, yes. But there is also a stubborn insistence on normalcy.

Shops reopen. Schools resume. Neighbors gather. It reminds me of Chicagoans after a horrific shooting or a brazen act of public corruption. We grumble, we

mourn, we demand accountability — and then we carry on.

That's not denial. It's survival.

As a reporter and good government watchdog, I've always believed that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Mexico's press corps operates under risks that would chill most American journalists, yet they continue to report, to expose, to question. That courage deserves acknowledgment.

So how do I feel about Mexico in the wake of nearby cartel violence?

Concerned, certainly. No one should be blasé about targeted killings or criminal organizations flexing their muscle. But I also feel admiration for a culture that predates our own republic, for communities that refuse to be defined by criminals and for a bilateral partnership that endures despite political theatrics on both sides of the border.

The easy narrative is fear. The responsible one is complexity.

If Chicago has taught me anything, it's this: A place is never just its worst headlines. Mexico, like my hometown, is more than the violence that periodically scars it.

And it deserves to be seen and covered that way.

So the towns along Lake Chapala, where most winter days are sunny, dry and warm, have regained their mojo, and we're back to living "la vida buena" — the good life — after a brief interruption that affects people and life everywhere without, in our case at least, precipitating a second thought about where and how to live out the winters of our retirement years.

Andy Shaw is a semi-retired Chicago journalist and good government watchdog who winters in Mexico.

Voice of the People

Toss that awful app

Thank you for the excellent editorial ("Fix your lousy shopping app, Jewel-Osco!" Feb. 26). As the Tribune Editorial Board said, is a grocery store app a global crisis? No. Is this app a royal pain in the neck? Absolutely.

I wonder if the Albertsons executives use this app? If they did, the app wouldn't exist. All people want to do is be able to go buy their produce and groceries and then go back home to make dinner. Instead, we have to wade through all that data nonsense in order to buy a pound of broccoli.

Grocery stores are personal; we all have our favorite store. Don't frustrate your loyal customers who make you successful. Throw out that unfriendly app.

— *Anthony Costa, Antioch*

Treatment of customers

Thank you for the editorial on the Jewel-Osco app. The Tribune Editorial Board wrote everything I have been thinking for a long, long time. As a lifelong shopper at Jewel, I felt I was dumped from Jewel's customer list these last few years.

The information the editorial board supplies in its editorial made it easy for me to contact my representatives in Springfield. Here's hoping for some good changes.

— *Lynn Rogge, Mount Prospect*

Tips for using Jewel app

Whoever wrote the editorial about Jewel-Osco's app needs a lesson in how to use their technology. I am 72 years old and use this app weekly without any problems. Same for my 50-year-old friends, my 40-year-old kids and my 20- to 30-year-old gym buddies. This is one of the best money saving apps I have at my disposal.

Here are some tips for you: First, and foremost, go through the app at home before you go to the store and clip your coupons. My biggest pet peeve is standing in the checkout while some shopper is struggling to find their item on their phone and holding up the line. And if you are just way too busy to clip your coupons ahead of time, then clip your coupons while you are shopping. The in-store Wi-Fi makes it easy and works if you spy an item not on your list.

We all make a game of this app and compare how much we save periodically. And best of all, you earn points that convert to dollar savings. You can even set up the app to automatically use your points so you never lose their value. Please, please, please do not have Illinois government try to regulate this app. You know Illinois will search for a way to tax anything.

Lastly, let's save paper and keep the parking lot free from all those paper coupons that you know will go flying around just like the plastic bags used to.

— *Mike Swift, Chicago*

What's the big deal?

Regarding the whiny editorial about Jewel-Osco coupons, just what's the big deal?

I'm a geezer who turns on my cellphone when I want to make a call, not to shop. Every Wednesday, I get an email (on my laptop) from Jewel-Osco with the week's coupon bargains. I scroll through the list, checking the items I want and adding the



NICK ANDERSON/THE CONTRARIAN

stuff to our grocery list. Works fine, and at checkout, I see the savings on my receipt, sometimes pretty significant.

When I go to the store, my wife tells me to get only what's on the list. Yes, dear.

— *Paul Oppenheim, Oak Park*

Clip coupons at home

I was surprised to read in the editorial that so many people have issues with clipping Jewel digital coupons at the store. Am I the only one who clips her coupons at home while making a shopping list? It's true that I occasionally add a coupon while I'm shopping, for items I might not have considered buying earlier. But doing it at my leisure is much easier.

And while I do not consider the Jewel app a shining example of online marketing, the app from Mariano's is even worse.

— *Frances Fruit, Winnetka*

Just use your laptop

I, too, have a problem with the recent increase in businesses that require the use of a QR code on a smartphone (theater tickets, theater program books, restaurant menu, etc.). Although I have a smartphone and generally carry it with me, I do not have unlimited internet access, so I can't always call these things up easily. However, I do disagree with the Tribune Editorial Board's complaint about Jewel's digital coupons. All you need to use them is access to a computer; they do not require a smart-

phone.

I always look at their ad before I go shopping and clip the digital coupons on my laptop. They will automatically be deducted at checkout. (Truth be told, I generally double-check on my phone in the store, but it is not necessary.)

I love Jewel and its Jewel-Osco for U program. It can save lots of money if used regularly.

Also, Mariano's has started putting out a piece of paper in stores that one can pick up to scan its digital coupons at checkout. Perhaps this would be helpful for Jewel to do too.

— *Nancy McDaniel, Chicago*

What we can all do

I read the Tribune obituaries every day. Every now and then, I see someone I know. This ritual has taken on new meaning now that my parents received word from their doctor on the same day, that Mother has Stage 4 cancer and Father has a suspicious spot on his pancreas.

During this time of Ramadan and Lent, reading the obituaries gets me thinking about what a good, fulfilling life looks like. I see the smiling photographs and the litany of accomplishments. But what gets me most excited is the loving family experiences, the relationships with neighbors and friends, the pride in community accomplishments, the lives touched by unselfishness. It is how that person has made their

very small corner of the world a better place for having lived.

I am one person, I cannot change the world in my lifetime, but I can make the small corner I live in a better place.

— *Michael Dejanovich, Crown Point, Indiana*

Glad to win the gold

Congratulations to the Team USA hockey team on winning the gold medal. So very proud for them. Congrats to the Canadian team also. What a game thriller it was!

Hold your heads up, Canada, as millions and millions of Americans stand side by side with our Northern neighbors. Of course, we are so excited the gold has come back to the USA.

— *Gloria Geddes, Sugar Grove*

Honor Lindsey Vonn

I mean no slight to Connor Hellebuyck and the USA men's hockey team and their achievement. But if any Olympic athlete deserves a special medal for Olympic competition and contribution, it is Lindsey Vonn.

— *Ed McGarrigle, Fox River Grove*

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The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

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An election that shakes up UK politics

The Greens' victory is a crushing blow for Starmer and creates more instability

British parliamentary by-elections are generally poor indicators of national contests but very good at giving you the state of the parties today.

By that measure Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government has a great deal to worry about after the Green party's victory in a parliamentary by-election in what was supposed to be a Labour stronghold in Manchester. The Gorton and Denton contest delivered a stunning win for the small party and one that points to the further fragmentation of British politics. Under a new party leader pursuing arguments influenced by Zohran Mamdani's New York mayoral campaign, the Greens have moved closer to establishing a viable populist left force in British politics.

Labour fell to third place, behind both

the Greens and Nigel Farage's Reform UK. The result points to disastrous results for Labour in May's Scottish and Welsh parliamentary and English council elections. It will lead to renewed pressure for a change of leadership. The outcome is also a warning for Reform. Although this seat would not normally be a prime target, Nigel Farage, who leads the party, should be troubled that his ever-rightward drift is being met by voters increasingly searching for the best way to stop him winning.

While much of Labour's strategic focus has been on the Reform threat, it has been losing far more voters to parties of the left. Labour MPs are now demanding a new approach, not least because the Greens' win also weakens the party's most potent political argument – that it alone can stop Reform.

By pursuing disaffected left and Muslim voters disillusioned by the Labour government's line on Gaza, the Greens are hollowing out Labour's base of support. With their added appeal to young

people they pose a particular threat in inner-city areas. The new Green MP Hannah Spencer, a young female plumber, also appealed directly to white working-class voters.

The defeat is all the more damaging for Starmer because he blocked the candidacy of Labour's charismatic Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, to prevent him challenging for the Labour leadership. May's elections are likely only to increase his lame-duck status and fuel the demands for a change. Starmer hopes next week's spring financial statement will highlight more encouraging economic news. But voters are yet to feel the change he promised and a series of political retreats do not instil confidence that he can deliver.

Starmer will face demands for Labour to tack further left by spending and borrowing more and raising wealth taxes. This could weaken a push for growth already hampered by higher business taxes and regulation. No Labour recovery is possible without an economic one.

While much of Labour's strategic focus has been on the Reform threat, it has been losing far more voters to parties of the left

For the Greens, success will rightly see greater scrutiny, not least of their ill-conceived economic policies and the sectarian politics which marked their courting of Muslim voters. But the message is that the populist left has firmly arrived in the UK. British electoral politics will now become even more a patchwork of local contests with parties needing far smaller vote shares to win and elections decided by tactical voting. Labour and the Conservatives find themselves squeezed between the Greens and Reform (as well as nationalists in Scotland and Wales) at a time when both are unpopular.

This is perhaps the biggest concern after the Greens' success. The worry for those who fear Reform is that while the populist left can win in local or regional elections, they are not an adequate safeguard against the populist right at a national level. Those who want moderate, inclusive, economically sane politics need at least one of the two major parties to get their act together and quickly.

