

Churn and change in three states



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

THE ASSEMBLY elections in five elections have brought about a dramatic change in three states — Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Assam and Puducherry have voted for the *status quo*. It is not possible to write a single narrative on the elections. Each state has produced a distinct narrative. **Kerala** is a straightforward story. The UDF and the LDF have alternated in ruling the state for several decades. The sequence was broken in 2021 when the LDF, under Mr Pinarayi Vijayan, was re-elected for a second term. The Congress put in place a new leadership (PCC and CLP) and the party has functioned in the last 5 years as a true Opposition with renewed vigour. The payoff is visible. The UDF has an obligation to govern and deliver results that will keep the UDF partners together, and advance secularism, economic progress and prosperity, and federalism.

Unexpected Results

The **Tamil Nadu** story is complex. The DMK, supported by the Congress and other

secular parties, was elected in 2021 with a solid majority. It undoubtedly delivered on two fronts — *economic growth and welfare measures*. Apparently, there were other factors that weighed with the electorate. The unknown factor was the entry of Mr Joseph Vijay, a film hero who has a legion of fans, especially among the youth and women. Since the announcement of the calendar of the elections, a wind started blowing; it gathered speed and turned into a storm in the last *10 days* before the polling date; swept across 108 constituencies; but did not go further. It was a spectacular debut for a two-year-old political party. Most candidates were unknown names and faces, and few campaigned. The candidate was ‘Vijay’ everywhere. Mr Vijay’s few short speeches, video memes and many film songs constituted the ‘campaign’. TVK was 11 short of a simple majority but, in order to forestall *President’s Rule* and avoid *another election*, Congress (S), CPI (2), CPI(M) (2) and VCK (2) have decided to offer support. **West Bengal** is the real story that has the potential to alter the direction of the country. The secular parties in West Bengal — Congress, Trinamool Congress and CPI(M) — fought separately against the BJP that had strengthened itself over the last 10 years. Besides, S.I.R. in West Bengal erased a large number of voters and left a deep scar on democracy. There are numerous instances where the son/daughter was a voter but the father/mother was not. Families were divided into voters and non-voters. The judiciary and make-shift judicial remedies let down millions of voters and

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thousands were disenfranchised. Besides S.I.R., the weight of three terms was a huge millstone around the neck of the Trinamool Congress.

BJP’s Dominance

The defeat of Trinamool Congress, portends grave developments: The BJP is the sole party or in coalition governments ruling the **West** (Maharashtra, Gujarat and Goa), much of the **Hindi heartland** (except Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand), the **East** and the **North East**. Figuratively, the Vindhya mountain range is a barrier to the BJP’s entry into the five Southern states. Its Herculean efforts to enter Kerala and Tamil Nadu were firmly rebuffed by the electorate (leaving the BJP with 3 and 1 seats, respectively). However, its control over the rest of India is nearly complete.

Despite winning only 240 seats in the Lok Sabha in 2024, the BJP has passed the following contentious Bills in Parliament: The Wakf (Amendment) Act, 2025; Jammu & Kashmir Local Bodies (Amendment) Act, 2025; Taxation Laws (Amendment) Act, 2025; and National Sports Governance Act, 2025.

Other controversial Bills are in the offing, including the anti-democratic ‘One Nation One Election’ Bill. Despite lacking the numbers, the BJP introduced the controversial Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill to *repeal and re-enact* a Bill for women’s reservation that had been passed in September 2023. The new Bill’s real purpose was to push delimitation and alter the

number of LS seats in each state. The Bill was defeated by the I.N.D.I.A. bloc. If the BJP continues its winning spree, the government will attempt to amend the Constitution to pave the way for an authoritarian state within the trappings of a parliamentary system. BJP’s next goal will be a unitary Constitution (bury federalism), Hindutva as the prevailing ideology (bury secularism), capitalism as the economic model (bury the welfare state) and eventually a one-party state (bury democracy).

Unite & pushback

The Opposition parties must firmly push back. BJP will be the conservative pole. Other political choices and alternatives must be preserved for India to remain a democratic, federal and secular country. The I.N.D.I.A. bloc gained partial success in 2024, but failed to build on the momentum. The bloc seems to be struggling and stumbling, but that is the only instrument to challenge the BJP.

After the election, Ms Mamata Banerjee (Trinamool Congress) has promised to strengthen the I.N.D.I.A. bloc. Mr M.K. Stalin (DMK) has not said a word adverse to the bloc. From his past statements (“*BJP is my ideological enemy*”), it may be possible to draw Mr Vijay (TVK) into the bloc. It is true there are fundamental differences among the constituents of the bloc, but these differences should be confined to the **State-level** and unity should be forged at the **National-level**. It will require a sense of urgency, dialogue and perseverance.

Political governors are dangerous



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

AT THE outset let me make clear that I have long believed that the post of Governor should be abolished. It is a colonial leftover from that time when our British rulers felt handing full democracy to us natives was dangerous and unwise. And so was created a spying post to serve the interests of the Raj. It is hard to understand why Narendra Modi has not noticed that the ugliest legacy of colonial times is colonial governance. There is no point in tearing down British monuments and replacing them with Indian ones if inside these edifices people continue to rule like our colonial masters. Why has Modi whose stated mission is to remove ‘all signs of India’s servitude’ not made governance less colonial? Has he succumbed to the urge in all political leaders to control everything, everywhere all the time?

Judging by the drama playing out in Tamil Nadu, it seems that way. The mandate in that vital southern state was so emphatically against the two Dravidian parties that for them to even consider coming together to stitch up an unwanted government is disgraceful. It should have been the Governor’s duty to give Vijay the chance he deserved to form a government and then allow him to prove his majority in the legislative assembly. Why did he take so much time that political uncertainty spread? The joy of seeing a political novice defeat two of the most entrenched and entitled political parties in India was allowed to fade before a decision was finally made. Why?

Now I shall explain why I have an aversion to governors. I see them as ugly symbols of colonial rule and object to us taxpayers paying for them to live like grandees. But my real aversion began from first-hand experience. I happened to cover Indira Gandhi’s toppling of Farooq Abdullah’s government in the summer of 1984. It was a bad decision because in my view our current Kashmir problem began with this dismissal of a legitimate government by an ill-advised and despotic prime minister. Farooq won that election fair and square as it was the first election in the former state of Jammu & Kashmir after Sheikh Abdullah’s death. I spent three weeks in the Valley covering the election and saw no sign of cheating. But a powerful lobby of Kashmiri Pandits told Mrs. Gandhi that there had been cheating and she believed them.

So, she decided in less than a year of Farooq Abdullah becoming chief minister that she had to get rid of him. For this she needed the complicity of an obedient governor. But the man in residence in Srinagar’s spectacularly situated Raj Bhavan was her uncle B.K. Nehru who warned her that destabilizing Kashmir was dangerous and reckless. He refused completely to cooperate and so this gracious and wise man was replaced by a factotum of Sanjay Gandhi called Jagmohan. He was sent to Srinagar with the specific purpose of removing Farooq and he did this by organising a split in the National Conference and installing as chief minister Ghulam Mohammad (Gul) Shah, husband of Farooq’s sister.

Shah’s credibility among ordinary Kashmiris was so low that he ruled by imposing curfew every time there was a disturbance. The Kashmir Valley spent so many days under curfew in the twenty months that Gul Shah ruled that he came to be mocked as Gul-e-curfew. The curfew flower. It was in those twenty months of turbulence and anger that in my view our current Kashmir problem was born. It has almost nothing to do with our historical Kashmir problem. That old problem in my view died after the creation of Bangladesh and the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In the three weeks that I spent travelling around the Kashmir Valley in 1983, every Kashmiri I spoke to said that they were participating in the election as Indians.

All this changed because of the dirty political game that a Governor played at the behest of New Delhi. The sledgehammer strategy that the Modi government has employed to solve the Kashmir problem has brought a measure of peace and prosperity but, as we saw, it took just one act of terrorism in Pahalgam for happy days to end.

In Tamil Nadu, it should have been the primary duty of the Governor to give the man with the largest number of seats in the assembly the first shot at forming a government. Instead, he chose, perhaps on the orders of Delhi, to play his own game of dice. It is hard to say where it will all end but the damage already done is considerable. As for me personally, a question I find myself asking more and more often is why the BJP, our proudly nationalist party whose leaders never stop reminding us about their great love for ‘Ma Bharati’, now walks slowly but firmly down the same road that the Congress Party trod for decades.

It was mistakes Congress made while walking on that road which created the biggest political problems that we still face. If the BJP carries on making the same mistakes, they will end up causing even more damage because with the whole world in flux, we cannot afford any mistakes. Those who play political games in these times will find it hard at some point down the road to be seen as patriots and nationalists. They could even be called anti-India.

This Met Gala, almost everyone failed the theme



TRISHA MUKHERJEE

ARECREATION OF the *Veiled Woman*. A ‘live’ *Madame X*. Claude Monet’s lilies on a gown. This year’s theme for the Met Gala was “Fashion is art”. But neither fashion nor art got the memo. The one criterion for something to be called a “work of art” is originality of thought. Most of the Gala was anything but.

Announcing the theme, Andrew Bolton, the head curator of the museum’s Costume Institute, had expressed concerns that it may be interpreted “too literally”. Bolton’s fears materialised on the iconic steps when celebrities served looks that recalled works of art — ancient, modern and contemporary — and too conspicuously.

Lauren Sanchez Bezos, the honorary chair, turned up at the event as *Madame X* from Singer Sargent’s iconic 1884 portrait. The look was a replica, barring the hairdo. Bezos let her hair down as she did what could have been a nuanced theme. Then, there was Jessica Kayll. In perhaps one of the laziest interpretations, Kayll painted Monet’s lilies on her gown. The fact that she is a designer and a textile artist makes the costume that much more univertive.

Raja Ravi Varma is the flavour of the season in India — his *Yashoda and Krishna* (1890) is now India’s most expensive painting after it fetched Rs 167.2 crore at a Saffronart auction in March this year — and Karan Johar wore the modernist on his sleeves. The filmmaker’s Manish Malhotra ensemble, titled, *Framed in Eternity*, included an oversized ornate cape featuring five of Ravi Varma’s paintings — *Hamsa Damayanti*, *Lady with a Lemon*, *Kadambari*, *Arjuna and Subhadra* and *There Comes Papa*.

Heidi Klum’s *Veiled Vestal*, undoubtedly, brings the marble sculpture to life in exceptional detail, but that was never the point.

The theme was: Fashion “is” art, not “as” art. It wanted the body to be transformed into a canvas and exemplify what fashion could create, not recreate. The fact that so many attendees chose to rely on “art” as we know it — paintings, sculptures — to fit the theme only shows how little faith they have in fashion as an independent art form; it is a medium of expression and cultural commentary. What could have been an affirming moment for fashion turned out to be a case against it — its imagination, derivative; its fame, borrowed.

Not everyone disappointed, though. Malhotra might have taken the ‘inspired’ route to dress Johar but with his own outfit, he was on point — original, innovative and imaginative. Using traditional Indian weaves such as *dori*, *zardozi*, *chikankari*, and *kasab*, he gave his cape a sculptural quality through recreations of Mumbai landmarks. It also bore signatures of the over 50 artisans who worked on it as a celebration of the fraternity that helps translate a vision into reality.

Equally stunning was stylist and entrepreneur Diya Mehta Jatia in her metallic Kanjivaram gown. It was layered with an intricately carved bodice and panel fashioned out of sholapith, an endangered craft from Bengal. The couture look by Mayyur Girotra was a specimen in how fashion can become a bridge between “art” and “craft”.

Not as impressive but an apt example of how the theme could have been interpreted in relation to art history, was Blake Lively’s voluminous Versace gown with a cloud-like trail of pink, purple and yellow tulle. It was inspired by 18th-century Venetian Rococo paintings in its choice of pastel hues; its dramatic 13-feet train and its four “bays” at the hip that evoke Baroque architectural sensibilities.

Sarah Paulson’s outfit included a dollar bill blindfold that took a dig at the richest “one per cent”, including Jeff Bezos who contributed heavily to this year’s Met Gala. It showed that fashion is art in the way it can do more than just be pretty. But such looks were only far and few.

Some of the Met Gala themes over the years include “Super-fine: Tailoring Black Style”, “Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion” and “Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty”. While about fashion, they were restricted by time, personalities and nationalities. This year was a rare opportunity for the fashion industry to embrace both its method and madness and come into its own, but it chose to follow, not lead.

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When Bihar’s Assembly was dissolved before it could speak



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SHUBHAM KUMAR

IN 2000, Nitish Kumar became Bihar’s Chief Minister for the first time. The term lasted only seven days. As leader of the Samata Party, he took oath but resigned soon after when it became clear that he could not prove a majority in the Assembly. Five years later, he would return to Patna’s highest office. Between these two moments lay one of the most dramatic constitutional episodes in India’s history of hung Assemblies.

The February 2005 Bihar election did not give anyone a clear mandate. It gave everyone a claim. The RJD emerged as the single largest party with 75 seats, Nitish Kumar’s JD(U) had 55, BJP 37, Ram Vilas Paswan’s LJP 29, and 17 Independents held the balance. In a House of 243, the majority mark was 122.

The Governor was Buta Singh, a Congress veteran who had won eight general elections, served under four Prime Ministers, and knew Bihar’s principal leaders from Parliament. He had taken charge only months earlier, after losing the 2004 Lok Sabha election from Jalore in Rajasthan. In a hung House, his task was constitutionally sensitive but conceptually simple: find out who could form a government and require that person to prove majority on the floor.

The signals before him were messy. Paswan’s LJP said it would support neither the RJD nor the BJP. The BJP urged the Governor not to invite the RJD. The RJD staked a claim but did not have 122 MLAs. Smaller parties refused to support either camp. Six Independents claimed they could form a government. Bihar was placed under President’s Rule on March 7, with the Assembly kept in suspended animation.

In later reports to President Kalam, Buta Singh alleged that the JD(U)-BJP combine was trying to secure a majority by winning over LJP MLAs and splitting the Congress.



Nitish Kumar’s JD(U) won 55 seats in February 2005

In his final report, he claimed that 17-18 LJP MLAs were moving towards the JD(U), and that this would “distort the verdict of the people”. He therefore recommended dissolution of the Assembly.

This was the constitutional turn. The Governor did not merely assess whether a claimant had numbers. He assessed the morality of how numbers might be assembled. Before MLAs could vote, their possible movement was treated as a reason to end the House itself.

The file reached Delhi on May 22, 2005, and moved with exceptional speed. The Union Cabinet met late at night and accepted the recommendation. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called President Kalam, who was in Moscow, to apprise him of the decision. A second call followed at 3:30 am Delhi time — I am in Moscow — to answer Kalam’s questions. Soon after, from Moscow, Kalam approved the dissolution of an Assembly that had not held a single sitting.

The NDA marched to Rashtrapati Bhavan in protest. Its memorandum claimed that 22 LJP MLAs had decided to merge with the JD(U). Nitish and Jaitley raised the issue repeatedly in Parliament. Lalu Prasad reportedly remarked that it was not in Nitish’s fate to become Chief Minister.

What we measure, what we miss

IN CONVERSATIONS on women’s progress, numbers often lead while meaning trails behind. Before asking how much progress has been made, we must ask what, exactly, we are measuring — and whether our words are equal to the lives they seek to describe. In cities like Delhi, where women’s educational attainment has steadily risen, the persistent gap between education and employment offers a telling contradiction — one that exposes the limits of how we read progress.

Consider the ease with which we invoke the term “independent”. It appears definitive, even celebratory. On closer scrutiny, however, it is less a destination than a comparison. A woman is often described as independent not in absolute terms, but in relation to others who are more constrained — more homebound, more economically deprived, less visible in the public sphere. The label does not capture autonomy so much as it ranks positions along a continuum of constraint. It is, in this sense, a

trouser-term: tailored and presentable, but cut from the fabric of relativity.

This relativity is not merely semantic; it shapes how success is recorded and rewarded. When independence is framed comparatively, even modest shifts can appear significant. A woman entering the workforce may be counted as a marker of empowerment, regardless of the conditions under which she works or the degree of control she exercises over her earnings.

This ambiguity has consequences for policy design and evaluation. We rely on indicators such as income, mobility, and participation in decision-making, treating them as markers of empowerment. They matter, but they are, at best, partial proxies. Income does not necessarily imply control over earnings; mobility may coexist with surveillance or limited choice; participation in decisions may mask deeper asymmetries of power. The metrics register movement, but not always a shift in the structures that shape that movement.



SHE SAID
BY SANGEETA KAMPANI

The limits of these measures are evident in the widely noted gap between education and employment for women in Delhi. Even as educational attainment has improved, this has not translated into commensurate workforce participation. Such divergence unsettles linear assumptions of progress. It suggests that while capabilities may expand, the ability to exercise them remains mediated by social norms, safety concerns, care responsibilities, and structural barriers in the labour market. Measuring education alone, therefore, risks overstating empowerment.

This gap also invites a deeper question about what we consider an “outcome”. Is it the acquisition of skills and credentials, or the capacity to deploy them in ways that alter one’s life choices? If a woman is educated but unable to work due to constraints within the household or the absence of safe and dignified employment opportunities, can we reasonably claim success?

If outcomes are to be meaningful, they

must move beyond surface indicators to capture substantive freedoms: the ability to make choices without coercion, to access and control resources, and to act without fear of sanction. This requires attention not only to what women do, but to the conditions under which they do it — whether choices are real or merely nominal, whether participation is enabled or negotiated within narrow bounds.

Such an approach calls for a more layered methodology, one that combines quantitative measures with qualitative insights into norms, relationships, and intra-household dynamics. Numbers are indispensable, but they must be read with humility — aware of what they illuminate and what they leave in shadow. For in the end, what we measure shapes what we see — and what we miss.

The writer retired as Commissioner of Income Tax, Delhi Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly ‘She Said’ column

MICRO ENTERPRISES MAKE UP 99.94% OF INDIA'S INFORMAL ESTABLISHMENTS

India’s informal sector becoming less indebted, also investing less

Unincorporated, non-agricultural enterprises account for a sizable portion of the economy

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, May 9

INDIA'S INFORMAL sector is becoming less indebted, with the interest they paid as well as the amount of loans they need to repay falling sharply, according to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's (MoSPI) full report on its Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) conducted in 2025.

An analysis of the MoSPI report data released earlier this week showed annual interest payable per unincorporated establishment — or an informal business unit — reduced by 16% on average compared to the previous annual survey, conducted between October 2023 and September 2024.

Similarly, outstanding loans per establishment fell 20% in the 2025 survey period compared to 2023-24 (October-September) to Rs 42,776, indicating new loans were outstripped by repayments.

The reduction in outstanding loans coincided with a fall in investments, with each establishment's net addition to fixed assets declining 14% in the 2025 survey from 2023-24.

In 2023-24, the annual interest payable and outstanding loans per establishment had risen by 7%, while net addition to fixed assets was just over 3% higher than in the 2022-23 survey.

India's unincorporated, non-agricultural enterprises — covered by the ASUSE survey — make up a sizable portion of

THE STATE OF INDIA'S INFORMAL SECTOR

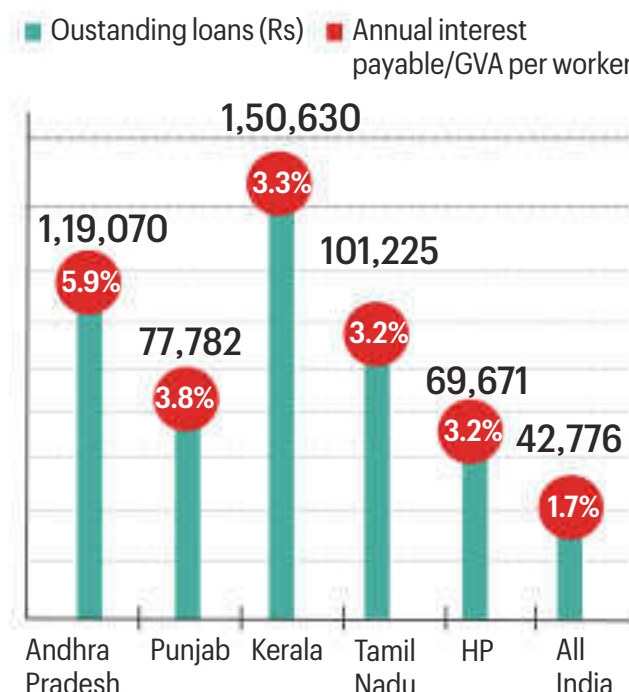


HOW INDIA'S INFORMAL SECTOR BORROWED AND INVESTED

	2023-24	2025
Outstanding loans	53,710	42,776
Net addition to fixed assets	12,770	10,946

NOTE: NUMBERS ARE IN RUPEES PER ESTABLISHMENT; YEARS REFER TO SURVEY PERIOD, SOURCE: MOSPI

STATES WHOSE INFORMAL ESTABLISHMENTS' ANNUAL INTEREST PAYMENTS AS % OF PER WORKER GVA IS HIGHEST



NOTE: FIGURES ARE PER ESTABLISHMENT SOURCE: MOSPI

the economy and include the likes of small manufacturers, service providers, and trading units. In fact, the 2025 survey estimates the total gross value added (GVA) of the unincorporated sector at Rs 20 lakh crore — or 6.4% of the entire country's GVA in 2025-26.

Signs of weakness

However, the 2025 ASUSE survey revealed signs of some weakness in the unorganised sector. As reported by The Indian Express on March 24, when the 'factsheet' of the survey was released, pay in the informal sector rose by just 3.9% — a third of the 13% increase re-

ported in the 2023-24 survey. Further, the number of establishments increased by 58.5 lakh as against 83.5 lakh in 2023-24, resulting in the creation of fewer jobs: 74.5 lakh in 2025 compared to 1.1 crore in the 12 months ended September 2024.

All but 12 of the estimated 7.92 crore unincorporated enterprises in the 2025 survey were Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises, with micro enterprises making up 99.94% of the estimated number.

The total number of establishments actually surveyed in 2025 was 6.7 lakh — 2.94 lakh in

rural areas and 3.76 lakh in urban areas. Interestingly, outstanding loans of informal enterprises reduced sharply even though bank credit to micro and small enterprises has been rising rapidly.

As per latest Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data, loans to 'micro and small' industry were up 33% year-on-year as on March 31. This suggests that most bank loans are going to 'small' enterprises.

According to ASUSE 2025, 81% of unincorporated establishments' outstanding loans were owed to institutional sources such as banks and government schemes.

Investment concerns

The smaller net addition to fixed assets, as per the latest ASUSE report, is part of a broader trend that has policymakers worried. Earlier this month, Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran criticised the Indian private sector for being reluctant to invest, saying that even though profits of India's top 500 companies had grown 31% every year since Covid, their capital formation rate had been "disappointing".

While the informal sector saw a decline in net addition to fixed assets at an all-India level, there were large differences between states. For instance, among large states, establishments in Punjab more than doubled their investments, with their outstanding loans rising nearly four-fold.

On the other hand, per establishment investment fell in Telangana (down 63%), Gujarat (down 48%), and Maharashtra (down 35%), although they also reported large reductions in outstanding loans.

At the same time, Uttar Pradesh-based informal establishments invested 30% less as per the 2025 survey even though their outstanding loans were only 3% lower from the 2023-24 survey. Meanwhile, outstanding loans per establishment in Bihar doubled to Rs 8,568, but investments were 3% lower. The opposite occurred in Goa and Chhattisgarh: a big reduction in indebtedness, but investments rising sharply.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

FLOOR WAGE TO BE FIXED IN CONSULTATION WITH STATES

Rules for all four Labour Codes notified, minimum wage criteria dropped

Normal working day of 8 hrs, weekly cap of 48 working hrs

Aanchal Magazine
New Delhi, May 9

GIVING EFFECT to the new Labour Codes in full after having brought them in November 2025, the central government has now notified final rules for all four codes after a four-month gap from draft rules.

As per the rules, a national floor wage will be decided by the Centre in consultation with an advisory board and states; a normal working day will be of eight hours with a weekly cap of 48 working hours; employers need to issue mandatory wage slips. A social security fund will also be created for unorganised sector and gig workers. States will follow suit with their rules.

In a critical omission from the draft rules published in December-end, the Centre has dropped the criteria for calculating minimum wage in the final Code on Wages (Central) Rules, 2025, stating that the criteria will be "separately specified by the Central government by special or general order".

This is likely to result in lower minimum wages and higher wage disparities for the same worker category across states, experts said.

The draft rules in January had included the earlier formula for calculation of minimum wage which was linked to net intake of 2,700 calories per day per consumption unit; 66 meters of clothing per year per standard working class family comprising the worker, a spouse and two children; and housing rent expenditure of 10% of food and clothing expenditure apart from fuel,

‘Pay contract workers on time or face blacklisting’

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, May 9

THE GOVERNMENT has come out with revised instructions to ensure timely payment of wages to contractual workers engaged in central ministries, departments, autonomous bodies and Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs).

The instructions, which are in line with the four new Labour Codes effective November 2025 and their rules notified on Friday, specify procurement-linked compliance measures and introduce penalties including debar-

ment and blacklisting of firms if contractors fail to pay workers on time.

Wage payments are required to be made only through bank transfer or electronic mode. The May 8 order directed all central ministries, departments, statutory, autonomous bodies and CPSEs to strictly ensure that contractors pay wages within the prescribed timelines: end of the shift for daily wages; before weekly holiday for weekly work; within two days of end of fortnight for fortnightly work; and within seven days of next month for monthly work.

electricity and other miscellaneous expenses as 20% of minimum wage; and 25% of minimum wage as expense for children education, medical, recreation and contingencies.

This formula had evolved in line with the landmark 1991-Supreme Court judgement in the Reptakos Brett case and recommendations of the 15th Indian Labour Conference (ILC) in 1957. The removal of the formula for fixing the minimum wage from the final version of the rules for Code on Wages is likely to result in lower-than-potential wages for workers as wages play a key role in collective bargaining, said K R Shyam Sundar, labour economist and former professor at XLRI.

"The consequence of the removal of the criteria for fixing minimum wage from the rules is that it will lead to unscientific and inconsistent

criteria for calculation of minimum wages across states. This will exacerbate the differential in wages for the same category of worker, say, unskilled worker. Otherwise, wages for an unskilled worker used to be similar across the states," Sundar said.

Separately, the new wage rules state that a floor wage will be fixed by the central government taking into account "the minimum living standard clothing, housing and any other factor considered appropriate by the central government from time to time".

Under Section 9 of the Code on Wages, 2019, the central government has the power to fix the floor wage taking into account minimum living standards of a worker, provided that different floor wages may be fixed for different geographical areas. FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

AHEAD OF TRUMP’S VISIT

China Apr exports rebound, trade surplus widens

Reuters
London, Beijing, May 9

CHINA'S EXPORT growth gathered pace in April as factories raced to meet a wave of orders from AI-related industries and other buyers seeking to stockpile components amid fears the Iran war could push global input costs even higher.

That export strength, which has seen China's trade surplus with the US widen to \$87.7 billion so far this year, will be in focus next week as President Donald Trump travels to Beijing for a leaders' summit expected to extend last year's trade truce.

While Chinese exporters have so far weathered the fall-out from the West Asia conflict economists warn that the longer the war drags on and energy prices rise, the greater the risk that external demand fades away — leaving sluggish domestic consumption unable to plug the gap.

For now economists are watching the pace of the AI manufacturing boom and

whether shipments of related equipment can keep the Chinese export engine purring.

"The conflict in the Middle East pushed up demand for global manufacturing inventory replenishment, and under the upward cycle of semiconductors, imports and exports maintained a boom," according to Xing Zhaopeng, senior China strategist at ANZ.

"There is still room for expansion in this round of manufacturing cycle driven by AI, and it is expected that the annual export growth rate will be about 10%."

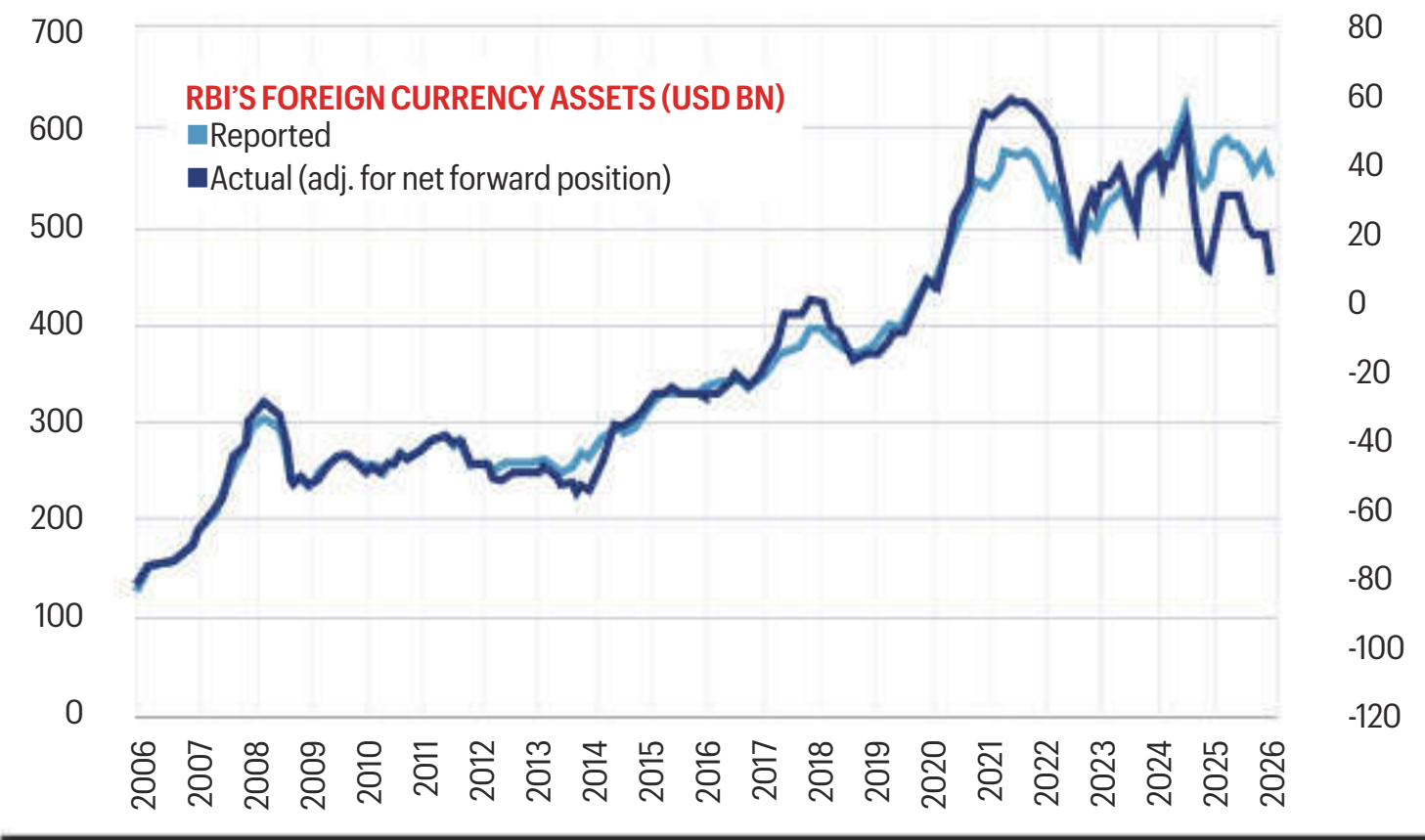
Exports expanded 14.1% from a year earlier in U.S. dollar value terms, customs data showed on Saturday, outpacing the 2.5% gain in March and a 7.9% rise tipped by economists.

New export orders rose to their highest level in two years, separate factory activity data for April showed last month.

Imports notched another strong month, climbing 25.3% versus 27.8% in March.

India's forex reserves adequate, but comfort 'thinning'

At \$691 billion, India's forex reserves are not far from their peak of \$728 billion, reached just before the West Asia war began. But elevated crude oil prices and a sharp fall in the rupee since late February have led to questions being asked about the adequacy of the reserves. According to economists at QuantEco Research, while they are adequate, the comfort is "thinning" if one considers the RBI's net short forward book of \$103 billion — dollars the central bank has sold in the 'forwards' market and must deliver in the future.



EU-India partnership limitless: Envoy

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, May 9

THE EUROPEAN Union-India partnership is "limitless, ambitious and progressive" and both sides have elevated the relationship to a "totally new level" in both qualitative and strategic terms, EU Ambassador Herve Delphin has said.

In an address at an event, the

envoy also noted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "not an era of war" message "deeply resonates" with Europe's values and identity, and called the EU "fundamentally a peace project".

Characterising the EU-India summit held three and a half months ago as a milestone, Delphin said the confluence of symbolism, substance and strategic significance resulted in

"momentous outcomes".

"We have placed our relationship to a totally new level, in qualitative and strategic terms. The EU-India partnership is limitless, ambitious and progressive," he said.

"These achievements would not have been possible without the political conviction and trust shared by our leaders," the envoy said.

M&M closes gap with JSW MG for second spot in EV race

Vikram Chaudhary
New Delhi, May 9

THIS YEAR is set to be of a big upheaval in the electric car space. While Tata Motors continues to enjoy a massive lead, the battle for the second place has gotten interesting, with JSW MG Motor India gradually losing its position to Mahindra.

According to data sourced from the Vahan retail sales portal, JSW MG was at the second position in January and February, but Mahindra overtook it in March and April, and with the latter's sales rising thanks to new EV models, the lead will only increase.

In 2025, JSW MG (51,387 units) led Mahindra (33,513) by

almost 18,000 units, but with the launch of the XEV 9S and XUV 3XO EV, the latter has reduced the lead.

In the first four months of the year, the gap between the two was reduced to just about a thousand units — JSW MG sold 18,726 units and Mahindra has sold 17,795 units.

Automotive analysts told FE that Mahindra's ascent to the second spot in March and April is driven by a multiproduct offensive. While JSW MG remains heavily reliant on the Windsor EV (as seen from its flat sales of 4,858 units in January to 5,006 units in April), Mahindra's diversified portfolio across key SUV segments has allowed it to capture a wider



JSW MG was at the second spot in January and February, but Mahindra overtook it in March and April. REUTERS

audience, helping it to grow by 42% just this year (from 3,817 units in January to 5,412 units in April), and therefore it is well-positioned to leverage its

superior production scale and brand loyalty to outpace JSW MG in 2026.

Gaurav Vangaal, associate director, light vehicle forecast-

ing, S&P Global Mobility, said that the Indian mass-market EV segment is entering a decisive phase.

"Mahindra's portfolio expansion demonstrates confidence in long-term category growth, creating multiple customer touchpoints. Conversely, MG's focused strategy has proven effective — the Windsor EV's success shows that niche dominance can outpace diversification. If MG's next vehicle performs as strongly, they're positioned to lead. This competition ultimately benefits consumers through choice and innovation. The outcome remains genuinely open, and that's healthy for the market."