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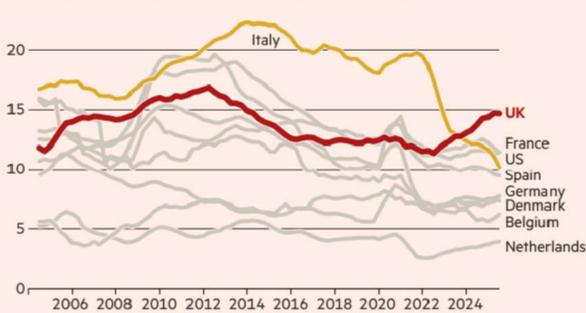
A million young Britons are falling through the cracks

John Burn-Murdoch



One in seven young Britons is not in work or education, the highest figure in the developed world

% of 16 to 24-year-olds not in work, education or training



Most of the modern narratives around young adult malaise are focused on the plight of the aspiring middle class, from ballooning student loans to housing shortages in superstar cities to the ghoulish graduate jobs market. That makes these issues no less pressing: they deserve all the attention they receive and more. But quietly, beneath the surface, a more troubling trend is eating away at the lower, often voiceless, ranks of that same generation – those for whom university, home ownership and a career are distant concepts.

According to data published on Thursday, one in seven of the UK's 16 to 24-year-olds – almost a million people – are stranded outside employment, education or training (Neet), with the steep rise of the past three years taking the share of dislocated youth back to levels not seen for over a decade. This upward march is a stark outlier internationally, making the UK worse than its peers on either side of the Atlantic and decisively displacing Italy as the country where youth means being left high and dry.

Most concerning, Britain's lost million are increasingly locked into their isolation: 60 per cent of current Neets have never had a job – the highest figure since records began – and almost a third report a disability or chronic health problem that prevents them working. Governments can at times rely on a fair wind in the wider labour market to bring some economically marginalised youths back in from the cold, but hundreds of thousands in this group are now so far removed from the world of work that they risk becoming permanently stuck outside.

Any serious attempt to reverse the trend should begin by understanding what is behind it. That must include acknowledging that government policy is at least partly to blame. As forecast in an analysis for the Institute for Fiscal Studies by Sam Ray-Chaudhuri and Xiaowei Xu, increases to the minimum wage and employers' social security contributions have made hiring much more expensive in hospitality and retail – two of the main employers of the young. Sure enough, the number of 16-24s in those industries has fallen markedly in the past year or two, tipping tens of thousands into unemployment.

But it's worth remembering that the

much larger and worst-hit group is those who have never worked at all; here we must turn to the education system. While common knowledge among most teachers and parents, the steep rise in chronic absence from school during and immediately after the Covid pandemic has derailed the crucial transition from compulsory education to the adult world for huge numbers of young people. The share of secondary school pupils in England missing at least one day of school every two weeks doubled from 14 per cent to 28 per cent between 2019 and 2021, and remains elevated at 24 per cent. Most concerning of all, the share who are absent at least half the time has climbed from one in 100 to one in 25. Quite aside from the implications for employability, this is an alarming indicator of young lives going off the rails.

The result, highlighted in a report by Julia Diniz and Louise Murphy for the Resolution Foundation think-tank, is that despite local authorities having a legal duty to track and support these marginally attached young people, huge numbers are slipping through the cracks. About 10 per cent or more of 16 and 17-year-olds are either registered Neet or unknown to the authorities in some local areas.

Intersecting with all of this is the rise of reported youth mental health problems and disability claims – itself owing to a combination of underlying health trends and changes to the way benefits are awarded to claimants. Nowhere else has seen as steep an increase in young adult ill health as the UK, where the share of 16 to 24-year-olds reporting a problem that reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities has almost tripled from 7 per cent in 2008 to 21 per cent today.

The good news is there are some clear remedies. First, a pause on further minimum wage rises and other policies that discourage hiring youngsters. Second, much closer and more strictly enforced co-operation between schools and other parts of the system to identify disengagement risk early. And third, more frequent check-ups for young people struggling with mental health problems, to ease the transition into work. Britain's youth are in a deep crisis of several governments' making, but it's not too late to turn the tide.

john.burn-murdoch@ft.com

Letters

US Treasuries policy plots a narrow course

John Plender is right that the erosion of the haven status of US Treasuries is accelerating ("Haven-asset status of US Treasuries starting to erode", The Long View, FT Weekend, February 21).

But a close reading of Washington's own strategic documents suggests this process may be more functional than accidental.

The administration simultaneously demands 5 per cent of GDP defence spending from European allies, pursues dollar devaluation to rebalance trade and requires

unprecedented fiscal expansion for re-industrialisation and defence. These objectives are contradictory through conventional policy. Devaluing while demanding allies purchase dollar-denominated weapons systems invites the question of why they should buy depreciating assets. The fiscal gap between stated ambitions and available revenue runs to hundreds of billions annually, with no identified funding mechanism.

Plender's observation that investors have reshuffled the hierarchy of safe

haven assets describes a symptom. The underlying condition is that the US needs Treasuries to lose just enough haven premium to enable controlled dollar adjustment, while retaining enough reserve currency credibility to finance the deficits its strategy requires.

Can that narrow corridor be navigated without a shock large enough to reset the debate entirely? This is the question for investors.

Timo Leiter
Vienna, Austria

German Romanticism – inventing the artist as hero

In his review of Michael Pollan's latest book *A World Appears* (Life & Arts, February 14) John Banville writes: "Most startling, perhaps, and most welcome, is [Pollan's] suggestion that not only philosophers but artists – poets, painters, even novelists – may have insights into the fundamental conditions of being that are beyond the ken of scientists."

Banville could have mentioned that group of philosophers in the German town of Jena, who, over two centuries ago, invented Romanticism as a counter to the Gradgrind utilitarianism of the British, and the cold-blooded scientism of the Enlightenment French, neither of which was, they asserted, adequate to explain human emotion and understanding.

Friedrich Schiller said that "beauty transports us to ethical principles and makes us better people", while Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* writes that imagination "bridges sense and understanding" – implying that only art can mediate between the heart and the head. The philosopher Friedrich Schelling took this further, writing: "Mind is invisible Nature, while Nature is visible Mind" – ie humans are inseparable from the rest of the natural world, which can only be understood holistically.

Their wildly overexcited student fans proceeded to hike into forests, sleep in caves, and invent the artist as hero, the bridge between humans and the Divine.

This ignorance of history is widespread in the tech world today, where leaders moan that the humanities community knows nothing about their subject, yet the technology bosses often seem ignorant of it themselves.

History reveals that Santorio Santorio, an associate of Galileo, invented a cage that could be said to anticipate the Apple Watch by 350 years in measuring and recording all bodily functions to optimise health (Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*); that a report from Wellesley College in the 19th century described how students send and receive a daily average of 116 incoming and 175 outgoing telegrams as an "addiction", and that during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, US conspiracy theorists waged a disinformation war by sending fake telegrams, purportedly from the surgeon-general, about the dangers of masks.

For more on the Romantics and their influence, I recommend Andrea Wulf's *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*. For more perspective on the tech world, I suggest a public library.

Sheila Hayman
Advisory Council, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, University of Cambridge, London NW1, UK



Franklin D Roosevelt with Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands — Alamy

FDR's idea of homeland

Steven Simon is spot on in "How 'homeland' put America on the path to illiberalism" (Opinion, February 20).

As president, Franklin D Roosevelt often spoke of "the homeland". But to him it was the Netherlands, which Claes van Rosenvelt had left in 1649. FDR could converse in Dutch and had kept his children's books, written in Dutch. He also was competent in French and German and, for his closest aides, would translate Hitler's broadcasts about defending "Das Vaterland". He'd never describe the US as the homeland, fatherland, or motherland. Americans of that era preferred terms that suggested a shared civic project rather than an ancestral territory. Many still do.

Derek Leebaert
Washington, DC, US

My grandson didn't even know we had a television

I'm glad your correspondent Louis Wise is enjoying TV in his bedroom (Opinion, House & Home, February 21). It was never my idea of luxury, except in a hotel room. However I totally disagree with Nicky Haslam's remark that "Nothing's worse than hiding a TV – it's common as muck. I think televisions must be showing. They give a kind of modernness to the room. The newer the TV, the better."

I live in an apartment in Hong Kong. My living, dining area is reserved for that. I don't think it's "common as muck" to hide your TV in your living area. Mine is discreetly disguised by a painting by the artist Amanda McColl.

We recently had family stay with us and my grandson didn't realise that we even had a TV in our home. Isn't that a plus?

Kim Forder
Hong Kong

All gas and gaiters?

John Ralfe ("C of E pension fund risks an earthly reckoning", Opinion, FT Money, February 21) portrays the Church of England's clergy pension fund as a casino, and recommends locking its surplus into long bonds. That advice ignores both economics and ecclesiology.

The Church of England is not a corporate sponsor in managed run-off, but a centuries-old institution with a multigenerational horizon.

A diversified allocation to equities, infrastructure and private loans is a rational way to earn the growth premium needed to support inflation-linked pensions over decades and to improve the conditions of the societies which pensioners retire in.

To "lock in the surplus" at today's gilt yields is also to lock in lower expected returns and shift risk to future parishioners and clergy who will have to pay more or receive less.

As St Paul to the Galatians reminds us "at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up".

Dan Hedley
Policy Director, New Capital Consensus, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, UK

Irish weather lexicon

Re your short item on words for the weather (Spectrum, February 21), having been born, reared and educated in the euphemistic land of euphemisms, to date I have enjoyed, 60 continuous "soft days".

Traditionally, for multicultural reasons we use the verbal ejaculation "soft day thank God", invoking, in a cynical way, the intervention of the Almighty to bring good weather. Not, I must add, "grand weather". We have had quite enough of that, thank God!

Cormac Meehan
Bundoran, County Donegal, Ireland

If you want peace, best prepare for war

Recent pieces – by Eric Schmidt ("Ukraine's no man's land is the future of war", Opinion, February 14) and Adam Tooze ("Only an army and true integration will solve Europe's defence problem", Opinion, February 21) – adopt a Utopian stance about the value of drones and the role of an EU army.

But digital solutions do not remove the need for service personnel to be in harm's way. War remains visceral, chaotic and violent; and, to borrow from the psychologist Ervin Staub, the "continuum" of destruction leaves families, societies and economies in pain and debt for decades.

Optimistic perspectives on tech and military structures give politicians and bureaucrats a cheap way out.

"Parabellum" – the theory that if you want peace, you must prepare for war – is expensive and will need to find a balance between digital solutions and bayonets – not one at the expense of the other.

Major James Moloney
Serving British Army Officer, Stamford, Lincolnshire, UK

Curious advice from such a respected ornithologist

Thank you to Jonathan Guthrie ("Are we killing birds with kindness?", House & Home, FT Weekend, February 21) for exposing the fallacy of gathering birds together to feed, which artificially inflates their populations, only for them to be decimated by the subsequent spread of disease.

Can anyone explain to me the epidemiological logic expounded by the communications boss of the British Trust for Ornithology Mike Toms, a respected ornithologist, when he advises us to withdraw feeding "only if there are signs of illness"?

This perplexing advice begs the question: what is the ornithological equivalent of the distant clattering of hooves and the subsequent sound of slamming stable doors?

David Watson
Fletchers Bridge, Cornwall, UK

Musk's Grok: stranger than science fiction

Your front page FT Weekend article reports that Elon Musk will restrict his vulgar new service to paying subscribers only ("Musk reins in AI chatbot after child sex deepfakes prompt European backlash", Report, January 10).

Would that Musk were to apologise for using the term "grok" as a noun instead of the verb that Robert A Heinlein intended. The great American science fiction writer would be appalled at the successful monetisation of these worst aspects of humanity.

Heinlein's term "grok" refers to maximal empathy and compassion among beings.

Musk's new enterprise, the artificial intelligence company xAI, allows for maximal humiliation and exploitation of others.

Musk is truly a stranger in a strange land.

Bruce Grill
Annecy, France

Correction

● Painter Loie Hollowell, featured in today's HTSI, is 42 years old, not 43 as wrongly stated in the article. She has a studio based in Queens, not Brooklyn, her son's name is Linden, not Lynden, and she has been represented by Pace since 2017, not 2019.

Opinion

When financial and geopolitical waves collide

ECONOMICS

Andy Haldane



What happens when two waves collide, disorder meets disorder, uncertainty touches uncertainty? This question has long occupied oceanographers and complexity scientists. But it is now occupying economists and finance professionals too, as they assess the effects of two waves, of unknown size and velocity, simultaneously crashing over them.

The first wave is geopolitical – the rupture in the global rules-based order. Or, more accurately, the transition from order to disorder in everything from global trade to global security. Without those rules the world's laws of motion are more quantum than Newtonian,

intrinsically and radically uncertain.

That uncertainty is a plague on all our houses. For businesses, it means a costly rewiring of global trading and financial systems; for governments, a rethinking of defence spending and a refashioning of security alliances; for citizens, threats to their public goods including the independence of central banks, courts and parliaments. Each carries an economic and fiscal cost that, given low growth and high public debt, we can ill-afford.

This uncertainty is also recontouring financial markets as investors seek sanctuary. Tellingly, they are doing so not by moves into “safe” government assets but into precious metals – prices have doubled over the past two years at the same time as those of many longer-maturity government securities have fallen. Geopolitical risk means it is in gold, not government, we now trust.

Yet this tells only half the story. The fattening of the lower tail due to heightened geopolitical threat has coincided with a fattening of the upper tail due to a rising wave of technological opportu-

nity, powered by the potential of AI and the prospect of quantum computing.

This wave has already generated a frenzy of investment into risky assets, both real (about \$1tn has poured into AI infrastructure each year over the past two years) and financial (the prices of some technology stocks more than doubled over the same period).

That has in turn driven a mini-boom in growth in the US, the centre of AI invention, which has averaged around 5 per cent recently, bucking global trends. Moreover, buoyant demand has occurred despite weakening employment prospects, implying US growth has been underpinned by productivity gains. This may be the first harvest of the fourth industrial revolution.

The turbulence generated by these twin waves gives the outward appearance of chaos. But today's state is better described as “kurtotic” – a statistical term for distributions with fat upper and lower tails – than chaotic. The twin waves mean the world increasingly resembles a barbell, with greater weight

at its extremities, rather than a bell curve. This has important implications for economies and financial markets.

Even small differences in the balance of weight can generate very different outcomes. We see that in wide growth disparities between countries – compare the tech-centred US and tech-peripheral western Europe. And we see

either end of the risk spectrum: in ultra-safe precious metals but also in ultra-speculative crypto and technology stocks. These are the gold and fool's gold of today's barbell portfolios.

Even small shifts in the probabilities of either tail can unbalance the barbell and cause outsized responses: “excess sensitivity” in asset prices in response to small shifts in sentiment. The sharp fall in the prices of both precious metals and technology stock so far this year, in the face of little news about fundamentals, is evidence of that fragility.

Finally, if these geopolitical and technological waves collide, should we expect chaos or calm? Oceanographers and complexity scientists have long wrestled with this question. The short answer is: it depends. If a rapidly retreating wave coincides with a forceful incoming one, the effect is to neutralise their collective force, not compound it. Disorder meeting disorder then generates calm and resilience.

That was the story of last year, whose economic and financial resilience sur-

prised many. The shock and awe of geopolitical risk and tariffs in the first quarter caused a rapid retreat in risk appetite and growth forecasts. But these forces were then neutralised by the incoming AI wave, leaving asset prices and growth prospects higher overall. In 2025, the barbell balanced. A kurtotic world was self-stabilising and resilient.

Alas, that happy coincidence cannot be guaranteed in future. If two waves collide at their crests, their forces are compounded. This is a recipe for chaos not calm, fragility not resilience. It is an oceanographer's perfect storm. Were an extreme risk to materialise – such as war, real or trade-related – that swept innovation off course, geopolitical and technological systems would become coupled. A kurtotic world could quickly turn chaotic. Economies and financial markets would then join oceanographers in being all at sea.

The writer, an FT contributing editor, is a former chief economist at the Bank of England

The state of the world today is better described as 'kurtotic' rather than chaotic

it too in growth disparities within countries – the K-shaped pattern of recent US growth reflects the contrasting economic fortunes of the tech-exposed rich and the tariff-exposed poor households.

Barbell behaviour is clearly visible in financial markets as well. The combined effects of the twin waves have been to cause high, rising and volatile prices at

Power failure could hurt America's AI ambitions

TECHNOLOGY

Gillian Tett



What might halt America's AI boom? There are many potential candidates. One is swelling anti-tech populism: a new survey shows 58 per cent of Americans do not trust AI.

Excess leverage is another: AI-linked firms are not just gobbling up oodles of private credit but plan to issue a record \$450bn in bonds this year, according to the Institute of International Finance. A third risk is that cheaper, better forms of AI will usurp the costly, proprietary large language models beloved of Silicon Valley.

But there is also a fourth, more hum-drum issue: electricity. If the AI boom keeps accelerating, global electricity demand for data centres is projected to double by 2030, with even bigger jumps in the US and China.

Beijing has already prepared by installing an eye-popping 1,500 gigawatts of new energy capacity since 2021, taking its total to 3,891GW. However, the US has not: its installed capacity has barely risen in recent years, and now sits around 1,373GW – or less than what China added in just four years.

This is shocking. Worse, China will add over 3.4 terawatts of electricity-generation capacity in the next five years, according to Bloomberg – six times as much as the US.

Unsurprisingly, the American tech sector is alarmed. Jensen Huang, head of Nvidia, for example, told the FT last year that China could “win the AI race” with the US because its “power is free”. Elon Musk says that “based on current trends, China will far exceed the rest of the world in AI compute” because it will have three times America's electricity output by late 2026.

And OpenAI has called for government action. “The US leads the world in developing AI [but] keeping that edge requires far more electricity than the US can currently provide,” it declared in a memo last year. “Electrons are the new oil.” (Which is ironic given that data was previously hailed by techies as the “new oil”).

But whether President Donald Trump can – or will – act is unclear. On Tuesday he declared in his State of the Union address that “we're telling the major tech companies that they have the obligation to provide for their own power needs” so that “no one's prices [as a consumer] will go up”. Next week he will apparently flesh that out in a White House meeting with Big Tech executives.

But don't expect him to wave a magic wand. It will be hard to shield voters from a looming energy squeeze, even if Trump does bully the tech companies into building their own generators. To

cite one issue: since many data centres use diesel generators as a backup, “price increases of 20 to 50 per cent could be expected in the tight global diesel market” soon, according to Philip Verleger, an energy economist.

Another enormous problem is electricity transmission. China has raced to build high-voltage lines in recent years. But America has not. This cannot be fixed by the private sector or states without federal action because lines typically cross state borders. However, there has hitherto been very little done – either by Democratic or Republican presidents. “In 2008, a new [transmission] project typically had to wait less than two years to get connected. But by 2024, it was over 4.5 years,” notes Heather Boushey, former economic adviser in the Biden White House.

Worse still, Trump is waging ideological war on renewable energy. Yes, China is using fossil fuels to expand its grid (including, lamentably, coal). But as Kyle Chan, an energy expert at Brookings, notes: “Over half of China's [recent] electricity growth during [the last decade] has come from clean energy sources, such as wind, solar and hydro-power.” These are fast and cheap to install – even before noting the climate change benefits.

But Trump's “drill, baby, drill” mantra makes him reluctant to embrace renewables even as a complementary power source, let alone as a replacement for fossil fuels. Last summer the energy department terminated a planned

It will be hard to shield voters from an energy squeeze, even if Trump does force Big Tech to act

\$4.9bn loan guarantee for an 800-mile “Grain Belt Express” power line intended to take wind power from Kansas to Illinois and Indiana. This is mad.

So can the US close the gap with China? Some White House officials tell me it can, by using federal powers to install transmission lines and forcing Big Tech to pay for huge energy investments.

David Victor, a professor at UC San Diego, thinks more innovation will also help. “The really big [future] story in energy will be energy-saving innovation for the chips,” he says. “Many of the scenarios for rapacious energy growth for data centres are quite frothy [since] many of these projects will not be needed, especially if the AI bubble bursts.”