Another analyst added that while the Windsor EV has been attracting a customer looking for an EV in the lucrative Rs 10-20 lakh space — and that's why the Windsor EV still is India's largest-selling electric car — Mahindra has been attracting entry-level customers with the 3XO EV, midsize SUV customers with the BE 6, and luxury and family customers with the XEV 9e and 9S.

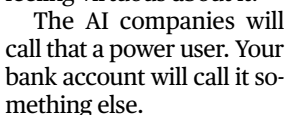
But despite Mahindra's rising sales, overtaking Tata Motors will be a big task, which launched the new Punch EV in February, and is set to drive in the Sierra EV this month, followed by the Safari EV, and the dedicated luxury EV brand Avinya possibly next year. FE

mark monsoon rainfall, to the Chamoli flood of 2021. Climate scientists have linked the rising frequency of extreme rainfall in the Himalayas to a warming atmosphere. Built-up areas, the study noted, have also expanded across the State, leaving less land able to absorb sudden runoff. The authors recommend flood maps be redrawn around extreme rainfall scenarios rather than long-term averages, and that buffer zones be created around the most vulnerable terrain.

Researchers have caught a glimpse of life on the Arctic seafloor using a portable camera. After they deployed the device 260 m into a Greenlandic fjord, they saw a bustling ecosystem previously hidden from view. There were hundreds of small organisms, including shrimp-like amphipods and tiny jellyfish, and a snailfish swimming backwards and a narwhal. Using red LED lights, which many deep-sea creatures can't see, the researchers observed these animals without scaring them away.

Hope for pancreatic cancer as new drug shows promise

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Flooding with light

by the heat have lifted. These larger particles scatter all wavelengths of light more equally, not just blue, an effect called Mie scattering. Rayleigh scattering happens only when the object scattering the light is much smaller than the light's wavelength. As a result of Mie scattering, the sky's colours are 'washed out' into a pale grey haze. Human perception also plays a small role. On hot and bright days, the overall luminance of the sky increases, forcing our eyes to adjust.

AND NDE

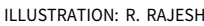
Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam

Ramya Kannan

Vijay had decided to take the bull by its horns in a State that understood a jallikattu metaphor very well. The city repaid him richly – the TVK won in 14 of Chennai's 16 seats, even defeating

Political and ideological rivals

Over 80,000 fan clubs were set up under the VMI, a base that would grow to outpace the mightiest of political parties in Tamil Nadu. While they implemented the regular welfare



He himself stretched beyond the remit of a welfare/fan club president - in January 2017, he extended support to the massive protests that shook the State against the ban on jallikattu, the bull taming sport. Taking on the role of the anti-establishment hero he had been building himself up as, through

He also met with political party leaders over the years, including the Congress' Rahul Gandhi, the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his term as Gujarat Chief Minister, and social activist Anna Hazare. Vijay met the family members of S. Anitha, a topper in the Class XII examination, who ended her life after she failed to clear the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), at their home in Ariyalur. He also visited the families of the victims of the anti-Sterlite protests, again in their homes, in Thoothukudi. This was something he failed to do,

During his rally in Karur, in September 2025, 41 persons, including children, died in a stampede that occurred when his caravan belatedly pulled into Velusampuram on the narrow Karur-Erode highway. His actions after this were unusual – he left the place overnight and brought the family members of the victims to Chennai to meet him, instead of meeting them in their homes. In a later rally, he would rhetorically ask: “What did I do wrong in Karur?” turning the tables on the State government.

Walking on fire

The TVK has indeed emerged the disruptor Vijay promised it would be. In some ways, it has already reshaped the power map in Tamil Nadu, but the sequence of events in the days after the declaration of results has turned out to border the farcical. While the TVK holds 108 seats (and 35% vote share), the highest any party has scored this election, it fell short of the absolute majority of 118 in a 234-seat legislature. After a week of negotiations, he managed to get support and bring his tally up to an acceptable 120 seats. Vijay, a political novice, has been thrown willy-nilly into the smouldering coal bed of politicking and political jockeying. How will a hero, used to setting the screens on fire, take to walking on fire? As the plot thickens, stay tuned.

THE GIST

Vijay had actually announced his political ambition in 2009 with the launch of Vijay Makkal Iyakkam (VMI), an organisation of fans with a welfare motive

Over 80,000 fan clubs were set up under the VMI, a base that would grow to outpace the mightiest of political parties in Tamil Nadu

Suvendu Adhikari

Shiv Sahay Singh



Growing influence

After the Trinamool came to power in 2011, Mr. Adhikari started extending his political influence across south and central Bengal, bringing MLAs, civic bodies and strongholds of the CPI(M)-led Left Front and the Congress into the Trinamool's fold. In 2016, he joined the Cabinet headed by Ms. Banerjee and became one of the most influential Ministers, in charge of the Transport and Environment Department.

Mr. Adhikari has not been a stranger to controversies. His name figured

At 57, Mr. Adhikari will take charge of West Bengal at one of its most challenging moments – when the State is in urgent need of industry and jobs, its social fabric deeply polarised, and concerns over law and order persist. One of West Bengal's most popular leaders, Mr. Adhikari brings decades of electoral experience and some administrative experience. But he will need considerable political skill and far-sightedness to put the State back on track.

Mythos

V. Nivedita



show how quickly risks are rising. Mythos is a large language model developed with general-purpose reasoning, coding, and autonomous tasks.

In April, Anthropic announced that Mythos would not be released publicly because of its ability to identify unknown flaws in IT systems, which could

"The vulnerabilities it finds are often subtle or difficult to detect. Many of them are ten or twenty years old, with the oldest we have found so far being a now-patched 27-year-old bug in OpenBSD – an operating system known primarily for its security," Anthropic said in a blog.

The company also re-

Fears of cyberattacks

More worryingly, the company revealed that these capabilities were not intentionally trained into the system. The blog noted that Mythos was able to develop these capabilities “very quickly” even though the AI was not trained specifically for them. “Rather, they emerged as a downstream consequence of general improvements in code, reasoning, and autonomy.”

The challenge is that AI is already deeply embedded within the financial

Mythos reveals a deeper problem in the system. The IMF points out that the risks are not limited to the financial sector alone. Sectors like energy, telecommunications, and public services are also vulnerable. Dependence on a small number of software platforms, cloud providers, and AI models could further increase the impact because many sectors rely on the same infrastructure.



REFLECTIONS

{ THEBIG PICTURE }

A relationship of unequals: US-India trade ties & twists

The coarsening of discourse by the US is likely part of a negotiating style, where public rhetoric shifts the terms of the negotiations

The India-US trade relationship has never been easy and has occasionally even been hostile. From aid to estrangement, from sanctions to strategic partnership, it has been tempestuous and is currently somewhere between partnership and irritant. The trade agreement hangs in balance, and what has changed is not the asymmetry which has always been there, but the willingness to weaponise it openly — naturally, by the side that can.

The US currently is India's largest export destination, accounting for roughly 18% of India's merchandise exports. It is also the primary market for India's information technology (IT) services. The Indian diaspora in America generates remittances exceeding \$32 billion annually. American institutional investors hold significant positions in Indian equity markets. To use a 2008 financial contagion inspired metaphor, when the US sneezes, India reaches for the inhaler.

The reverse is not true. America's exposure to India, while growing, remains manageable and is definitely not critical. This is the structural reality that entraps every conversation between the two countries.

What has changed materially over the better part of the last two and a half decades is the content of our trade with the US. India's emergence as a global services force was not planned. It was a combination of

historical accident and an earlier act of foresight. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's investment in the ITs in the 1950s was motivated by the idea of nation-building, not export strategy. The engineers and (computer) scientists those institutions delivered were meant for India. Many went to America instead, embedded themselves in technology, medicine and finance and created a diaspora presence that became the foundation of the bilateral relationship. By 2023, the Indian-American community was about 4.4 million, playing a disproportionate role in leadership of American political and economic institutions. Naturally, US corporations are deeply invested in keeping the relationship functional regardless of what politicians on either side do.

The historical accident was Y2K. The fear that the global financial system would malfunction at the turn of the millennium sent American corporations looking for software engineers who could work in English, immediately and economically. India had them — trained by the institutions created in the late-1950s and 1960s, of course, for a very different purpose. The IT services industry that subsequently emerged from that moment has been India's most durable export engine since. By 2022-23, IT and business services exports to the US alone stood at approximately \$80 billion.

The goods trade has followed a more linear trajectory, up from \$5 billion in 1990 to over \$190 billion by 2023, although it has been considerably more politically complicated than services. The US runs a goods deficit with India of about \$45 billion while enjoying a services surplus of approximately \$15 billion. The net position is a deficit of around \$30 billion, considerably smaller

than the goods only figure. But it is the goods deficit that has been driving recent US trade policy. Counting goods and ignoring services when calculating bilateral balances is not an economically defensible position. It is analogous to an entrepreneur saying he does not take a salary from his wholly owned enterprise, while ignoring the profits it generates.

Advanced economies, including the US, are services-dominated, with services accounting for 70-80% of the GDP. Services trade has also grown faster than goods trade in recent years. These facts are central to understanding contemporary trade balances. India has not found a satisfactory way to make this argument land in Washington. While goods deficits are visible, services are diffuse and harder to measure. The result is a framing that is selective and the justification is largely political and therefore effective.

The 2005 civilian nuclear agreement was the high point of our relationship. It was the moment when the US formally acknowledged India's strategic weight. The Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, negotiated during the Uruguay Round and operational from 1995, was at the other extreme. TRIPS required India to introduce product patents for pharmaceuticals by 2005, ending a regime under which Indian companies manufactured generic versions of patented medicines using reverse processes. The US pharmaceutical industry lobbied hard, arguing that innovation would slow. India complied by amending its Patents Act in 2005, but inserted Section 3(d), a provision that prevents patenting of new forms of existing molecules unless they demonstrate enhanced efficacy. This was designed to block ever-



Rajat Kathuria



America's exposure to India, while growing, remains manageable and is definitely not critical. This is the structural reality that entraps every conversation between the two countries.

REUTERS

greening, the practice of making minor modifications to existing drugs and re-patenting them to extend monopoly periods.

The outcome is worth noting. Indian generics have emerged as the world's largest source of generic medicines, meeting approximately 40% of American generic drug demand and a significant share of global supply. During Covid-19, Indian manufacturers also played a central role in vaccine production for the developing world. India continues to appear on the US Special 301 intellectual property watch list even as its pharmaceutical exports contribute materially to lowering health care costs in advanced economies, including the US.

The current state of the relationship reflects a sharper and more transactional phase under the Trump administration, but it is hardly exceptional. The first Trump administration removed India from the Generalised System of Preferences in 2019, ending preferential tariff treatment on approximately \$6 billion of Indian exports. The second has imposed tariffs of 26% on Indian goods, built on the goods deficit calculation

described above. India has not retaliated. It has offered to increase purchases of American energy and defence equipment, signalled willingness to reduce tariffs on certain agricultural imports, and indicated flexibility in its energy sourcing. The posture has been quite accommodating.

Trump's recent description of India as a "hellhole" sits uneasily alongside the language of strategic partnership. Such remarks are often dismissed as undisciplined asides from an undisciplined commentator. A more plausible interpretation is that the coarsening of discourse is part of a negotiating style, where public rhetoric shifts the terms of negotiations. If that is the operating logic, India's restrained response offers little evidence that it is ineffective. Asymmetry is being asserted not only through tariffs and market access, but also through the tone in which engagement is conducted.

Why has India been soft? While India is not without options, these are limited. It could restrict access in selected services sectors, slow regulatory approvals for Ameri-

can firms, or accelerate alternative trade partnerships. It could leverage its market size and its role in supply chain diversification, especially away from China. But these have not translated into reality. The most possible explanation is that the US is simply too important to India's export earnings, its services revenues, its remittance flows, and its capital account to risk a serious deterioration. In other words, the luxury of principled retaliation has been eschewed in favour of patient negotiation.

Mirza Ghalib captured Adam's expulsion from paradise, and the dishonour of departure, in lines that continue to resonate: *Nikalna khuld se Aadam ka sunte aaye hain lekin/ Bahut be-abru ho kar tere kuche se hum nikle*

(We have heard (often) about the departure of Adam from Paradise, But with much greater dishonour, I left your street.)

Rajat Kathuria is dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and professor of economics, Shiv Nadar University. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Recollecting legends and lores about India's forces

Amongst my fondest memories are evenings spent on the terrace of our old farm in Chhatrapur, listening to Daddy reminisce about his days in the army as he sipped his first drink. To my teenage ears, places like Kohat, Quetta and Loralai seemed to belong to another world. Even Ambala, where he commanded 4 Div in the 1950s, appeared exotic. These were stories of a time long past. Of nostalgia and history. Yet they became vivid in his telling of them.

My favourite was when my parents were presented at Court in the late 1930s. George the VI was King Emperor, Daddy was a young captain and Mummy a new bride. As they lined up in one of the palace's ante-rooms, to be received by the British sovereign, an equestry mistook Mummy's *palu* for a train and tugged at it. That virtually undid her sari seconds before her turn to be received by their majesties. She was 19 and quite flustered by this experience.

Mummy recounted how later, at the reception, the tip of the scabbard of Daddy's ceremonial sword got embedded in the Marchioness of Zetland's dress. At the time, her husband was the Secretary of State for India. To be honest, nothing could have been more embarrassing.

General Manoj Naravane's new book, *The Curious and the Classified: Unearthing Military Myths and Mysteries*, reminds me of Daddy's anecdotes. The book is about the legends and lore of the Indian army, the navy and the air force. It's about things you may occasionally have thought about but never really bothered to find out more. And it's a riveting read.

For instance, do you know the difference between an army, air force and navy salute? As Daddy's son, I thought I did. I was wrong.

All three salutes are performed with the right hand raised to the forehead. In the army case, the palm faces outwards. In the navy, it faces down. In the air force, it's angled upwards.

General Naravane reveals that the origin of the salute probably stretches back to ancient Rome or, even, the Apache Indians of America. As he puts it, "Soldiers would raise their right hand to demonstrate that they were unarmed and not a threat."

However, it's the three chapters at the end of the book that truly fascinated me. One of them is about rum and its unique connection to soldiering. The General describes how the Company Quartermaster meticulously uses a peg measure to pour out a tot to each jawan. In a delightful aside he reveals that the army categorizes soldiers as "meater" (non-vegetarian) and "non-meater" (vegetarian). How very apt! Now, if you're a drinker, you will know the name Mohan Meakin. It's the legendary brewery in Solan which makes Old Monk. But did you know that it was originally founded by the father of General Reginald Dyer of Jallianwala Bagh notoriety?

The second fascinating chapter is about the origin and tradition of army messes. The word mess, the General points out, comes from old French word *mes*, which means a portion of food or a course of a meal.

However, the chapter that I will always remember is simply called PPC. The initials stand for the French phrase *pour prendre congé*, which goes back to Louis XIV, the Sun King. It's the formal way officers would request time off duty from their superiors. The General recounts how officers, when posted out of the sta-

GENERAL MANOJ NARAVANE'S NEW BOOK, *THE CURIOUS AND THE CLASSIFIED: UNEARTHING MILITARY MYTHS AND MYSTERIES, IS ABOUT THINGS YOU MAY OCCASIONALLY HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT BUT NEVER REALLY BOTHERED TO FIND OUT MORE. AND IT'S A RIVETING READ*

tion they are serving in, would sign in the remarks column of the Mess visitor's book with the letters PPC. It would "signify that the association with the present unit was coming to an end".

On April 28, 2022, when he was being "dined out" at the Army Battle Honours Mess on his retirement as Army Chief, General Naravane wrote PPC in the remarks column of the visitor's book. "It encapsulated everything the army had taught me to value," he adds, "...of letting go with grace and never looking back."

I recommend this book to everyone with a military connection.

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

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Why balancing work and motherhood is still hard

It obviously struck deep at my mother's core because she talked about it more than just a few times — how she had given up her fledgling career as a lawyer in Kanpur when she married my father.

But why? I would ask on cue. In my mother's mind, the two were irreconcilable. You either had a career or you had a family. The choice, as she saw it, was absolute.

Ten years after she passed, I am on the phone with my elder daughter. She is calling from the airport, on her way to a work trip, guilty at leaving behind her six-month-old daughter with her father.

How is it that more than six decades after my mother made that choice, the same dilemma shadows her granddaughter? Yes, things have changed. Women no longer believe it's a stark choice between career and family. But the one thing that has survived across generations is the internalised guilt that seems to attach itself almost exclusively to mothers.

The guilt that cuts across class, though the privileged have the purchasing power to outsource care. For others, the cost can be brutal. Rani Baa, a migrant from Odisha who has worked in Delhi for over 30 years, says it was possible to do so only because her daughter was brought up by her family back home. She missed her child's growing up years, seeing her just once a year.

Economists talk of the motherhood penalty that affects career trajectories. A 2024 study of 134 countries by academics from the London School of Economics and Princeton University found that on average 24% of women leave the labour force in the first year after the birth of their first child. Five years later, 17% are still absent. And after 10 years, 15% will not rejoin the workforce.

Women don't have to make the choice my mother did any longer. We juggle multiple identities as mothers, professionals, gym-goers, solo travelers, discoverers of new pas-

sions, companions to aging parents and baby-sitters to grandchildren.

And yet it is hard — because we are constantly judged, our mothering is always under scrutiny, and because patriarchy has convinced us that raising a child is, ultimately, a mother's work, a duty elevated to almost mythic levels. Fathers provide, mothers are expected to be inexhaustible. And so, generation after generation without complaint we plough ahead, apologetic and guilty for never being enough.

Perhaps we've set up impossibly high standards for ourselves. Leaning in cannot be one person's responsibility. If it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to support the mother.

"How do you justify women staying at home and men going to work?" asks Utkarsha Jagga, founder of The Coping Central that focuses on mental health. "If care-giving comes 'naturally' to women, why do you have to constantly keep excelling at it?"

Jagga advocates being a "good enough mother", a term coined by British pediatrician Donald Winnicott in the early 1950s. "Children don't need perfect mothers," she explains. "They need a good-enough mother who can be a caregiver but also hold the capacity to disappoint us. That is what allows emotionally healthy adults to be formed."

My daughters do not have to choose, as my mother believed she did. But until care is seen as a human responsibility shared equally by both parents and not segregated by gender, the old guilt will travel generation to generation.

My mother believed motherhood demanded sacrifice. My daughter knows it should not require surrender. That is progress — hard won, incomplete but worthy of celebrating this Mother's Day.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

An age of loneliness, of permanent afternoons

At the homes of elderly couples who live alone, their children settled in far-off parts of the world, you will encounter the "smell" of old age.

Their houses are museums, showcasing items curated over the years — some received as wedding gifts four-five decades ago. The dressing table is older than their eldest kid. The sofa, with that hexagonal cane webbing, has surrendered to the shape of their bodies. The cushions smell grand-fatherly. No matter what time of the day, it's always afternoon in the house — quiet. It's the time when the sunlight enters softly and grazes bedcovers before dying out. The *panchang* (Hindu lunar calendar) on the wall still shows last month; there is no urgency to turn it over. There are half-empty strips of medicine by the bedside. Each tablet used to be a phone-call, a reminder from someone to take it, without fail. Not anymore. Since the children started their own families, their tablet reminders get exhausted in their own nuclear household. The luckiest houses of the elderly have a porch or a balcony and a folding chair to sit and read local crime-news in the newspaper. "Elderly couple robbed, murdered in Gomtinagar," the headline reads. The elderly, lonely parents have become numb to it.

Most days, they try to trick their grandchildren into a conversation on a video call; the kids aren't interested beyond pleasantries. So, the parents turn to their own child, covertly asking them when he/she will pay a

visit. "Office is hectic," they hear. They always understand. There are no hard feelings. They go back to scrolling videos on their respective phones. The algorithm knows about your parents more than you do. Even though the furniture is old, the electronics in the house are brand new. The kids jump at such occasions, as if spending some money on their parents can melt some of their guilt. Meanwhile, the phone is dutifully put on charge.

Every lock of the house is locked. And the old couple drifts off. Their pillow is usually the satisfaction of having "settled" their kids well, validated by their relatives. They sleep in the silence of an empty nest, a silence that is broken only by the ticking of the wall-clock, bringing the inevitable closer by the second. Double income, no kids (DINK) is a lifestyle gaining currency. But having switched sides from that camp, I have some insight. The purest form of love is that of a parent, for their kids. There may not always be a vice versa. It's often unrequited, especially after the kid discovers dating apps.

Relationships and marriages often devolve into transactional setups. But the affection for one's kid remains pure. And that's why, even if your office isn't as hectic, and you opt for a Thailand trip instead of visiting your parents, they understand.

For the children, especially after having their own kids, visiting parents becomes a filial responsibility. Such trips are literally



SHUTTERSTOCK

Relationships and marriages often devolve into transactional setups. But the affection for your child remains pure.

guilt trips. The parents try to reassure over calls, "We are fine, the neighbour's son takes care of us during emergencies."

"Is he still working in Lucknow?" the child asks with some derision. "Yeah, his father isn't happy. They couldn't settle their kid well," comes the reply. "Heh," another derisive snort escapes the child.

Ironically, a parent in India is sad if they can't send their kid thousands of miles away from them, permanently.

When an adult actually visits the parental home, the first thing he/she does is to confirm the return tickets. But one's parental home is always sweet. It is where the family photo albums are — physical, hardbound. On those visits to your parents, you peel off the pages to reveal your childhood to your kids. Then, the albums are placed back in those creaky Godrej *almirahs*. For the next visit, maybe.

It takes you some time to merge with the silence of your parents' homes, their permanent afternoons. But there is not enough

time to feel its weight. The return flight is on Sunday night. Mother will pack some *lad-doo*, her kitchen buzzing for a bit. Then, on Sunday night, it is back to the dense quiet. Both houses go back to the struggle of arranging internet-mediated facetime between the grandparents and grandkids.

This is the inescapable reality — old age is lonely. Even if you make friends — a group of active retirees who participate in all events, celebrate festivals together, and share each other's bigotry — you will still lose them to attrition. To old age. To pandemics. To cancers. Nobody is at fault here. Nests are built and, one day, left empty. As a society, we need to reduce the stigma of living in old-age homes or assisted living facilities. Being a prisoner in your own museum, depending on a neighbour's child, is not a dignified way to go.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, who tweets as @gabbarsingh. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The looming climate crisis

This is with reference to "Prepare now for heat, water, and crop risk" by Arunabha Ghosh and Roxy Mathew Koll (May 03). A below-normal monsoon, influenced by El Nino effects, can intensify heat stress, delay sowing, and strain water resources. Early warnings must translate into local preparedness.

Sanjay Chopra

The role of laughs in diplomacy

This is with reference to "In the US, a King Charles masterclass in diplomacy" by Karan Thapar (May 03). US-UK relations are a clear example of how a history of animosity need not be the reason two nations cannot have cordial relations with each other. A mix of humour and sarcasm can work wonders.

Avantika Lokhande

Diljit and his global aura

This is with reference to "An unbothered minstrel called Diljit Dosanjh" by Nishtha Gautam (May 03). Diljit captivates audiences worldwide. His humility and music are make him a beloved artist.

Ninad Sharma

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

“WAR: A MASSACRE OF PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW EACH OTHER FOR THE PROFIT OF PEOPLE WHO KNOW EACH OTHER BUT DON'T MASSACRE EACH OTHER”
— PAUL VALERY

Russia celebrates Victory Day, as Ukraine war rages on



JON RICHARDSON

Russia has dramatically scaled back its annual Victory Day parade in Red Square on May 9, with no heavy military hardware for the first time in 20 years. There will also be fewer foreign and Russian dignitaries present.

In addition, the government has shut down airports and temporarily suspended mobile internet access ahead of the holiday.

The Kremlin says the security measures are intended to guard against Ukrainian “terrorism”. It has declared a unilateral “truce” for May 8-9, warning that any Ukrainian attacks during the celebrations could trigger a massive strike on Kyiv. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has rejected the proposal, calling it a “theatrical performance”.

As the war grinds on in Ukraine, the Kremlin's precautions at home are remarkable - a sign that Ukraine's long-range strike capabilities have punctured one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's most important political rituals, as well as the country's seeming impregnability to the war.

Ukraine's momentum

Under Putin's rule, Victory Day has become more than just a commemoration of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany. The parade, a showcase of Russian military might, has been elevated into a core ritual for legitimising his regime.

The symbolism has taken on even greater meaning since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The defeat of Nazi Germany has been fused with Putin's bogus claim that Russia needs to defeat fictitious Nazis in Ukraine.

Last year, Putin welcomed two dozen world leaders, including Xi Jinping of China, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt.

It was seen as an attempt to project Russia's global power and show that the West's attempts to isolate Moscow were failing.

Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system launchers displayed during the Victory Day military parade in Moscow on May 9, 2025. Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP

What a difference a year makes.

Ukraine has steadily expanded its ability to hit targets deep inside Russia, including oil terminals, refineries, military infrastructure and defence industries. Some targets in the Baltic Sea near St. Petersburg and in the Ural Mountains are hundreds of kilometres from Ukraine. The mere threat of drones has prompted dozens of airport closures and hun-



Ukraine's defence industrial base is a major part of the story. Kyiv says its capacity has grown 50-fold since 2022 and now accounts for 70 per cent of its weapons procurement



dreds of flight delays in recent months, especially in Moscow. At the same time, Ukraine has become much more adept at repelling Russian drone attacks on its own territory, reportedly shooting down 33,000 Russian drones in March this year alone — a record for one month.

The expansion of its unmanned ground robotic systems and deep-strike capabilities - including its Flamingo missile, which hit a defence plant 1,500 kilometres from Ukraine on May 5 — has helped Ukraine offset its disadvantages in manpower (which remains a major constraint) and ammunition.

Ukraine's defence industrial base is a major part of the story. Kyiv says its capacity has grown 50-fold since 2022 and now accounts for 70% of its weapons procurement.

Its successes have won the admiration of its European partners and others around the world. In recent days, for example, it signed a 10-year defence export deal with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, all three of which were attacked by Iran.

And there are signs Ukraine is gaining momentum on the frontlines. Analysts say Ukrainian forces actually gained more territory than they lost in February, for the first month since 2023.

Estimates of Russian death tolls are difficult to verify, but NATO chief Mark Rutte said Russia is losing 30,000-35,000 soldiers per month, while Zelensky said 35,000 Russian troops were either killed or wounded in the month of March.

Cracks at home

Meanwhile, Putin has only grown more paranoid about a potential coup or assassination attempt involving drones. He has reportedly sharply reduced his movements, spends more time in bunkers, and is surrounded by tighter security.

Domestic strains are growing as well. Russia's rate of recruitment has begun to fall short of its battlefield losses. The quality of recruits has plummeted as well, with alcoholics reportedly being duped or pressured into signing up.

It is becoming harder to sustain recruitment without another politically risky mobilisation. That matters because Putin has long tried to convince Russians the war can be fought at a distance, without demanding too much from society at large.

Russia's economy is suffering too, from chronic labour shortages, negative growth, and high inflation and



interest rates. And there are increasing signs of discontent. One critic, Ilya Remeslo, a former Kremlin propagandist, publicly accused Putin of being a “war criminal”, for instance. He was arrested but, in a surprise move, was released after just 30 days and has vowed to continue his campaign against the Russian leader.

Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of Russia's Communist Party (loyal to Putin), has warned the country's faltering economy risks stoking a 1917-style revolution. And an anonymous former senior official wrote in The Economist that grumbling among the elite shows Putin is losing his grip on Russia. Rising popular anger has also been triggered by the tightening of controls on the internet, including WhatsApp and Telegram, aimed at curbing dissent and criticism.

It is too early to claim the war has turned decisively in Kyiv's favour. The current stalemate may prevail for some time.

But recent trends suggest Russia can no

longer assume it can simply outlast Ukraine through attrition. This may well cause Putin to adjust his calculations about peace talks and his unwavering pursuit of maximalist goals.

Despite US President Donald Trump's recent unfounded claim that Ukraine has been “militarily defeated”, Kyiv is more than holding its own. It continues to have Europe's backing as well, with the EU recently finalising a massive 90 billion euro (A\$145 billion) loan. As eminent strategic analyst Lawrence Freedman argues, Ukraine is succeeding by not losing. He argues Ukraine's “Micawber strategy” - hoping that something will turn up, like the character Wilkins Micawber in David Copperfield - could very well pay off.

(The writer is visiting fellow, Centre for European Studies, Australian National University)
Courtesy: The Conversation



FROM AGENDA COVER

Thalapathy storms...

There is the usual retinue of freebies like financial aid for women and unemployed youth, free annual medical check-ups, free LPG, loan waivers etc, that seems run-of-the-mill.

He even did the de rigueur temple run to assuage people of faith who could have had potential concerns owing to his belief systems. His youth-baiting beyond the “Starpower” was with quaint promises like a Ministry of Artificial Intelligence — whether that delivers as well as it sounds remains to be seen. He even showed political astuteness in courting and heeding Prashant Kishore's critical advice on going solo, as opposed



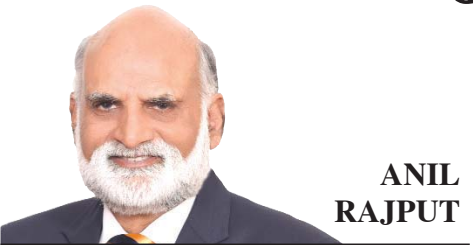
to tying up with any other regional or national party. Unlike the stuttering and seemingly confused positions of other cine stars like Kamal Haasan or Rajinikanth, Vijay has stunned all and sundry with his clarity, grit, and confidence in his chosen path.

For now, the masses have given him a solid benefit of doubt that has glossed over many personal, financial, cinematic, and even political controversies like the recent mishandling of his political rally that resulted in a deadly stampede. If anything the deployment of the state machinery to suppress his movement e.g., delayed clearance and supposed leak of his latest movie, Jana Nayagan, to

curbs on his political activities have all seemingly backfired as the Tamil electorate have given him a thumping endorsement to victory.

However Vijay would know better than most, that in real life the script rarely plays out as seamlessly, as it should. Film stars know the fickleness of stardom and how the fate of a star can never be taken for granted, as there is always yet another star waiting in the wings to dislodge the first. Today the masses are a lot more impatient, demanding, and seek action rather than words — that is particularly truer in the Southern States, where the overall socio-economic indices are higher than the national average. Vijay's much bandied cinematic line, Naa Vaaren (I am coming) has come true, now the stage is set for the more difficult path of leading the State of Tamil Nadu to its aspired destiny.

Savitri Puja: Where faith, food and family endure



ANIL
RAJPUT

Observed across many parts of Bharat under different names, Savitri Puja is among those sacred observances where faith is expressed through fasting, prayer and remembrance. Rooted in the timeless story of Savitri and Satyavan from the Mahabharata, the occasion honours a wife whose courage, intelligence and spiritual determination compelled even Yama, the lord of death, to restore her husband's life. Over generations, the observance has come to symbolise more than marital togetherness. It reflects steadfastness, duty, prayer and the moral strength of the household. Around this occasion evolved a distinctive culinary tradition as well, where fasting foods, seasonal fruits, simple sattvic preparations and ceremonial offerings became part of the custom and atmosphere of the day.

The story of Savitri and Satyavan gives the festival its moral depth. In the Mahabharata, Savitri is born to King Ashwapati after long prayer and is raised with strength of character and clarity of mind. When she chooses Satyavan as her husband, she does so despite being warned that he is destined to die within a year. Satyavan is no ordinary figure in the tale. He is the son of Dyumatsena, a blind and exiled king living in the forest after losing his kingdom. Savitri therefore accepts not only Satyavan, but also the hardship that surrounds his life. On the foretold day, she undertakes a rigorous fast and accompanies him into the forest, where he grows weak while cutting wood and rests his head in her lap. As his destined hour arrives, Yama, the divine lord of death and guardian of departed souls, comes to claim Satyavan's life. Savitri does not collapse in grief. She follows Yama and speaks to him with composure, wisdom and moral force. One by one, she secures boons for her father-in-law's sight, his lost kingdom, her father's lineage and finally her own future as Satyavan's wife. By the logic of this final boon, Satyavan's life must be restored. The banyan tree, or vat vriksha, later became an important symbol of this observance because of its association with long life, shelter and continuity.

The importance of the festival lies in the way this epic episode moved from scripture into lived household practice. Savitri Puja allows the story to be remembered through fasting, offerings, worshipping banyan

trees, seasonal foods and family rituals. It transforms Savitri's journey into a recurring cultural lesson on courage, presence of mind and the quiet strength with which women have shaped the moral life of the home.

While Savitri Puja is observed across different parts of the country, its rituals and modes of celebration vary from region to region. The festival assumes different names, ceremonial forms and degrees of social prominence depending on local customs, ritual calendars, culinary traditions and inherited community practices. In Odisha it is celebrated as Savitri or Sabitri Brata, in Bihar and parts of North India as Vat Savitri Vrat, in Maharashtra and Gujarat as the related observance of Vat Purnima, and in parts of Bengal through related observances linked to Savitri Chaturdashi. Some emphasise banyan-tree worship, others fasting disciplines and household offerings, yet all remain rooted in the enduring story of Savitri and Satyavan. What binds these traditions together is a shared reverence for endurance, self-control, prayer, family continuity and the moral strength of women within the household.

Food on Savitri Puja observes these sentiments through humility, simplicity and inherited practice. Fasting is generally observed in the early part of the day and is usually followed by fruits and sattvic preparations. A brass thali filled with ripe mangoes, bananas, soaked grains, flowers, vermilion and sacred thread is readied for the vrat and placed as an offering. It becomes part of the festival's beauty, reminding the household that food is first offered, then received as nourishment, and only afterwards enjoyed.

Odisha offers one of the richest culinary spreads, while in many northern and western communities the emphasis remains on fruits, coconut, simple sattvic foods and post-vrat nourishment. Among the most distinctive savoury offerings is muga chakata, a simple preparation of soaked green gram that reflects the quiet culinary spirit of the vrat. It is usually made from soaked or lightly sprouted whole green moong dal mixed with banana, coconut, sometimes jaggery, black pepper, or other fasting ingredients, then mashed into a sattvic preparation. Alongside it, soaked chana or buta (in Odia) is sometimes eaten plain, sometimes lightly mixed with coconut, ginger and a touch of salt after the fast is broken. Arwa rice, also used as a ceremonial grain, appears in ritual settings as a sign of auspiciousness and sustenance. These



are not elaborate dishes, yet they show that the meal begins with the simplest forms of sustenance.

On completion of the fast, many households move toward light vegetarian meals. Chudadahi, made with flattened rice softened in curd, is cooling, quick to prepare, and often enriched with banana, grated coconut, jaggery or small pieces of mango. In some homes, kheera-dahi, or cucumber mixed with curd, offers similar relief from the heat. Pakhala, the beloved fermented or water-soaked rice, may also be consumed after rituals, served with curd, roasted cumin, salt, green chilli and simple accompaniments. Its character makes it especially suited to the season, as it restores the body gently after the fast.