One hopes so. But unless – or until – this occurs, the saga will be yet more evidence of why joined-up, proactive, pragmatic policies can outperform a governance system plagued by polarisation and excess financialisation. Future US historians may well weep. But right now, tech investors should ponder the grubby real-world problems of power – in both a political and literal sense.

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The defence secretary is fighting culture wars, but can he lead the US into a battle with Iran? By Steff Chávez and James Politi

As the drumbeats of a new American war in the Middle East sounded this week, US defence secretary Pete Hegseth was busy battling a very different opponent: high-profile AI start-up Anthropic.

In a tense Pentagon meeting on Tuesday with chief executive Dario Amodei, Hegseth demanded that Anthropic let the military use its technology however it sees fit, or face expulsion from the defence department's supply chains. Anthropic balked, concerned about the potential use of its technology in lethal autonomous weapons and for mass domestic surveillance. One of Hegseth's top lieutenants, Emil Michael, lashed out online at Amodei for being a “liar” with a “God complex”.

The feud is emblematic of the newly styled secretary of war's crusading approach to leading the Pentagon. Hegseth is shaking up how the defence department does business in an institutional revolution that has echoes across the second Trump administration. But as a standard bearer of the Maga culture wars, the 45-year-old former Fox News host is also overhauling the Pentagon in far deeper ways, tearing up what the administration considers “woke” policies and purging top military leaders viewed as disloyal or unaligned with its rightwing agenda.

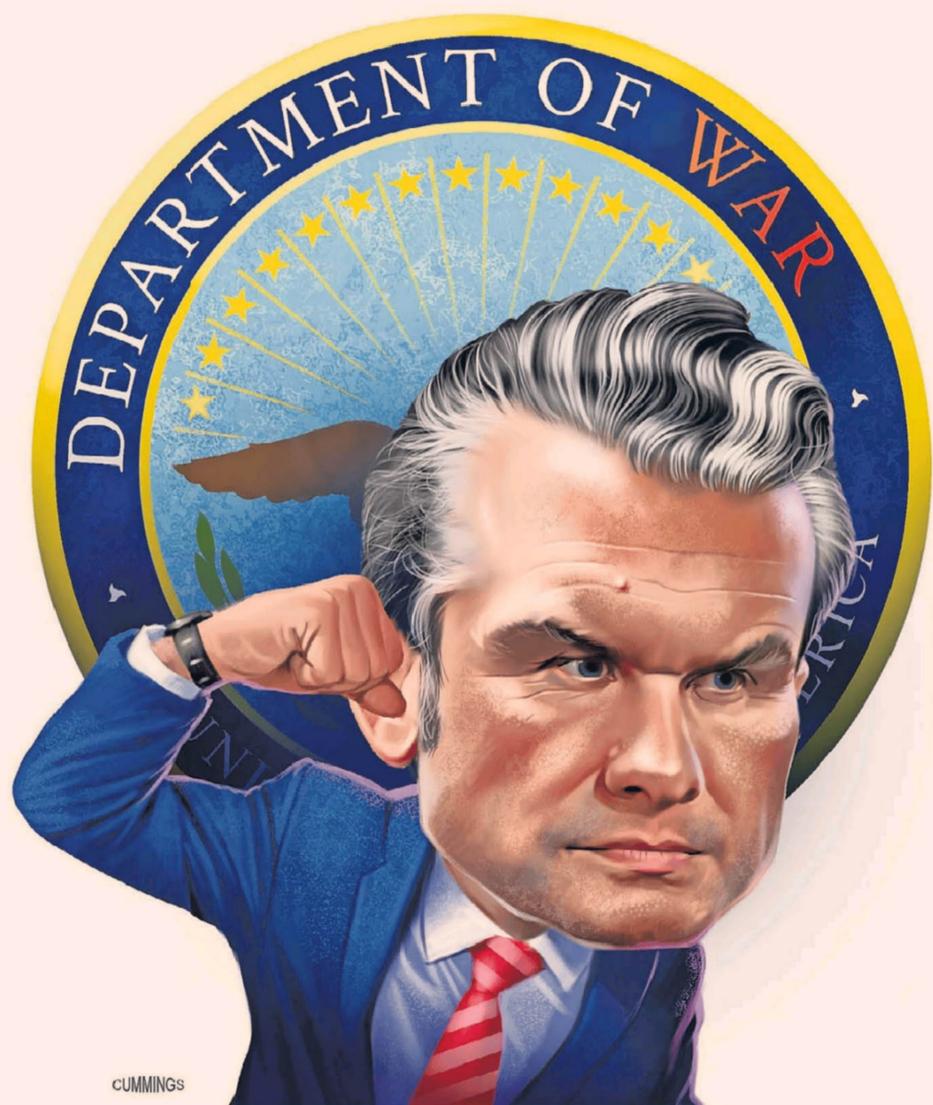
Hegseth has done so with a performative style that has been shocking to many. With his slicked-back hair, he has declared that he no longer wants to see “fat generals”, fixating on physical fitness and making videos of himself working out with US troops, cabinet secretaries like Robert F Kennedy Jr and foreign officials such as Japanese defence minister Shinjirō Koizumi. Last week, he was pictured swinging from a tree alongside top health department official Mehmet Oz after a midweek brunch, as the top ranks of the military were briefing Donald Trump on options to attack Iran.

“Between travelling and doing social media videos, I don't know that he's got a bearing on [what is] fundamentally important that the Pentagon does,” says a US defence official.

“The fact that he's doing all these other things in the lead up to potentially a major war in the Middle East is somewhat alarming,” adds one former senior defence official. “It's a very strange set of behaviours.”

Born in Minneapolis in 1980, Hegseth grew up in its suburbs with his basketball coach father and executive career coach mother. He studied politics and played basketball at Princeton University, where he joined an army officer training programme. He was also publisher of The Princeton Tory, a conservative student magazine, where he railed against “encouragement and support for premarital sex, homosexuality, abortion, and a general hostility towards faith and religion”.

At the Pentagon, Hegseth has put his faith front and centre, starting a monthly prayer service that has featured a Christian nationalist pastor who opposes same-sex marriage and thinks women should be denied voting rights.



Person in the News | Pete Hegseth

Maga's crusader makes a mark on the Pentagon

After graduating in 2005, Hegseth did a brief stint on Wall Street before being commissioned as an infantry officer in the Army National Guard and deployed to Guantánamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan. His service ended in 2021 after he was barred from duty on Joe Biden's inauguration day when a fellow soldier reported that he had a tattoo of “*deus vult*” – a symbol that has been associated with white nationalists.

During his service, Hegseth became an advocate for veterans. Paul Rieckhoff, who knew him at the time and is now a critic, says the “intense” and “charismatic” secretary previously had more moderate views but “was built to be a culture warrior in a rightwing lab”.

In 2014, Hegseth became a Fox News contributor and then co-host of the *Fox & Friends Weekend* show, catching Trump's attention. “Pete never struck me as Maga, but like others who owe their success and enhanced positions to Trump, he became Maga, knowing that Trump and his large, powerful audience could eliminate him in a nanosecond,” says one former colleague.

A person familiar with Hegseth's

meetings with defence industry executives says he “can be quite personable”, in “a break from his public persona”. But of all Trump's cabinet picks, he has had the most fraught confirmation process.

In November 2024, he told a podcast that “I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles”, triggering an early backlash. A California police department released

“Between travelling and social media videos, I don't know that he's got a bearing on [what is] important”

a report containing an accusation of sexual assault against him, surprising Trump's transition team. Separately, Hegseth's former sister-in-law wrote to senators saying he abused alcohol and “was abusive to his ex-wife”, who she said had at one point hidden from him in her closet. Hegseth has denied the allegations.

Soon after he took the helm at the

Pentagon, scandal enveloped him again. In March 2025, Hegseth shared plans for strikes against Houthi rebels in a Signal chat of national security officials that also included a journalist, an action the Pentagon's watchdog found violated department policy. And late last year, he became embroiled in a furor over the legality of the military's campaign against alleged drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

Trump has continued to stand by his unorthodox defence secretary. The Pentagon said Trump chose Hegseth for his “bold, visionary reforms that reject the failed experiment of woke ideology force-fed to our troops and to restore the warrior ethos that has always made our military the greatest fighting force on Earth”. But in recent days, General Dan Caine, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, has been widely seen as the more influential adviser to Trump on military options for Iran. “Nobody's going to look to Hegseth as the guy who's going to run a major war,” says the former defence official.

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OPINION

Rage and Rectitude in the Texas GOP Primary

By Barton Swaim

Houston

In a former age, the circumstances of this year's GOP Senate primary in Texas wouldn't offer much in the way of suspense. That former age is gone.

The incumbent, John Cornyn, first won the seat in 2002. Mr. Cornyn is a reliably conservative vote in a red state, hasn't committed any personal misdeed, and hasn't, by ordinary lights, offended conservative orthodoxy.

His main opponent, Attorney General Ken Paxton, is known for suing the federal government during Democratic administrations. His record of public service is, if nothing else, more colorful than Mr. Cornyn's. In 2015, Mr. Paxton's first year in office, he was indicted for securities fraud; the trial lasted, amazingly, until 2024, when the attorney general agreed to pay \$300,000 in restitution and undergo legal ethics training. (The settlement entailed no admission of wrongdoing.) In 2020 seven senior staff in the attorney general's office publicly accused their boss of a variety of offenses, including

Sen. John Cornyn says character still matters. Some supporters of Ken Paxton think that rancor is more important.

abuse of office and bribery, eventually leading to Mr. Paxton's impeachment by the Republican-controlled Texas House in 2023. The state Senate acquitted him. His wife, Sen. Angela Paxton, abstained from that vote as per Senate rules.

In July 2025, Mrs. Paxton filed for divorce "on biblical grounds," meaning adultery. Details of the attorney general's infidelities emerged during his impeachment trial.

All that aside, Mr. Paxton has led in the polls since summer. Although the polls have narrowed in recent weeks, he is still ahead by 4 to 5 points. A third contestant, U.S. Rep. Wesley Hunt, a former Army aviator and an impressive speaker, polls third. He could surge, come in second on Tuesday, and thus compete in the runoff on May 26. Early voting began on Feb. 17.

A simplistic though not unfair way to understand this primary, and Texas GOP politics generally, involves the difference between suburb and exurb. Republican suburbanites—wealthier, less transient and more credentialed—incline toward the Reaganite principles of a simpler age: lower taxes, less regulation, freer trade, traditional morality. The exurbs of Texas's major cities, by contrast, teem with Republicans who, for a

variety of sociological and demographic reasons, have given up on politics in the traditional sense and want something more akin to street fighting. The coherence of their views depends almost entirely on opposition to the political left.

Is Mr. Cornyn a liberal, as his right-wing detractors claim? In 2022, after a de-ranked killer shot schoolchildren in Uvalde, Texas, Mr. Cornyn was among 15 Republicans who voted for the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which strengthened "red flag" laws and background checks. (His legislative allies argue that he weakened the bill with amendments before he voted for it.) Mr. Cornyn supports a legislative solution for undocumented migrants brought to the U.S. as children. Mr. Paxton's ads have used both positions to portray the incumbent senator as antigun and pro-illegal alien.

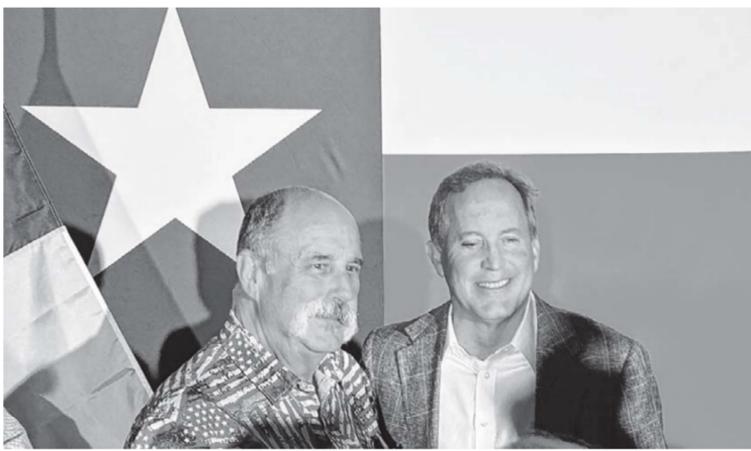
But Republican opposition to Mr. Cornyn, if my impressions are right, relates less to ideology than to style. He doesn't seek to offend, and his despisers on the right fault him for it.

Mr. Cornyn needs to grasp the problem. "Complacency is a killer," he told a crowd of about 50 last week at On the Kirb, an organic sports bar in the upmarket Houston neighborhood of Upper Kirby. "It's a killer in relationships. It's a killer in careers. It's a killer for countries. And it's a killer for political parties."

The senator made the case for his record and censured Mr. Paxton for unethical behavior. But Mr. Cornyn has no gift for meanness. Asked by a reporter about Mr. Paxton's claim to be a stronger general-election candidate, Mr. Cornyn began gallantly: "I'll try to watch my language. That's, let me just say, that's BS." He went on to say three times that "character matters"—a phrase used repeatedly and unsuccessfully, I couldn't help recalling, by President George H.W. Bush in 1992.

Mr. Hunt, 44, contends that Mr. Cornyn, 74, is too old for another term. The Senate "isn't a retirement community," the younger man likes to say. The jibe probably lands with some voters, their memory of Joe Biden's decrepitude still fresh. When I asked Mr. Cornyn about it, he parried the question. "I work pretty well with a certain 80-year-old at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."

But the most common objection to Mr. Cornyn's re-election bid has to do with experience rather than age: He's been in Washington too long. I tend to interpret this complaint as a proxy for something else—voters don't eject officeholders they like on grounds of longevity in office.



Attorney General Ken Paxton (above) and Sen. John Cornyn meet voters.

So what's that something else? One explanation was reluctantly suggested to me by several Republican officials—fervent supporters of Mr. Cornyn and not inclined to criticize him: that he spends insufficient time with local GOP groups. I'm reminded of George F. Will's book "Restoration" (1993), in which the author contended that the founders meant for lawmakers, especially senators, to live mostly in Washington and return home infrequently. Thus would they remain insulated from the volatility of public sentiment and keep their minds on lawmaking. Mr. Cornyn, in that sense, is a refreshingly Madisonian figure.

Then again, Mr. Will wrote his book to establish the need for term limits. He argued that the founders didn't foresee the desire of federal lawmakers to hold on to their positions. Mr. Cornyn seeks a fifth term. No Texas senator has held more than four.

Mr. Paxton, 63, isn't a retail politician. His campaign strategy mainly involves TV, radio and web ads highlighting the high into innumerable lawsuits launched by the attorney general against Democratic administrations in Washington. His office claims he sued the Biden administration 106 times, although in person he sometimes gives the number as 107.

As a political strategy, it's effective—everybody in Texas knows who the attorney general is. For that reason, perhaps, traditional campaign events are rare on Mr. Paxton's schedule.

But last week he scheduled several, including one at the Angry Elephant, a bar in the Houston exurb of Magnolia. The bar's name is political: Photos of Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan and other GOP figures adorn the walls, although I noticed one of Bill and Hillary Clinton on their wedding day. It hung in the lavatory.

In the hour before the event began, I canvassed the happy-hour attendees for their attitudes. Most, I was surprised to learn, felt no animosity toward Mr. Cornyn, even if they said he had "been there too long." "There's nothing I hate about Cornyn," Sally Centrice, 71, allowed—hardly an endorsement, but also not the sort of attitude Mr. Paxton hopes to capitalize on. Mary Monroe, 79, told me she liked all three candidates. For her, an endorsement by Mr. Trump—he has yet to issue one—would make a difference.

Does Mr. Paxton's baggage—my deliberately foggy term—bother his fans? Robert Julian, 72, paused before answering. "There's a Scripture," he said: "Let him without sin—I forget where it is."

"John 8," I said.

"Well I see you have some religious knowledge."

Others at Mr. Julian's table gave similarly tolerant responses to my question about Mr. Paxton's peccadillos.

I mean no disrespect to Mr. Paxton or his fans when I say his talk was hard to follow. Much of it related the story of how Joe Biden won the 2020 election. The former president did so by vote-counting

shenanigans, whereupon he announced he wouldn't deport anyone "because he wanted the cartels to know, bring these people here." That, in turn, gave the attorney general a mission for his third term, namely to "take out Joe Biden," which he did by filing all those lawsuits against him.

That Mr. Paxton leads in the polls is more reminder that money doesn't get you everything in politics. Mr. Cornyn's campaign and aligned political action committee have spent \$64 million on ads. Mr. Hunt's campaign and PAC have spent \$11.4 million. Mr. Paxton: \$3.6 million. "You've seen these fake ads where Cornyn tries to tell you that I'm bad and he's good," Mr. Paxton said. "They're just not true."

Cornyn-aligned ads are indeed everywhere. As Mr. Paxton spoke, one of the muted screens mounted above the bar broke from a college basketball game to show a pro-Cornyn ad. There before me was the real Ken Paxton, and just overhead was a series of lurid pixelated images of the man beside headlines announcing his infidelities.

Earlier, during the preliminaries, someone had led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance—first to the American flag, then to the state of Texas. I was fiddling with my phone during both expressions of loyalty, nervous that I wouldn't get an intelligible recording of Mr. Paxton's remarks. A woman in her mid-40s with straight blond hair, stylish jeans and Mary Janes told me with a stern grin next time to "put your things down and pledge allegiance." I said I wasn't from Texas, but that, she pointed out, didn't explain my failure during the pledge to the flag. "Do things right," she admonished.

After the event, she approached me again to explain her earlier counsel. Since we were talking, I sought her opinions on Mr. Cornyn. "He's basically a covert communist," she said. She referred to something called the Liberty Score, which gave the incumbent an F. Unfamiliar with the Liberty Score, I discovered later that it was run by the Glenn Beck-owned outfit Blaze Media before closing down three years ago. Its latest score for Rep. Dan Crenshaw was a C. Sen. Ted Cruz got a B.

She went on at some length, eventually comparing Mr. Cornyn to Sen. Mitch McConnell. "That guy should have been shot a long time ago," she said. I asked her name. "Welcome to Texas," she replied and drifted backward into the crowd. On her necklace was a tiny pendant in the shape of a dove.

Mr. Swaim writes the Journal's Unruly Republic column.

Alabama's Retirees Helped Pay for My Vacation



CROSS COUNTRY
By Howard Husock

Mobile, Ala.

When my family decided to spend a vacation here, I looked forward to the French-influenced architecture, Gulf Coast seafood, and the historic hotel where our stay, to my surprise, would be subsidized by state-government retirees. As in many blue states, Alabama's pension system dabbles in investments that neither reduce the state's unfunded liabilities nor earn the returns needed to support retirees.

Such investment errors are usually motivated by political correctness. Former New York City Comptroller Brad Lander recently pushed to divest the city's pension funds

The state's pension funds invest imprudently in real estate, including the hotel where my family stayed.

from reliable investment firms—notably BlackRock and Fidelity—because of their alleged failure to use their financial leverage to "decarbonize" the economy. "The systemic risk of the climate crisis threatens the long-term value of New York City's pension funds," Mr. Lander said in November, criticizing BlackRock for its lack of "proactive engagement" on the issue.

Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA) makes the same mistake. It appears to believe its portfolio managers can make better investment decisions than the private sector and

that earning the best return for retirees isn't the top priority. Its mission statement comes close to making that clear. "Our commitment goes beyond financial gains; we are deeply motivated to invest in ways that shape the future for our members and the generations to come. Our passion lies in transforming lives and enhancing Alabama, which helps to guide our decisions."

That's how RSA came to subsidize my stay at Mobile's Battle House Hotel, a stunning "property," as they say in the hospitality biz. Built on the site of Andrew Jackson's headquarters in the War of 1812 and replete with marble staircases and stained glass, the hotel dates to 1908. During the 1970s, a difficult period for Mobile, Battle House fell into disrepair and closed its doors.