A more complete vegetarian spread often includes dalma, the Odia preparation in which lentils and vegetables are cooked together with minimal spice. Raw banana, pumpkin, papaya, brinjal, drumstick and colocasia may be added, depending on what is available. Tempered with cumin, dry red chilli and ghee, and finished with grated coconut in some versions, dalma carries the dignity of everyday food elevated for a special day. It occupies an important place in Odia festive, temple and community food culture, valued for being wholesome, balanced and easy to digest. Kanika, a mildly sweet fragrant rice cooked with ghee, bay leaf, cinnamon, cardamom, cashew and raisins, may appear in festive Odia meals, offering a bridge between savoury rice and sweet pulao. Ghuguni, made from soaked yellow peas or dried white peas simmered with ginger, cumin, turmeric and a light masala, provides a heartier savoury note. When served with puri or luchi after the vrat, it becomes a family dish that gathers people around the table after the long quiet of fasting.

In Bihar and parts of North India, the post-vrat meal often remains simple, built around fruits, curd, soaked gram, light potato preparations and cooling foods suited to the

summer season. In many north Indian homes, vrat-friendly aloo jeera is prepared with boiled potatoes, cumin, rock salt, green chilli and ghee, avoiding onion and garlic. Sabudana khichdi, made from soaked tapioca pearls tossed with roasted peanuts, potato, cumin and coriander, offers energy while remaining light. Singhara puri or kuttu puri, made from water chestnut or buckwheat flour, may be prepared where grain restrictions are observed, usually eaten with curd or a mild potato curry. In Maharashtra and Gujarat, where the related observance is often known as Vat Purnima, the culinary emphasis may remain more restrained, with fasting, fruits, coconut offerings and simple family foods carrying the meaning of the day. The vow remains consistent, but the plate changes with language, climate, agriculture and family tradition.

No account of Savitri Puja cuisine can be complete without its sweets, because they mark the emotional release of the vrat. Kheer, prepared by slowly simmering rice in milk until it thickens, then sweetening it with sugar or jaggery and flavouring it with cardamom, is among the most familiar offerings. In some homes, makhana kheer replaces rice with fox nuts roasted lightly in ghee before being cooked in milk. The dish is soft, cooling and auspicious, making it suitable for a day centred on prayer. Malpua, made from a batter of flour, milk, fennel and sometimes banana, fried gently and dipped in sugar syrup, brings a richer festive note. It is not always a fasting food, but after the rituals it becomes part of the family's celebratory table.

Odisha's pitha tradition gives Savitri Puja another layer of regional richness. Manda pitha, made from a rice flour casing filled with coconut and jaggery, is steamed until soft and fragrant. Kakara pitha is more robust, made with semolina or wheat dough, stuffed with coconut and jaggery, then fried until golden. Arisa pitha, prepared from rice flour and jaggery and fried slowly, has a deeper flavour and longer keeping quality, which makes it suitable for festive sharing. These sweets are not simply desserts. They carry the imprint of the household through recipes handed down by grandmothers, prepared carefully and shared with family and friends.

Seasonal fruits remain central even when elaborate dishes are prepared. Mango is perhaps the most visible fruit, not only because it ripens during the season but because its sweetness feels like a blessing in itself. Jackfruit, with its honeyed fragrance and many seeded bulbs, represents abundance besides being readily available in the eastern states. Banana brings softness and satiety, coconut purity and completeness, while palm fruit and date palm offer relief in the summer heat. Kendu, pineapple, apple and other fruits may also be included depending on region and availability. Fruit chaat, made after the puja with chopped mango, banana, apple, pomegranate, cucumber, grated coconut and lime, becomes an easy way to share the offered fruits among family members. Served with rock salt, chaat masala and lime, it is favoured for its sweet and tangy conclusion to a nutritious meal. In some homes, panchamrit, made

with milk, curd, honey, ghee and sugar or banana, is also prepared for offering to deities and later distributed as prasada. Each ingredient carries ritual meaning within Hindu thought, making the preparation both simple and deeply symbolic.

While non-vegetarian dishes are included in some households, they belong to the later family meal and not to the vrat or puja thali. Non-vegetarian dishes are not treated as offerings to Savitri. However, in some eastern Indian households, especially where fish is a normal part of the regional diet, the family meal after the fast may include fish or meat once the formal ritual has concluded. A light machha besara, prepared with fish cooked in mustard paste, turmeric and green chilli, can appear as a post-puja household dish in Odia or Bengali-influenced kitchens. Macher jhol, a thin fish curry with potato, tomato, cumin and turmeric, offers a gentler alternative that pairs well with rice. Chingri malai curry, made with prawns simmered in coconut milk and mild spices, may be reserved for a more festive meal, while chicken jhol, cooked as a light curry rather than a heavy restaurant-style dish, can be prepared for family members who are not fasting or for the evening meal after observance. This distinction protects the sanctity of the vrat while acknowledging the diversity of regional food habits.

The beverages associated with the season of Savitri Puja deserve a special mention because the festival falls during a hot period and the body needs cooling drinks after fasting. Pana, made with water, jaggery or sugar, curd or milk, fruit pulp, grated coconut, black pepper and sometimes chhena, is one of the most culturally resonant summer beverages in Odisha. Aam panna, prepared from boiled raw mango, cumin, black salt and jaggery, restores salt and sharpness after the heat of the day. Bel sherbet, made from the pulp of wood apple mixed with water and jaggery, is valued for its cooling nature. Chaas, or spiced buttermilk, brings curd, roasted cumin and rock salt together in a simple drink that settles the stomach. Sattu sharbat, made by mixing roasted gram flour with water, lemon, salt or jaggery, gives strength without heaviness. Tender coconut water, sugarcane juice, lemon sherbet and light fruit drinks made from mango, watermelon or bael also fit naturally into the day's refreshments. These beverages reflect the seasonal wisdom of the festival and help devotees remain hydrated through the long summer day.

The cuisine of Savitri Puja thus moves from a personal vow to shared nourishment. The morning belongs to fasting, prayer, offerings and family rituals. The evening opens into fruits, pulses, curd, rice, sweets and, in some households, a fuller regional meal. The festival does not seek meaning from excess. It asks food to remain sincere, seasonal and suited to a moment of prayer. I believe it teaches that the kitchen, like the shrine, can preserve values across generations.

In that sense, Savitri Puja is not only a celebration of Savitri's love for Satyavan, but also a reminder of how the household has served as one of Bharat's most enduring civilisational institutions. Its cuisine gathers the sacred and the seasonal into one graceful observance, where fasting, offerings, fruits, grains, sweets, cooling drinks and carefully prepared family dishes become more than food. They become carriers of memory, responsibility and cultural continuity. I believe this is where the deeper lesson of Savitri Puja lies. Our civilisational heritage is preserved not only in temples, scriptures and public rituals, but also in the quiet practices of the home, in the food placed before the divine, in the stories retold across generations, and in the values that families continue to live through their daily customs.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Finding the boundary of AI era on Mother's Day

NISHANT SAHDEV

There is a spine-broken diary on the granite counter of my family's Delhi kitchen. It is an ordinary object filled with slanted Hindi script and measurements making no mathematical sense. On a page detailing a Gajar ka Halwa recipe, there is a faded thumbprint. It is a stain from a drop of warm ghee that fell a decade ago, pressed into the paper by my mother's hurried thumb.

Beside that diary is my smartphone. Applications can photograph my mother's recipe, translate it into Mandarin, calculate its caloric breakdown, and generate a hyper-realistic video of a digital chef cooking it. I could take three minutes of her WhatsApp voice notes, feed them into a neural network, and have an AI archive her pitch and intonation forever. While this tech allows us to preserve our heritage with total fidelity, our obsession with AI's infinite capabilities is creating a dangerous blind spot in how we understand human love. We are confusing data preservation with devotion.

In the tech industry, we design systems with a singular goal: eliminating friction. We want processes to be seamless and perfectly efficient. But when we bring this mindset into our homes, we forget that an Indian mother's love is built entirely on friction.

When a mother spends three hours by a hot stove in the sweltering humidity of a summer afternoon, she is not executing a task a robotic arm could replicate. She spends a currency she can never earn back: her time, energy, and cellular youth. Every act of maternal devotion is a microscopic expenditure of her mortality, given willingly to fuel yours.

Viewing her labor as a mere optimization task blurs her sacrifice. While an AI model never fatigues, a mother has joints that ache with the



monsoon rains. Unlike AI, which consumes cheap computing power, a mother sets aside her ambitions to absorb the messy details of your heartbreak. She spends her life-a resource neither cheap nor renewable. As a generation of busy professionals, we often assuage our guilt of absence by throwing technology at the problem. We buy our parents smarter devices, set automated deliveries, and point high-definition cameras at them during Diwali. We think building an efficient digital infrastructure means loving them better.

But AI, for all its staggering brilliance, gives you the product of a mother without the cost. And the cost is what makes it love. As a physicist, I study the laws of thermodynamics and the inevitable decay of systems. We build intelligent machines to outsmart this decay, attempting to mathematically archive ourselves into eternity. As we wade into this



algorithmic age, we must draw a hard boundary. We do not need to resist Artificial Intelligence; we need to put it in its proper place.

The purpose of AI is not to simulate human connection, nor perfectly archive our mothers so we can comfortably ignore them while they are still here. Its true, revolutionary promise is giving us our time back.

This Mother's Day, let AI draft your emails. Let the algorithm manage your calendar and optimize your spreadsheets. Let the machine absorb the friction of the modern workplace so you can step away from your screens and back into the kitchen. Use the machine's ultimate efficiency to afford the beautiful inefficiency of being human. The most sacred artifacts of an Indian childhood are inherently imperfect.

It is the slight misalignment of a hastily applied bindi. It is the dal she forgets to salt because her mind is paralyzed with worry over your career. It is the way her voice cracks with tears when blessing you over a video call. These imperfections cannot be prompted by an LLM. You cannot engineer a hallucination of

genuine worry. These flaws are the friction of a human soul colliding with a difficult world, trying to shield you. Digitizing the recipe cleans up the archive, but you lose the ghee stain. You erase the messy, chaotic evidence that she was actually there, breathing, rushing, living, and loving you in real-time.

This Sunday, do not buy her a smarter gadget or send an AI-generated poem. Use the time technology saved you to sit across from her. Look at the lines around her eyes and recognize them as the physical receipts of the worry spent keeping you alive. Eat the food she made, knowing you will never taste this exact batch again. Listen to her voice, knowing the sound waves will permanently dissipate into the air.

Let AI handle the infinite. But let your mother be beautifully, fiercely, and painfully temporary. Because it is only when we accept that our time with her is a finite resource, that we finally understand the sheer magnitude of what she did with it.

(The writer is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Rekindling old Delhi's culinary soul

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

At a time when "modern Indian dining" often means deconstructing familiar dishes beyond recognition, Daryaganj Gold takes a refreshingly different route. It elevates North Indian cuisine without disturbing its soul. The newly launched flagship format of the Daryaganj brand in Aerocity is not merely a larger restaurant; it is an attempt to give classic North Indian food the scale, theatre, and dignity usually reserved for global fine-dining concepts.

The moment one enters the expansive 150-seater space, the intention is clear. Gold-plated tandoors glow in the open kitchen, chefs move with choreographed precision, and the mood balances old Delhi nostalgia with contemporary luxury. Yet, for all its polish, the restaurant never feels intimidating. Instead, it carries the warmth of a family celebration.

What makes Daryaganj Gold stand apart is that it resists the temptation to reinvent for the sake of novelty. Its celebrated Butter Chicken and Dal Makhani continue to anchor the experience, drawing from recipes linked to the legacy of Kundan Lal Jaggi. But the new Gold menu introduces thoughtful additions that surprise without alienating. The chaat selection is particularly inventive. Dahi Bhalla Bingsu and Mushroom Ram Ladoo reinterpret street-



food memory with finesse, while the Daulat Ki Chaat evokes the fleeting winter delicacy of Old Delhi with admirable delicacy.

The highlight, however, is the Five Senses Curries. The dish arrives not just as food, but as performance - the whistle of the cooker, the aroma escaping the lid, the slow reveal of deeply spiced gravy, and finally the tenderness of the meat. It captures what Co-Founder and CEO Amit Bagga calls "presenting familiar food in a contemporary and engaging way, without changing its soul."

Bagga's larger philosophy is visible throughout the restaurant. "Modern Indian dining in 2026 is not about changing the food, but about changing how it is experienced," he says. That idea defines Daryaganj Gold. It respects nostalgia but refuses to remain trapped within it.

The live chaat counters, chef theatre nights, unplugged music performances, and intimate private dining rooms all add layers to the experience. Yet, the real triumph is simpler: beneath the glamour, the food still comforts. In a city crowded with fashionable dining experiments, Daryaganj Gold succeeds because it remembers that memory itself can be luxurious.

OLD DELHI
NOSTALGIA FINDS
CONTEMPORARY
EXPRESSION



Nobody Can Really Hurt You

If someone has used harsh words with you, but with good intention, you can only thank them. You have only grown stronger by their act

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

When you feel hurt, you blame others for causing it. But the truth is, it is not people who hurt us. It is our own mind, our own vulnerability and our own emotions that entangle us and make us feel hurt.

If you really look into it, what causes the hurt? Somebody's words, somebody's selfishness, somebody not caring for you? What usually happens is you love somebody, and you think they do not care for you, or you have helped somebody a lot, and they do not talk to you, and that hurts you, does it not? Wake up and see: Is there an intention in them to hurt you? Place yourself in their shoes and try to look at things from their perspective too.

Often, you never intended to hurt someone, yet they feel hurt by your actions. What do you usually tell them? "I did not mean it, it just happened. I did not mean to hurt you, but an incident or event happened that gave you the idea that I hurt you."

Now, if you really intended to hurt somebody, it means you have a deep hurt inside you. Even then, you are worthy of being excused, and similarly, you have to excuse the other person as well.

If someone has hurt you intentionally, you should know that they are unwell. People hurt others out of a lack of wisdom, unhappiness or a lack of inner connection with the divine, and this keeps them mentally disturbed and dissatisfied. When someone is unwell, how can you get angry at them? In a mental hospital, there are so many people saying so many things. Do you get annoyed at them? You do not.

Someone happy, content and in love will not hurt anyone. It is simply impossible. If someone hurts another, it is because there is a deep wound or scar of pain and rejection inside them that needs to be healed. What should your attitude be towards someone who is unwell? You will naturally be compassionate towards them, and when compassion reaches its peak, it is nothing but love.

And if someone has not intended to hurt you, if it is an unintentional act, then it is a mistake on your part to blame them for your hurt. You can only blame your own perception, and not them. They are not culprits. Then it is you who has to ask them for forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness in such a situation can save the relationship. If someone has used harsh words with you, but with good intention, you can only thank them.

You have only grown stronger by their act. For example, no parent has raised their children without giving them a piece of their mind, have they? They may have used hurtful words, but it has been for your own good. If a friend has insulted you knowingly, you can only thank them. This is because they have dared to give you honesty, to give you what you needed to grow. Why would anyone want to hurt you at their own cost? Nobody wants to risk their friendship. What should be your attitude? "Thank you! You did something good for me. It has made me strong."

How you perceive situations around you is entirely in your hands. Any intention you put out there comes back to you. If you think that everyone is hurting you, your own intentions will create similar situations again and again. Wake up and see: "There is none other than the One, and the One



“TIME, MIND AND EVENTS ARE CLOSELY INTERLINKED, AND NONE OF THEM IS STAGNANT; THEY KEEP CHANGING. WHEN THE MIND IS STUCK TO EVENTS, THERE IS SUFFERING”
— GURUDEV



IF YOU REALLY LOOK INTO IT, WHAT CAUSES THE HURT? SOMEBODY'S WORDS, SOMEBODY'S SELFISHNESS, SOMEBODY NOT CARING FOR YOU? WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS IS YOU LOVE SOMEBODY, AND YOU THINK THEY DO NOT CARE FOR YOU, OR YOU HAVE HELPED SOMEBODY A LOT, AND THEY DO NOT TALK TO YOU, AND THAT HURTS YOU, DOES IT NOT?

comes to me in many forms. It is all for my growth, for my well-being, for my happiness." This is because the Universe is so loving and compassion-

ate towards you. If we keep this wisdom in our hearts, nobody can hurt us. In India, there is a proverb: If God is happy with you, He gives you a lot, and if He is very happy with you, He might slap you as well. When your senses are turned outwards and you get attached to material things, you invite pain and suffering. Problems come so that you can look within and enter a state of dispassion and calm. God creates situations to turn you away from this outward chase and brings you towards Himself. He wants to draw you to Himself so that you drop everything and look at Him. When the soul is united with the Divine, when there is no duality, you experience this innermost joy. Once that connection happens, nothing whatsoever in the universe can bring down your smile, energy, enthusiasm or joy. Everything is an opportunity for growth in life.

If you are happy and comfortable, it is an opportunity for you to recognise the truth and share it with others. If misery comes your way, make use of it as an opportunity to turn inwards, become very strong from within and recognise the truth of the Universe - that everything is changing and every relationship is fleeting.

Usually, we tend to let go of pleasant emotions and hold on to unpleasant ones. But when the mind becomes free and cultured through meditation, this tendency to hold on to negative emotions is the first thing that disappears. We start living in the moment. Little things cease to bother you. Every up and down that comes your way makes this recurrent play of life more interesting.

Time, mind and events are closely interlinked, and none of them is stagnant; they keep changing. When the mind is stuck to events, there is suffering. When the mind flows with time, it is fresh and alive.

A Millennium Monument of Harmony: The Abu Dhabi Hindu Mandir

Rising from the desert of Abu Dhabi, this BAPS Hindu Mandir Abu Dhabi stands as a rare symbol of unity in a divided world. A timeless gift to the modern age by the revered Mahant Swami Maharaj, it embodies a vision far beyond stone and structure. More than a place of worship, it reflects love, peace, non-violence and harmony between nations, faiths and cultures. In a land shaped by diverse traditions, it redefines coexistence with quiet dignity and universal truth. A true millennium monument, it reminds humanity that the deepest values of faith can build bridges stronger than borders



DR GYANANANDDAS SWAMI

Across years, decades and even centuries, most days pass without distinction. The sun rises and sets, and life moves forward in familiar rhythms. But occasionally, a single day stands apart, marked by an event so significant that it earns a lasting place in history. These rare moments remind us that even within the ordinary flow of time, something extraordinary can redefine the future.

One such moment unfolded on 14 February 2024. The dawn over Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, carried an unusual radiance. The vast skies of the Middle East bore witness to a day of quiet grandeur, as the desert sands of Arabia seemed transformed from barren stretches into landscapes of spiritual meaning. It was the inauguration of the first and largest Hindu mandir in the Middle East, built using traditional Indian craftsmanship, a landmark that turned vision into reality.

At precisely 8 a.m., within the newly constructed, magnificent BAPS Hindu Mandir Abu Dhabi rising proudly in Abu Dhabi, the sacred ceremony of murti-pratishtha (consecration of deities) commenced. The air resonated with Vedic chants, broadcast live across the globe, echoing through homes and hearts worldwide.

This was an unprecedented event in world history. The very idea of creating a grand symbol of Hindu civilisation and culture on land associated with Islamic heritage once belonged to the realm of imagination. Yet, it stood realised. In doing so, the mandir emerged as a bridge of harmony, bringing together leaders such as the UAE's royal authority, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and India's esteemed Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a shared platform, bound not by politics but by mutual respect and

trust. Such a convergence is nothing short of transformative, an event marking the dawn of a new era.

It is this very spirit of unity that resonated across the world. Across nations, religions, societies and languages, words like love, brotherhood, harmony, coexistence and dialogue are often spoken, but too often remain abstract ideals. This mandir has given those words a living voice and tangible meaning.

Walking upon the earth is ordinary; yet when a human steps onto the moon, the world takes notice. But every such achievement begins long before the moment itself, with a

TRUE ACHIEVEMENTS,
AFTER ALL, ARE NOT
WRITTEN MERELY IN INK,
BUT IN RARE ACTS OF
DEDICATION AND
DETERMINATION, WHICH
COME TOGETHER TO
CREATE HISTORY

dream, sustained by faith, that quietly sows the seeds of greatness. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself recalled in his speech on the day of inauguration, "The magnificent mandir that we see today in Abu Dhabi is because it was first envisioned years ago (in 1997) by Pramukh Swami Maharaj."

Every great achievement rests on a strong foundation. In this case, the guiding force was the revered guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj, whose vision became the source of inspiration for the mandir. Yet, a long journey still lay ahead. Sustained effort and decisive action were essential to carry that dream to completion.

True achievements, after all, are not written merely in ink, but in rare acts of dedication and determination, which come together to create history.

That responsibility was taken forward by Mahant Swami Maharaj, who carried the legacy with unwavering dedication. Inspiring thousands of volunteers and craftsmen, he helped transform his guru's vision into a living reality. Through tireless effort, day and night, the dream was not only preserved but fulfilled in its fullest form.

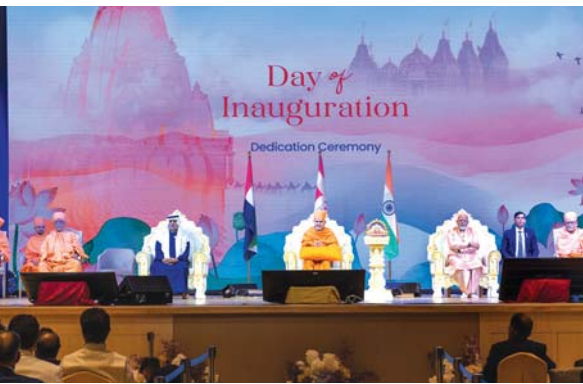
In the inauguration assembly, the Tolerance and Coexistence Minister, Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, thanked Mahant Swami Maharaj for building the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi. He said, "Today marks the beginning of something special. The new mandir will serve as both a place of worship and a community centre for all."

After introducing Mahant Swami Maharaj as "a powerful advocate for human harmony" and "a renowned global leader whose teachings are a source of spirituality, inspiration and joy," Sheikh Nahayan added, "Your visit, Your Holiness, is an opportunity for us to marvel at your example in working cooperatively to resolve conflicts between different communities and to build a spirit of tolerance as a gateway to understanding, mutual respect and peace."

In his blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj said, "Harmony is the power of God, and humility is the way of God. With this understanding, we can serve humanity." Swamiji also thanked Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, indicating that his generosity had made this grand and beautiful mandir possible.

The world watched that day and witnessed how love and harmony can forge a powerful bond between different faiths and nations.

(The writer Dr Swami Gyanananddas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)

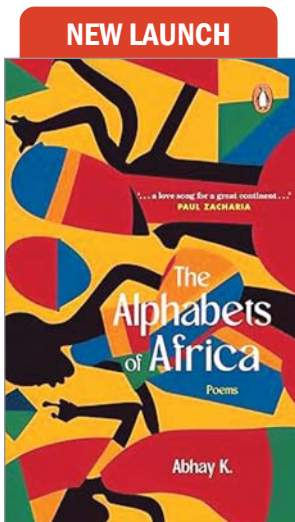


Breaking the African stereotypes

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

The launch and reading of *The Alphabets of Africa* by Abhay K was not merely a literary event at Oxford book store in Connaught place in Delhi — it was an act of re-seeing a continent long trapped in narrow narratives. The occasion brought together literature, diplomacy, and lived experience in a rare confluence. Abhay K, who has served as a diplomat in Madagascar and now represents India as Ambassador to Azerbaijan, spoke not as an observer of Africa but as someone who has encountered it intimately. The interactive session with Murtaza Ali Khan and Amit Singh was informative and as well as a rare peep into the continent we know so little about yet think we know everything about it — Africa.

At the reading, passages from the book revealed its distinctive voice-lyrical yet informed, poetic yet grounded in history. The poems move alphabetically, each letter opening a window into a dif-



Title: The Alphabets of Africa
Author: Abhay K
MRP: ₹499
Publisher: Vintage Classics

ferent facet of Africa — its landscapes, civilisations, icons, and everyday rhythms. This structure, deceptively simple, becomes a powerful narrative device, turning the book into what critics have described as a "cartography of a continent" told through verse.

What makes *Alphabets of Africa* stand apart is its deliberate departure from the dominant, often reductive imagination of Africa. For decades, global narratives have flattened the continent into a trilogy of stereotypes-wildlife, poverty, and conflict. Abhay K challenges this framing head-on. His poems foreground Africa as the cradle of humanity, a land of ancient civilisations, intellectual traditions, and cultural innovations that have shaped the world.

During the launch, the author underscored a striking idea: that every human being carries Africa within them. This is not poetic exaggeration but a reminder of scientific and historical reality—that human origins trace back to the continent. By weaving such insights into verse, the book bridges knowledge and emotion, transforming facts into felt experience.

The collection draws extensively from the author's travels across Africa, lending it authenticity that goes beyond second-hand observation. It introduces readers

to figures and histories often absent from mainstream discourse-emperors, queens, resistance leaders, artists, and everyday cultural practices. From the wealth of Mansa Musa to the resilience of Yaa Asantewaa, from ancient treaties to living traditions, the poems reclaim a narrative that is both diverse and deeply rooted.

The *Alphabets of Africa* refuses to romanticise Africa while also rejecting colonial stereotypes that once reduced the continent to a "heart of darkness". Instead, Abhay K presents a layered portrayal that acknowledges both struggle and splendour, giving the work emotional depth and intellectual credibility.

The reading session encouraged audiences to question inherited perceptions and engage with Africa as a living, evolving reality. More than poetry, the book becomes a bridge across histories and cultures, reminding readers that Africa is central to understanding humanity itself.

Ram, poetry and the human spirit

TEAM AGENDA

Ashutosh Agnihotri, while illuminating the collective consciousness of Indian culture, spiritual traditions and civilisational values, emerges as a devoted traveller through the emotional and philosophical landscape of Sab Par Ram Tapasvi Raja. Written in fluid Hindi verse and lyrical expression, this poetic work deserves to be read not merely as literature, but as a profound exploration of the humane, cultural and national dimensions of Shri Ram's character.

Carrying forward the epic tradition into modern Hindi poetry, the poet presents contemporary interpretations of several episodes from the Ramcharitmanas. Passages such as the "Shiv-Parvati dialogue" and the celebrated "Dhanush Yagya" are rendered with freshness and emotional resonance, offering readers a renewed understanding of these timeless episodes.

The lines: "Haan Ram

nahin hai saadhan,
Shiv ka hai aadhar priya,
Jo mere andar dikhta hai
wahi to Ram hai... beautifully capture the spiritual essence of the collection.

Throughout the book, the reader encounters not only devotion and surrender, but also moments of nationalism, moral introspection and deep human sensitivity. Whether exploring Kaikeyi and Sita's inner dilemmas, Bharat's selfless sacrifice, or the emotional devastation surrounding Mandodari's grief, the poet consistently brings forth a spiritual voice that resonates amid human suffering and ethical conflict.

The emotional strength of the poetry lies in its ability to connect devotional philosophy with contemporary human concerns. The poet's lines flow with rhythm and musicality, often carrying the cadence of compositions meant for theatrical or artistic performance.

The language remains expressive yet accessible, never weighed down by excessive ornamentation;

instead, it allows the emotional core of each episode to emerge naturally and powerfully. Although rooted in tradition, the poetry sustains a distinctly modern sensibility.

Ram is presented not merely as a divine figure, but as a symbol of ethical consciousness, sacrifice, compassion and cultural unity. References to Shabari's devotion, Bharat's renunciation and the ideals of Rajdharm deepen the philosophical texture of the collection.

Read through the lens of Indian poetics, the work evokes an aesthetic space where poetic beauty and spiritual experience merge seamlessly. The poet's ability to internalise Shabari's longing, Kaikeyi's remorse, Bharat's sacrifice and Ram's ideals of governance lends the collection emotional depth and dramatic vitality.

Ultimately, *Sab Par Ram Tapasvi Raja* emerges as a meaningful and enduring poetic work—one that holds relevance not only for

readers of devotional literature, but also for theatre practitioners, performing artists and wider cultural discourse for years to come.



Title: Sab Par Ram
Tapasvi Raja
Author: Ashutosh Agnihotri
MRP: ₹495
Publisher: Radhakrishna
Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., Delh

NEED TO RECOGNISE THE LONG SHADOW BEYOND SINDOOR

ONE year after Operation Sindoor, it is perhaps appropriate to move beyond the immediate emotion and symbolism associated with the operation and examine what it may truly have achieved. Nations often celebrate military responses in the immediate aftermath of provocation, but strategic communities must ask harder questions. Did the operation fundamentally alter Pakistan's calculus? Has the infrastructure of proxy war weakened irreversibly? Or has the conflict merely entered another phase of adaptation and pause?

Operation Sindoor undoubtedly marked another milestone in the evolution of India's deterrence doctrine. Like Uri and Balakot before, it demonstrated that India was willing to impose costs for acts of terrorism linked to Pakistan-based groups and their support structures. Equally important was the manner in which the response was executed. India signalled resolve, both political and military, without recklessness, and retaliation without uncontrolled escalation. In an era when military action is scrutinised not only on the battlefield but also in diplomatic, informational and economic domains, this calibrated approach mattered.

Yet it would be strategically unwise to assume that one successful operation, however effective, can permanently transform the behaviour of an adversary whose statecraft has for decades relied upon irregular warfare. Pakistan's dependence on proxy war is not merely tactical; it is deeply structural. Conventional asymmetry vis-a-vis India, domestic political fragility, the centrality of the military establishment within Pakistan's power architecture and the enduring utility of jihadist groups as instruments of influence ensure that the temptation to revive proxy strategies never entirely disappears.

In fact, recent geopolitical developments in West Asia may produce precisely the kind of misplaced confidence that sections of Pakistan's deep state have historically exploited. Periods of turbulence in the Islamic world often generate narratives of strategic opportunity within Rawalpindi's security establishment. Diplomatic flux, sharpening ideological

sentiment and renewed great-power competition can create the perception that international attention is fragmented and that proxy actors may once again operate within widened grey zones. Pakistan's establishment has repeatedly shown an ability to publicly deny sponsorship of terrorism while quietly sustaining the infrastructure that enables it.

History warns us against premature declarations of victory over terrorism. Terror ecosystems possess an extraordinary capacity for regeneration. They survive periods of pressure, disperse geographically, mutate organisationally and return in altered forms when geopolitical conditions become favourable again. The contemporary instability across West Asia once again carries the potential to energise extremist ecosystems globally. Even conflicts geographically distant from India can influence radical discourse within South Asia through digital ecosystems.

India cannot remain insulated from these currents. Technology is rapidly democratising the means of disruption. Cheap drones, encrypted communications, cyber coordination, AI-assisted propaganda and decentralised radicalisation networks are reshaping how proxy warfare may be conducted in the future.

Already, security agencies have encountered increasing use of drones for movement of weapons, narcotics and financial assets across borders. Narco-terror networks now intersect with organised crime, arms trafficking and extremist financing in ways that blur distinctions between internal security and external aggression. Recruitment, indoctrination and operational guidance can increasingly occur remotely, often without physical contact.

For India, therefore, the challenge is not merely to respond to individual attacks but to sustain long-duration national resilience. Counter-terrorism can no longer be viewed only through the prism of military operations. Cultural and social understanding through deep analyses should be an area of focus. The continuing erosion of extremism and separatist sentiment in Jammu & Kashmir must remain an unwavering priority. Equally important is vigilance in the Northeast and on the Indo-Nepal border, where adversarial networks may seek new vulnerabilities, logistical routes and influence spaces. The contest is now as much about preventing ideological penetration and social fragmentation as it is about neutralising armed cadres.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated that India possesses political will and operational capability. But deterrence in the realm of proxy warfare is inherently more complex than conventional deterrence between armies. States employing proxies often calculate that deniability, ambiguity and time will eventually dilute the costs imposed upon them. India must, therefore, guard against triumphalism. Strategic success lies not in believing that proxy war has ended, but in ensuring that the adversary progressively loses both capability and confidence in using it effectively.

One year after Sindoor, the broader lesson is perhaps this. India seeks peace, stability and regional normalcy. But peace cannot rest upon illusion. The long war against terrorism will not be won through a single operation, however successful. It will be won through sustained national resolve, institutional adaptability and the ability to anticipate the changing character of conflict.

The shadow beyond Sindoor still exists. Recognising it clearly may be India's greatest strategic strength. *(Views are personal)*

Full article on newindianexpress.com

SAFFRON BENGAL NEEDS RAM RAJ



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
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IN the blazing midday sun on May 9, history did not merely turn a page at Kolkata's Brigade Parade Ground. It erupted in a saffron surge that scorched away over seven decades of ideological inertia. For the first time in West Bengal's storied annals, a saffron-clad stalwart ascended as Chief Minister. Suwendu Adhikari, 55, a celibate political phoenix who rose from the Trinamool Congress's daredevil ranks, strode forward in resplendent saffron to take his oath. His attire was no mere fabric. It was a defiant drape of cultural reclamation in a state long bound by Congress complacency, Marxist misrule and Mamata's machinations.

Moments earlier, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had driven alongside him in a saffron-coloured, open-top motorised 'rath', a chariot of conquest specially forged for this occasion cutting through streets electric with anticipation. Before that, Governor R N Ravi, who had rarely donned traditional vestments during his Tamil Nadu tenure, stood resplendent in a saffron kurta paired with a flowing Bengali dhoti and offered his prayers to Rabindranath Tagore, whose birth anniversary fell on the day, along with his wife in a matching sari.

The entire pandal was transformed into a saffron sea of humanity: flags fluttering, scarves waving, foreheads marked with vermilion resolve. Adhikari and his five Cabinet ministers, each a study in saffron symmetry, embodied the new colour and new contours the state had so decisively

acquired. It wasn't just symbolism. It was a statement declaring Bengal's new cultural identity.

The mandate that propelled this moment was nothing short of a historic rupture. BJP's victory, securing 207 seats and a commanding 45 percent vote share, spoke not in whispers but in roars of righteous resentment. Voters came not for incremental tweaks but for total transformation. For Modi, Amit Shah and the RSS's loyalist cadre, this was more than electoral arithmetic. It was a cultural conquest that erased, in one sweeping stroke, 175 years of British imperial memory. Kolkata was the cradle of colonial conquest. It was from here that Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of Bengal in 1774, had administered an empire that stretched its tentacles across the subcontinent. The city that birthed the British Raj's administrative spine now witnessed its symbolic demolition.

The BJP's choreography was masterful, meticulous and farsighted. West Bengal was deliberately positioned as the last state to conclude its polls. A generous five-day interval separated the final voting phase from the

count on 4 May, a date pregnant with purpose, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Jan Sangh's icon Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder whose vision of integral Bharat had been buried under layers of leftist historiography. The swearing-in was fixed for May 9, evoking Tagore's timeless legacy while stamping it with saffron sanctity. Even the decision to relocate the seat of governance from Banerjee's pet project, Nabanna, back to the storied Writers' Building signalled restoration. Designed in 1777 by Thomas Lyon as the East India Company's clerical citadel, the building had housed the 'writers' who scripted colonial edicts.

Beneath this spectacle lay deeper roots that the BJP had patiently wa-

tered for 15 years. West Bengal's soil had always been fertile for *sanatani* nationalism. It was the land of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the rationalist reformer who lit the first lamps of renaissance. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee penned Vande Mataram, the national song that stirred generations. Subhas Bose forged an aggressive freedom movement that challenged the Raj. Sri Aurobindo elevated Hindu spirituality into a revolutionary creed. Swami Vivekananda became Hinduism's global ambassador, thundering at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago that India's soul was eternal. These giants had sown seeds of cultural nationalism so profound that neither Congress's secular dilution nor the Marxists' materialist hammer could uproot them.

Yet for seven decades, these icons were consigned to archival dust. The Congress, the Left Front and later the Trinamool Congress converted Bengal into a soulless, splintered state. Votepan politics fragmented society along religious and regional fault lines. Infiltration from Bangladesh turned border districts into tinderboxes. Violence, often state-tolerated,

chased away investors. Once an industrial powerhouse, Bengal became a byword for capital flight, deindustrialisation and extortion. Per-capita income, which stood at 127.5 percent of the national average in 1960-61, plummeted to a humiliating 83.7 percent. Its share of national GDP shrank from 10.5 percent to 5.8 percent.

The BJP spotted the opening. For 15 years, they worked silently identifying victims of humiliation, reminding Hindus of their endangered symbols of worship, warnings of a future where demographic shifts could render them strangers in their own land. The anger that simmered through the Sandeshkhali horrors, post-poll violence and daily indignities finally boiled over.

Hindus, across castes and classes, voted in unprecedented solidarity not merely rejecting the old regime but demanding restoration.

Yet victory brings its sternest litmus test. Adhikari's government must now deliver more than rhetoric. The millions who queued under the summer sun expect bread with brotherhood, tangible development that heals rather than divides. They voted for Hindu solidarity; they now crave Ram Rajya in practice: governance that restores dignity to the dispossessed, revives investment without fear of goons, secures borders without appeasement, and rebuilds Bengal's intellectual and economic sinews. The shift to Writers' Building is emblematic of this deeper intent. No longer will the secretariat sit in a modern edifice severed from history. It returns to the very halls where clerks once penned imperial decrees and where revolutionaries later defied them. In moving there, the new dispensation declares that Bengal's identity is neither a colonial relic nor a leftist laboratory, but a living continuum of Bharat.

Critics will carp, of course. Some will decry "saffronisation" as if cultural assertion were a sin. Others will lament the end of "secular" fiefdoms built on selective silences. But the mandate is unambiguous. Voters rejected the broken promises of the past—land reforms that stagnated agriculture, industrial policies that invited strikes over growth, minority politics that ignored the majority's mounting anxiety and chose disruption instead.

The May 9 ceremony was not pomp for its own sake. It was a prophecy fulfilled. The seeds were planted by Bengal's own nationalists. Roy's reason, Bankim's patriotism, Bose's bravery, Aurobindo's vision, Vivekananda's vigour have finally fructified. History has been rewritten in saffron ink. The coming years will determine whether that ink becomes the permanent script of a resurgent Bengal or merely a bold first chapter. For now, one truth stands unassailable. The original soul of Bengal has returned home.



PTI

OF MARMALADES AND MARKETING MYTHS



REVERSE SWING

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN
Senior journalist
Follow him on X @madversity

ARE the British losing their marbles over marmalade? English breakfast tables are now potentially liable to European political correctness. Thereby hangs the tale of how, in an interconnected world, things may find new identities away from their birthplace while facing rude shocks at home.

There is a debate on whether Keir Starmer's Labour government, already on a shaky wicket at home, would be compelled to say 'citrus marmalade' for something they never thought would need an adjective. After all, the dictionary defines marmalade as a "type of jam made from oranges or lemons". The touch of mildly bitter rinds is what makes marmalade tangy, much like the clipped accent of the Queen's English.

Members of the UK's House of Commons recently expressed outrage after reports that the bread-spread associated with Queen Elizabeth—because of her fictional video with marmalade-loving Paddington Bear—may be subject to re-

labelling under a trade deal with the European Union. It might have something to do with the Germans, who use the word 'marmalade' for all sorts of fruit preserves. The new requirement is a pushback from the Brexit days as Starmer's Britain tries to start life afresh with the EU. Maybe the UK should insist on calling it "British marmalade" when it is made from citrus fruits.

They may pick a leaf from the Bengal vs Odisha battle over who invented the rosogolla. Bengal now has a geographical indication tag for 'Banglar rosogolla' while Odisha has received a separate GI tag for 'Odisha rasagola'. It seems spelling the same thing differently can get you some mild respite in intellectual property disputes. A GI tag acts like a trademark to protect authenticity and offers a limited guarantee for authorised producers.

Heritage gets shaky in a shrinking world. We Indians have often had to worry about misappropriation of traditional knowledge. In the 1990s, India had to fight two significant battles. Government agencies won one dispute against the US patenting the medicinal core of turmeric, which in India is part of grandma's remedies for everything from sore throats to wounds, and another that restricted US-based RiceTec from taking a patent on basmati rice.

Twice-bitten, hundreds of times shy. Thanks to increased IP awareness, India now has more than 500 GI-tagged products that include Alphonso mangoes, Nagpur oranges, Bikaneri bhujia, Kanjeevaram silk, Pashmina shawls and Darjeeling tea. But global appro-

priation is a two-way street. You sometimes have to give as good as you get. Some of the most common things assumed to be Indian at least by large parts of the world are not Indian if history were to bear witness.

Samosa's origins are traced variously back to central and western Asia or even Egypt, where it was called sambusa and typically filled with meat. If you think replacing meat with potatoes

A recent row between Britain and the EU over what to call marmalades has led to a cascade of linguistic and culinary ironies. Maybe they can learn from India's own efforts at protecting food heritage

makes it truly Indian, think again. Potatoes were brought to India from South America by the Portuguese in the 17th Century. Syrupy jalebis, often relished with samosas, trace their origin to Arab lands where they were called jalebia. Had the Arabs and/or Turks got GI tags for samosas and jalebis, the history of Indian cuisine would have been different, at least in name.

As for the British, it may be time for them to frown on William Shakespeare, who famously wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet." Imagine Starmer invoking the best-known Eng-

lish writer to defend a concession to the EU. It is unlikely to wash. There is another layer of irony when you notice that a name for what is essentially a preserve cannot be preserved so easily.

But then, culture can be manufactured. I grew up reading P G Wodehouse's stories of elite British life in which a combination of eggs and bacon seemed quintessentially English. But things have rolled on from there.

An Austrian-born American nephew of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays, is considered the father of public relations. He is credited with making the heavy-duty breakfast combo popular in America, where orange juice, rolls and coffee used to be the morning staple. Bernays famously co-opted 4,500 doctors in a campaign to boost the idea that a heavy breakfast was a healthy one. The story made it to newspapers across America. The rest is culinary history.

It is quite a reverse swing for me to infer that Wodehouse's "British breakfast" may have its origins in American PR strategy. The main years he wrote his bacon-laden Jeeves novels, the 1920s and the 1930s, coincide with the high points of Bernays' comparably long career. The two were born just 10 years apart.

Marmalade, meanwhile, is now a many-splendoured thing. It is made in India with GI-tagged Nagpur oranges, Himalayan Galgal lemons and locally-grown 'Malta oranges'. In a world of fusion cuisine and social media collaborations, culture has become as unpredictable as the English weather.

(Views are personal)

QUOTE CORNER

The Epstein class is above party. They don't associate as Republicans or Democrats. The people who are funding the [White House] ballroom, funding the arch, funding the rebranding of the Kennedy Center, these are the people who are also funding my opponent.

Thomas Massie, US Congress member who co-sponsored the Bill to release Epstein files, on funding against him by billionaires mentioned in the files

Operation Trust Me Bro failed. Now back to routine with Operation Fauxixos.

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Speaker of Iran's parliament, on the end of Donald Trump's Operation Project Freedom and an Axios exclusive claiming a new peace deal had been signed to open the Strait of Hormuz

IPL is now purely business. They prepare flat pitches because low scores are boring for sponsors. Even I would struggle to bowl against aggressive kids like [Vaibhav] Suryavanshi.

Muttiah Muralitharan, Sunrisers Hyderabad coach who claimed 63 IPL wickets before retiring as a T20 player in 2014

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Bengal currents

Ref: *The Renaissance required in the East again* (May 9). In early medieval Bengal, while Shashanka cut down the Bodhi tree, Dharmapala restored Nalanda; while the Senas revived orthodox Hinduism, the Khaljis ushered in the first Muslim sultanate. In modern Bengal, when the Derozians were flying high, the Brahmo Samajis remained grounded; if Hindu College pioneered western education, Shantiniketan pioneered the Indian. After independence, if the political compass moved from the centre to the Left, it has now taken a turn to the right. Bengal flows like a river, with cycles of change and continuity, and any attempt to fixate on a particular current holds no water.

K S Mohana Murugan, email

Revival time

Ref: *The Renaissance required in the East again* (May 9). With the change of government in West

Bengal, it is a timely write-up on the decadence of values in the state. The fall is all the more evident in unbridled violence and unchecked corruption of the ruling parties. The masses are neglected and their economic needs uncared for. The literature and music is replaced with meaningless cacophony. An overhaul is the need of the hour.

Ramalingeswara Rao, email

Remove bottlenecks

Ref: *Urgency needed in oil exploration* (May 9). The main bottlenecks to such projects include bureaucratic delays, complex land acquisition, high taxes and lack of foreign interest. Solutions involve AI-driven exploration, fair compensation and collaborative state-central policies. With the West Asia conflict causing a dent to crude supply and warning of possible future disruptions, there needs to be urgency in jacking up domestic oil output.

R Sampath, Chennai

Moniker's weight

Ref: *Vijay still two short* (May 9). The VCK chief

bears two illustrious and ancient Tamil names—Tholkappian, the source of Tamil grammar, and Thirumavalavan, another name for the incomparable Chola king Karikala. But he seems not to be behaving like either. He can either justify his great names with his behaviour, or be known as another "me too" person. It is sad that he does not understand the greatness of the names he carries.

Krishnaswamy N Ponnani, Palakkad

Opening doors

Ref: *TNEA cut-off likely to drop as centum scorers in Class 12 exams decline* (May 9). The drop in centum scorers need not be read as a setback. Instead, it may reflect a more honest assessment of student performance. Maithili's story says it all. A corporation school student from a humble family background, topping Chennai with 593 marks, proves that circumstance never determines potential. Lower cut-offs will open doors for many such deserving students who were earlier excluded by a single mark.

Prajesh Paramasivan, Neelambur

School counsellors

Ref: *Students account for 8.5% of suicides* (May 9). This is a shocking revelation from the latest national crime data. One of the important reasons is that most schools do not have full-time psychological counsellors. I have seen in my teaching career spanning over four decades that good counsellors serve as a bridge between students, teachers and parents, help students perform to their potential, and ensure that they lead a stress-free life. Money spent on psychological counsellors by schools is an investment on human capital.

S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Vatican mission

Ref: *Rubio urges Europeans to share Iran burden* (May 9). Trump in damage control mode sent Secretary of State Marco Rubio on this mission to the Vatican. The damage caused by Trump's insults to the Pope is rebounding on him and the war is going completely out of control. He should have been a little more careful about what he said and did.

Philip Alexander, Bengaluru

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Bengal Shift

Sumendu Adhikari's rise to the chief minister's chair marks more than the fall of a 15-year government. It signals the collapse of an entire political grammar that had defined West Bengal since the Singur-Nandigram upheavals first brought Mamata Banerjee to power in 2011. The irony is stark. The same Nandigram movement that destroyed the Left Front and elevated Ms Banerjee also created the political figure who would eventually end her dominance. Mr Adhikari was not an outsider storming Bengal's gates from Delhi. He emerged from the inner machinery of the Trinamool Congress itself. He understood its district networks, its methods of mobilisation, its emotional vocabulary, and its dependence on local strongmen. The BJP's Bengal victory therefore cannot be explained merely as a national wave imposed upon a resistant state. It was also an insider-led dismantling of the Trinamool system from within. That distinction matters because it changes the future of Bengal politics.

For years, Bengal's political culture rested on a regional identity framework. Even when fiercely confrontational, Ms Mamata Banerjee projected herself as the defender of Bengali political autonomy against Delhi-centric power. The BJP has now replaced that framework with something fundamentally different: a politics rooted in border security, demographic anxieties, citizenship debates, and national integration. Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks describing the Bengal outcome as linked to "national security" were not rhetorical excess. They revealed how the BJP now sees the state - not merely as another electoral prize, but as the eastern frontier of a larger ideological project. This shift will have consequences beyond party politics. Questions involving Bangladesh, illegal migration, border management, religious polarisation, and voter identity are likely to dominate governance in ways Bengal has not experienced before. The state may increasingly resemble Assam's political trajectory rather than its own traditional culture of linguistic regionalism and ideological contestation. Mr Adhikari's political style reinforces that possibility. The BJP had other options. It could have chosen a softer administrative face to reassure minorities and the urban middle class after a bitter campaign. Instead, it selected its most combative Bengal leader - a politician whose appeal rests on confrontation, organisational aggression, and direct street-level mobilisation. That decision suggests the party believes Bengal remains a battleground requiring political hard power rather than consensual governance. Yet victory brings risks that opposition politics never does. Campaigns thrive on anger and polarization, but governments are judged on administration, employment, law and order, and economic delivery. Bengal's finances remain fragile. Industrial revival has stalled for years. Political violence has exhausted public patience across party lines. The BJP now inherits the same state machinery it spent years condemning. The real challenge before Mr Adhikari is therefore not defeating Ms Mamata Banerjee. He has already done that politically. His challenge is whether he can transform Bengal from a permanently mobilised political battlefield into a governable state. If he fails, the victory that looks epochal today may eventually resemble merely another transfer of Bengal's culture of confrontation from one party to another.

Hollow Opposition

The Indian Opposition's deepest crisis is no longer electoral. It is psychological. For nearly a decade, anti-BJP politics has revolved around a single assumption: that public dissatisfaction, economic distress, institutional controversies, or even internal contradictions within the ruling party would eventually weaken Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dominance in the natural course. That assumption now looks increasingly detached from political reality. The BJP has evolved beyond dependence on one leader. It has become the default national political machine in a way India has not witnessed since the Congress at its post-Independence peak. Its strength lies not merely in organisational reach or financial resources, but in occupying the emotional centre of Indian politics - nationalism, aspiration, welfare delivery, and cultural confidence simultaneously.

The Opposition still has not understood this shift. Most non-BJP parties continue to operate as defensive regional formations rather than as components of a coherent national alternative. Their politics is often built around preventing BJP expansion within state boundaries, not constructing a persuasive national vision. This explains the contradiction visible across India today: regional parties remain locally relevant, yet collectively appear incapable of altering the national balance of power. The Congress faces the sharpest version of this dilemma. Having lost its social coalition over three decades to regional parties like the Trinamool Congress, DMK, Samajwadi Party and others, it now depends on those very parties for survival. The result is strategic paralysis.

A party seeking revival cannot indefinitely play junior partner to forces that replaced it. Equally significant is the ideological drift of the Opposition. The BJP successfully positioned itself as the custodian of nationalism and political confidence, while many Opposition leaders became uncomfortable engaging on the same terrain. This allowed the ruling party to portray critics as disconnected from majority sentiment, particularly on issues involving national security, identity, and religion. That does not mean India is becoming uniformly right-wing. The 2024 Lok Sabha election itself showed that a majority of voters still did not vote for the BJP.

But voters increasingly reward clarity, conviction, and cultural confidence over fragmented coalition arithmetic. International examples reinforce this lesson. In several democracies facing dominant nationalist governments, Opposition victories have emerged not from elite consensus-building but from reconnecting with mainstream voters on everyday concerns - inflation, wages, public services, and corruption - while also engaging national identity instead of surrendering it. Indian Opposition parties, by contrast, often appear trapped in an echo chamber of press conferences, social media outrage, and institutional complaints. None of these can substitute for political rebuilding at the grassroots. The BJP's rise was not accidental. It was built patiently over decades through cadre expansion, ideological consistency, and narrative discipline. Defeating such a structure requires more than tactical alliances or moral criticism. It requires a rival political imagination. At present, the Opposition does not lack leaders or issues. It lacks a believable national story.

Election Integrity

Many citizens are unaware of their rights or disengaged from the process. Schools rarely embed civic education in curricula, leaving young voters ill-prepared to understand the stakes of participation. Without awareness, voters become vulnerable to misinformation, inducements, or apathy. Contrast this with democracies where civic education is a structured part of schooling, instilling respect for institutions and responsibility in participation. In India, the absence of such education leaves a vacuum that money and patronage readily fill

Elections in our country are often described as the largest democratic exercise in human history, and the numbers alone justify that claim. Nearly a billion citizens are eligible to vote, supported by millions of polling staff and security personnel spread across every corner of the country. The logistical scale is staggering: ballots and electronic voting machines must reach remote villages, mountain hamlets, and island communities, ensuring that no citizen is denied the right to participate.

More than a million polling booths are set up, each requiring staff, security, and logistical support. In some regions, polling officials trek through forests or sail across rivers to ensure that even the smallest hamlet is included. Citizens themselves show remarkable commitment: elderly voters being carried to booths, villagers walking miles in the heat to cast their ballot. Participation is not the problem; it is the integrity of the process that is under strain.

Campaign financing operates under a complex legal framework, but loopholes abound. The Representation of the People Act sets expenditure limits for candidates - Rs 95 lakh for Lok Sabha contests in larger states and Rs 40 lakh in smaller ones - yet political parties face no such restrictions.

This imbalance allows parties to spend hundreds of crores on rallies, advertising, logistics, and digital campaigns, drowning out smaller voices and independent candidates. Campaigns now resemble corporate marketing exercises, with helicopters ferrying leaders across constituencies, massive stages erected for rallies, and advertising blitzes dominating television and social media. For a candidate bound by expenditure limits, the contest is unequal from the start.

The introduction of electoral bonds in 2018 was intended to formalise donations, but it has instead enabled anonymous contributions of unlimited sums. Reports suggest that thousands of crores have flowed through this route, with the public left guessing about the source. Transparency, which is the lifeblood of electoral integrity, has been sacrificed at the altar of expediency. Critics argue that anonymity shields corporate



donors and allows ruling parties to benefit disproportionately, while citizens are left in the dark about who funds whom.

The Supreme Court has debated the issue, but reforms remain stalled. In effect, the system has created a parallel economy of influence, where money speaks louder than manifestos.

The criminalisation of politics compounds this imbalance. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, more than 40 per cent of Members of Parliament face criminal cases, and nearly one in four face serious charges including murder, kidnapping, and crimes against women. Trials drag on for decades, allowing accused legislators to continue contesting elections and shaping laws.

The maxim that one is innocent until proven guilty is stretched to absurdity when trials never conclude, and the accused continue to wield power unchecked. The result is a system where lawbreakers thrive as lawmakers, and the credibility of democracy itself is weakened. Citizens are left to wonder whether the ballot is truly a tool of reform or merely a mechanism that perpetuates entrenched interests.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls illustrates another weakness in the system. Intended to update and cleanse voter lists, the exercise often becomes controversial. Citizens complain of names being arbitrarily deleted, genuine voters being asked to repeatedly prove their identity, and entire groups - especially migrants and the poor-facing exclusion.

When revision itself becomes inconsistent or politicised, trust in the process erodes. Electoral integrity cannot be sustained by half measures; it requires a system where inclusion is the norm and exclusion is the exception, and where the burden of proof does not fall unfairly on the citizen.

Another distortion arises from India's vast floating population of migratory workers and gig labourers. Lakhs of citizens move between cities for employment, often excluded from voter lists or unable to return home to vote. In urban centres, turnout is depressed because workers cannot afford to travel back to their native constituencies. This exclusion weakens representation and creates a silent disenfranchisement.

A democracy that prides itself on scale must also ensure that mobility does not translate into invisibility. Mechanisms such as absentee ballots, postal voting, or portable voter registration could address this gap, but progress has been slow. Equally troubling

is the lack of civic education. Many citizens are unaware of their rights or disengaged from the process. Schools rarely embed civic education in curricula, leaving young voters ill-prepared to understand the stakes of participation.

Without awareness, voters become vulnerable to misinformation, inducements, or apathy. Contrast this with democracies where civic education is a structured part of schooling,

instilling respect for institutions and responsibility in participation. In India, the absence of such education leaves a vacuum that money and patronage readily fill.

The freebie culture further distorts voter choice. Promises of cash transfers, subsidies, or gifts shift focus from policy to patronage. Parties compete to outbid one another with short-term inducements, while long-term governance issues are neglected. Freebies may provide immediate relief, but they erode the principle that elections should be contests of ideas and vision.

Democracies elsewhere regulate or ban such practices, recognising that inducements undermine free choice. India's tolerance of this culture reflects a failure to distinguish between welfare and patronage, between policy and populism.

Underlying all these distortions is a deeper fear: in any democracy, the State must avoid being judgmental in selecting voters. It is the function of the State to keep a check on infiltrators, but when it fails, citizens should not be pushed to repeatedly prove their identity. The burden of proof must not fall unfairly on the voter.

When citizens are harassed or excluded under the guise of verification, the very fabric of democracy is torn. The right to vote is not a privilege to be granted conditionally; it is a fundamental entitlement. A democracy that mistrusts its citizens risks losing their trust in return.

Comparative experience offers lessons. In the United Kingdom, donations above modest thresholds must be disclosed, and corporate contributions are tightly regulated. Germany imposes strict caps on campaign spending, while Scandinavian countries experiment with public funding of elections to level the playing field. The United States, despite its own challenges, enforces disclosure of donations above \$200 and subjects



S S SAXENA

The writer is a retired Air Commodore, VSM, of the Indian Air Force



End the motherhood penalty at work

It is utterly frustrating that thousands of experienced women in the country are being pushed out of the workforce at the very stage when they are ready to assume leadership roles.

A recent report by this daily shows how many women are forced to choose between their careers and caregiving responsibilities because of inadequate childcare support, inflexible workplaces, and unequal burdens at home.

Over the past decades, the country has made significant progress in women's education, but that progress has not been fully translated into economic advancement in the absence of a conducive, women-friendly environment at workplaces.

The story of Feroza Ahmed, as reported in this daily, reflects the widespread reality

of many women in the workforce. Despite having more than a decade of experience and a successful media career, she had to leave her job after the birth of her second child. While she successfully managed her department remotely during the pandemic, no hybrid or part-time option was offered to her when she needed it most.

Such experiences are common across sectors, where motherhood often becomes a penalty for women.

According to a BRAC study, nearly 75 percent of 1,200 mid-career women now seeking employment had previously quit jobs due to domestic responsibilities or motherhood. Meanwhile, a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Time

Use Survey found that married women perform 7.3 times more unpaid care work than men. These numbers expose how women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid work while being expected to compete equally in the formal job market. The country loses valuable human capital as trained women professionals leave work. It is telling that less than seven percent of managerial roles in the country are currently held by women.

We therefore urge the government to formulate the necessary policies to create an environment where women do not have to leave their careers midway. Childcare and caregiving services must be expanded so that women from all economic backgrounds can access

these services. Community-based and affordable day-care centres, certified caregiving services, workplace childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, paid parental leave, and inclusive support for mothers of children with disabilities are all essential.

Equally important is raising awareness and challenging the deep-rooted notion that caregiving is solely a woman's responsibility. A 2024 ILO report suggests that investing 3.99 percent of GDP in care sectors could create around 70 lakh jobs in Bangladesh by 2035, with 91 percent formal roles for women. If we are serious about economic growth, productivity, and equality, we must build a care economy that allows mothers to thrive at home and work.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Floor test

Sir, Indian constitutional practice is replete with instances where Governors invited the single largest party to form the government despite the absence of a clear majority, leaving the final legitimacy test to the floor of the House.

In Karnataka in 2018, Governor Vajubhai Vala invited B. S. Yediyurappa though the BJP lacked numbers.

In Maharashtra in 2019, Devendra Fadnis was sworn in amid uncertainty over legislative support.

Earlier, in Goa and Manipur in 2017, post-poll arrangements and discretionary gubernatorial calls became fiercely debated

constitutional episodes. The underlying principle remained that the Assembly floor - not the Raj Bhavan - is the ultimate arbiter of majority.

Against this backdrop, the Governor's stance in Tamil Nadu naturally invites scrutiny. Constitutional offices derive credibility not merely from legality, but from consistency.

If identical precedents elsewhere were defended as constitutional convention, selective departures inevitably raise suspicions of political interpretation overtaking institutional neutrality.

In a parliamentary democracy, Governors are expected to facilitate government formation, not appear as gatekeepers of

political preference. The floor test exists precisely to resolve ambiguity democratically and transparently.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai, 7 May.

Letter and spirit

Sir, Post the recent state elections, Mamata Banerjee is the only one who has dug in her heels, and refused to resign. It is indeed childish and churlish for a senior political figure to behave in this manner.

Even if the Indian Constitution does not explicitly say that a defeated Chief Minister must resign, Mamata, acting in

accordance with the spirit of the law, ought to have tendered her resignation.

However, both Mamata Banerjee and Abhishek Banerjee have confirmed that their party, the TMC, will move the Supreme Court, alleging large-scale irregularities and demanding scrutiny of the election process.

If the election process was compromised, the TMC should not have contested on moral grounds. Would she have raised any objection had her party won the election? Mamata can't have the cake and eat it too.

Yours, etc.,
Avinash Godbole,
Dewas, 7 May.



What should we expect from Trump-XI summit



PRABHU DAYAL

The scheduled visit of President Donald Trump to Beijing on May 14-15 2026, marks a pivotal moment in global diplomacy, signalling an attempt to stabilize the world's most critical, yet deeply strained, bilateral relationship.

Coming after a period of intense economic volatility and geopolitical friction, the summit - the first by a U.S. president in nearly a decade - is less likely to yield a transformative "reset" and more likely to focus on damage control and the establishment of "managed competition". Expectations for this high-stakes meeting are diverse, ranging from hopeful trade deals to apprehensions regarding shifting stances on security.

The most immediate expectation is the restoration of regular, high-level communication between the two leaders, which has been severely lacking. In an era marked by "tense stability," the personal interaction between Mr Trump and President Xi Jinping is considered a necessary guardrail to prevent misunderstandings from escalating into open conflict.

While both leaders have signalled an interest in dialogue, they are expected to navigate intense domestic pressures. Trump is seeking to appear strong on China, while Xi wants to project authority aimed at tightening Party control and ensuring economic stability ahead of the 21st Party Congress in 2027.

Trade will take centre-stage, with expectations focused on an extension of the current "trade truce". Following intense trade war friction and heavy

tariff adjustments, the summit is likely to yield some important results. China is expected to pledge large-scale purchases of American goods, particularly agricultural products, energy, and Boeing aircraft. This would be a "headline-grabbing" win for the Trump administration.

In exchange, the U.S. may offer partial relief from tariffs and a pause on technology export restrictions on Chinese subsidiaries. Discussions may also focus on establishing new bilateral "boards" for trade and investment to manage disputes in non-sensitive sectors.

The geopolitical context of the 2026 visit is complex, influenced by the ongoing U.S. military engagement in Iran.

Middle East Stability: A major priority for Trump is securing Chinese leverage to prevent further escalation in the Middle East and stabilize global energy markets, particularly given China's role as a major energy importer. Securing Chinese leverage to manage Middle East instability and stabilize energy markets is a central, yet complex, goal of the Trump administration's foreign policy.

Facing an intensified Iran crisis and a blocked Strait of Hormuz, the US is pressuring Beijing - a primary importer of Middle Eastern oil - to use its economic influence to curtail Iranian actions. While China has officially called for de-escalation and pledged a "greater role" in restoring peace in the Middle East, it has maintained its own diplomatic engagement with Tehran.

During Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi's recent visit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for an urgent "comprehensive ceasefire," stating that a resumption of hostilities is unacceptable. China urged the reopening of the Strait

of Hormuz for international shipping. China will benefit from stability, but it also gains leverage as the US deals with a "muddle" in the region.

The Taiwan "Red Line": China considers Taiwan the primary risk factor, viewing US actions as undermining sovereignty. Beijing is expected to strongly press for a halt to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, which reached record levels in late 2025. On 17 December 2025, the U.S. government announced a record-breaking arms sales package for Taiwan valued at approximately \$11.1 billion, marking the largest single weapons deal in history between the two sides.

This move, authorized by the Trump administration, followed a \$330 million sale of aircraft parts in November 2025, reinforcing a rapid escalation in defense cooperation amid rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. side aims to manage this tension while navigating concerns that a transactional approach could lead to shifts in long-standing security policies.

The meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping highlights an attempt to manage intense rivalry through direct negotiation. The U.S. treats economic and security commitments to Taiwan as re-negotiable bargains, which boosts near-term deterrence but introduces volatility.

Technology is the core conflict area of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, surpassing trade in geopolitical significance by determining future military superiority and economic dominance. The competition focuses on artificial intelligence (AI), semiconductors, and quantum computing, with both nations employing industrial policy and tech nationalism.

While the U.S. has imposed severe restrictions on high-end



semiconductors, there is an expectation of discussing guardrails for artificial intelligence (AI) to stop the rivalry from spiralling into a crisis. However, both sides are likely to keep collaboration in advanced technology, military applications, and frontier AI capabilities firmly off the table, focusing instead on risk management.

Given the deep-seated structural issues and mistrust, there should not be high expectations for comprehensive breakthroughs. The Trump-Xi summit is aimed at managing deep-seated structural rivalries rather than achieving a comprehensive, long-term framework. The summit is more likely to codify new, temporary rules of coexistence, useful for short-term stabilization rather than a durable, long-term framework. The ultimate goal is to move from a state of antagonism to a more predictable form of "managed competition".

The 2026 Trump visit to China serves as a crucial test of leadership

for both presidents. It is a necessary exercise in ensuring that the world's most significant economic powers can continue to engage despite fundamental differences. While transactional deals on agriculture or technology are expected to dominate the headlines, the true success of the visit will be measured by the ability to prevent economic and technological competition from turning into military confrontation.

The key metric for success is managing the rivalry to prevent it from escalating into military conflict, especially regarding Taiwan and regional disputes, amid a backdrop of significant trade friction. The meeting aims to transition from a "cyclical spiral" of mistrust towards a more structured competition, and lasting success depends on creating long-term frameworks to prevent escalation.

(The writer, a retired IFS officer, served as India's Ambassador to Kuwait and Morocco and as Consul-General in New York.)

UP adds edge to India's defence arsenal



SHEHZAD POONAWALA

One year after Operation Sindoor lit up the skies and delivered justice to terror networks, one truth stands crystal clear: Uttar Pradesh has become the beating heart of India's defence manufacturing revolution. While the nation rightly celebrates the valour of our armed forces, it is time to recognise the real enablers of that victory - the factories, foundries and missile integration lines rising rapidly across Uttar Pradesh's six defence corridor nodes.

This is not just industrial progress. This is the living success of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Under the powerful double engine governance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Centre and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Uttar Pradesh, the state has moved with extraordinary speed and purpose. PM Modi's bold vision of dedicated defence corridors has been turned into a formidable reality in Uttar Pradesh through the unwavering support of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and tireless execution by Yogi Adityanath.

The numbers tell a compelling story of transformation. Investment proposals worth over Rs 35,000 crore are actively being implemented on the ground across the six nodes of the Uttar Pradesh Defence Industrial Corridor - Agra, Aligarh, Lucknow, Kanpur, Jhansi and Chitrakoot. This builds upon Rs 12,000 crore worth of projects already seeded by January 2026. The state has created a large land bank and is offering attractive incentives under its Aerospace and Defence Policy.

Uttar Pradesh is not merely setting up factories it is producing systems that matter in battle. Lucknow has been developed as the hub for BrahMos missiles and heavy defence manufacturing. The BrahMos Aerospace Integration and Testing Facility here has already begun delivering supersonic cruise missiles, providing critical firepower that proved its mettle during Operation Sindoor.

Aligarh is evolving into a major centre for small arms, defence equipment, military supplies, drones and electronic warfare systems. Kanpur, the traditional industrial heartland, is emerging as a powerhouse for ammunition, missiles, defence textiles and protective gear. Agra and Chitrakoot are being positioned for precision engineering in aerospace and defence.

The corridor is actively manufacturing artillery shells, drones, bulletproof jackets, and advanced communication systems. All of these strengthened India's capabilities during Operation Sindoor. The Uttar Pradesh-made drones provided real-time intelligence and strike support, while other systems from the corridor bolstered overall operational effectiveness.

The Chief Minister has positioned the defence corridor as a future "knowledge corridor" that will combine large-scale manufacturing with cutting-edge research. The state is collaborating with IIT Kanpur to establish a Centre of Excellence for drones. Uttar Pradesh possesses 56 per cent skilled manpower and a massive base of 96 lakh MSMEs, creating a perfect ecosystem for defence manufacturing.

Uttar Pradesh has also fostered a vibrant start-up environment. More than 21,000 start-ups have been established across AI, robotics, drones, semiconductors and data centres, many of which are now feeding into the defence sector.

The synergy has been exceptional. Prime Minister Modi provided the national vision and policy direction. Defence Minister Singh extended steady central support. And Chief Minister Yogi delivered decisive on-ground execution. This double engine model has proven far more



effective than fragmented efforts seen elsewhere.

As the nation marks the first anniversary of Operation Sindoor, the message is powerful and unmistakable. The BrahMos missiles from Lucknow, the drones from Aligarh, the ammunition from Kanpur and the support systems from across the corridor were not imported. They were made in India and substantially made in Uttar Pradesh. This is the clearest proof yet that Atmanirbhar Bharat has moved from slogan to battlefield reality.

Uttar Pradesh is no longer just participating in the national defence

mission. It is leading it with determination, scale and speed. The state is now poised to move beyond meeting domestic requirements and emerge as a significant defence exporter to friendly nations. Challenges remain, but the trajectory is unstoppable.

One year after Operation Sindoor, Uttar Pradesh stands tall as the sword arm of a proud and self-reliant India. The future of Indian defence manufacturing is rising unmistakably from the soil of Uttar Pradesh.

(The writer is National Spokesperson, Bharatiya Janata Party.)

NOW AND AGAIN

THE RIGHT SHOE

KRISHNENDU BHATTACHARYYA

Having just written our BSc final year exams, we desperately needed a break - a break to permanently dislodge from our heads stuff like Fourier analysis and Michelson-Morley's experiment. So, one windy July morning, three of us - Amit, Ritwik and I - set off for Bakkhali with Rs 2,500 each, and five packs of Charminar.

Ritwik in particular was blooming. He sported on his wrist a sparkling Rado that his aunt had sent him from the UK, and on his feet a brand-new pair of Adidas - quite a novelty then - that he had picked up for all-round achievement in our college sports.