Thanks to RSA's investment, the hotel was restored and reopened in 2007. It's tempting to view this as a triumph of financial leadership. On New Year's Eve, during my family's stay, the hotel was teeming with visitors in black tie. Crowds swarmed a revitalized downtown's "MoonPie Over Mobile" celebration, in which an oversize replica of the famous Southern snack descended from the RSA's building. Mobile being the site of America's first Mardi Gras celebration in 1703, a brass band led a second line march.

But a close look at RSA's annual report reveals the problem. Like retirement systems across the country, Alabama's state-employee and teacher funds face significant unfunded liabilities. According to the Equable Institute, the nonpartisan organization that rates state pension funds, Alabama faces a \$16 billion funding shortfall and ranks 35th among the 50 states in the percentage of its liabilities that are funded.

Alabama, in other words, has a lot of catching up to do.

The system is doing well overall, earning a 21% return on investment in 2024. But RSA's real-estate investments—including the Battle House, dozens of small businesses, and a group of resort hotels on a Mobile-area golf course—haven't performed so well. That part of the portfolio, per the annual report, returned less than 9%. Compared with RSA's other investments, its real-estate investments leave money on the table. Meanwhile RSA's CEO was paid \$975,000 in 2023, making him the

state's highest-paid employee who isn't a college sports coach.

Even if RSA's real-estate investments are turning a profit, that doesn't mean they are prudent. The combined cost of the RSA headquarters office tower in Mobile and the renovation of the hotel—hailed as a showpiece for the convention market—was \$162 million.

When RSA decided to rehabilitate the Battle House, did anyone ask why private capital wasn't restoring the hotel? What might the city have done to lure investment? Mobile could have waived or reduced the combined 17%

hotel and tourism tax it collects. Or improved public safety. Or simply asked: Why did the hotel stand vacant for more than 30 years?

Political direction of state pension funds is a temptation to which states across the country are succumbing—in their own distinct ways. But as they face financial liabilities and a wave of boomer retirements, it's a temptation to resist. That said, I recommend the Battle House—and am grateful to Alabama's retirees.

Mr. Husock is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

U.S. Hockey's Pair of Jacks

By Mike Kerrigan

History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes. The echoing aphorism is apparently nowhere truer than in cavernous Olympic hockey ice arenas.

By now most Americans and Canadians know of Jack Hughes, the impossibly toothy and toothless forward on the 2026 U.S. Olympic men's hockey team who scored the game-winning and gold medal-securing overtime goal against Canada on Sunday. Fewer know the story of U.S. Hockey's other Jack Hughes.

This defenseman, whose given name was John Francis Hughes, was among the final cuts made by Coach Herb Brooks to the 1980 U.S. National Team. The moment is captured in the movie "Miracle" when Coach Brooks strikes his name from the roster. Forty-six years to the day after the Miracle on Ice, a same-named Olympian brings gold and glory to America.

This coincidence—the two men

aren't related—called to mind the poem "Cathedral Builders" by Welsh poet John Ormond and equal to the mystical moment. It's a tribute to the medieval craftsmen who built Europe's glorious cathedrals, but also a reminder that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

The 1980 team had a player with the same name as this year's star.

That is how I see the elder Mr. Hughes—as a cathedral builder. Like a humble laborer who, in the poet's words, "hoisted hewn rock into heaven" but didn't live to see his life's work completed, the defenseman didn't make the 1980 hockey team—his cathedral—that won gold in Lake Placid. He did go on to play two seasons with the National Hockey League's Colorado Rockies (now the New Jersey Devils).

By giving his best to the end, he made the American side as good as it needed to be to beat the Soviets in the medal round and Finland for the gold. Vince Lombardi established the importance of this when he observed practice doesn't make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect.

John Francis Hughes's mystical mark on U.S. Hockey is like that of a medieval mason who helped lay a forgotten stone in a cathedral's foundation. This base allowed to soar last Sunday's spire of victory at another Jack Hughes's laboring hand. Both men are cathedral builders, the latter only more famously so.

I hope the elder Mr. Hughes reads this and then "Cathedral Builders." As he reflects on U.S. Hockey's victory in Milan, he too can, like the poem's older laborers at consecration, look upward and say to himself with proper pride, "I bloody did that."

Mr. Kerrigan is an attorney in Charlotte, N.C.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

China Wins the Pentagon-Anthropropic Brawl

President Trump on Friday banned Anthropic and its AI products from all government contracts, and the Communists must be cheering in Beijing. The Administration is making what is a modest dispute over the military uses of AI into a self-destructive show of brute political force that will hurt the U.S. military and the rest of the government.

Anthropic's models were the first cutting-edge AI deployed on classified networks in the U.S. government. The Pentagon prefers a contract to use the tools for "any lawful use," as outlined in its AI strategy. Anthropic took exception. The company doesn't want its models deployed for "mass domestic surveillance," nor used in fully autonomous weapons that strike without a human in the decision loop.

The Pentagon is within its rights to stop working with the company. The missions of the U.S. military are the responsibility of elected and politically accountable officials. It's an imperfect analogy, but a company can't sell the U.S. military a missile and then haggle about acceptable targets.

That's the principle at issue, not whether the Pentagon can "mass surveil" U.S. citizens, which nobody supports and isn't happening. The employment of fully autonomous weapons presents real ethical quandaries, though the technology isn't ready for that. Both are questions for Defense Department practices and Congress, not contracts. Anthropic could have made a concession without giving up its larger principles.

But instead of wishing Anthropic the best in its future endeavors and accepting potentially inferior products, the President has gone nuclear. Mr. Trump thundered online on Friday

that he is directing "EVERY Federal Agency" to "IMMEDIATELY CEASE all use of Anthropic's technology," with six months to phase out the tech at the Pentagon.

This will hurt Anthropic, but it may also damage U.S. defenses. The company's Claude model and AI tools are on the front line of U.S. innovation, and nothing is more important for U.S. troops than having the battlefield edge in technology.

The Pentagon doesn't divulge much about how it uses AI, but an official said late last year that U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is "one of the premier users," which means against China. What intelligence or planning tools will U.S. forces now have to give up?

Elon Musk belly-flopped into the dispute this week by posting that "Anthropic hates Western Civilization," and no doubt he's pleased that Mr. Trump's Anthropic ban may create an opening for his Grok AI to get the contracts. But Anthropic doesn't lack for patriotism. The company says it has left revenue on the table by cutting off firms linked to the Chinese Communist Party. It's no small matter that a technology company has been willing to help the U.S. military in combat, a change from a decade ago when most of Silicon Valley viewed Pentagon contracts as complicity in imperialism.

Mr. Trump derided Anthropic as "some out-of-control, Radical Left AI company." But the bigger picture before the meltdown was that an AI company with a progressive reputation and the Trump Pentagon largely agreed that America has to be defended with premiere technology. The Pentagon needs all the AI help in can get as the technology races ahead and China isn't far behind. The People's Liberation Army is the winner of the Anthropic ban.

Trump goes nuclear on the AI firm, in a needless escalation.

Why Netflix Lost Warner to Paramount

The bidding war for Warner Bros. Discovery ended Thursday with Netflix walking away. President Trump may have tipped the scales for Paramount Skydance, but Netflix's progressive political slant didn't help its cause.

Netflix appeared to ace Paramount out in December with an all-cash offer of \$27.75 a share, which excluded Warner Bros.'s declining TV networks. But then Paramount came back with a tender offer to shareholders of \$30 a share that included the TV networks (one of which is CNN).

Enter Mr. Trump, who as always was a wild card. Mr. Trump first said he wouldn't interfere in the antitrust review, which was hard to believe. But he couldn't resist after Netflix board member Susan Rice, a former Obama and Biden adviser, said in a podcast that Democrats won't "forgive and forget" companies that "bent the knee" to the President. Was she *trying* to scuttle the Netflix takeover bid?

On cue, Mr. Trump wrote Sunday on social media that Netflix should fire Ms. Rice "IMMEDIATELY, or pay the consequences." Democrats accused Mr. Trump of bullying Netflix, never mind Ms. Rice's threats of political retaliation against other companies.

Don't forget how Democrats cheered on Biden antitrust regulators who conditioned approval of the Chevron-Hess and Exxon-Pioneer Natural Resources mergers on barring shale fracking execs John Hess and Scott Sheffield from serving on their corporate boards. Messrs. Hess and Sheffield had criticized the Biden team's anti-fossil-fuel policies.

In any case, Paramount this week improved its offer to \$31 a share, which the Warner Bros. board on Thursday deemed "superior" to Netflix's. Netflix bowed out late Thursday, saying

"at the price required to match Paramount Skydance's latest offer, the deal is no longer financially attractive." That's probably true. Netflix's stock had fallen by more than a third since last autumn when it made its play for Warner Bros., and it surged 13.8% Friday after it bowed out of the bidding war.

Democrats are running with the writes-itself narrative that Mr. Trump thwarted Netflix to help Paramount CEO David Ellison, the son of GOP donor Larry Ellison. "A handful of Trump-aligned billionaires are trying to seize control of what you watch and charge you whatever price they want," Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren said Thursday.

But that's a media fantasy. Netflix dominates streaming with 325 million subscribers, far exceeding Disney Plus (132 million), Warner Bros.'s HBO Max (132 million) and Paramount Plus (79 million). Netflix's programming also leans left, which is one reason its bid had drawn opposition from Republican Members of Congress and state Attorneys General.

In a better world, Warner Bros. would have only had to consider which bid provided the best value for shareholders. But in a world in which antitrust has become a political weapon, Paramount had the upper hand. Its reward means it will now have to combine two companies whose debt is junk-rated and find a media business model that works.

The left-leaning press, which means most in the press, is preoccupied with what will happen to CNN. Paramount already owns CBS, which is still trying to figure out how to please Mr. Ellison and mollify Mr. Trump while remaining a credible news source. Try hiring journalists who are curious about the world and think for themselves rather than follow the herd.

flavor their products and deceptively market them in ways that encourage kids to ingest fluoride." Both companies agreed to adjust images on their packages.