We reached past noon. A preliminary survey of the beach was not promising, neither was the lunch that our hotel served. But our spirits were too high to be battered by such trifles. Soon we were seated in our modest room, Charminars dangling from our lips, discussing love. Later, we went to the beach.

Our idea was to ramble about for a while, and later take a cycle-van to Frasersgunge, another beach a couple of kilometres away. But the tempting sea changed all that. Fully clad but sans our shoes, we were, before long, knee-deep in the waters when Amit chose to remember that Ritwik's flame had lately been going out with Abhijit, widely believed to be the only first-class material of our class. A scuffle ensued - surely not the first between friends, or between philosophers with a girl unknowingly pulling at the strings.

I, the mute spectator, observed two events in quick succession. First, Ritwik's Rado flew off his wrist and into the water, at my feet. I quietly retrieved it. Second, a colluding wind stirred up an unexpected breaker in the normally languid Bakkhali waters that lashed the beach at precisely the spot where Ritwik had left his pair of Adidas, and the right shoe was gone in no time.

In a minute Ritwik discovered his first loss. I pointed out his second. He went dumb - and I feared numb too - until in a flurry of animation he ran towards the spot and flung the left shoe deep into the sea. The waters took it without a murmur.

That evening we discussed God and his strange ways. Amit sheepishly said that the sea always returns what it takes. Ritwik said nothing. He refused dinner and Amit found it difficult not to follow suit. I was in charge of our Rs 7,500, and since a single meal would make record-keeping complicated, I rang up reception and said no-meal for all. I turned the Rado over in my trouser pocket. It was still ticking.

The next evening we were to return. The night's sleep, the bright sun and a breakfast of alu-parathas and omelettes did wonders for our morale, and Ritwik volunteered that we spend the morning on the beach.

We were the only ones about. I had been looking for the right moment to return the Rado. Amit seemed lost, clearly thinking of the evening before and the central role he had played in the turn of events. None of us spoke of it.

It was Amit who noticed it. A white-and-blue object sticking out of the sand some 25 yards from us that looked perilously like a shoe. Another 10 yards, and the object was as plain as day, but a vital question remained - which one was it?

It was the right shoe.

Ritwik stood looking at it for a long moment. Then he turned, and I held out the Rado. He took it without a word and put it on. We walked back to the hotel.

News Items

“NO REPRISALS” PROTECTION FOR LOYAL WORKERS

London, May.

The British Gazette officially notifies all workers that every man doing his duty by the country in the present crisis will be protected by the State from reprisals and loss of benefits or pension, and legislation with that purpose will be proposed at an early date. —Reuter.

GERMAN FLAGS

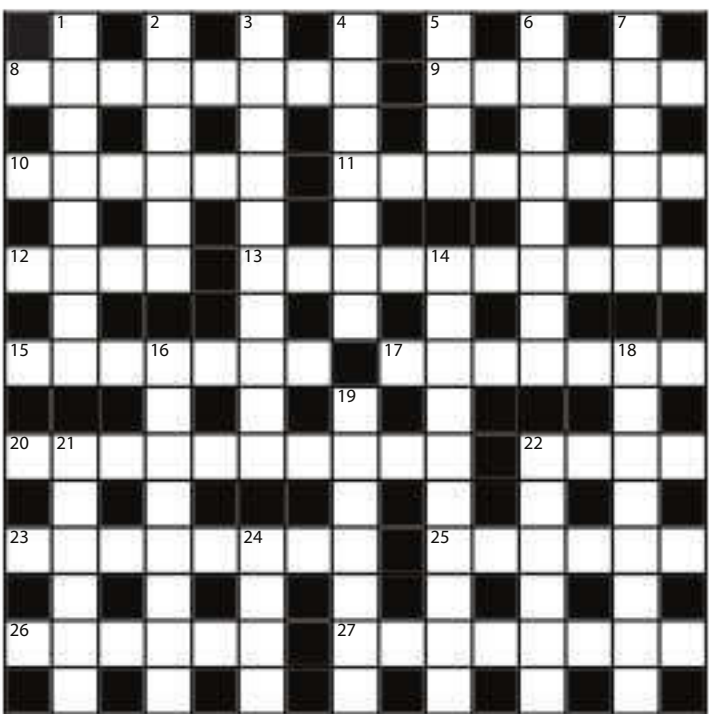
PRESIDENT HINDENBURG'S LATEST ORDER

(Special Cable.)

Berlin, May.

The president has decreed that all German Embassies and Consulates shall hoist by the side of the Republican flag a merchant flag in the form of the Monarchist colours with the Republican colours in the corner. Political parties are very much excited. The Leftists describe the decree as an affront to the Republic. The Socialists are furious and are submitting to the Reichstag a vote of no confidence in the Chancellor, which stands a good chance of adoption. The Democrats and Centre Party, belonging to the Government Coalition, strongly disapprove of the move and the Catholics regret the decree. —Copyright.

Crossword | No. 293457



Last Sunday's Solution



ACROSS

8 Language without appeal draws in two kings (8)

9 Building quickly assembled before cracking (6)

10 Obstacle on marshland where ship departs (6)

11 Engage in sport and kit wears out (8)

12 Enemy circles large ice sheet (4)

13 Offensive revolutionary deeply hurt a right-winger (10)

15 Short holiday viewed as sound, healthy preparation? (7)

17 Storm in Belgium with freakish result (7)

20 Purgative from sailors in Surrey? (5,5)

22 Woman into bed with Democrat (4)

23 Music rocks on beat that can be hot (8)

25 Country game needs good man in charge (6)

26 Jack meets fool and hospital cleaner (1-5)

27 Is it paste produced in this plant? (8)

DOWN

1 One found in bed happened to have a bad back (8)

2 American playwright discussed on the beach? (6)

3 Perhaps Bering, Blixen and Kierkegaard, or certain 7s? (5,5)

4 Crew member checks mounting fear in two ways (7)

5 Son, mine, an exact likeness (4)

6 Car capital leaves nothing - just endless rubble (8)

7 One earning crust from bread engages right tout (6)

14 Warmer in the main with huge opening flower? (4,6)

16 Peevish with formal greeting showing arm (8)

18 Weird Scots rook inside the Spanish moat? (8)

19 Some terrible mishap brings scar (7)

21 Swimmer one put outside (6)

22 Ulster manoeuvring shows brilliance (6)

24 Characters inside school getting cooked salmon (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

epaper.thestatesman.com

The Butterfly Deception: Unmasking Lupus

DR. ARGHYA CHATTOPADHYAY



In anticipation of World Lupus Day on May 10, 2026, this feature story explores the dual ideas of “Steps for Change” and “Hope in Action.” It highlights the hidden reality of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE), a complex autoimmune condition that affects millions—disproportionately young women—and examines how medical advancements and social advocacy are finally bringing this “invisible” illness into the light. Emphasized and guided by Consultant Rheumatologist and Academic Director of AIIR, Dr. Arghya Chattopadhyay.

The Great Mimicker in Our Midst

Imagine a disease that hides in plain sight, masquerading as a dozen other ailments while quietly attacking the body from within. This is the reality of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE), a condition often called the “great mimicker.” Globally, lupus prevalence is estimated to vary widely, often ranging between 20 to 150 people per 100,000, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood chronic illnesses of our time.

In India, the challenge is amplified. Due to its varied symptoms—ranging from joint pain and hair loss to the signature “butterfly” skin rash—many cases are either misdiagnosed or caught far too late. For the nearly 90% of patients who are women in their child-bearing years, the diagnosis often arrives just as they are beginning to navigate the complexities of careers, marriages, and motherhood.

Behind the “Invisible” Mask

The true weight of lupus is rarely seen on the surface. While a patient may look healthy to a casual observer, they are often battling a trifecta of physical, psychological, and social hurdles:

The Physical Toll: Beyond the joints and skin, lupus can strike vital organs. Between 40% and 60% of patients face kidney involvement, while others deal with complications in the brain and blood.

The Mental Burden: Living with a “relapsing-remitting” disease—where you feel fine one day and bedridden the next—takes a heavy psychological toll. Studies suggest that depression affects up to 40% of patients, with nearly half of the lupus community struggling with chronic anxiety.

The Social Stigma: In many societies, a lupus diagnosis can unfairly impact a woman’s prospects for marriage or

employment. The fear surrounding pregnancy is particularly poignant, though modern medicine is rapidly changing that narrative.

Steps for Change: A New Era of Care

The ideas of “Steps for Change” serve as a rallying cry for collective action. It is no longer enough to simply know the name “Lupus”; the goal is now early detection and seamless access to care.

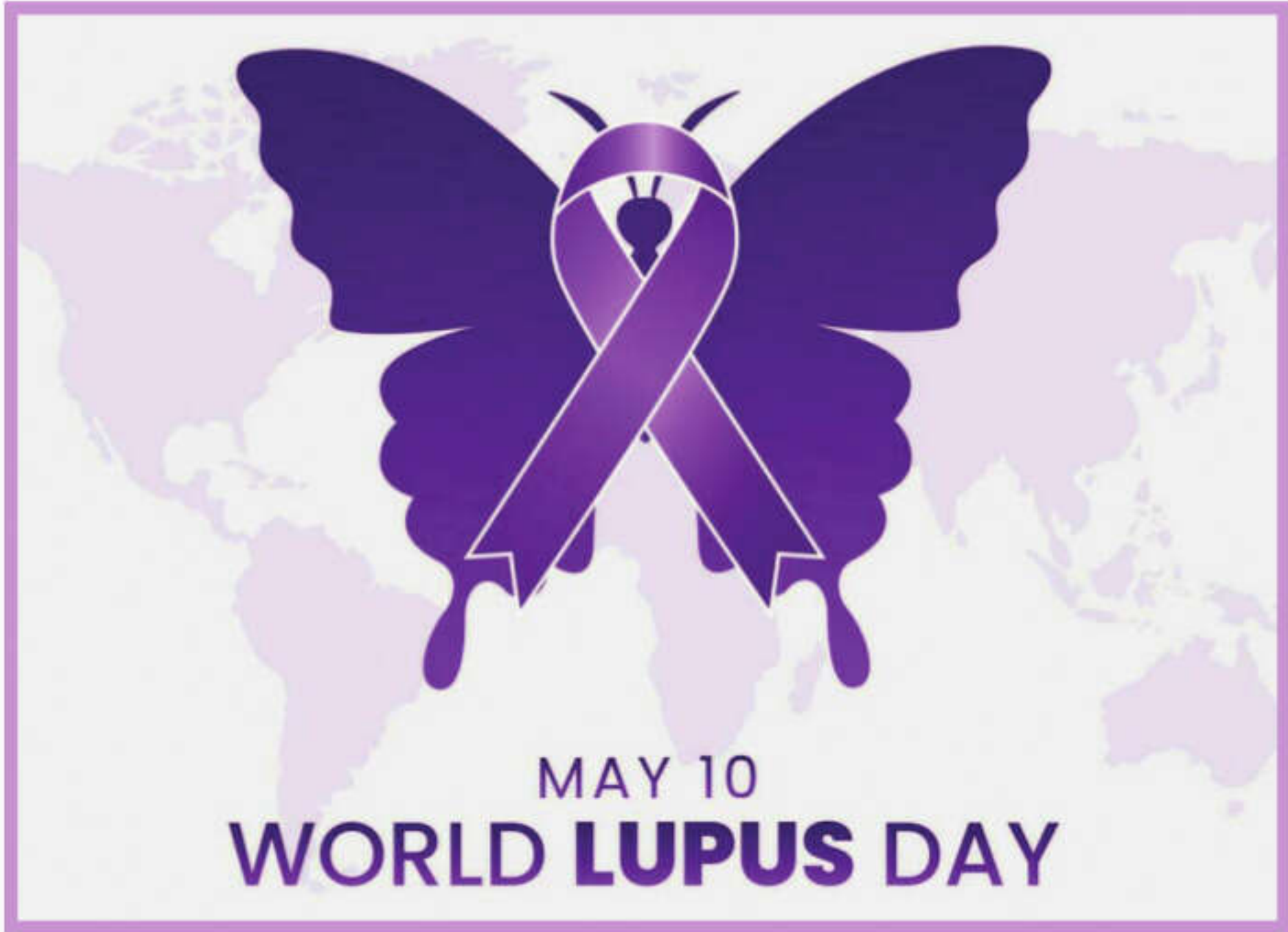
The medical community is pushing for a shift toward precision medicine. By identifying specific biomarkers, doctors can now tailor treatments to the individual rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. This shift has turned the tide on what was once a terrifying prognosis. Today, long-term survival exceeds 90% in many regions, and with the help of targeted therapies, many are able to maintain active, high-achieving lives.

Hope in Action: The Path Forward

Perhaps the most inspiring shift is seen in the realm of family planning. For decades, women with lupus were often told that motherhood was a dangerous impossibility. Under the banner of “Hope in Action,” that myth is being dismantled. With controlled disease activity and close monitoring, the majority of women with lupus can now experience successful, healthy pregnancies.

As we approach World Lupus Day, the message from advocates and healthcare providers is one of empowerment. Lupus is a formidable opponent, but it is no longer a life sentence of limitations. By making the invisible visible—by talking about the fatigue, the flares, and the triumphs—we turn the tide from mere awareness into tangible change.

This May 10th, the call is simple: Take a step. Create change. Turn hope into action.



Varicose Veins: The Hidden Science of the “Blue Cord” Crisis

DR. AVIK BHATTACHARYYA



In the high-stakes rhythm of modern life, our legs are the unsung heroes of our daily commute and professional hustle. However, they are also the first to signal distress. What begins as a dull ache or a “heavy” sensation is often dismissed as routine exhaustion. But as Interventional Radiologist Dr. Avik Bhattacharyya observes, these subtle whispers from our veins can escalate into a clinical crisis if ignored.

The rising prevalence of varicose veins is no longer just a concern for the elderly. It is increasingly being seen across age groups and is influenced by contemporary lifestyles—prolonged standing, sedentary habits, obesity—as well as genetic and occupational factors.

The Anatomy of Failure: Beyond the Surface

Under normal conditions, veins carry blood upward toward the heart with the help of one-way valves and muscle contractions. When these valves weaken, gravity takes over. Blood pools in the lower limbs, causing the veins to become

distended, twisted, and visible as blue or purplish cords.

If left untreated, this venous hypertension can lead to a cascading series of complications:

Skin Discoloration: A brownish tint near the ankles caused by blood leaking into the tissue.

Venous Ulcers: Chronic sores that are notoriously difficult to heal.

Bleeding: Fragile surface-level veins may bleed, sometimes after minor trauma.

Case Study: The Pedagogy of Pain

Madhumita Devi, a veteran school teacher, spent decades standing in front of blackboards. For her, “heavy legs” were simply a professional hazard. She ignored the initial swelling until it transformed into a painful, non-healing ulcer. Her story is a quintessential example of venous insufficiency—where the underlying “plumbing” of the vascular system requires a mechanical fix rather than just a medicinal one.

“I used to run for my work; now I walk for myself,” Madhumita reflects. Her journey back to the classroom was paved with a commitment to both modern medicine and lifestyle discipline.

The Modern Intervention: Beyond the Scalpel

Gone are the days of invasive “vein stripping” that required long hospital stays. Today, Interventional Radiology offers pinhole solutions, and many patients are able to return home the same day they are treated.

Thermal Ablation: Using ultrasound guidance, a thin catheter seals the diseased vein with heat, allowing the body to naturally reroute blood flow to healthier channels.

Vena Seal (Medical Glue): A revolutionary approach where a medical-grade adhesive closes the vein, often eliminating the need for multiple numbing injections.

Sclerotherapy: A specialized solution is injected into smaller “spider veins” to shrink and eventually eliminate them.

The Protocol for Prevention

While modern medicine can fix the damage, lifestyle remains the primary defense. A successful recovery and prevention strategy involves:



The Calf-Muscle Pump

Regular movement, such as walking, engages the calf muscles. These act as a “second heart,” physically helping push blood upward against gravity.

Compression and Weight

Reducing BMI may lower the pressure that stresses leg veins, while medical-grade compression stockings provide external support, improve circulation, and help reduce symptoms.

Final Thought: Reclaim Your Mobility

Madhumita Devi’s recovery serves as a vital reminder: pain is a diagnostic tool. By embracing early diagnosis and minimally invasive technology, you are not just treating a cosmetic issue; you are reclaiming your mobility. Your legs carry the weight of your world—it is time you returned the favor. When treated correctly, your legs will finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Sipping Hidden Risks

DR. VIKASH MASKARA



As temperatures rise, so does the craving for chilled, indulgent beverages. From creamy milkshakes and cold coffee to fizzy soft drinks, these summer staples are especially popular among young people seeking quick refreshment. While they offer momentary relief from the heat, their regular consumption may carry hidden health consequences.

Milk-based drinks such as flavored shakes, iced coffees, and smoothies are often perceived as nutritious. However, many commercially prepared options are loaded with added sugars, syrups, and high-fat ingredients like ice cream and whipped cream. Excess sugar intake is closely linked to weight gain, which in turn increases the risk of hypertension and places additional strain on the heart. High saturated fat intake can also contribute to elevated cholesterol levels, further affecting cardiovascular health.

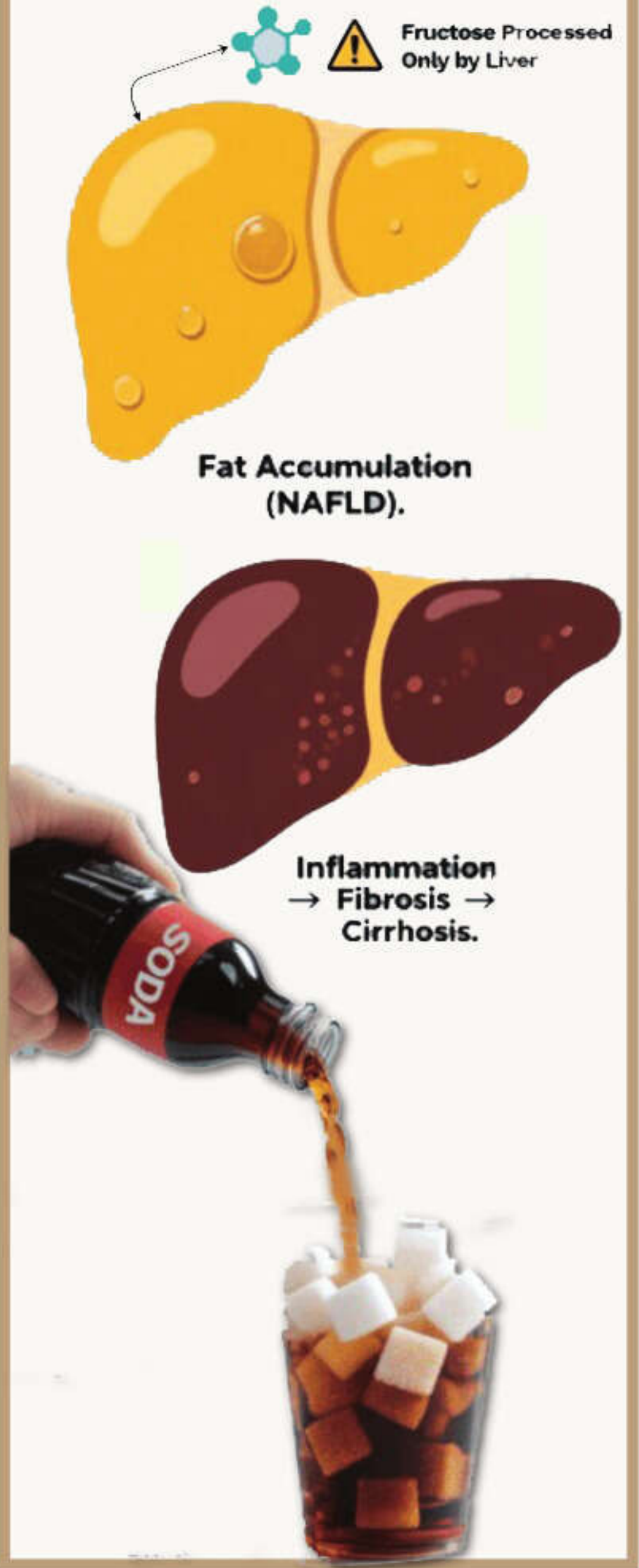
Soft drinks and colas present a different but equally concerning profile. These beverages may contain high amounts of added sugar or artificial sweeteners, each with different health considerations, and many also contain caffeine. Frequent consumption has been associated with weight gain, insulin resistance, a higher risk of metabolic disorders, and in some individuals, elevated blood pressure. The high sugar load of sugary drinks may also contribute to fat accumulation in the liver, raising the risk of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), an increasingly common condition across younger age groups.

Another often overlooked factor is portion size and frequency. What begins as an occasional indulgence can quickly turn into a daily habit during the summer months. Regular intake of calorie-dense beverages adds “empty calories” without providing lasting satiety, making it easier to exceed daily energy requirements without realizing it.

This does not mean such drinks must be completely avoided. Moderation and mindful choices can make a significant difference. Opting for homemade versions with controlled sugar, choosing low-fat milk, or replacing sugary beverages with natural alternatives such as coconut water, buttermilk, or fresh fruit-infused water can help maintain hydration without compromising health.

Summer hydration is essential, but the quality of what is consumed matters as much as the quantity. Making informed beverage choices today can go a long way in protecting heart health, maintaining healthy blood pressure, and supporting liver function in the long run. Smart beverage choices today can protect heart, liver, and metabolic health tomorrow.

The writer is a consultant - General Medicine & Diabetology, Narayana Hospital, Barasat



BIZ BRIEFS

Shoppers Stop opens store

Shoppers Stop announced the launch of its second store in Visakhapatnam, further strengthening its presence in Andhra Pradesh. Located in Inorbit Mall, the new store offers a modern, elevated shopping experience for the city's increasingly aspirational and style-conscious consumers. Spanning over an expansive 32,166 sq. ft., the store brings together a curated portfolio of leading global and national brands across fashion, beauty, accessories, and lifestyle. The store aims to cater to the evolving preferences of Vizag's consumers.

FRND app helps people

In an increasingly fast-paced and digitally connected world, meaningful human connections often remain elusive. The FRND (short for friend) app is most suitable and welcome app for the people who yearn for friend connections but somehow fail to make friends. In a fictitious example let's say, for 35-year-old Maheshwari from Chennai, the journey toward emotional wellbeing and self-expression took a transformative turn when she discovered FRND. Following a difficult divorce, Maheshwari found herself navigating intense loneliness. It was during this challenging phase FRND app helped her.

Bandhan Bank's new branches

Bandhan Bank inaugurated three new branches across Telangana, 12 across South India. The bank has also opened five branches in Tamil Nadu and two branches each in Karnataka and Kerala. The new branches in Telangana are located at Film Nagar Branch Hyderabad), Padmarao Nagar Branch (Hyderabad) and Miryalaguda Branch (Nalgonda). With the launch of these new branches, the bank's total number of banking outlets in Telangana touched 162 and 670 across South India.

GRAM 2026 meet in Hyd

In a significant move towards establishing Rajasthan as a global hub for agricultural innovation, agritech investment, and a technology-driven agricultural economy, the Department of Agriculture, Government of Rajasthan, in collaboration with Rajasthan Foundation and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), successfully organised the Hyderabad Investor Meet under the banner of 'Global Rajasthan Agritech Meet (GRAM)-2026' in Hyderabad. Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma and others attended the meet.

Axis Bank's new initiative

Axis Bank announced the launch of a unified suite of AI-powered compliance transformation solutions for its current account customers, marking a significant step forward in simplifying traditionally complex and time-consuming regulatory processes for businesses. The new offerings include an AI-powered ReKYC solution and an AI-driven Digital Business Profile Update Service, both designed to deliver faster, more accurate, and fully digitally compliant journeys. The Digital Business Profile Update Service enables Current Account customers to seamlessly update their business details.

Stable spreads, shifting pressure: India's bank sector at the crossroads

Deposit rates not falling as quickly as lending rates, reflecting competitive pressure

CHOLLETT

India's banking sector is entering a phase of stable but uneven repricing. The broad story in May 2026 analyst reports is that lending and deposit rates have both eased, but not at the same pace, leaving spreads largely steady even as credit demand continues to outstrip deposit growth.

Rates and spreads

For Scheduled Commercial Banks, the outstanding spread between weighted average lending and term deposit rates stood at 2.37 per cent in March 2026, down 34 bps year on year but broadly flat sequentially. Outstanding lending rates fell faster than deposit rates, with WALR down 76 bps to 8.99 per cent and term deposit rates down 42 bps to 6.62 per cent. That tells us something important: monetary easing is clearly passing through to loan pricing, but liability costs are proving stickier than many borrowers would like. The more revealing signal is in fresh business. Fresh lending rates fell more sharply than outstanding rates, and fresh spreads compressed to 2.33 per cent in March 2026, suggesting banks are pricing new loans much more aggressively than the legacy book. In simple terms, the old portfolio is still yielding relatively more, while new loans are being written at thinner margins.

What drives the squeeze

The analyst reports point

to a familiar but uncomfortable pattern: banks are leaning harder into lower-risk, lower-yield segments such as housing and high-rated corporate lending. That helps preserve asset quality, but it also drags down overall yields. This is a healthy risk-management choice in one sense, yet it comes with a margin cost that investors and managements cannot ignore. Transmission is also being helped by the rise of external benchmark-linked lending, which reprices faster when policy rates move. That improves pass-through, but it also means banks lose a degree of pricing flexibility. For customers, this can mean faster relief when rates fall; for banks, it means faster pressure on spreads when competition intensifies.

Deposits and funding

The analyst report's deposit numbers show a sector that is still fighting for stable funds. Bank deposits rose 12.2 per cent year-on-year, below credit growth of 15 per cent, while term deposits remained the dominant funding base at 87.4 per cent of total deposits. Demand deposits jumped 22.1 per cent, but that does not by itself remove the structural issue: banks are still relying heavily on time deposits to fund loan growth.

This matters because deposit rates are not falling as quickly as lending rates. The analyst reports say deposit rates mod-



erated only 42 bps year on year and were unchanged sequentially, reflecting competitive pressure and household preference for alternate financial instruments. In other words, banks are competing not just with each other, but with mutual funds, debt products, and other savings avenues.

Liquidity and policy

Liquidity conditions are another reason spreads have not collapsed, even though they have narrowed at the margin. The banking system was in surplus by about Rs 2.6 trillion at the end of April, helped by government spending and G-sec redemptions. But the RBI has already responded with variable rate reverse repo (VRRR) operations, open market operations (OMOs), repo operations, and FX swaps to manage funding conditions and avoid excess volatility.

This creates a more nuanced

The analyst reports point to a familiar but uncomfortable pattern: banks are leaning harder into lower-risk, lower-yield segments such as housing and high-rated corporate lending. That helps preserve asset quality, but it also drags down overall yields. This is a healthy risk-management choice in one sense, yet it comes with a margin cost

outlook than a simple "liquidity is easy" narrative. Surplus liquidity can temporarily ease funding costs, but the analyst reports also warn of possible upward pressure from crude prices, currency volatility, and RBI forex intervention linked to West Asia tensions. So the funding environment looks

comfortable only in a qualified sense.

PSBs and private banks

Public sector banks and private sector banks are not moving in lockstep. The analyst reports note that PSBs' one-year median MCLR fell by 33 bps year on year to 8.75 per cent in April 2026, while private banks' median MCLR fell more sharply by 75 bps to 9.25 per cent. Yet on a more recent basis, private banks have shown some tightening, which suggests they may be protecting margins more actively as competition evolves.

There is a deeper structural point here. Private banks often reprice faster because they have a larger share of mortgage-linked and benchmark-linked portfolios, but they are also more exposed to direct market competition in premium retail segments. Public sector banks, by contrast, often reprice more gradually, which may make

them look slower but also gives them some protection against abrupt margin compression.

Sectoral read-through

The sectoral lending data are especially useful because they show where the next pressure points may lie. Rates have moderated across MSMEs, housing, and other personal loans, but agriculture and large industry have been stickier in the legacy book. Fresh lending rates have fallen more sharply across most segments, reinforcing the idea that the competitive battle is being fought in new originations rather than on old loans. This sectoral shift has mixed implications. On one hand, lower rates in housing and better-rated corporate loans support credit demand and can aid broader economic activity. On the other hand, a persistent move toward safer and lower-yielding assets can gradually erode bank profitability unless volumes rise enough to compensate.

Analytical view

The biggest takeaway from the analyst reports is not that spreads are stable, but that they are stable under pressure. That distinction matters. Stability here is less a sign of comfort than of a balancing act: lending rates are falling, deposit rates are adjusting slowly, and banks are managing the gap by changing the mix of loans they originate. That makes the sector look

resilient, but not immune. If credit growth continues to outpace deposit growth, and if competition for deposits remains intense, banks may find it harder to defend margins without either slowing loan growth or taking more pricing risk. The current picture is therefore one of controlled compression, not structural deterioration.

Outlook

Over the next few months, the key variables will be deposit mobilisation, liquidity conditions, and loan mix. If deposit rates remain sticky while credit demand stays strong, margins will remain under pressure even if spreads appear broadly stable in aggregate. If banks continue to chase secured retail and high-rated corporate loans, the system may look safer but earn less on each incremental rupee of credit. The Indian banking sector is thus in a reasonably healthy but more demanding phase. It has the advantage of solid credit growth and manageable liquidity, but it faces the harder task of preserving profitability in a world of faster transmission, intense competition, and shifting borrower preferences. That is a more mature challenge than crisis management, but it is no less consequential for the sector's next phase of growth.

(The author is with The Cholleti BlackRobe Chambers, Hyderabad)

Mining sector can add \$500 bn to Indian GDP by 2047: Report

The mining industry of India has potential to contribute an additional \$500 billion to the economy and generate nearly 25 million new jobs by 2047, provided the industry adopts advanced technologies and sustainable mining practices, a report has said.

The joint report by Deloitte and the Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) said that the nation's mining ecosystem is entering a major transformation phase as demand for minerals rises due to rapid infrastructure development, clean energy goals and manufacturing expansion.

It noted that the mining industry could play a major role in supporting India's ambition of becoming a \$30 trillion economy by 2047. At present, the sector contributes around 2-3 per cent directly to India's GDP while also supporting core industries such as steel, cement, automobiles, power and infrastructure. The report highlighted that India's mining sector is gradually moving beyond the Mining 4.0 phase, which largely focused on au-



tomation and digitalisation, towards a more integrated 'Mining 5.0' model driven by artificial intelligence, advanced analytics, digital twins and connected operational systems.

It has described 'Mining 5.0' as a shift from conventional volume-based extraction to a more technology-enabled, sustainable and value-focused mining ecosystem. Many Indian mining companies have already adopted isolated digital technologies, but a lack of integration across operations continues to remain a challenge, the report said. However, it warned that fragmented digital adoption could limit the long-term value of such investments unless companies build unified and connected decision-making systems across planning, production, logistics, maintenance, safety and sustainability operations.

SIP inflows growing over 10x as youngsters power growth: Keshre

India's investment landscape is undergoing a rapid transformation, with participation expanding beyond metro cities to smaller towns, young investors and women, according to Groww CEO and Co-founder Lalit Keshre on Saturday.

Speaking at the 'Groww IIF - India Investor Festival 2026' here to mark the company's 10th anniversary, Keshre said retail investing in India is no longer limited to a select group of people in major cities. "Retail investing in India has expanded significantly beyond metro cities, with growing participation from young and women investors," he said. He further said women now account for nearly one-fourth of new in-



vestors entering the market, calling it a sign of increasing maturity in India's financial ecosystem. According to him, the growing participation of women also indicates their strengthening role in household financial decision-making. Keshre highlighted the sharp growth in India's retail investment ecosystem over the past decade and noted that mutual fund assets under management (AUM) have risen from nearly Rs 12 lakh crore in 2016 to more than Rs 80 lakh crore at present.

India's aviation growth needs strong regulation before ATC privatisation

ICAO standardises competency-based skill sets focusing on safety and efficiency

B V SURYA BHAGAVANULU

Recent reports suggest that the GOI proposes to privatise Air Traffic Control (ATC) services. Separating Air Navigation Services (ANS) — of which ATC is a component — from the Airports Authority of India (AAI) and creating a separate corporation under the Government has been debated since 2007, enabling the corporation to use its Air Navigation Charges income to modernise Air Navigation Systems and meet growing aviation demand.

Eventually, in 2015, the proposal was withdrawn, with a decision to separately account for the ANS components of AAI's revenue and to have a full-time Member (ANS) on the AAI Board. Thus, ANS remains a function of AAI, a Government body, at all airports. Now, the government seems to be pondering the idea of privatisation rather than corporatising ANS under Government control. Against this background, let us examine the issues of interest to an inquisitive common air passenger.

Mandate of ICAO on provision of ANS services

Article 28 of the Chicago Convention mandates the provision of airports and Air Navigation Services within the territory of each contracting state in accordance with the Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs). However, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) does not mandate that the ownership and management of ANS must remain solely under the state. Thus, the ownership and management of ANS may be delegated to a statutory autonomous body, a corporate body, or even the private sector.

However, while doing so, states should bear in mind that they are ultimately responsi-



Recent reports suggest that the GOI proposes to privatise Air Traffic Control

ble for the safety, security, and economic oversight of these entities. States should also ensure that ICAO policies are observed and that all relevant international obligations are fulfilled. Thus, the overall responsibility for the provision of services in compliance with ICAO SARPs remains with the States.

ICAO standardises competency-based skill sets focusing on safety and efficiency. These include training and licensing requirements, consideration of human factors, adequate staffing to ensure workload does not compromise safety, Safety Management Systems to manage fatigue and stress mitigation, human error handling, maximum duty hours, maximum consecutive working days, minimum rest periods, continuous proficiency checks, training and professional upgradation, and periodic assessment of personnel knowledge, skills, attributes, and situational awareness.

Personnel are required to be well-trained, implying that compensation structures should support high staff retention in view of the substantial investment involved in training and development.

Disadvantages of

privatisation of ATC services

1. Transferring control of airspace management from government-owned AAI to private entities results in a conflict between profit motives and expensive safety requirements. This may lead to cost-cutting in training, equipment maintenance, staffing levels, and remuneration, potentially compromising the high standards set by ICAO. Privatisation can fragment the existing unified national system under AAI that manages the entire Indian airspace into multiple smaller providers — practically resulting in smaller airspaces managed by different entities — thereby creating serious concerns regarding accountability, operational integrity, and uniformity in safety procedures across different airspaces.

2. If private service providers attempt to fully comply with ICAO standards, their operational costs may increase, which in turn could lead to higher ANS charges for airlines and consequently higher airfares, burdening both passengers and the aviation sector overall.

3. Private players may not come forward to manage ATC services at smaller airports, which would again have to be managed by AAI. Meanwhile, ATC service providers at bigger airports and larger hubs could become powerful enough to influence policies and regulations. A relevant example is the massive cancellation of flights by IndiGo in December 2025, which reportedly forced the DGCA to withdraw its own regulations regarding pilots' Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL).

4. There is every possibility of another monopoly or duopoly emerging in the ANS sector, similar to what has happened in the airline and airport sectors in India. Any misconduct or operational failure by such private players could jeopardise the entire system, as seen during the IndiGo crisis. Furthermore, AAI does not compromise on implementing DGCA regulatory directions concerning ANS services, notwithstanding the cost implications, whereas the same may not necessarily

hold true for private operators.

5. If the boards of private ATC service providers are dominated by airline managements or private airport operators, conflicts of interest may arise.

6. Airspace is a strategic national asset. Situations often require close civil-military coordination in airspace management. If both entities remain under Government control, coordination is likely to be smoother and more effective.

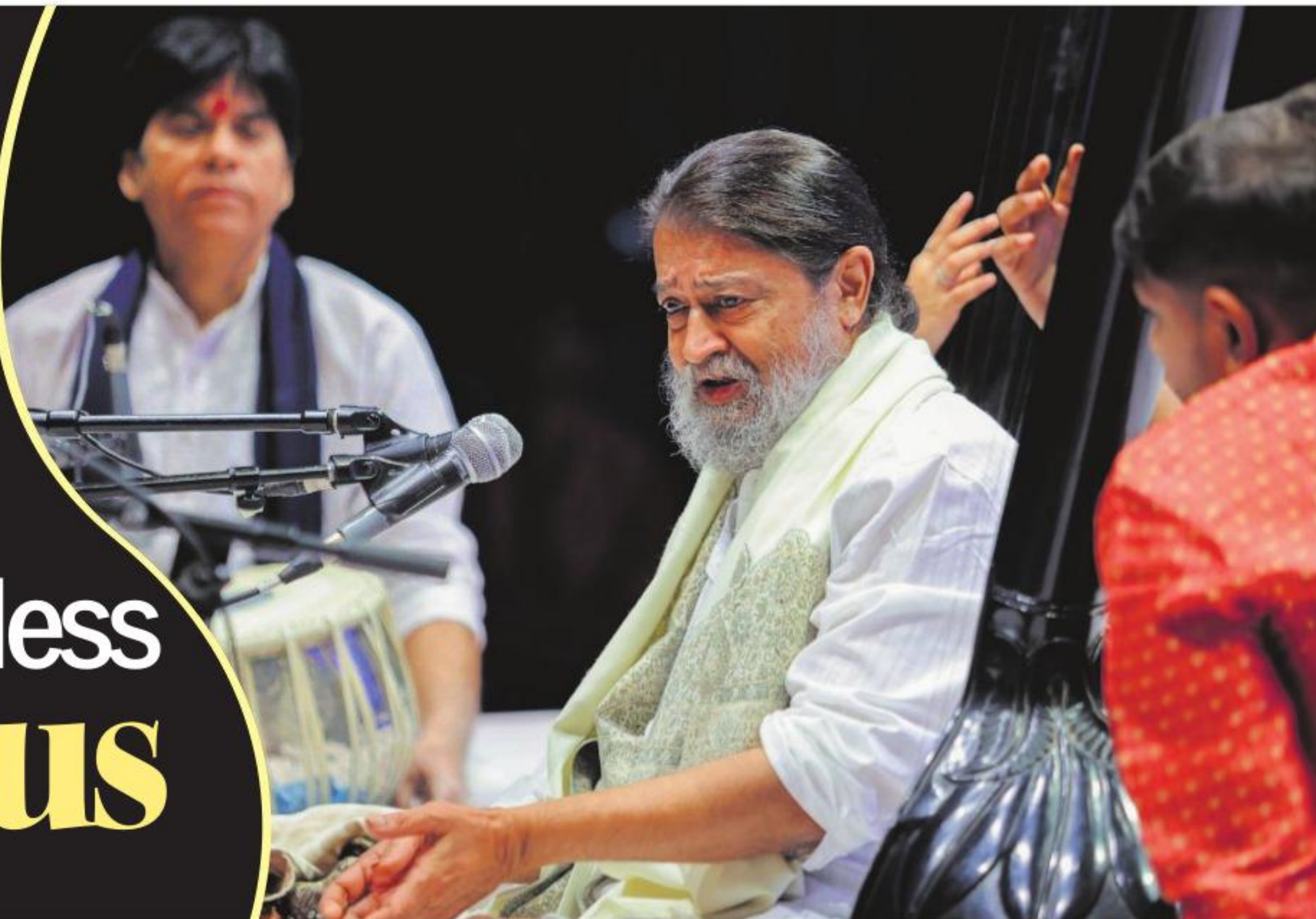
Conclusion

While India has been transitioning towards a mature aviation policy, rapid growth in demand continues to outpace infrastructure and regulatory maturity. Challenges include shortages of skilled manpower and high operating costs, leading to frequent safety, training, and capacity-related stress. Therefore, the Government may prioritise streamlining other areas of the aviation sector, such as further strengthening the DGCA, checking monopolistic or duopolistic tendencies in private airports, and creating conducive policies to reduce airline operating costs and encourage the establishment of new airlines, rather than taking up ANS/ATC privatisation at this juncture.

(Author is a retired Jt General Manager, Airports Authority of India)

Mukul Shivputra has had a difficult life. At 70, his music celebrates the world, revealing its beauty and grandeur, but also its fragility

The restless genius



Pt Mukul Shivputra's music bears a distinct imprint of his wandering life. PHOTO COURTESY: BHILWARA SUR SANGAM 2026

ASHOK VAJPEYI

MUKUL SHIVPUTRA'S emergence as a musical genius in the later years of his life is a rare phenomenon. There have been child prodigies. Mukul's father, the legendary Kumar Gandharva, himself was a child prodigy and his musical talent was recognised when he was barely 10 years old. It also gave him a new name, Kumar Gandharva, changing it from Shivputra Sidaramaiah Komkali. Mukul, however, was not a child prodigy, at least not in my knowledge or experience.

I first saw him in 1973 in Bhopal — still in his teens, he was meticulously instructing that the public address system be properly set for his father's concert.

A couple of years later, when we were visiting Kumarji at his home in Dewas, soon after spending a holiday in southern India, we met Mukul again. I was narrating my experience of attending Carnatic music concerts and happened to remark that the ordinary listeners in the South seemed to know the grammar of music, discussing it during coffee breaks passionately. Mukul butted in with a remark, asserting that there was a problem: there was a lot of grammar but very little art! This remark provoked a rebuke from Kumarji, who said, "My dear, without rhythm, no flower blooms." Sometime later, Mukul was sent to get some training in Carnatic music from the eminent vocalist MD Ramanathan.

Mukul has had a tragic life. As a young child, he lost his mother, the vocalist Bhanumati Kaunsa. And just days after his only son Bhuvan was born, his wife died of burns. The inherent wandering instinct started asserting itself. Even while Kumarji was alive, he would disappear for months from his parental home, Bhanukul, in Dewas, named after his mother. I recall how, on January 12, 1992, he came almost at the eleventh hour for Kumarji's cremation. At the time, he was living in a temple near Nemavar on the banks of the Narmada. He was dressed like a *sadhu*. It turned out that he had started spending a lot of time with the *sadhus* of Malwa region.

Earlier, when Kumarji was recovering from tuberculosis in another bungalow in Dewas, he had collected a lot of Nirgun songs and *dhuns* from some of these *sadhus*. The long company of *sadhus* drew Mukul to drugs and alcohol.

It is a sad and ironical fact that as he matured in his musical imagination and started giving concerts, he also became unpredictable. As his reputation grew as an out-of-the-ordinary musician, he also started behaving in an erratic manner; many a time his concerts were cancelled as he failed to appear.

In spite of this unreliability, Mukul also displayed a scholarly bent of mind. He composed some verses in Sanskrit, a copy of which remains somewhere in my huge pile of personal papers. He also assiduously studied many masters, imbibing some aspects in

his grand vision of music. He spent some time in Bhopal as well and was offered to start a Khayal Institute, but to no avail.

It became evident that he was a 'yayavar', a wanderer who could not stay at one place for long. It is difficult to identify the elements that he inherited from his father and guru. But what is certain is that he learnt to question the given, to dare to take a path away from the beaten one, to welcome and explore the unexpected and the unanticipated from Kumarji. Also, perhaps the creative dialectics of 'raga' and 'viraga', attachment and detachment.

Kumar Gandharva had serious reserva-

tions about *gharanas*. He felt that following a *gharana* meant you had got hold of a cheque book of the ancestors' bank account and were issuing cheques without adding anything to it. He refused to be bound by any *gharana*. Mukul seems to have imbibed these precepts and quietly stands outside the traditional *gharanas* and Kumar's music. This aloofness gives his music its own glow. He is, like his father, a lonely singer.

The musical imagination and the vocalism that Mukul has finally evolved are all his own: they bear a distinct imprint of his wandering life. That life now echoes in the wandering, meandering structure that his music chooses to follow. In Hindustani classical music, the *ragas* have their own personality and the tradition is so strong and robust, almost unshakeable, that it rarely allows anyone to provide his/her own colour to a *raga*. In Mukul, the meaning is not fixed; it is fluid and so is the geometry of expression — fluid and pleasurablely uncertain. When I heard him recently at a concert (organised by LNJBhilwara Group) in Delhi, it was not just Vasant in all its sensuousness and celebrative ethos, it was Mukul-Vasant.

For some years now, Mukul has been living in Pune, the capital of Hindustani classical music. Besides practising music, he is also teaching some chosen disciples. His return to music in a major way, as a genius, was first intimated to me by the late Kumar Shahani, filmmaker and music lover. He had heard him at a concert in Pune.

Like his father Kumar Gandharva, who refused to follow the rigid gharana system, Mukul quietly stands outside the traditional system. This aloofness gives his music its own glow

Blending reality & fiction, a rag called happiness

SUKANT DEEPAK

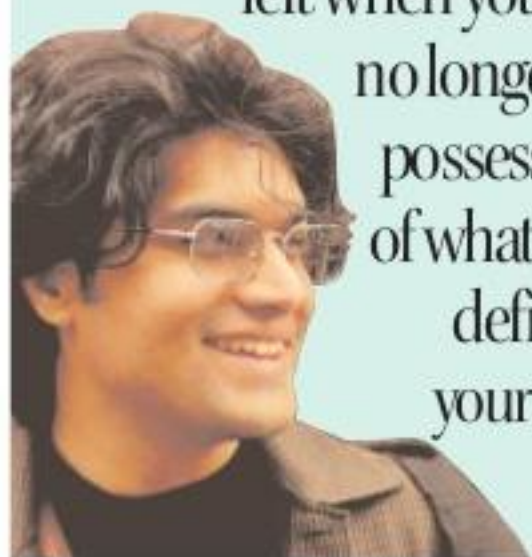
LESS is more. Pauses speak a thousand alphabets. The ever-enveloping fog melts into a reality more stark. The grey of winter's landscape distils into multiple hues of loneliness, alienation and... humility. Empty frames with weighed-down characters, that peculiar soft winter light, countryside stillness, animals resting, staring into nothingness, and the quiet shapes of trees... A film that did not start with a fully formed idea, and was almost called off two days before the shoot. A movie where nothing was written, where only intuition — spending time in diverse spaces, allowing things to unfold — 'created' something more than what fits the definition of a film.

Filmmaker Ankur Hooda's latest, 'The Calf Doll' (2026), a critically acclaimed Haryanvi-language docudrama, was recently screened in the international competition at the Jeonju International Film Festival, South Korea, after its premiere at CPH:DOX in Denmark earlier this year.

The 90-minute film centres around a retired teacher in a Haryana village attempting to save his cow from the 'pressures of urbanisation'. After a stillborn calf, he resorts to an outlawed ritual passed down in his family for generations — creating a doll out of the calf's cadaver in an attempt to soothe the cow's grief.

Hailing from Dayalpur, a village in Faridabad, Hooda says the movie began with a simple image — seeing his grandfather sitting on a winter afternoon, quietly watching a neighbour's cow after having sold his own herd. "There was a deeply unset-

Ankur Hooda's critically acclaimed Haryanvi film, 'The Calf Doll', started with this idea — what is left when you are no longer in possession of what has defined your life?



ling question in that moment — what is left of you when you are no longer in possession of what has defined your entire life? That image slowly became the seed of the film," he recalls.

While, in many ways, the theme of the film had been brewing within him for years, the actual impulse to make it came after a rupture. The production crashed right before the beginning of the shoot. The actor playing the protagonist wanted everything to be written in the conventional way. However, Hooda felt that if everything was already decided on paper, there would be no discovery left in the process.

"For months after that, I was shattered and unsure of myself. Then, slowly, I felt



the need to return — not with any plan, but with a simple intention to create something again, just to believe once more that I could make a film," he smiles.

Considering that he has cast his grandparents along with professional actors, the filmmaker says the interplay between non-professional and professional actors created something quietly magical. "It helped us arrive at the space of para-fiction unknowingly — a suspension between reality and fiction, full of endless possibilities that we could play with and weave into a narrative on the go."

Stressing that there was no ambition to make a feature at all, and that the film grew almost on its own, he smiles. "My

grandparents were not performing as actors. They were simply living through fictionalised fragments of their own real lives. The film was not something we constructed. It was something that revealed itself to us over time, as we spent time in my ancestral spaces," he recalls.

While his lived experience has guided the film, it is definitely not about a specific space but holds a universal essence. Adding that there is something about simplicity that allows people to enter a story sans resistance, he opines, "The film may come from a very particular world, but the feelings within it — loss, change, attachment, existentialism — are not bound by geography."

Watching 'The Calf Doll', what strikes immediately is a certain silence and restraint that runs through its spine — something that rests quietly at the core of Hooda's practice as a filmmaker, almost unconsciously. Deeply influenced by Mani Kaul, Hooda says it was only while editing the film that he began to recognise how much of himself had seeped into the film's language. "The film moves the way I experience the world: quietly, attentively, and from within, with a huge space for imaginative realities," he states.

An admirer of Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr, Hooda wanted to convey an essence of spatial atmosphere he acquired through years of engaging with the works of those like author Anton Chekhov and Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan — balancing realism with poetry.

Watching the film for which he poured his own savings and those of friends, cinematographer Anish Sarai's gaze cannot be missed. "Both of us are inclined towards observing the spaces around us through the medium of photography for many years. We were two comrades constructing images intuitively while responding to the spaces," says the director.

Stressing that through sound designed by Bigyna Dahal, the images began to open again while editing, Hooda remembers: "Gradually, rhythm and chaos, the expansion of space beyond the frame began to emerge."

His next feature will explore themes of displacement and urban loneliness, where he wants to follow the same process of improvisation and developing narrative without deciding too much in advance.

— The writer is a freelancer

BOOKS

The sacredness of desire

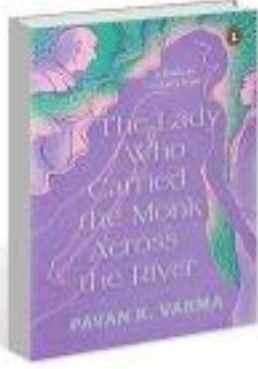
MEGHNA PANT

THESE are books that shout their wisdom at you from the first page. And then there are books like 'The Lady Who Carried the Monk Across the River' that sit quietly beside you, like an old friend on a train journey, waiting for you to arrive at your own truths.

At first glance, the novel appears deceptively simple; the title, Zen-like. Two monks. A river. A beautiful woman. The famous Buddhist parable of two monks encountering a woman unable to cross a river. A story about baggage, hypocrisy, righteousness, and the exhausting burden of moral performance.

One monk carries her across despite monastic rules forbidding physical contact; the other stews in judgment for hours afterward. The one impulsive act that alters the course of many lives.

Pavan Varma writes with the confidence of a man who has spent years wrestling with Indian philosophy not as abstraction, but as lived contradiction. His prose is elegant without becoming indulgent, scholarly without becoming inaccessible. What makes the novel remarkable is that it does not merely quote Hindu philosophy—it inhabits it. The Upanishads, the Rig Veda, *tantra*, *bhakti*, asceticism, and metaphysics are woven into the



THE LADY WHO CARRIED THE MONK ACROSS THE RIVER by Pavan K Varma. Penguin Random House. Pages 160. ₹499

lives of the characters with startling fluidity.

Kevala, the monk at the centre of the story, is one of the most fascinating male protagonists in contemporary Indian fiction. He is not the cliché renunciate battling temptation. He is a man genuinely trying to reconcile the body and the soul without reducing either to shame. When he lifts Mandakini in his arms to carry her across the river, the moment is electric not because of physicality alone, but because something tectonic shifts within him: the realisation that spirituality devoid of humanity becomes sterile.

What I appreciated most about this book is that it refuses spectacle. There are no dramatic

villains here, no cinematic twists designed for binge culture. Instead, Varma writes about ordinary people trapped between desire and duty, ego and compassion, modernity and inherited morality. And somehow, that restraint becomes its greatest strength.

Mandakini, meanwhile, is luminous. Not merely because she is desired, but because she refuses to exist as an allegory. In lesser hands, she would have become a "temptress" or "muse". Here, she is intelligent, emotionally awake, questioning and deeply alive. Some of the most compelling sections of the novel are their philosophical conversations on desire, divinity, and the feminine principle. The passages invoking the Devi Sukta are breathtaking in ambition and tenderness.

And yet what moved me most was the novel's central rebellion: its refusal to accept that enlightenment must come at the cost of love.

For centuries, Indian storytelling has often sanctified denial. The ideal sage is detached. The ideal woman sacrifices. The ideal seeker rises above longing. But Varma asks a dangerous question: What if desire itself is sacred? What if intimacy can be a pathway to transcendence rather than an obstacle to it?

These questions feel radical even today.

As a woman reader, I found myself deeply affected by the novel's treatment of feminine energy—not as passive devotion, but as cosmic force. Mandakini is repeatedly linked

with Shakti, creation, river imagery, fire, and freedom. She is not merely loved by Kevala; she transforms him. The book understands something many spiritual discourses fail to grasp: women are too often expected to embody purity while men are allowed complexity. Varma dismantles this binary intelligently and with enormous empathy. His women are not loud feminist manifestos, they possess something rarer: interiority.

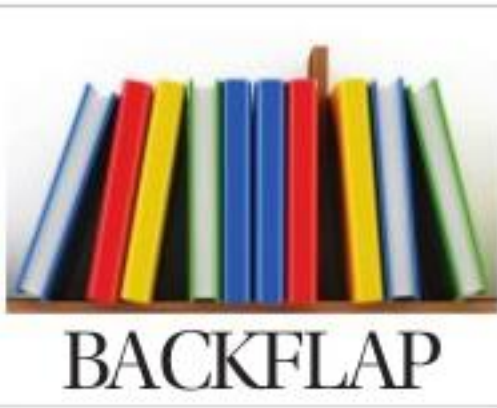
There is a tenderness in the writing that feels almost radical today.

If I have one criticism, it is that portions of the philosophical discourse occasionally become dense enough to momentarily slow the narrative momentum. But even there, the emotional undercurrent remains strong enough to carry the reader through.

Varma's prose is elegant without becoming ornamental. He writes like a man who has spent decades observing power and has emerged disillusioned by its vanity. You can feel the diplomat in him—the awareness of masks, hierarchies, social choreography—but you can also feel the seeker. The sentences are measured, thoughtful, almost meditative. He trusts silence. He trusts implication. He trusts the reader.

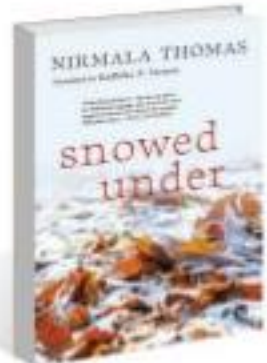
And that trust is refreshing. Especially for women. Especially for Indians raised on duty before selfhood.

—The reviewer is an acclaimed author



SOULS OF SOMEONE by Shino Cheria. HarperCollins. Pages 184. ₹799

In this photobook, Shino Cheria guides readers into the heart and legend of Koovagam, a sleepy hamlet in central Tamil Nadu, which hosts one of the most extraordinary festivals in the world in which thousands of transgender women participate. While beauty pageants, sexual health awareness workshops, etc, define the first 16 days, the festival crescendos over the final 48 hours when these women enter the Koothandavar temple to marry Lord Aravan, who played a crucial role in the victory of the Pandavas.



SNOWED UNDER by Nirmala Thomas. Translated by Radhika P Menon. Speaking Tiger. Pages 317. ₹599

Set against the cold landscape of Canada and the quiet routines of immigrant life, this book (first published as 'Manjil Oruvai' in Malayalam) captures the emotional reality of living with cancer—the waiting, the medical procedures, the stigma that surrounds the illness and the strain it places on the closest relationships. It tells the story of Ashwini Ram, a successful engineer in Canada, who discovers a tiny lump in her right breast. What follows is a journey she never expected to take.



FROM JAITEWALI TO THE HALLS OF ACADEMIA by Harjinder Singh Rose. Adhyayan Books. Pages 478. ₹599

More than a conventional memoir and a chronicle of personal achievements, this book offers an unfiltered narrative of the academic ecosystem. Born and raised in the modest surroundings of Jaitewali village in Punjab, the author, a zoologist, reflects on the interplay of circumstances and opportunities, and how he pushed himself to achieve new heights despite the constraints.

Peero, the defiant Sufi poet

MANDIRA NAYAR

IMMERSED in Him, I am Khuda and Khuda is me. In Him I see the One, neither Hindu nor Muslim," wrote Peero, Punjab's first woman Sufi poet, in praise of her *murshid*, the *guru* of the Gulabdas sect. 'In the Constant Rain of Bliss—Songs of Punjab's First Woman Mystic-Poet Peero', translated by Neeti Singh, ensures that her voice rings across centuries—loud, fearless and defiant.

This is not the first time Peero has found her way onto bookshelves. Historian Anshu Mahotra's work on her is foundational. In the past two years, she has appeared in Arundhati Subramaniam's 'Wild Women' and 'The Lost Heer' by Harleen Singh.

Neeti's book—a creative retelling of her life, its historical context, and translations—attempts to mainstream Peero's story and work. It makes her words—whether *Hori* songs or autobiographical writings—accessible.

Peero's story is fascinating. A courtesan, she was sold in Heera Mandi by her uncle; not the Sanjay Leela Bhansali version of it, though. Her life, ironically, would fit into a script with Bhansali's maximalist sets. Her years at the *kotha* are narrated through her poems in 'Tik Sau Sath Kafiyaan' (Hundred and Sixty Kaafis).

While there is no firm historical record, Neeti writes that she was courted by Ilahi Khan Jamail, a General in the court of Ranjit Singh.

She escapes from the clutches of the brothel to the *dera* of Gulabdas, her *guru*, in Chathanianwal. "Dusky, handsome, of cheerful visage, royal in raiment and weapon, the Lord enchants again and again," Peero writes of the *guru*. "For with one glimpse of Him, all sins are purged." It is her refusal to accept binaries—and the power of her devotion—that makes it impossible to forget Peero once you have read her work.

Soon, 21 men and women, along with her lover, travel to Chathanianwal to take her back.

Their arguments—to "grant her" as "*bakshish*"—offer a glimpse into how fierce the need to control her was. She is taken back, imprisoned, and, in dramatic fashion, smuggled out by Ilahi Khan in Waziristan. She is buried with her *murshid* in a tomb near Kasur in Pakistan—together forever.

Her afterlife is equally complicated—she is now cloaked in motherhood. "Why is that woman (Peero) more deserving of honour as mother (Maata Peero) or wife but not as a loving partner, friend or companion?" asks Neeti in the introduction. It is this question that cuts through the heart of her poetry—and echoes as you leaf through the poems.

Peero's words would have been scandalous then but feel powerful today; her defiance, courage, and refusal to conform give you goosebumps. Her *kaafis* take on the establishment, society itself.

"The Qazi, the Pandit/goad me to read the Kalma and the Purnana. They seek in the written script/my ferryman Lord, who stands outside and beyond it all," she writes. "Says Peero: how will they lead who themselves are lost?"

Elsewhere, she writes, "All forms collapse/and I live as the sum of waters three/The cosmos is but a manifestation of me, and I all the aspects therein."

It is clear from her poems that her cultural landscape is rich. When she is held against her will, she appeals to her *guru*, comparing her situation to that of Sita. She also stakes claim to the Shudra (low caste), to the woman within her—embracing the margins of society. "Let me sit at your feet. I am homeless, a Shudra woman." She compares herself to Kubjan, the hunchback woman rescued by Krishna; to Shabri, who tasted berries for Ram; as well as Ganika, a "prostitute" mentioned in the 'Bhagvata Purana', whose *bhakti* made her a saint.

Peero's words are a reminder that women's voices do not fit into neat boxes. Nor should they. Her verses speak of the complexity of Punjab's past. They tell the story of a woman who was a courtesan, a poet, and a Muslim; who became a devotee of the Gulabdas sect, banned for its epicurean, almost hippie-like practices. She left behind a legacy of words that women, centuries later, can draw courage from in their own longing for freedom.

—The reviewer is a literary critic

Cities and myth of growth

SONALI GUPTA

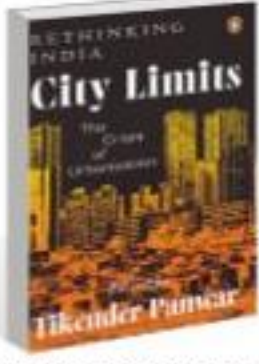
INDIAN cities are like that overachieving cousin at family weddings: always introduced as the "engine of growth" and "world class", while quietly leaving unpaid bills and broken things in their wake. In 'City Limits: The Crisis of Urbanization', edited by Tikender Panwar, the golden child is sat down and told, "Beta, let's talk." What unfolds is less a TED Talk and more a post-mortem: how our style of urbanisation widens inequality, consumes commons, and treats people and places as disposable in the service of prestige.

On paper, 'City Limits' is part of the Rethinking India series and "brings together leading voices". In practice, it gathers people who have lived inside the mess: municipal officials who understand how tenders actually work, unionists who have negotiated at demolition sites, architects who have watched floor-space indices do gymnastics, and scholars who translate all this into a language that is readable.

Together, they ask a question that policy panels avoid: after three decades of liberalisation, what have cities become—for us as well as for the workers, the street vendors, the homeless, excluded from gated enclaves? The recurring answer is 'uncomfortable': Smart Cities, PPPs and mega projects often function less as fixes and more as glossy covers for older habits of exclusion.

The contributors are sharp and grounded. Indu Prakash Singh writes about homelessness in Delhi; Aravind Unni traces how demolition and displacement have become normalised tools of governance; architect-researchers like Kanishka Prasad and Vertika Chaturvedi show how built form and infrastructure systematically exclude those who sustain the city. Running through the volume is the idea of the "Right to the City": the insistence that cities are not real-estate portfolios with incidental populations, but collective habitats where residents deserve a say over land, infrastructure, and resources.

The most powerful essays refuse abstraction. Homelessness is not a statistic but a winter night on a pavement. Informal



CITY LIMITS: THE CRISIS OF URBANIZATION Edited by Tikender Panwar. Penguin Random House. Pages 256. ₹699

workers are not categories but the people who clean homes and deliver goods.

The Smart City critiques peel back the polished surfaces of dashboards and control centres to show how such systems can centralise decision-making, obscure accountability, and sideline elected bodies. The issue is not technology itself, but its deployment as a political instrument that makes exclusion appear efficient and forward-looking.

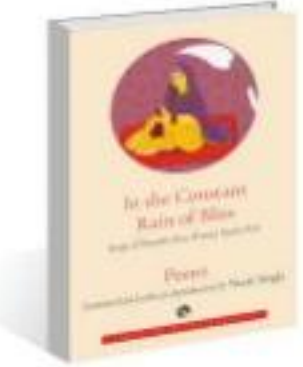
Equally compelling are the accounts of disappearing commons: lakes converted into plots, wetlands regularised, pavements cleared. These are not nostalgic laments but grounded analyses.

One of the book's strengths is its refusal to soften its politics. The contributors write from lived engagement and tie policy language to material consequences: evictions, rent increases, and new forms of exclusion.

That said, the collection leaves some questions open. I found myself wanting more on small and medium towns, where urbanisation unfolds in equally transformative ways. A clearer thread linking colonial governance, post-Independence planning and contemporary neoliberal frameworks would've deepened the analysis.

We are living in times when environmental and infrastructural crises are no longer exceptional. Yet the dominant policy response remains unchanged: more expressways, more vertical expansion, more emphasis on the ease of doing business. 'City Limits' disrupts this script.

—The reviewer is founder-director of the Himalayan Institute of Cultural & Heritage Studies



IN THE CONSTANT RAIN OF BLISS—SONGS OF PUNJAB'S FIRST WOMAN MYSTIC-POET PEERO Translated by Neeti Singh. Speaking Tiger. Pages 211. ₹399

ASHUTOSH KUMAR

PUNJAB, the land of five rivers, has always had a distinct geographical, historical, ethnic, and cultural presence. The origin of the Sikh faith in the region in the 15th century further contributed to its ethno-religious distinctiveness. It became a political-administrative unit during the Mughal period and more so during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The colonial annexation of Punjab after the third Anglo-Sikh war in 1849 transformed it into a land of farmers and soldiers. As the prime catchment area for recruitment for the colonial army, the British invested heavily here, developing canal-based irrigation systems and vast grasslands for the cavalry. The introduction of separate communal electorates in British India, first for the Muslims under the 1909 Act and then extended to the Sikhs under the 1919 Act, led to the politics of descriptive representation in colonial Punjab. Sikhs competed with the Muslims for greater representation in the provincial legislative bodies, elections to which took

place in 1936-37 and 1946. The success of the Muslim League among the Muslim voters, especially in the 1946 elections, sealed the fate of Muslim-majority Punjab as it got partitioned, causing immense suffering on both sides. The politicisation of religion continued unabated in post-Partition Punjab as well, as the Akali Dal, the Panthic party that emerged out of the gurdwara reform movement, used linguistic grounds to demand a Sikh-majority Punjabi Suba, which was granted belatedly in 1966. The aspiration to have a territorial homeland of their own has always been on the agenda of a segment of Akali leadership since Partition.

Essays in the handbook cover the period before the transition into East and West Punjab, though the focus is more on the post-Partition eastern part. The two essays focusing on West Punjab relate to the predominance of Punjabi language and the political prominence of the province in Pakistan.

The handbook, edited by two expatriate Punjabi Sikh academics, stands out for several reasons. First, it includes the essays of a few scholars who do not belong ethnically to Punjab or even other parts of India, thus



ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PUNJAB STUDIES Edited by Pritam Singh and Meena Dhandra. Routledge. Pages 511. GBP 196

bringing an "outsider" perspective. Second, the contributors, mostly Punjabis, are based abroad, though one can guess they remain rooted to their ancestors' homeland.

Third, like the varied profile of contributing authors, the volume's essays too are wide-ranging in their thematic focus, the broader themes being Partition and aftermath; politics, religion, race, caste, and gender; literature and art; political economy of development; and issues confronting the Punjabi diaspora, including women, the lat-

ter still burdened by inherited patriarchy.

Fourth, the interdisciplinary nature allows readers to deviate from the conventional discipline-specific understanding of issues. Fifth, at a time when the trend in academic writing is to take only the pre-2014 period for analysis, the booklet also covers events like the farmers' movement in 2020. Sixth, it does well to have a whole section on the lived experiences of the Punjabi diaspora in the West, and shows the dilemma they continue to face, especially if born and brought up in an alien culture and confronted with their elders' insistence on adhering to Punjabi social norms, ethos, and practices.

The essays focus on rural Punjab and agrarian distress as well as the challenges that urban Punjab and the industrial sector have been facing. They cover not only the Sikh community, but also others, including the marginalised.

Pritam Singh and Meena Dhandra, the editors, have done a commendable job in assembling an impressive cohort of academics, some of them in the early stages of their careers, and choosing the themes and structuring these in a coherent manner. They

have also authored a comprehensive introduction, besides contributing chapters of their own—not only summarising and analysing the essays, but synthesising them as well, which is not an easy task.

The handbook, however, would have been enriched by including essays on political parties, especially the century-old Akali Dal, and the political leadership. Also, the section on "cultural repositioning" deserved an essay on how music and song lyrics have of late become forms of cultural/community assertion, be it the dominant Jat Sikh community or the sizeable Dalit community, many of them crypto-Christians and *dera* followers. Also missing is the study of the migrant community, mostly farm labourers and semi-skilled technical workers, who have now permanently settled in both urban and rural Punjab.

Undoubtedly, it is a valuable contribution to the discipline of Punjab studies, comparable to the 'Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies', which, as the title itself suggests, had a narrow focus.

—The reviewer teaches political science at PU, Chandigarh

REFLECTIONS

Giants we must celebrate



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

THE world celebrated the centenary of two extraordinary men in the past week. Let me talk first of Sir David Attenborough, a living treasure and someone whose quiet, yet watchful, presence leaves no footprints except those on the ground. Which one of us has not been mesmerised by his television series on Nature and the natural world? From the Earth to the oceans and deep forests, this recorder of the wonders of the world that we are often blind to — or unaware of — has opened our eyes and hearts. His brother, the equally gifted filmmaker Richard Attenborough, was another genius. His ‘Gandhi’ is one of those classic films that one never tires of seeing.

Like these remarkable siblings, two talented storytellers here in India (RK Laxman and RK Narayan) have left their own footprint for us to remember them by. ‘Malgudi Days’ (RK Narayan’s exquisite gems of a small imaginary town and its delightful population) is unforgettable, as are the brilliant cartoons that his brother RK Laxman created for *The Times of India* for decades. The Common Man, Laxman’s eyes and ears, never spoke a word but he saw it all. With a few deft lines, Laxman managed to catch the quintessential soul of the characters he drew — capturing the imperious Mrs G with her hooked nose and tilted chin, or the lovable Nehru with the rose in his *sherwani*. Even long after their demise, the RK brothers (like the Attenboroughs) have not been bettered.

While on the subject of century tributes, I want to pay a deep homage to another cartoonist who brought a smile to several generations of Indians. Mario Miranda (who would have turned 100

on May 2) also preferred to stay away from public gaze yet his characters have lingered on as delightful memories. Among them are Godbole in a *dhoti* and shabby coat, holding a rolled-up umbrella, the bosomy secretary Miss Ronsecain in a polka-dotted dress tightly stretched over her generous curves, the corrupt politician Mr Bundalass and his sidekick Moonaswamy and the unforgettable Miss Rajni Nimbupani, the dumb but sexy Bollywood bimbo.

Unlike RK Laxman, Mario’s cartoons did not have a clever turn of political phrase but his characters needed no words, except generic ones like ‘Saar’ to convey a certain mood and situation that needed little else. For years, Mario was the central attraction of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and had a loyal following of

Forget Hindu-Muslim, we are now so sycophantic that even those not connected to politics are denied their due

admiring editors — Khushwant Singh, Frank Moraes and Vinod Mehta, to name just a few. Along with his acolyte Gerson de Cunha, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes and Alyque Padamsee, he set up what can be called the Bombay school of irreverence, producing clean fun that was inoffensive but sharp, and lines to make stereotypes that imprinted them on the reader’s mind.