Artificial food coloring is another bogeyman for RFK. Sure enough, Mr. Paxton last year opened an investigation into Mars, the maker of M&M's and Skittles. The AG accused the company of adding "toxic dyes" to its products. He launched a similar inquiry into Kellogg's, suggesting it had deceptively marketed its cereals, as if it were some scandalous secret that Froot Loops contain food coloring.

Mr. Paxton's actions make headlines, while bolstering friendships in the plaintiffs bar. The Texas AG's office has more than 750 staff attorneys according to its website, yet private firms have billed hundreds of millions of dollars for work as outside counsel. Mr. Paxton's office has said it "could not have gotten a better return on its investment," but the contracts have enriched his allies.

In 2024 Mr. Paxton hired Houston lawyer Tony Buzbee for a lawsuit that claims BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street conspired to buy shares in coal companies to advance a green agenda. Mr. Buzbee had represented Mr. Paxton in his 2023 impeachment trial.

The Texas primary is Tuesday, and the polls show Mr. Paxton narrowly leading incumbent GOP Sen. John Cornyn. Democrats are having their own nomination brawl, between Rep. Jasmine Crockett, an in-your-face progressive, and James Talarico, who is more rhetorically moderate. But they both would love the chance to take on Mr. Paxton, since he's Democrats' best hope for turning Texas blue.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Systems Run on Software No One Understands

In "AI Can Help Defend Against Cyberattacks" (op-ed, Feb. 20), Anne Neuberger rightly argues that AI cybersecurity has become a contest at machine speed. But before building ever-faster defensive agents, we must address a deeper vulnerability: Much of the software underpinning critical systems today is poorly understood by its own operators.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency warns of a "software understanding gap." Organizations often lack visibility into the full security posture of the complex systems they rely on. A Software Bill of Materials (SBOM) is a step forward, but documentation alone does not reveal latent vulnerabilities, insecure coding practices or malicious logic buried across millions of lines of code.

Cybersecurity defense needs to begin with full-system analysis of the software already deployed—in power grids, pipelines, financial systems and defense platforms. Advances in AI code analysis, such as those at Adronite now allow deep

contextual audits of entire codebases, which detect unintended weaknesses—along with flawed assumptions, insecure design patterns and even deliberate backdoors that traditional tools and human reviewers routinely miss.

But defense doesn't stop at auditing legacy systems. Full-system AI coding agents can help embed secure coding practices into the development lifecycle itself, in addition to preventing the accumulation of tech debt: years of patches and workarounds that render systems more fragile under stress. For defense and homeland-security systems especially, continuous AI-assisted code auditing should become a requirement.

Machine-speed attacks demand machine-speed understanding. Without achieving genuine visibility into our existing systems, faster defense will be built atop fragile foundations.

LT. GEN. JON DAVIS USMC (RET.)

Sagle, Idaho

Mr. Davis is former deputy commander of U.S. Cyber Command and an adviser to Adronite.

Small Companies Lose Out on Tariff Refunds

While large corporations like FedEx have received significant attention for suing the U.S. government over tariff refunds, many small, family-owned businesses like ours are also struggling to address the financial burden of these tariffs ("The Real Tariff Liberation Day," Review & Outlook, Feb. 21).

Unlike large firms with extensive legal teams and lobbying power, small businesses lack the resources to pursue lengthy legal battles or access capital from financial markets. We must fight every day to stay competitive, and these tariffs only add to the financial strain. The recent Supreme Court decision on tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act

might seem a victory for large companies, but for small businesses, this decision and the process of seeking refunds is often inaccessible.

At Landice Inc., a family-owned business founded in 1967, we manufacture high-quality fitness equipment that is sold worldwide. While we continue to operate with a commitment to quality and customer service, the challenges we face—compounded by the tariffs—have never been greater. Without the capital to fund legal action or the influence to lobby for changes, we are left to manage these burdens on our own.

DAVID RAINIS

President, Landice Inc.
Randolph, N.J.

Preserving America's Agricultural Heartland

"Farmers Are Aging. The Family Business Is in Peril" (Page One, Feb. 17) illustrates the existential crisis plaguing America's farmers who are struggling to make ends meet, while their futures become increasingly uncertain.

As a corn and soybean grower who hopes to someday transfer his fifth-generation farm to his children, I understand well the problems farmers face. There are market-based solutions that could improve the long-term outlook for

agriculture, but these remedies require action by lawmakers in Washington.

Opening new foreign markets for American imports will be key to helping farmers. Growers have supported President Trump's trade initiatives with countries such as India and the U.K., but these deals and the specific details of the agreements need to be implemented more quickly. We also urge the president to make renewal of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement a top priority. The trilateral accord has continuously bolstered the farm economy.

Congress also has an instrumental role to play. We have called on the House and Senate to pass legislation that would expand access to higher fuel blends of corn ethanol, which would save consumers money at the pump, increase income for farmers and help inject life into the rural economy.

These actions are critical to the survival of the American farmer. Without them, we could see additional bankruptcies and further draining of rural America, the economic consequences of which would extend well beyond the farm gate.

JED BOWER

President, National Corn Growers Association
Washington Court House, Ohio

Comfort in a Hospital Room

I am writing this from a hospital room where my mother recently entered palliative care. In Dennis Prager's op-ed "Mostly Paralyzed but Happy to be Alive" (Feb. 27), he states that his mission is "to deliver ideas that better people's lives." For me and my family his message was well timed, and it offered us some comfort during a difficult time.

WILLIAM T. CHARLTON JR.
Cary, N.C.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Be careful, dear.
Your father and I are
heavily invested in your teeth."

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OPINION

The Oprah State of the Union



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

The president's State of the Union address came straight from the heart of Crazytown. It had everything—tears, cheers, spectacle. They handed out medals and honors like Oprah in the early 2000s: "You get a car! Everybody gets a car!" At one point I thought he was going to pull out a ceremonial sword and knight Kristi Noem. There was yelling and booing and people crying, it was big and rousing, boring and absurd. And important in some things it revealed.

Ten years in, and Democrats still don't know how to handle Donald Trump. He used them as foils and they allowed it, sitting there snarling, at points screaming. Part of how to handle him is if he tries to manipulate you into doing the right

It had everything—tears, cheers, spectacle, awards. Democrats still haven't figured Trump out.

thing—if, for instance, he challenges you to stand in respect for a mother mourning the murder of her daughter—you put aside that you're being manipulated and stand. Because it is right to show human sympathy and regard. The thing to do is look better than Mr. Trump, not worse. You say: *My base demands coldness.* Then get a new base. If you can't, leave before you are reduced to a soulless husk of the eager, happy person who walked into that chamber a decade ago.

The speech left the president in

better shape than he started it. We have all seen the polls. His ratings have tanked. He spent the beginning of his presidency with foreign preoccupations—Greenland, bombing Iran's nuclear sites, literally picking up and removing Nicolás Maduro and telling Venezuela to find someone better. When Mr. Trump moved his attention to domestic issues, he tore down the East Wing of the White House and left a gaping hole of hanging pipes and torn-out wires; it looked as if Washington had been bombed. He sent heavily armed and apparently unaccountable officers to pull frightened people out of their homes, and two protesters were shot to death.

Americans don't like these things. They will never like them.

Bubbling in the background was inflation, and behind that the coming destabilizations of artificial intelligence, so the president is in deep trouble. The only question has been by how much the Democrats will win the House in November, and do they have a chance in the Senate?

The sanest, coolest thing about all this was said by Melissa DeRosa on Mark Halperin's "2WAY" podcast: "Dems are winning because Republicans are losing, and Republicans are losing because America feels chaotic now."

In the speech Mr. Trump, as only he would, decided to calm things down and make them less chaotic by . . . giving constant jolts of electricity. But the electric jolts were largely positive. It was a speech whose subtext was about how great the American people are, examples of which he spread throughout the evening, not clumping them all at the end, which allowed him to brag personally for long stretches but then break it up, shifting to the excellence of others. This produced an effect of narcissism leavened by good-heartedness.

When the gallery doors swung



Royce Williams receives the Medal of Honor.

open and the triumphant U.S. Olympic men's hockey team marched in, it was vulgar and fabulous. They were wearing their medals and their Ralph Lauren sweaters and smiling and laughing like good young men. We all think we're above theatrics. Perhaps you had a moment like this: You were home on the couch and you saw the guys bounding in and thought, "I am sophisticated, I know what they're doing, they're manipulating me, but I'm not some rube, I'll watch clinically. Oh Jeez, Jack Hughes's tooth is still broken, God bless him. The goalie's chewing gum like some 1945 GI." And your throat hitched up against your will and your eyes moistened and when they started with "USA! USA!" you gave up, gave in, and pumped your fist. It is a damnable fact of life that great propaganda works even when you know it's propaganda.

Mr. Trump then hit hard at cultural issues that have more support in the polls than he has. In doing this he reminded a not insignificant portion of voters that no matter how much they dislike him, they dislike Democratic policies more. They don't hate Democrats, but things

that party allows or sits silent for.

All politics, even in the brazen age of egomania, comes down to policy. "I will raise taxes." "I will lower them." "Boys can play on the girls' team." "No boys on the girls' team." "If the Democrats win, they'll open the border again." "If the Republicans win, it will stay closed."

Mr. Trump brought back his social issues—immigration, transgenderism, crime. Most potent was the story of Iryna Zarutka, the 23-year-old woman murdered last August in Charlotte, N.C. She had legally migrated here with her family from Ukraine and was working in a pizzeria. Her story haunts me, haunts a lot of people. She was brand-new here, innocent of America, and died by herself in terror on a train seat, her throat slashed; the last thing she saw was the towering man, her blood dripping from his knife.

It haunts us because in the way of life the obscure judges and court officers and prosecutors and legislators who let it happen are all fine, their lives undisturbed, but the girl is dead and the man who killed her had been arrested more than a dozen times before the stabbing, and

had a criminal record going back to 2007. He never should have been free to do what he did.

On the president's giving out of honors: You shouldn't formally award the Medal of Honor at a State of the Union address because you cannot give our greatest national honor at what is, always and inevitably, a political and even partisan event. The Medal of Honor is above politics. It speaks of nation, not party. You don't use brave men like that as your prop. You don't insinuate yourself into their valor. A person would be churlish not to be moved by the two recipients' stories Tuesday night, but awarding them what they'd earned in that venue marked the abuse of a great honor.

As for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which Mr. Trump awarded to goalie Connor Hellebuyck, that august honor has been diminished in the past 10 years, Mr. Trump starting the trend and Joe Biden enthusiastically continuing it.

The Medal of Freedom isn't for a *moment*, it is for a *life*. From its modern inception in 1963, it was the nation's highest peacetime civilian honor for those who had traveled a long road and given our country something great. It was intended for the greatest American artists, scientists, entertainers, writers, thinkers—Robert Frost, John Ford, Jonas Salk. It went to Jesse Owens in 1976—40 years after he showed Adolf Hitler up at the 1936 Olympics. He was given it not for an instant but for a lifetime of constructiveness.

Why does this matter? Because it matters! Because this honor isn't a matter of passing public mood or political need, it speaks of deliberation, it marks a nation *recognizing*, with wisdom and time and through the instrument of a president, who really helped us live.

There is nothing about the devaluing of this award that makes America great again.

States Rip Families Apart to Serve Transgender Ideology

By Laura Bryant Hanford
And Erin Friday

Fifteen years ago if somebody was up here and said that, they'd say "What's wrong with him?" President Trump said Tuesday in his State of the Union address. Said what? "Surely we can all agree no state can be allowed to rip children from their parents' arms and transition them to a new gender against the parents' will." When Democratic lawmakers declined to stand in assent to that statement, the president declared: "These people are crazy."

Mr. Trump had introduced Sage Blair, 19, and her adopted mother (and biological paternal grandmother), Michele. Their story is unbelievable—and part of a horrifying trend.

Sage was 14 and a high-school freshman when she declared she was a boy. Her Virginia school "transitioned" her without informing Michele. The school counselor told her to use the boys' bathroom, where she was assaulted. Police and school officials met with Sage without her parents, warning she could be sued for making the hyperbolic statement that "all the boys are rapists." Fearing harm to her family, Sage ran away. She was kidnapped by a sex trafficker.

When the Federal Bureau of Investigation rescued Sage in Maryland, a state judge denied Ms. Blair and her husband all contact with their traumatized daughter and withheld custody on claims of abuse related to "misgendering." The judge ordered her to be housed in a group home for high-risk male teens and young adults. Sage ran away again, only to be abducted by another trafficker and exploited for months until Texas law-enforcement officers found her and returned her to her mother. Why did she claim to be a boy? "Everybody was doing it," Sage later explained. "I just wanted to have friends."

The child-welfare system has been hijacked through federally and state-funded programs to classify parents as abusive if they don't accept their children's assertions that

they are members of the opposite sex. Several liberal states have codified this view into law. Washington enacted legislation permitting children as young as 13 to leave their homes and not be returned to their parents if they are seeking sex-rejecting medical interventions. Colorado lawmakers have repeatedly introduced bills that would require courts in custody disputes to favor a parent who "affirms" his child's trans identity.

Even when courts determine no child abuse has occurred, children are being removed from homes through networks of runaway shelters and nonprofits. Nonfamilial adults are hiding children who are confused about their sex, and child-welfare departments extend investigations until the child turns 18, rendering the cases moot.

Many states permit or require that foster placements and residential facilities affirm a child's "gender identity" and consent to medical interventions. That sends a message that the foster-care system offers an exit from parental authority.

The mantra offered to parents is no longer "would you rather have a

dead daughter or a living son?" It is "would you rather lose custody of your child, or 'transition' her?" Sage Blair's story is far from unique, and its ending is a relatively happy one.

In Connecticut, Elvira Sayed faced child-abuse proceedings for declining to affirm that her daughter was a boy. Before the case was resolved, the daughter turned 18 and cut off contact with Ms. Sayed. The young lady died by suicide shortly after being

The case of Sage Blair, which Trump highlighted, is unbelievable—and part of a horrifying trend.

gunning testosterone treatment. Her body wasn't discovered for four days.

Connecticut also removed Charles Smith's daughter from his home for refusing to treat her as male. She had severe psychiatric co-morbidities and had carved up her body from her arms to her feet, but the state viewed her transgender identity as paramount. They took and placed her

with an "affirming" gay couple.

California removed Andriy and Alexandra Lyashchenko's daughter for not treating her as male. The state placed her in an "affirming" foster home, where she shares a bedroom with a teenage boy. Oregon investigated Ashly Wallace four times for alleged abuse for not affirming her trans-identified daughter. She was cleared each time. Her daughter had used Oregon's shelter system designed for homeless youth to avoid a mother who never abandoned her.

In Washington state, Jodie and David Holman's daughter used free nonprofit legal services to leave home and was placed with an unvetted stranger. The parents weren't found to be abusive, and their daughter was eventually returned. But she subsequently fled again and has been missing for months.

Vernadette Broyles, Sage's lawyer, says that ideologues have used laws designed to protect children as a cover for their abuse: "Confidentiality requirements governing child-welfare proceedings conceal the full extent to which the child welfare apparatus is being used to investigate, coerce and separate children from

their parents who decline to affirm their children's rejection of their sex."

State legislatures have begun to respond. Texas, North Carolina and Indiana have enacted laws clarifying that raising children consistent with their sex doesn't constitute child abuse. Lawmakers in Ohio, Georgia and New Hampshire are taking up similar measures. Democrats have killed similar measures in Virginia each year since Sage's Law was introduced in 2023 and refused even to hold a hearing for Yaeli's Law in California. Yaeli's Law is named for a teenage girl who died by suicide after the state removed her from her family because her mother refused to "transition" her.

Mr. Trump's recognition of the Blairs at the State of the Union signals that the federal government is prepared to examine how the child-welfare infrastructure has been turned against the children it was designed to protect.

Ms. Hanford is a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Ms. Friday is a lawyer and president of Our Duty USA.

Unsurprisingly, Netflix Bails Out on Its Bid



BUSINESS WORLD
By Bob Holman
Jenkins, Jr.

its then-pending acquisition of the Warner Bros. Discovery film and video cornucopia, which it abandoned Thursday.

Netflix now says Warner would have been "nice to have" but not a "must have." The company's choice to walk away showed it was financially "disciplined."

The New York Times and Bloomberg used the same word for

Netflix's withdrawal: stunning. But it wasn't stunning if you followed Netflix's stock price. Investors hated the deal from the get-go, knocking \$150 billion off Netflix's \$500 billion market cap. It wasn't stunning either if you actually thought about what Netflix ownership would entail: a complexifier and time-suck for management, disproportionate to any value that controlling Warner Bros. would provide.

I won't rehearse the arguments made here three months ago and alluded to again last week. Given all the conflicts that owning Warner Bros. would have entailed, every director, producer and actor in Hollywood would have been screaming "anticompetitive" anytime Netflix made a decision they didn't like.

Worse were the incentives. Netflix is the utility streamer, where all producers want their shows to turn up sooner or later. Netflix itself, overly algorithmic, benefits from freestanding producers whose shows succeed by being, you know, good. In Netflix's hands, the temptation to despoil the peerless Warner brands (Batman, Game of Thrones, Bugs Bunny, etc.) for AI slop would have been disturbingly large.

Add that politically, winning the necessary approvals would have been an uphill fight. Democrats and Republicans were already carping. Stupidly, board member and former Obama official Susan Rice chose this moment to bait President Trump as Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos was scheduled to pay a lobbying call on the White House. Or maybe not so stupidly if Ms. Rice knew Netflix intended to bail and was

providing ammunition for when the company turns to rallying its political allies to sandbag Paramount's bid.

Let it also be said that Netflix would likely have prevailed in court and, contrary to some pundits, if Warner was worth buying it was worth a three-year court fight because during that three years a rival wouldn't have had the benefit of Warner ownership.

In suggesting the price was a smidge too high, the streamer tells us it never really lusted after Warner.

The real howler, though, is Netflix's claim that it's acting now on some uncannily fine-toothed financial appraisal. Boy, Netflix must employ some clairvoyant accountants. Its number crunchers apparently judged the deal a winner for Netflix at a Paramount-equivalent price of \$30 a share but a loser at \$31. Knowing with such calibrated exactitude what Harry Potter etc. would be worth to Netflix until the end of time is quite a feat.

As implied here all along, Netflix's real triumph was driving up the price Paramount had to pay and saddling the newcomer with enough debt to hobble any challenge to Netflix's streaming dominance. But give the younger Mr. Ellison credit too—a lot of peanut-gallery voices thought he'd have to go to \$35 a share or higher.

Other questions now come to the fore. Paramount partisans assured investors their version of a Warner Bros. Discovery takeover would receive speedy and unconditional approval from the Trump administration. This is a bet on Mr. Trump's loyalty, always an uncertain quantum, never mind Trump-placating gestures from the Ellisons too numerous to list, from hiring Bari Weiss to remake CBS News (and doing a good job of it) to putting Trump critic Stephen Colbert on the road to cancellation.

After all, CNN will come under the same management now as Trump-friendlier CBS. We'll see if Netflix clout is mobilized to stir up trouble and sink Paramount's deal. Still, progressives shouldn't overdo their fretting about an alleged MAGA takeover. When the Ellisons have the necessary approvals, expect them to cut a more neutral path politically. They have every reason to mollify the Hollywood crowd to extract full value from their merged empire.

Hollywood personalities never liked either acquisition, of course. Consolidation means less leverage in negotiating their next deal. California's attorney general threatened either buyer with rough sledding. The California types risk being overly provincial here, as if movie and TV production aren't already being dispersed to global production centers and, indeed, into cyberspace with AI. Holding back local companies like Paramount and Warner from adapting can only accelerate the region's relative decline.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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