Do try and get a copy of Mario’s ‘To Goa with Love’, dedicated to his lovely wife, Habiba, to revisit those innocent times when we had not sanitised our natural responses to such a level of political correctness that the fun went out of humour.

What we have also lost is the generosity to pay homage to those who are not from the same political gene pool as us. Forget Hindu-Muslim,

we are now so mealy-mouthed and sycophantic that even those who were not in any way connected to politics are not given their due. Look no further than *The Tribune* territory to remember all those whom we have not acknowledged sufficiently. The redoubtable MS Randhawa, Chandigarh’s first Chief Commissioner, planting the beautiful trees that still stand as a testimony to his unerring taste in greenery, the collection of Kangra paintings and Gandhara sculptures in the Chandigarh Museum and at the Panjab University museum, the famous agricultural university in Ludhiana, the one who started the Van Mahotsav when we are encouraged to plant trees over a week, the Green Revolution... how many other wonderful initiatives were undertaken by this remarkable man who was an author, botanist, civil servant and art historian.

I mentioned the university’s museum to remember another legendary art scholar, Prof BN Goswamy, whose reputation as an authority on Pahari paintings made him respected across the world.

Dr Randhawa ensured that the collection of Gandhara sculptures from the Lahore Museum came to Chandigarh as India’s share. I shudder to think if these worthy people had not been there when Chandigarh was being created.

And yet, while every worthless political lightweight and charlatan is decorated with the highest civilian awards, the Bharat Ratna is largely bestowed only on this lot. Think of how many philanthropists, industrialists, writers, academics and scholars are overlooked when we think of celebrating the lives of those Indians who shaped this country, had the courage to speak up fearlessly and quietly did what was right. They spoke through their work and made their long lives an opportunity to create lasting institutions and lay down traditions that would inspire generations after them.

There are so many lives which have gone unsung and unacknowledged but their work, like the fragrance from dried roses, refuses to die out. May they always be remembered with bowed heads and deep reverence.

— *The writer is a social commentator*

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven



AVAY SHUKLA

SINCE these are tricky times, let us begin with a trick question: what do the following events have in common?

■ The huge, and sometimes violent, protests in Noida last month by factory workers and domestic helpers over the increase in minimum wages.

■ The refusal of a High Court judge to recuse herself from a case in which her children are employed by one of the parties, and she herself is reported to have attended functions organised by that party’s affiliates.

■ A “gherao” of judicial officers (appointed as adjudicators for appeals by deleted voters) by thousands of such disenfranchised voters in a district of West Bengal.

■ The deletion of names of almost 30 lakh voters in West Bengal, who had voted in previous elections and possessed all the required documents, because of an opaque, algorithm-driven “logical discrepancy” feature not provided in any law or used in any other state.

■ The holding of polls without deciding the pending appeals of these 30 lakh unfortunates, and the callous indifference of the Supreme Court to their constitutional right to vote, saying that they could vote in the next election!

■ The imposition of a casteist bail condition on accused (but not convicted) Adivasi Dalits by an Odisha court to the effect that they should clean police stations every morning for two months, demeaning their dignity and making a mockery of the law.

■ The defection of seven Rajya Sabha MPs, led by one Raghav Chadha, from the AAP to the BJP.

■ A poor tribal in Jharkhand being compelled to carry the corpse of his dead sister to a bank in order to prove her death, just so that the meagre balance in her account could be transferred to him as the heir. The KYC converted from Know Your Customer to Know Your Corpse.

■ The dismissal of cases of hate speech against leaders of a political party by a court on the grounds that their utterances did not amount to expressing hate or inciting violence. One of these speeches included the now infamous exhortation: *Desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maro salon ko*. The other was a video of a Chief Minister pointing a rifle at a target with a picture of a Muslim man.

The incidents differ in context, content, import and location, but they all contain one common element: the complete collapse of what makes a developed country — governance, common law, societal values, empathy, the rule of law, trust in the government or its institutions, the idea of equity and even-handed justice.

Taken together, these point to the breakdown of something cumulatively more precious — democracy itself. It vindicates the far-sighted and cautionary words of Dr Ambedkar: that

democracy in India was only a thin layer of top soil which could be blown away easily and should not be taken for granted.

A devil’s wind is blowing through the country these days, removing the top soil and exposing the outcrop of power, lust, greed, religious bigotry, casteism, violence that have always underpinned our society. We had expected that progressive governments, democratically elected, would over time erode and disintegrate these negative features of our civilisational landscape, but the opposite has happened. Successive governments, more so the one we have had for the last 12 years, have only reinforced these flaws and fault lines; these have been made the driving force behind national (even international) policies; these are being embedded in laws and educational curriculum; these have become unapologetic instruments of state policy; these constitute the agenda on which elections are being fought.

The defection of Raghav Chadha only confirms this terminal decline because it shows that a liberal upbringing and foreign education is no shield against the unscrupulousness of India’s politics, and it vindicates the mounting distrust of politicians in general. The executive has even managed to brutalise our society to a point where the top 10 per cent care only for their own comforts and privileges, leaving the other 90 per cent to survive as best as they can. We are among the most inequitable countries in the world, and proud of it. Democracy is the last thing which can emerge from this witch’s cauldron.

We had naively expected that when the executive went on a rampage, our judiciary at least would rein it in and preserve the rule of law. That hope has been belied and now lies trampled in the dust, as some of the above episodes demonstrate. We have today plumbed depths lower even than the Jabalpur ADM moment of Emergency days. Then at least there was a constitutionally legitimate state of Emergency in place, today we do not have even that fig leaf to cover the government’s naked pursuit of absolute power. Then there was one Jabalpur judgment, today we are being shredded by a thousand judicial cuts every day, whether it be on denying bail, allowing elections to be stolen from under magisterial noses, redefining hate to suit a particular ideology, spurning any notion of accountability, throwing overboard any restatement of judicial values.

A Constitution alone cannot make a democracy, or ensure that it survives. For that to happen, the top soil has to be tended carefully, its nutrients lovingly added and preserved, the negative infestations and weeds kept away; the gardeners have to be men of wisdom and empathy, people who love what they are doing, not mercenaries seeking the maximum payouts.

Sadly, it is the mercenaries and carpet-baggers who own our patch of land today. What remains of the top soil will be blown away soon, leaving a rocky outcrop, a civilisational desert of no value to anyone but these rapacious seekers of power and their hirelings. They will rule over a wasteland, but then, as Satan mused: “It is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.”

— *The writer is a former IAS officer*

Song offerings of a nation



UNIVERSE

ASHISH ALEXANDER

working out their theological convictions in the political sphere. Known for advocating limited government and constitutionalism, Puritans believed that individuals purified by divine grace could elect their representatives and hold them accountable, because ultimately all human rulers and human kingdoms must live

Our songs and hymns preserve the deep magic of human and divine union

BETWEEN the writing and appearing of this piece in print, the nation paid homage to Rabindranath Tagore on his 165th birth anniversary — twice. First on May 7, according to the Gregorian calendar; and then on May 9, as per the Vikrami one. The myriad-minded man is after all a foremost symbol of the confluence of East and West. He is also the modern prophet who connected the destiny of an emerging nation with the ancient purposes of Providence. The first Nobel laureate from India, in arguably his most-quoted poem, had made a plea to the Divine to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven: “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; ... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

Freedom for that generation meant the unfurling of the individual soul in the ever-expanding world of human experience, discoveries and solidarities across all divides. Political freedom was a natural outgrowth of this metaphysical liberation. Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of Swaraj, in a similar vein, was much more than a political or economic ideal; it was, ultimately, the sign of an individual’s mastery over his own passions and desires, self-rule at its most profound. A man in command of his appetites and furies would not, and could not, be coerced against his will by another man or man-made institution.

The idea had gained prominence in the post-Reformation period in the West, with Puritans

and work under the authority of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The ruler and ruled must bow to Him alone; and that is why Tagore’s *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata* deserves adoration from the *jana-gana-mana*. Tagore was able to avoid the pitfalls of negative nationalism only because he knew that something, or rather someone, greater than earthly territory has a claim over our most fundamental loyalty.

It is only an awareness of the transcendent reality that makes our loyalties worthwhile. Our actions acquire meaning only because they go beyond the immediacies and urgencies of our palpable present into an inscrutable future. A mother loves and nurtures a child even when she knows that, in normal circumstances, the child will outlive her, and she may not live to receive all the love the child is able to give her back.

The child’s regret, on the other hand, sublimates into a faith that she’s now in a better place. It is in the world of dreams or visions of heaven that we stay united. Our songs and hymns preserve the deep magic of human and divine union. And in the end, it is only the transcendent that makes our union eternal. It is as true of our relationship with our motherland, as it is of our inviolable bond with the mother herself.

The savant, whose birthday we just celebrated, reminds us that a nation is shaped by its citizens who themselves are shaped by the “Dispenser of India’s Destiny”, the *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata*.

— *The writer teaches in Prayagraj*

How a decade in Iran shaped me and my family

ALAKA RAJAN SKINNER

I WAS a toddler when my family moved to Iran and much of what I recall takes one of two forms — visual snapshots or sounds and rhythms. One pre-revolutionary memory that stands out in my mind is a Farsi children’s poem, ‘Ma Gol-hoye Khandanim’ (We are the Smiling Flowers). It is a poem celebrating children as the future of Iran, their joy, innocence and national pride, a poem rendered particularly poignant by what confronts the people and children of Iran today.

*We are the smiling flowers, the children of Iran
We cherish our pure Iran like our own souls
We must be wise; we must be vigilant and observant*

For the sake of protecting Iran, we must be capable.

*Be prosperous, O Iran; be free, O Iran
From us, your children, be joyful, O Iran.*

The truth is that Iran was quite possibly the most wonderful accident that could ever have befallen our family. It was the 1970s and my father was working as an English language specialist at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, when a recruitment team from Tehran

University arrived. My father was quite settled and what with a baby — my brother — on the way, he had no plans for change. But then the hand of fate intervened in the form of a well-meaning colleague, who persuaded my father to attend an interview...

Iran is an experience that touches the heart and soul in ways that are hard to describe. Rabindranath Tagore expressed it thus: “The spirit of Persia has always been a spirit of beauty and harmony. It is a land where the soul of the poet finds its home.” The country welcomed us with open arms. People we had just met invited us into their homes for meal after meal. The sizeable expatriate community, particularly Indians, played a part in this, of course. But it was more than that. There was a sense of connectedness, of shared humanity that seemed to be inextricably intertwined with Iranian culture.

Initially enrolled in a British-run international preschool, my brother and I then moved to the Indian School in Tehran, where we learned Hindi, Punjabi and Farsi. Of these my favourite was Farsi, a charmingly lyrical language. One of the most surprising things for me as a child — other than realising that it snowed in Iran, of course — was finding out just how much Indian and Iran-

ian culture had in common, from language to food. The mouth-watering *naan*, *pulao* and *faloodeh* savoured in Iran I would later find in India. I delighted in the discovery of shared words — like *zindagi*, *jaan* and *azad*. And Iranians were always thrilled to learn that we were Indian. “Same culture, same civilisation!” they would enthuse.

Ancient Iran (Persia) was the dominant nation of West Asia for over 12 centuries. Predating the Magna Carta by over 1,700 years, the Cyrus Cylinder is a Persian clay artefact from 539 BC that records Cyrus the Great’s decrees on religious tolerance and the restoration of displaced peoples to their homelands, including the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

The Iranians we met were proud of their rich cultural heritage. This was balanced by an attitude of humility and curiosity towards learning. Nowhere was this clearer than in my father’s students. Many of them sought extra classes and tuition in English, as did professionals like doctors and engineers. And when they came to our home for lessons, they were never empty-handed. They came bearing gifts for their *Ustad*, because teachers and scholarship have always been highly regarded in Persian culture.

My family lived in Iran for a decade and in

the early years, thanks to the Shah’s alliance with the West, American influences were everywhere, shaping everything from fashion to television programmes and music. Young Iranians, like their Western counterparts, often dressed in bell-bottoms and mini-skirts.

Everything changed after the Islamic revolution. Still beautiful, Iranian women now covered themselves with *chadors* or *hijabs* and Iranian friends gifted me a pretty floral *chador*. We now saw protesters chanting ‘*Mar bar Amrika*’ (Death to America). Much later, father would tell us the story of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and his plans to nationalise the oil industry — plans that triggered US and UK intervention and a chain of events leading, eventually, to the Islamic revolution. Oil, he said, had been both a blessing and a curse for Iran.

When I listen to the news now and see that centres of learning have been attacked, my heart breaks as I think of Tehran University and my father’s eager students, so hungry for knowledge, so hopeful about the future. When I watch cultural centres being bombed, I feel both anger and sorrow as I recall the beauty of Tehran’s Golestan Palace and the majesty of Azadi Tower, its white marble edi-

fice rising to meet the heavens.

Some have spoken of the elasticity of Iranian culture, its capacity to absorb other influences while not losing its own identity. I can only hope that this resilience will help this glorious civilisation survive the challenges it faces today. I can only hope that we heed Persian Sufi poet Saadi Shirazi, who emphasises our shared humanity and connectedness as *Bani Adam* (Children of Adam).

One of the most memorable days of my time in Iran was the day we bought our first Persian carpet. My brother and I would spend hours pretending it was a magic carpet that could fly us to anywhere we desired. And when we left Iran during the Iran-Iraq war that followed the Islamic revolution, it felt like I was leaving behind a piece of my heart.

For years after we left, my mother urged me to write about our time in Iran. And each time I would say “I will one day...” but sadly, she died before that day came. In 2024, my graphic memoir about growing up in Iran, ‘*Persian Nights: An Indian Child in Iran*’, was finally published. It was, in many ways, a tribute to both my mother and a country which, like its exquisite carpets, are forever woven into the tapestry of my life.

— *The writer is an author & storyteller*

14 civilians died in shelling by Pakistan on May 7, 2025, and for their families & border town's residents, the scars are still fresh

POONCH, A YEAR LATER

ARJUN SHARMA

At the Ajote war memorial, the wax from half-burnt candles drips in uneven trails, clinging to the stone where flames were extinguished mid-way. The wax feels soft, as if it has yet to harden — much like the grief of the families of 14 civilians killed during cross-border shelling by Pakistan in Poonch town of Jammu and Kashmir on May 7 last year, hours after India launched Operation Sindoor.

Marking the first anniversary of the tragedy, families gathered at the memorial built by the Army. Atop a hill overlooking the town, they traced the names of their loved ones engraved in stone. It is now a site of collective mourning for a region that, a year ago, was deserted under a barrage of fire — unlike anything the residents had witnessed in decades.

On the surface, life in Poonch has resumed its rhythm, but beneath the facade of normalcy, the pain persists. While the physical damage to homes in Syndicate Mohalla, Kamsar, Kama Khan, and Dungas has been repaired, the internal scars remain.

Sanjeev Bhargav's only child, 13-year-old Vihaan, was a Class 8 student at Christ School. He was killed instantly when a shell exploded near the family's car as they attempted to flee the bombardment.

A year later, Sanjeev's voice breaks as he speaks, his wife Rashmi weeps quietly beside him. "Family and friends continued to visit us throughout the year, but their support cannot lessen our grief. We are still standing where we were a year ago," he says.

Although the government provided monetary compensation and a job for Rashmi in the Education Department, the gestures feel hollow. "We lost our only son," Sanjeev



Poonch resident Gurcharan Singh spent over ₹12 lakh to repair his house in Kamsar after it was hit by two cross-border shells in May 2025. (Right) Gurcharan Singh is seen pointing to the damaged ceiling in a report published in *The Tribune* last year. PHOTOS BY ARJUN SHARMA



The octogenarian parents of Ranjit Singh with his framed photograph and (right) the distraught parents of Vihaan Bhargav.



The Ajote war memorial, built by the Army, has the names of the civilian victims.

says. "A job cannot help us forget him. The administration didn't even hold a remembrance event for the victims."

Unlike those living directly on the Line of Control (LoC), the residents of Poonch felt relatively insulated from the conflict. But the blasts by long-range shells and rockets left the population in a state of shock.

In Syndicate Mohalla, a predominantly Sikh neighbourhood, splinter marks are still visible on the shutters of a shop once owned by Amrik Singh. He was killed when he stepped to the front of his shop to retrieve food items while his wife and three children hid in the back.

The government has provided a job to

Amrik's wife, but the family claims the salary is just not enough.

His brother, Harjit Singh, who suffered serious injuries on his right hand in the same blast, recalls the irony of their survival during the 2005 earthquake. "Our house was destroyed then, but we were all safe. This time, we lost Amrik."

Nearby, the octogenarian parents of Ranjit Singh — another victim killed while trying to help others find cover — sit on a bed clutching a framed photograph of their youngest son. Their grief is so deep that they struggle to speak.

Jasmeet Kaur, Ranjit's elder sister, says their elder brother has been given a com-

pensatory government job. The tragedy has fundamentally altered the dynamics in Poonch. Safety is no longer viewed as something the state can guarantee; it has become private responsibility.

In the Kama Khan locality, residents like Randhir Singh, a local chemist, are busy constructing private bunkers beneath their homes. "After 2025, people are taking safety into their own hands," he explains. "We cannot solely depend on the government."

In November last year, Lt Governor Manoj Sinha laid the foundation stone for construction of new houses for families affected due to Pakistani shelling in Poonch and Rajouri. As many as 133 houses

in Poonch and 388 in Rajouri that were completely damaged are to be built free of cost. These also include houses damaged in flash-floods and rain.

In Poonch, compensation was also given to 160 owners of damaged mud houses and 425 owners of permanent houses.

Gurcharan Singh spent over ₹12 lakh to repair his house in Kamsar after it was hit by two shells, receiving only ₹3.3 lakh in government compensation. Despite the financial strain, he refuses to leave. "My forefathers came here from the other side of the LoC. I am not leaving this place."

However, Gurcharan Singh notes a lingering resentment regarding infrastructure: "The district hospital remains in the same condition, lacking the specialists who might have saved lives that day."

Harcharan Singh, general secretary of the SGPC in Poonch, recalls how the "Pakistani side targeted civilians in a cowardly attack; a gurdwara, temple and even a mosque were targeted".



The loss was felt acutely at Christ School, which lost three students that day, including 12-year-old twins Zoya and Zain. Their father, Rameez Khan, had moved the family from a village to the town specifically to provide them better education. "They were excellent students," says Father Shijo Kanjirathingal, the school's principal. "The institution will never forget them."

While Poonch mourns at a hilltop memorial, the neighbouring Rajouri district has taken a different approach to remembrance. The government quarter of the late Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) Dr Raj Kumar Thapa — who was killed by a shell after returning from relief work — has been converted into a museum and library.

His vehicle remains parked there, riddled with splinter holes — a frozen moment of the shelling that forever changed the landscape of the border districts.

A *Tribune* report of June 2025 on the aftermath of the shelling in Poonch.

Before buying another expensive phone, try these smart habits that will keep your current device a fast and active performer

A longer, healthy life for your phone



YOUR phone is basically your second brain — alarm clock, camera, wallet, therapist and sometimes, your entire personality. And yet, most of us upgrade phones not because they die, but because we accidentally kill them early. The good news? With a few smart habits (no rocket science, promise), you can stretch your phone's life by years, not months. Think of it as giving your phone a reset, not a burnout. Let's get into it.

OPTIMISING BATTERY LIFE

Let's be real, the battery is the main character of your phone's life. Modern smartphones run on lithium-ion batteries, which are smart but a little high-maintenance. The biggest mistake? Treating your battery like a petrol tank — full charge to 100 percent, then straight down to critical levels, repeat. That's basically putting it on a stress cycle. In reality, batteries vibe best in the middle zone. Keeping your charge between roughly 20 per cent and 85 per cent is like giving it a balanced lifestyle. Do this consistently and your battery ages way more gracefully.

Now let's talk about the real villain: heat. Using your phone while charging builds up internal heat that quietly damages the battery over time. If your phone starts feeling warm, take the hint, it's asking for a break.

REMOVING DIGITAL BAGGAGE

A slow phone feels ancient, even if it's

not. Most of the time, though, it's not its age, but its clutter. Over time, your phone collects unused apps, cached junk and a camera roll that could rival a wedding photographer's archive. All that digital baggage weighs it down. A quick clean-up can work wonders.

Delete old, unused apps and clear cache to free up space. It is like decluttering your room and being able to breathe again.

Updates are another mixed bag. Security updates? Install them ASAP, no questions asked. But big software updates. Those need a little patience. Sometimes they are not perfectly optimised for older phones, so it's okay to wait, check reviews and then decide. And then there are background apps, the sneaky energy vampires. Apps refreshing data when you're not even using them? Not cool. Limiting background activity keeps performance in check.

CHARGE SMARTER, NOT HARDER

Charging isn't just about plugging in, it is about how you plug in. Using original or certified chargers keeps things stable and safe. Fast charging is great like a quick espresso shot for your phone, but using it all the time generates extra heat and long-term stress. Best to use it when you're in a rush, not as your everyday routine. And yes, overnight charging. We all do it. While modern phones are smarter now, keeping your battery at 100 per cent for hours still adds to wear over time.

Features like optimised charging help by slowing things down overnight, so your phone isn't sitting fully charged for too long.

TEMPERATURE & ENVIRONMENT

Phones are low-key sensitive to weather. Extreme heat speeds up battery ageing,



while extreme cold can mess with performance. In summers, this becomes a real issue. Leaving your phone in direct sunlight or inside a hot car is one of the quickest ways to damage it. Even phone cases, while protective, can trap heat.

If your device starts heating up during heavy use or charging, taking the case off for a bit can help it cool down faster.

DON'T LET YOUR PHONE CHOKER

Imagine stuffing your cupboard till it won't close. That's your phone when storage is full. It slows down, struggles and just doesn't function smoothly.

Regular clean-ups, deleting junk files and restarting your phone occasionally can give it a noticeable boost. It's like hitting refresh on your device.

If your phone is older, switch to lighter versions of apps. These small tweaks often

bring back that "just bought it" feel without spending a rupee.

PHYSICAL CARE

Not everything is software magic, some of it is just common sense. A decent case and screen guard can save your phone from those "heart-in-mouth" drop moments. Also, your charging port deserves some attention. Dust buildup can mess with charging efficiency, so keeping it clean helps more than you'd think.

REALLY NEED TO UPGRADE?

Let's be honest, brands like Apple and Samsung drop new models every year with mostly cosmetic tweaks, massive hype and clever marketing that makes perfectly fine phones suddenly feel outdated. A slightly slower phone or a weaker battery doesn't mean it's done for. With good habits, most phones can easily last four to five years.

EUROPE'S 'REPAIR' MOVE

Your next smartphone might finally become easier to repair instead of replace. From February 18, 2027, many phones sold in Europe will need batteries that can be removed and replaced using ordinary tools, making repairs far less of a headache and cutting down on mountains of e-waste.



Instead of tossing out phones every few years, companies will be encouraged to design gadgets that are easier to fix, service and keep running for longer. This isn't the EU's first tech shake-up. It already nudged Apple towards adopting USB-C charging ports on iPhones, ending the lightning cable era globally. While the new battery rule officially applies only to Europe, the impact could go global. Smartphone makers usually prefer one standard design worldwide rather than separate versions for different regions.

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YOUR VOICE

Every birth of a calf is a joyful occasion

By Susan Koch
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

We're deep into spring, and you don't need to travel far from any Midwestern city to be surrounded by unmistakable evidence of the season. As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather wrote in "My Antonia": "The vital essence of it (is) everywhere."

On our farm in Muscatine County, Iowa, three hours west of Chicago, spring means calving season. Everywhere we look, we see twos — a black Angus cow with a calf at her side — each one a perfect miniature of its mother.

Angus cows are renowned for their strong maternal instincts as well as for "calving ease," meaning they usually give birth easily. Given the average birth weight for an Angus calf is about 80 pounds, that's no small feat!

For stockmen and women, there's nothing more rewarding than a 283-day pregnancy that results in a contented cow and a healthy calf.

Cows tend to have their calves during daylight hours, typically outdoors in a pasture or pen near the barn, and it's not unusual to have an opportunity to quietly observe the birth process. Regardless of the number of times I've witnessed such an event, it's always a memorable experience.

Cows often separate themselves from the rest of the herd, then lie down to give birth. As labor progresses, first to appear are the two front hooves. With additional contractions, the calf's nose and head appear, followed by the rest of its body. It's magical to see the cow immediately turn to welcome her wide-eyed offspring — almost as if they've always known each other.



A cow stands over her newborn calf after it was born earlier in the day at Hildebrandt Farms in South Beloit, Ill., on June 12, 2017. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Cattleman Bruce Kiesewetter, an Illinois native and graduate of the University of Illinois' renowned animal sciences program, has witnessed well over 1,000 births during his career. "I still get a little emotional when that calf hits the ground," he said. "It brings me joy and satisfaction. Every time."

Moments after birth, the cow stands and starts vigorously licking her wet calf — clearing amniotic fluid to ensure the calf's breathing, stimulating circulation and drying its coat to prevent heat loss. She is instantly protective, sniffing and memorizing its scent so she will always be able to identify her baby. Soft mewing sounds tell the calf: "I'm here, and you're safe with me."

Guided by generations of instinct, even a heifer, a first-time mother, almost always knows exactly what to do.

In a half hour or so, the newborn gathers itself and stands unsteady on wobbly legs. After months of waiting, he's meeting his mother face to face for the first time, and it's like the beginning of the world. Then with a little nudging, the clumsy newborn finds the udder bulging between the cow's back legs and hungrily suckles colostrum so critical for its first feeding. This unique "first milk," as is the case for all mammals, including humans, provides vital antibodies to protect against diseases as well as concentrated nutritional support so neces-

Soft mewing sounds tell the calf: "I'm here, and you're safe with me." Guided by generations of instinct, even a heifer, a first-time mother, almost always knows exactly what to do.

sary for the early days of life.

Unlike dairy breeds, multiple births in Angus cattle are quite rare, but this year, we've been surprised by not one but two sets of twins. When it occurs, twins tend to be smaller at birth, and the cow doesn't always accept both calves. We've been fortunate the two cows are doing fine with their increased responsibilities — attentive to both calves and producing enough milk to enable them to thrive.

Soon it will be summer, and the pastures will be dotted with coal black cattle — cows grazing in nutritious grass, ambling to the creek for water, always watchful for the safety of their calves. Growing offspring will nurse when hungry, play like puppies and nap in the shade of the old oak trees. We'll drive an all-terrain vehicle out every day to check on them — probably spending more time than necessary sitting quietly in a sea of domesticity.

And who can blame us? There's nothing more satisfying than a successful calving season. And as Bruce said, "It brings joy and satisfaction. Every time."

Susan Koch is a retired chancellor of the University of Illinois Springfield. She lives in Iowa City where she and her husband farm and raise purebred Angus cattle.

Voice of the People

I welcome delivery robots

At the Golden Nugget's four locations, our in-person diners have started returning to pre-pandemic numbers, and delivery, which spiked in 2020, is still humming. But running a restaurant in Chicago these days is still no picnic.

When I first saw the blinking eyes of a Serve delivery robot, I was charmed. Then I thought about my staff, my customers and my business.

We rely on delivery to meet customer demand, but too often the experience falls short of the standards we work hard to uphold. Waking up to a Google review complaining that a delivery customer's drink was spilled or their food was cold is a new dreaded headache I never had when I first started in the industry.

As food delivery continues to be part of everyday life, I see the strain it's putting on the delivery drivers who come through our doors, many of them polite and courteous. But when people feel pressured to maximize deliveries, especially with gas prices what they are, drivers can end up being rushed, careless or, at times, openly disrespectful to our staff. Orders that leave our kitchen hot and carefully prepared sometimes arrive cold, spilled or mishandled. And then it's our reputation, not the delivery service that takes the hit.

This isn't about replacing people; it's about adding options that protect the product my team creates. Robots offer consistency. They don't crowd the host stand or try to take a picked-up order into the bathroom before heading out (my hostess stopped the delivery person).

For our staff, this means a more focused, respectful work environment. For our customers, it means greater confidence that their order will arrive as intended. The restaurant industry runs on tight margins, and if technology can help us reduce costly errors, it can allow us to continue supporting our employees and customers.

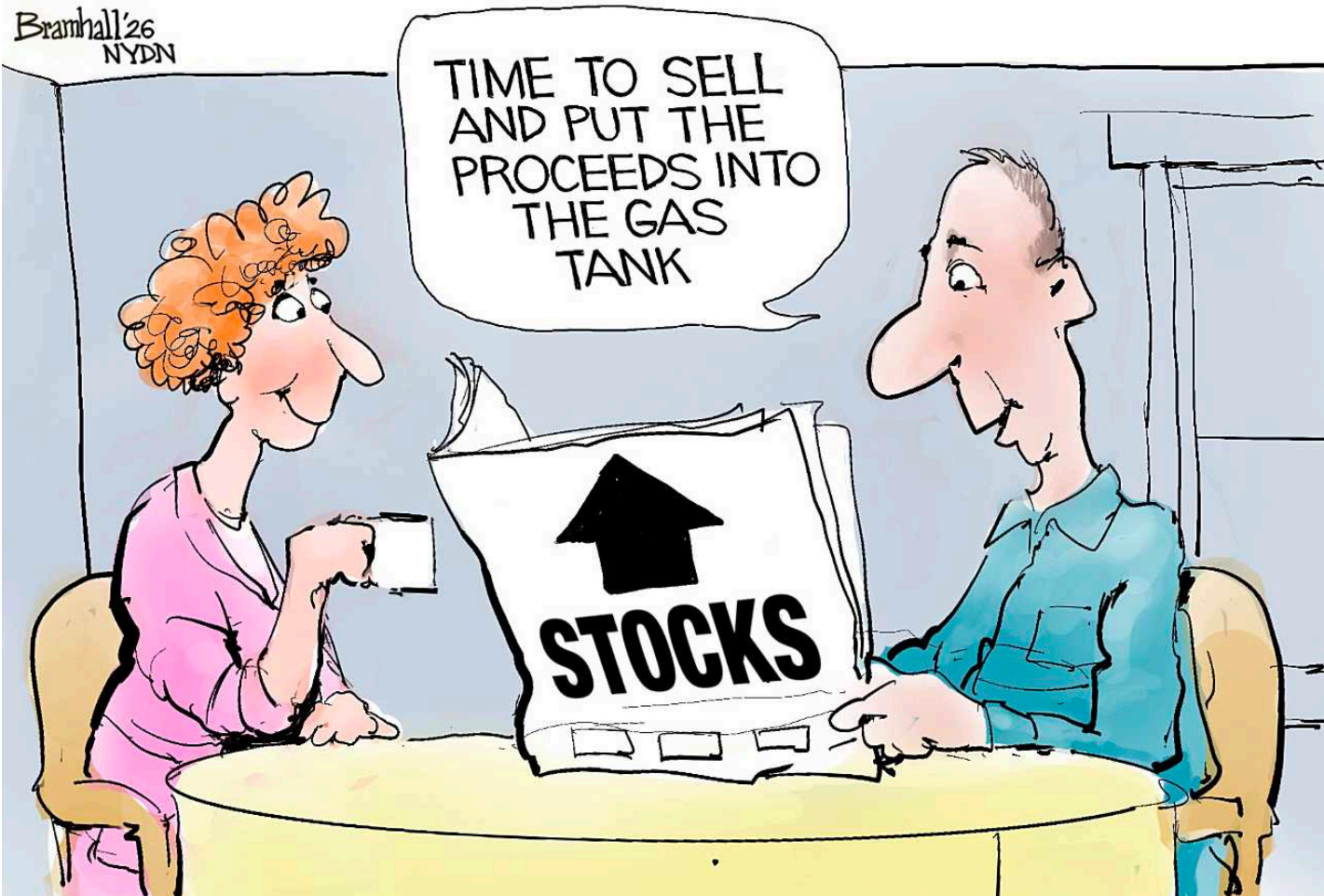
I understand that the idea of delivery robots may feel impersonal. But from behind the counter, the current system already lacks accountability and consistency. This is about finding a better balance. How can we use technology thoughtfully to enhance, not replace, the human elements that make local restaurants special? — *Cathy Guzman, owner, Golden Nugget Pancake House, Chicago*

Let's host a teen takeover

Tuesday's editorial about neighborhood responses to so-called teen takeovers is definitely the way to go ("A neighborhood shows how to defang the teen takeover. Let's scale that up"). We can all remember being teenagers, wanting to explore and feel the freedom of being unsupervised by our parents — and maybe even test our boundaries.

Chicago as a whole, and especially the downtown area, should follow the parents in Hyde Park's example and actually host a "teen takeover." What would it be like to open the downtown to our city's teens and show them what a great city they have? Maybe they wouldn't feel so shut out. Maybe they would even come to love it and admire it so much that the last thing they would do is damage it.

After all, our city belongs to our teenag-



BILL BRAMHALL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

ers as much as it belongs to anyone else.

Let's invite them in, show them around and help them love our beautiful city. We might even have some fun together.

— *Bryan Cones, Edgewater, Chicago*

The end of a mall's life

A recent editorial on outdated shopping malls ("Demolition looms for Lincolnwood Town Center, as shopping malls across the country struggle to find new life," May 1) reminded me of something I saw many years ago.

When the CTA opened the elevated line to Midway Airport in the early 1990s, the newest train cars had their front and side destination signs on long cloth rolls powered so that the train operator could scroll through once to find the right sign and then set it for the entire train. The signs could also be seen from inside the cars.

One day back then, I was on a train when an electrical fault caused all the signs to continuously scroll from one end to the other and back again. I was surprised to see that the last sign on the roll was "Ford City," where there was no station.

That told me that the CTA planned — or at least hoped — to eventually extend the line from Midway to Ford City.

Now, alas, that will never happen.

— *George W. Price, Chicago*

Pulitzer win for the Tribune

Congratulations to the Tribune on receiving the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for local reporting. I'm a Tribune subscriber, print and online, seven days a week. This award reflects the very reason I subscribe: local

reporting.

I find it hard to understand why local reporting is not valued more by residents of any community. But Chicago holds a special place in the interest of the nation, indeed the world. It reflects the soul of the heartland.

Since I moved here 45 years ago, I've wanted to know the history, the politics and the creative force that make this such a dynamic city. Most of my information, I've learned through reading the Chicago Tribune.

Well done.

— *Kathryn Williams, Chicago*

What we need, more than ever

In this age when newspapers and newspaper journalists have been all but pronounced as anachronisms, I find it absolutely thrilling that the Chicago Tribune has won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for local reporting. The coverage of Operation Midway Blitz was in-depth reporting of a critical issue that could not have been reported effectively in any other medium.

As a result of the courage and determination of Tribune journalists, our public and government were given the opportunity to address wrongs. Wrongs that might have slipped by without the dogged efforts to document the truth.

More than ever, we need the printed word to capture and keep our attention. More than ever, we need a source of factual news reporting, separate from pundit opinions. Congratulations to the journalists and editors of the Chicago Tribune for earning this well-deserved, prestigious award.

— *Linda Finley Belan, Chicago*

Tribune, Chicagoans earned it

We learned the glorious news in the Tribune that our newspaper has been awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Those of us who subscribe and read the paper each and every day know the coverage of the deplorable Operation Midway Blitz has been outstanding, and now the world knows too.

The article indicated the award was based on the Tribune's "powerful coverage" of the Trump administration's abuses on display each day this past fall. While the Tribune's coverage was certainly powerful, we are reminded how those words also describe Chicagoans' willingness to stand up to the many abuses inflicted on the city by this administration.

So, bravo to the Tribune and to the people of Chicago: You earned this recognition.

— *Mark G. Lindsey, Hales Corners, Wisconsin*

Note to readers: In honor of our "Chicago 2050" op-ed series, we'd like to hear from you about your hopes for what Chicago will be like in 25 years. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.



ft.com/opinion

Starmer and Britain’s new politics of instability

Labour’s failures have opened the way to Reform and other insurgent parties

True electoral earthquakes in Britain usually come in general elections. But Thursday’s ballots for scores of councils in England and the parliaments of Scotland and Wales have, for now, smashed the century-old Labour-Conservative duopoly. Two years after Labour’s landslide election victory showed the centre broadly holding, British politics has fragmented into an unstable kaleidoscope that makes forecasting the next general election almost impossible. The biggest gainer is Nigel Farage’s nationalist Reform UK, which in many areas has displaced the Tories as the main opposition party. The biggest loser, after Labour’s predicted dismal showing, is surely the political career of Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. The results reflect above all an elec-

torate weary of economic stagnation and strained public services, whose yearning for “change” is not being satisfied by the traditional UK parties of government. Labour’s pledge to replace Tory turbulence with competence and stability held out the prospect of rebuilding business confidence and rekindling growth. The failure of Starmer’s government to achieve either stability or growth, and of Kemi Badenoch’s Conservatives to rebuild themselves into credible contenders, has propelled voters in multiple directions. In some urban areas they are turning to the Greens, reinvented as “eco-populists” by their leader Zack Polanski — leaving Labour now facing insurgent challengers from both the right and the left. Labour’s weakness in Scotland has enabled the Scottish National Party to extend its 19 years in government, while in Wales the nationalist Plaid Cymru is set to replace it as biggest party for the first time since devolution in 1999. Ominously for the UK union, governments

in three of its four nations are now led by parties whose goal is to break away. The most significant breakthrough nationally was by Reform. Its overall voting share has not made a major advance. Whether it has a path to power is still far from certain. But after last year’s local council ballots, this is the second set of elections in which Farage’s party can claim to have become the dominant force on the British right. By taking control of several councils and winning many seats on others it is building local power bases — but will also be tested in office. Even though Badenoch seems to have led the Conservatives into an electoral cul-de-sac, there seems little appetite among the already diminished rump of Conservative MPs to replace her. But dozens of Labour MPs will this weekend be viewing their prospects at the next election with alarm. Many will see a change of direction as vital to reviving Labour’s fortunes. Stealing too much of the political

The results of the local elections reflect an electorate weary of economic stagnation and strained public services, whose yearning for ‘change’ is not being satisfied

clothing of either Reform or the Greens, however, would risk driving away different sections of Labour’s fragile electoral coalition. A lurch to the left would further alienate a business community whose support is vital to resuscitating the economy, and risk a crisis in the restive gilt market. What voters crave most is competent and productive government. Sadly, after almost two years in office, this is something Starmer has been unable to project. Amid the swirling unpredictability of UK politics, what is increasingly apparent is that the prime minister is unlikely to lead Labour into the next general election. But if his MPs decide that he should be replaced sooner rather than later, they should keep in mind that, for the sake not just of their own interests but those of the country, there is a value in stability, both economic and political. They need to find a way to address their problems in government that does not make Britain’s outlook worse, rather than better.

Opinion Global affairs

We are living in the age of the middleman

FT montage/Getty Images



Ivan Krastev

The geopolitical thinker Robert Kaplan once suggested that “while an understanding of world events begins with maps, it ends with Shakespeare”. Today’s global condition is less exalted. It begins with Donald Trump’s social media posts and ends with the business interests of the US president’s friends and family. A recent European Council on Foreign Relations publication concludes that Trump’s near-exclusive reliance on friends and family as envoys to broker deals to solve thorny foreign policy problems poses systemic risks for Europe. The president’s use of special envoys “follows a pattern as recognisable as the signature rhythm of a Morse code operator”, the authors say. “Pressing the weaker party Special envoys are the new peacemakers because they are unburdened by expertise and process

special operations (like the one in Iran) are global problems to be solved by others. In Trump’s foreign policy speed is more important than direction. Frenetic unpredictability keeps everyone off balance. Allies cannot plan, adversaries cannot calibrate and institutions cannot adapt. By the time the world has absorbed one shock, the next has landed. This helter-skelter approach is what the American political theorist Stephen Holmes calls “hierarchy without order”. You could also call it the Agamemnon doctrine, in which retribution — for enemies and disloyal allies alike — is inevitable. This is a worldview that assumes that states are unequal, that even great powers are not equally great, and that those powers should enjoy their privileges and keep the spoils — but on the condition that they recognise US supremacy. It is not a 21st-century version of spheres of influence politics because in this view the hegemon does not act on interests but is guided by pride and anger. Being a professional diplomat in the age of Trump is like being a coachman in the age of the car. Simply put, you are no longer needed. Your expertise determines your uselessness. Special envoys are the new peacemakers because they are unburdened by expertise and unconstrained by bureaucratic process. And the fact that Trump’s middlemen, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, are mired in conflicts of private business interests is an advantage — without conflicts of interest, there would be no incentive to solve military conflicts. The fact that they talk all the time about business should make the world believe that they mean peace. Living in Trump’s world is like taking a turn on the Ferris wheel in the Prater, the historic amusement park in Vienna where vertigo makes profits. It is a world shaped by middlemen rather than middle powers — the middle powers (think of Turkey, the Gulf states or Pakistan) dream of being middlemen. America is in a rush, so there is no time to shoot real movies, only trailers. Some trailers will be powerful enough, as with Venezuela; but some will backfire, as in the case of Iran. What matters is time. Conflicts should be short, and if America cannot finish them it will leave it to others to do so. That’s the real meaning of power for Trump: it’s not the capacity to impose your will on others, but rather the ability to force them to solve your problems. The role of the special envoys is to get everyone else to understand this. The writer is an FT contributing editor, chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies, and fellow at IWM Vienna

Letters

Public begins to face the harsh reality behind the AI hype

Shahid Mahdi, a New York expert in energy regulatory policy, critical infrastructure and cyber security, says “The proliferation of AI . . . will act as a profound liberator that catalyses a renaissance in the classical and liberal arts” (Letters, April 13) Meanwhile, down the hill from his Elysian home, an NBC News poll in March revealed that a massive majority see the risks of AI as outweighing the benefits: the only subjects less popular than AI were the Democratic Party and Iran. Is this because the majority of us are too low in the hierarchy of intelligence to see the view from the AI

Utopia? Or is it, perhaps, because of our experience? Every time employers and employees are asked about the results of introducing AI in the workplace, the people who actually have to use it say it has made them less productive, not more. Partly, this is because the USP of “generative AI” is in its name; it is designed to generate enormous quantities of slop, easily and quickly, which then needs to be sifted by human operators or by bots for any value it contains. As a result, many young people have given up even trying to find work, knowing they’ll be competing with

hundreds or thousands of indistinguishable AI-generated applications. Coincidentally — or not — another recent piece of research reveals that the UK now has more people working in HR than as doctors or lawyers, and more than almost any other western country. HR is a rare growth story; but what is it growing? More forms, more bureaucracy and more “AI assistance” we were all quite happy to be without. The sales pitch for GenAI was, indeed, that it would automate the drudge work and liberate us all to be artists and creators. Not, “we’re going to cover the planet

in data centres, reverse the green transition, throw half of you out of work, destroy career ladders by eliminating junior jobs, drown the rest of you in maddening chores and walk away with massive profits, leaving bankrupt governments struggling to keep you alive. Oh, and while we’re about it, create rogue programmes that may annihilate anyone left.” The public seems to be judging by experience; and I would not presume to blame them. Sheila Hayman Advisory Board, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, University of Cambridge, London NW1

The precarious power of naming rights

I very much enjoyed the Big Read “Trump is remaking America in his image” (May 2) for how it sets out the ways in which the president’s name and face is increasingly being appended to “US institutions and the visual symbols of the state”. A follow-up consideration is what might happen to all these buildings, banners and banknotes bearing the moniker and likeness of the 45th/47th president when he leaves office. For, despite Donald Trump’s apparent assertion quoted in the article, “you’ve got to put your name on stuff or no one remembers you”, we can look to ancient Rome to see just how precarious such naming rights are. On buildings and inscriptions across the Roman world there are numerous examples of emperors (or the senate, officially) substituting a predecessors’ name and image with their own. Usually, although not always, this occurred in reaction to the death of a particularly unpopular ruler and was an attempt to control the narrative of their legacy or to take revenge for their outrages. In some instances the names and faces were removed or substituted with great subtlety, so no casual viewer would be aware they were recarved. In other cases, texts and likenesses were violently erased, leaving permanent scars in the stone as reminders of the fate of the unhappy former ruler. What the US will do with the Trump name and image now it is on so many national monuments when his term comes to an end presumably depends upon who succeeds him. When the emperor Hadrian died, the Roman senate first attempted to condemn his memory and annul his decrees. Yet his successor, Antoninus Pius, not only dissuaded them from this course of action, but even had the supine Senate declare Hadrian a god. On occasion, and even despite official sanctions, the names of controversial emperors continued to be associated with particular monuments, although this was no guarantee of it being a positive memory. Some two decades after the fall of Nero — an emperor notorious for his self-aggrandising reconstruction of the imperial palace on an inappropriately large scale — the public bathing complex he had built in Rome still retained his name, allowing the ancient poet Martial to quip “what is worse than Nero, what is better than his baths”. In 20 years, what will the White House State Ballroom be called? What will those dancing say about it? Christopher Siwicki Rome, Italy



Shakespeare displayed a botanist’s eye for detail in many of his plays

A happy convergence of Shakespeare and spring

How good that even a poor production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream should direct Robin Lane Fox back to the text, to compare Shakespeare’s vivid observations on spring flowers with plants in his own garden (“Living the dream”, House & Home, FT Weekend, April 11). It prompts him to identify the small red “freckle” in the throat of a cowslip. Shakespeare even noted the mark’s distinctive shape in Cymbeline when Iachimo studies the sleeping Imogen: “On her left breast / A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops / I’ th’ bottom of a cowslip.” Shakespeare takes us to the heart of things. Drifts of wild fritillaries in my Oxfordshire garden each year recall the lines from the narrative poem Venus and Adonis on the death of Adonis: “And in his blood that on the ground lay spill’d, / A purple flower sprung up, chequer’d with white; / Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood / Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.” Dora Thornton London EC1R, UK

Enough to crack you up

James Max’s “Some luxuries I can’t give up (even as prices rise)”, (Money, May 2), reinforced my view that current price rises are not solely due to the so-called “geopolitical” events in the Middle East. My trusted and long-used free-range egg source on the shores of Lough Erne in County Fermanagh bumped up the price of 30 eggs from £5 to £6.50 in the past few weeks, a high premium to pay for the occasional double yolk. Cormac Meehan Bundoran, County Donegal, Ireland

Not everyone lives by the S&P and Topix

At the end of a typically perceptive piece by Gillian Tett on the financial markets’ insouciance (to put it mildly) in the face of potential socio-economic catastrophe (“What’s up with the markets?”, The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, May 2) she poses an important rhetorical question: “But perhaps the issue we should all ponder more deeply is why our society feels it should focus so heavily on markets as a computerised mirror and measure of our complex ecosystem?” To which I would reply — do we? Really? I worked in the City for more than 40 years and, inevitably, in those days, we talked incessantly about markets. Deep in my dotage/retirement, I sometimes meet up with old colleagues from those half-remembered days and there is much chatter about markets. But among the people with whom I now choose to spend most of my time — including my own family — the subject rarely comes up. We are, I like to think, intelligent, well-informed people — we discuss economics, politics, even philosophy, the arts and the meaning of life — but not the S&P, the Topix and the Nikkei. And I do not think we are atypical of the general population — although we may not be typical FT readers. Jonathan Allum Amersham, Buckinghamshire, UK

Why we need more decisions made ‘au jugé’

Janan Ganesh highlights an overlooked aspect of decision-making in his article “The mystery of good judgment” (Life & Arts, FT Weekend, April 25). As an Englishman who has lived in Paris since 1980, I am often struck that we have no equivalent for certain expressions used by our closest neighbours. The French say that people decide “au jugé” when relying on quick-witted judgment alone. If a partridge disappears into a thicket, the hunter will have to shoot at it “au jugé”, hoping his blind shot will benefit from instinct, honed by practice. The 19th-century literary brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt once noted that artists, too, paint “au jugé”, drawing on their taste and formal training. Just as serendipity is not mere luck, but a skill requiring, in Louis Pasteur’s words, “a well-prepared mind”, so deciding “au jugé” demands one’s better judgment, not basic instinct. A rugby player responding to what is in front of them, with French flair, offers a sporting analogy. In an uncertain world, should we not rely more often on decisions made “au jugé”? Hugh Wilson Paris, France

Solutions to manosphere crisis lie in the home

As the father of an eight-year-old, I greatly appreciated Simon van Teutem’s Weekend Essay, “The market failure beneath the manosphere” (Life & Arts, April 11). It excellently highlighted the problem of how boys and young men are struggling in the current system, and can easily be manipulated when they reach a certain age. I agree about the remedy too; the space is being occupied by misogynists because it is being neglected by others. And at the very end, Van Teutem hints at the real problem: “The child is father of the man; whoever reaches the child first stamps everything that follows.” But there’s the problem, screaming at us. Back in 2004, Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté published a book that exposes the manosphere problem, and most other young adult issues of our day. The book was called Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers. It details how kids have lost their attachments to their parents and other adults, which leaves them exposed to a whole raft of issues. If we want to raise healthy, well-adjusted kids, the solution is simple, at least to describe, even if difficult to achieve in our money-obsessed world: make time to be present for kids. Ryan Holiday, the stoic scholar, put it well: kids need presence, not presents. James Beadle Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France

Britain’s market structure shapes dividend payouts

Steve Johnson’s report, “Dividend payments from UK companies up ‘over a fifth’ on last year” (Money, May 2), highlights a rebound in shareholder payouts. Yet the prominence of dividends in the UK market may reflect deeper structural forces. The London market remains heavily weighted towards mature sectors such as energy, mining and banking, where investment opportunities can be cyclical and firms often distribute surplus cash rather than retain it. At the same time, the UK’s investor base includes large tax-exempt institutions, notably pension funds, for whom dividend income remains particularly attractive. The interaction of mature corporate sectors and income-oriented investors helps explain why dividends continue to play a central role in UK equity markets. The latest surge in payouts may therefore reflect not only current profitability but also the structure of both the companies listed in London and the investors who hold them. Erhan Kilincarslan Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK

Opinion

Markets are banking on the ‘Bliss trade’

Gita Gopinath

The disconnect between the historic disruption to energy supplies – with the Strait of Hormuz closed and Brent crude hovering around \$100 a barrel – and the S&P 500 reaching new records is stark. AI optimism and strong earnings are providing a strong tailwind. Even so, risk is mostly being disregarded as the Wall Street fear gauge, the Vix, has barely increased relative to its historical average.

Many attribute this to the belief that “Trump always chickens out”, the so-called Taco trade that rules out worst-case scenarios. But stock market highs could also reflect what I call the Bliss trade: a belief in resilience underwritten by “big lasting state support”. Such a belief is consistent with government

actions over the past several years, actions that have driven public debt levels ever higher and expanded central bank balance sheets. Global public debt is now projected to reach 100 per cent of GDP by 2029.

During the pandemic, the balance sheets of households and firms were not just rescued but boosted by very large government support that averaged 25 per cent of GDP for advanced economies, including assistance in the form of equity injections, loans and government guarantees to companies. This boost has buoyed consumer and business finances for several years.

When Russia’s invasion of Ukraine set off an energy crisis, governments in Europe spent 2.5 per cent of GDP in energy support in the form of broad-based price-suppressing measures when it would have required only 0.9 per cent of GDP to fully compensate the bottom 40 per cent of households for the entire rise in energy costs. Germany, Italy and Spain have all reactivated price-distorting taxes and subsidies to

insulate people from the current energy price surge.

There are plenty of good reasons for the state to provide support in a crisis. However, the past several years of government support have gone against fiscal advice by being large and lasting instead of targeted and temporary.

The Bliss trade is reflected in the divergence between the prices of stocks and government bonds. While equity markets have held up surprisingly well, government bonds have suffered even as long-run inflation expectations have stayed mostly anchored. Since the start of the Iran conflict, long-term government bond yields have risen across major economies including the US, Europe and Japan.

This divergence has become a pattern over the past several years. Term premia on 10-year US treasury yields are now close to 100 basis points higher than they were before the pandemic, driving up the interest rate bill.

The urge to rush to the rescue, regardless of merit, was recently evident in

President Donald Trump’s attempts to bail out the US budget carrier Spirit Airlines as he mused “I’d love to be able to save an airline”. While the bailout ultimately did not go through, it does not take much imagination to predict that in a real crisis, government support in the US would be excessive.

Moreover, while Taco is idiosyncratic

They may be pricing in state insurance that governments can no longer afford to provide

and dependent on the psychology of the US president, Bliss is structural. Research shows that political parties of all stripes, from socialists to conservatives, all now favour higher government spending, and fiscal restraint has few champions. In the US, both Democrats and Republicans are responsible for the large increase in debt. We should there-

fore expect little political pushback against fiscal splurges if a crisis were to unfold. The IMF predicts that in a severe scenario, the Iran conflict could cause global growth to fall to 2 per cent (instead of the reference forecast of 3.1 per cent) and global debt could rise past 120 per cent of GDP.

The Bliss trade is fragile, however. Markets, increasingly driven by retail investors, may be pricing in state insurance that governments can no longer afford to provide. As compared to before the pandemic, the scope to deliver on fiscal largesse is limited.

Even in advanced economies, the sensitivity of borrowing costs to debt insurance has increased, which then spills over into emerging and developing economy borrowing costs. Even as bond prices have declined, markets may be too sanguine about the consequences of rising debt on fiscal health.

Policymakers would do well to use this period in which stock markets seem disconnected from heightened risk to craft a new playbook for crisis support

that is both fiscally sustainable and supportive of long-term growth. The experiences of the pandemic and Ukraine war provide a valuable lesson in what that should look like: support targeted to the vulnerable; bailouts only to companies that are liquidity constrained but otherwise viable – and whose failure poses systemic risks; and co-ordinated fiscal and monetary policy so they do not work at cross-purposes.

If a new course is not charted, governments constrained by fiscal space may rely on heterodox measures, including broad-based price controls, financial repression, nationalisations, and pressure on central banks to absorb fiscal risk. None of this would be good for the economy with synchronised sell-offs across stocks and bonds as markets realise that the backstop they were counting on is no longer there.

The writer is a professor of economics at Harvard University and was first deputy managing director and chief economist of the IMF

His \$56bn hostile bid could become the first major meme stock-driven deal. By James Fontanella-Khan and Oliver Barnes

Ryan Cohen has spent much of his career being dismissed. It is a pattern that has turned the chief executive of video-game retailer GameStop into a leather jacket-wearing outlier with a loyal base of meme-stock investors.

The Canadian entrepreneur turned activist investor has built his cult-like reputation by repeatedly betting on ideas that many institutional investors labelled as absurd. First it was online pet supplies. Then a dying strip mall video game retailer. Now it is a \$56bn attempt to acquire eBay, an ecommerce giant roughly four times the size of GameStop.

Wall Street’s immediate response to the hostile bid has ranged from scepticism to outright mockery. Analysts have questioned how GameStop, valued at roughly \$11bn, could realistically finance the takeover of a company worth about \$47bn.

None of that has dissuaded Cohen.

“The more [eBay] fights me, the more . . . I’m not going to take no for an answer. I’m not going away. I’m a pain in the ass,” Cohen told the FT.

The 40-year-old billionaire first set out his stall for the takeover bid in an awkward interview with CNBC on Monday that instantly ricocheted across social media. He responded to questions about the financing details with a blank expression and clipped monosyllables, explaining that it was “half cash, half stock”.

The interview generated a wave of memes online as X and Reddit users speculated that Cohen looked drunk, high or exhausted. For his supporters, however, the spectacle only reinforced the mythology of Cohen as an eccentric outsider underestimated by establishment finance.

This script has played out before.

Born in Montreal in 1986 to a teacher mother and a father who imported glassware, Cohen did not attend university. As a teenager he built websites for family friends and small businesses, teaching himself coding.

In 2011, now in his mid-twenties, he co-founded Chewy from South Florida with the ambition of creating an online pet supplies business that could compete with Amazon.

Investors thought the idea ridiculous. “I knew that significant capital would be required to finance the growth,” Cohen later wrote in the Harvard Business Review. “We approached dozens of VC firms – I even flew out to Silicon Valley . . . and went door-to-door on Sand Hill Road explaining how Chewy would succeed by delighting customers and running an ultra-efficient operation. But everyone turned us down.”

The scepticism was understandable given the failure of pet supply website Pets.com in the dotcom bubble era. Pet food was bulky, low-margin and expensive to ship. Venture capitalists doubted consumers would buy 40lb bags of dog food online.

Cohen ignored them all. Instead, he focused obsessively on customer service. Chewy employees wrote customers handwritten cards and sent flowers to



Person in the News | Ryan Cohen

GameStop’s rebel CEO gunning for eBay

grieving owners whose animals had died. The approach helped to create unusually intense customer loyalty.

By 2017, private equity-backed PetSmart bought Chewy for \$3.35bn, then the largest ecommerce deal on record. It cemented Cohen’s reputation as a rare entrepreneur who had successfully challenged Amazon on its own turf.

Flush with cash and credibility, he launched RC Ventures, his investment vehicle. That led to his most controversial bet. In 2020, while much of Wall Street viewed GameStop as a doomed relic of the physical retail era, Cohen quietly amassed a large stake in the company and began pushing for a radical digital transformation.

His arrival electrified the retail traders who gathered on Reddit forums like WallStreetBets during the pandemic lockdowns. Many viewed Cohen as an anti-establishment figure willing to challenge the short sellers who bet against the company.

“This dude knows his shit in

ecommerce,” said Keith Gill, the trader who helped to rally hordes of retail investors into the stock. “[He] may act as a visionary.”

What followed became one of the defining financial manias of the Covid era. GameStop shares exploded in early 2021 as retail traders co-ordinated buying campaigns that triggered a historic short squeeze. The stock surged from under \$5 to a peak of around \$500, vaporising billions of dollars for hedge funds betting against it and turning GameStop into the ultimate meme stock.

Cohen emerged from the frenzy as a hero to retail investors. Online

Many retail traders view him as anti-establishment and willing to challenge the short sellers

followers dubbed him the “Meme King”.

He has cultivated this mystique, often communicating cryptically on social media with deliberately vague messages that retail traders try to dissect.

Now he is attempting perhaps his boldest gamble yet: the first major meme stock-driven deal. If successful, it would rank among the most audacious takeovers in recent history. Cohen said its retail footprint complements eBay’s platform and also pledged deep cost cuts. Analysts remain unconvinced, although experience shows that dismissing Cohen outright carries its own risks.

“If it’s not obvious already, I have such disdain for corporate America and [eBay] is a good example of that,” he told the FT. “We’ll see what happens in terms of how they respond and what they do, but it’s fun. It makes me feel alive.”

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Humans still matter more than AI in finance

BUSINESS
Gillian Tett



A few months ago a New York financier told me he had just experienced a “first”: his 2025 summer interns “were the first true AI natives I have seen”. This meant they had grown up not only among digital tech, but AI too.

So how did it go? He winced. While those wannabe masters of the universe initially seemed wildly impressive, when senior financiers later probed their ideas they found them alarmingly shallow.

Consequently this person’s company made fewer return offers and is now focusing less on graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – and more humanities students instead.

“We want critical thinking, not just AI,” he explains. Human brainpower is needed to handle the silicon variant.

Now, this is just one tiny anecdote in a tsunami of emerging AI-linked stories and I daresay there are counter-examples. But it illustrates a bigger point: as AI fever sweeps finance, it is neither delivering the profit nirvana predicted by tech evangelists nor hastening the doom the Cassandras have warned about. Or at least not yet.

Yes, techies are wildly excited about putative productivity increases, with entities ranging from JPMorgan to Visa now presenting themselves as AI tech groups, not stodgy money handlers. Indeed, a recent survey from Nvidia claims that 89 per cent of finance executives say that AI is boosting revenues, while 73 per cent think it’s “crucial to their future success”.

Unsurprisingly, that is alarming regulators too. One reason is that the eye-popping volumes of (mostly) private credit backing for AI data centres is likely to produce defaults, as the Financial Stability Board warned this week.

But the other risk is that the technology itself damages financial stability. The immediate threat on financiers’ minds, as the IMF notes, is a systemic crisis arising from a cyber attack. But as the FSB observes, there are other dangers: computer “herding” around identical trades; concentrated reliance on a few cloud providers outside regulatory oversight; and models’ hallucinations.

Regulators are responding. Scott Bessent, US Treasury secretary, and Jay Powell, Federal Reserve chair, recently met top financiers to discuss the threats posed by Anthropic’s new Mythos model. And Michelle Bowman, Fed vice-chair, has called for more “flexibility” in how regulators evaluate banks’ risks models.

This week the UK’s Financial Conduct Authority took a novel step: it is offering free computing power and data to fin-

techs that work inside an FCA “super-charged sandbox”, after the success of a pilot scheme with Nvidia last year. “The idea is to have an environment where [innovators] come in and test and bring their solutions to life in a safe and responsible way,” explains Jessica Rusu of the FCA.

But as the AI rhetoric intensifies, AI reality is proving to be more complex. Consider, as one example, a new survey from the Judge Business School in Cambridge of 628 finance and AI companies and regulators from around the world. (Disclaimer: I work at the University of Cambridge, but was not involved in this research.)

This found that 81 per cent of private-sector finance groups are now using AI, and half are embracing agentic AI. Most of these firms use external models and the top provider, by far, is OpenAI.

However, the survey also suggests AI is overwhelmingly being used for back-office functions, with limited deployment elsewhere. And, unlike the Nvidia poll, the Cambridge survey found that 76 per cent of large financial groups – and 55 per cent of all industry respondents – struggle to measure the value of AI.

Indeed, only 40 per cent reported any profit boost from AI and 43 per cent saw no change at all. More notable still, only a quarter expect sector job losses, while 58 per cent actually expect AI to spark more hiring or reskilling at their own group.

AI evangelists might dismiss this as

Some 76 per cent of large financial groups struggle to measure the technology’s value

proof that some financiers are Luddites. After all, the AI revolution is still in its infancy. Meanwhile, many regulators seem even more Luddite: their level of AI adoption (and thus knowledge) is half that of the private sector groups they are overseeing. This is worrying.

But the point about the gap between rhetoric and reality in AI deployment is echoed in numerous other surveys from McKinsey, the Institute of International Finance, EY and others. A survey from Hyland, for example, says that only 45 per cent of businesses say AI is delivering the results they hoped for.

This may be merely a time lag effect. But I suspect it also reflects something else: intelligent machines do not automatically deploy themselves either for good or bad. Human strategy is crucial.

So the big question now – for financiers, regulators and educators alike – is to how to create skilled AI natives who can also use the critical thinking needed to spot both the opportunities and (very real) risks in AI. Those companies which find them will be the real winners. All eyes, then, will be on the 2026 intern pool.

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OPINION

Habits for Humanity in the Age of AI

By Ben Sasse

America’s experiment in self-government has always depended on wisdom and self-control. These aren’t virtues that politicians or bureaucrats could ever impart. They aren’t fostered by technology’s illusion of endless consumption, infinite options and cost-free disembodiment. No, the virtues for a life well-lived are taught, modeled and practiced in the daily life of society’s smallest but most important platoons—chief among them the family. In the coming decades, if artificial intelligence continues to progress as it has, America is going to have a big messy debate about universal basic income. In its long-term implications, this debate will dwarf the fights about ObamaCare, the Great Society and the New Deal. I think UBI is terrible policy, but whether we end up with it or not—whether we find ourselves at the sunny uplands of abundance or the hellscape of a jobs apocalypse—Americans will need better habits than we have right now.

Help your kids build the character to make the most of technology rather than become a slave to it.

No matter what the illiberal left or the increasingly illiberal subset of the right claims, that can’t be done with policy levers in Washington. We are never just one piece of legislation away from civilizational recovery. Politics are merely means; the bigger questions are technological, and souls are central. We are in a civilization-warping crisis of institutional decline. The consequences are all around us. • *We’re lonely.* The share of Americans who tell pollsters that they have no close friends has quadrupled since 1990. A study last month from the University of Arizona found that over the last 15 years, people average 338 fewer spoken words per day than the year before. That’s 120,000 fewer words a year. • *We don’t trust our institutions.* Pew data shows this most pointedly around the federal government, whose trust has dropped from 77% in the mid-1960s to 17% last year. Pew and Gallup have measured 10 different institutions every year for about 50 years. Nine of them have experienced a declining level of public trust for four consecutive decades. The military is the only exception. • *We don’t trust one another.* Only 1 in 3 Americans tell Pew that they think they can trust most

people, down significantly from previous decades. Conspiracy theories are metastasizing across the internet, and more of our neighbors are falling prey to these echo chambers. How did we get here? We should understand that the economic and especially the technological moment we’re in is far more fundamental than anything in politics. Our story is the story of bits vs. atoms. For almost all of human history, until a couple of years ago, productivity was measured in atoms. Job categories lasted for a lifetime; physical products were the tangible output. Today, it’s mostly about bits—data. Sociologists call it the postindustrial economy, which is a way of saying we don’t even know what it is; it’s the after-the-last-thing thing. The debate right now is usually whether AI is going to bring heaven or hell. And the troubling, dizzying, but true answer is it’s going to bring both. When the cost of quantification falls close to zero, amazing new opportunities are unlocked. But lifelong work is a thing of the past, and our fellow citizens don’t know how to articulate it. They know how to feel it, and it feels scary. It has massive implications for how we conceive of ourselves. Think about how our identity is wrapped up in our work. For thousands of years, people lived in set communities from birth until death, and their lives were defined by their work. Many times our work even gave us our names: Smith, Miller, Carter, Mason, Weaver, Brewer, Baker, Cook, Porter. Most jobs are going to be unbundled and rebundled. Emotional intelligence and character are going to matter more than they’ve mattered in the past, because the hardest things to automate are the things that depend on relationships. But if the future of work is relational, the nature of relationships matters. A really good coach—that’s a relational job. You can motivate young men. You can help people get fit. That’s an important relationship, and the work matters. But an OnlyFans model selling pictures of her feet to lonely men? That’s also a relationship, but it’s pretty damn bleak. Our daughters and our sons deserve better. All of this that we’re living through and that our neighbors feel is so much bigger than whatever clickbait outrage is driving the cable news cycle today and will be forgotten by Thursday. A technological revolution is driving an economic revolution in our time, and the changes in this economy are already having and will have more profound spiritual, cultural,



educational and even political implications—though the political is arguably the least important. To be clear, this is an incredibly exciting moment to live. This isn’t a neo-Luddite argument. Who could have thought we could launch rockets to space and then catch them as they plummet back to earth? We should all stand in awe of this. It is a breathtaking tribute to human imagination, ingenuity, innovation and entrepreneurial creation. As someone who’s being kept alive this very month by incredible advances in biotechnology, I am a zealous proponent for disruptive innovation. The challenge is how to live with virtue and technology when technology tends to erode virtue and place and human texture. Our response must be to cultivate habits, community and a revivification of place.

The biggest divide isn’t going to be race, class or income. It will be between people who master the tools of technology and those who outsource their affections and their habits to these tools and algorithms. The future will be awe-inspiring for the first group, and life will be miserable for the second—heaven and hell. Lots of us grew up fearing the dystopian future of George Orwell, but it turns out the dystopian future of Aldous Huxley was much more likely. We face the tyranny of ubiquitous pleasure, of easy comfort—the soft despotism of “Brave New World,” not the brutal authoritarianism of “1984.” The family is the source of the habits that we’re going to need to cultivate the next generation. Nobody loves your kids as much as you do. Loves are local, and creating the habits that foster the love of the good, the true and the beautiful begins at home. The bad news of what I’m suggesting is that it’s deeply inconvenient. The good news is that parenting has always

been inconvenient. It’s the ultimate inconvenience. So let’s flag four starter habits: • *Reading.* Fewer than half of Americans read a book last year. That is a national crisis. Shorter attention spans are killing our imagination. Before our kids even learn the alphabet, we hand them tablets, and we know from neurological imagery that it is rotting their brains. Families need to read aloud together again to build children’s affection for books and to build a shared library—a family canon to inform the character of a home. As in every debate about the canon, there will be fights about what is in and what is out. There is no definitive answer to the canon because the intellectual journey is central to the point. We need to teach our kids to fall in love with reading and show them that the endless dialogue between ideas is more rewarding than the endless scrolling of social media. • *Hard work.* This habit can start at an early age. Sure, it’s easier to load and unload the dishwasher and put away the laundry yourself, but we miss the opportunity if we don’t bring the next generation into the labor. Over time, small jobs become medium jobs and ultimately pave the way for hard tasks. Young men especially need work. There’s a reason that dad hobbies are all chores: woodworking, yard work, grilling, tinkering. It’s work that engages your body when so much of our work has merely engaged our minds. Right now we are insulating our children from work, on average until they’re in their mid-20s, and by then lots of them turn out not to be able to learn how to do it. • *Tech sabbaths.* We should love work but not worship it. We need to be able to set it aside, recognizing that we need rest. In my theological tradition, we remember the Fourth Commandment not only as

an obligation but as a gift. As more of our work becomes detached from specific places—Zoom meetings, calls, emails—the habit of rest, of airplane mode, emphasizes place, guards against digital intrusion, and allows the revivification of the thickest, the most local, and the most important. Lock up our devices and keep them away from the family meal. Pay attention to the people around the table, the bread, the conversation, and the hugs and hands. • *Serious travel.* In the same way that learning another language helps us understand our native tongue more deeply, travel forms character through lived experience. Don’t view this as vacation. “Travel” has the same etymological root as “travail.” To travel should be a kind of work. It takes work to leave your comfort zone. If you live in a city, you need to experience the country. If you live in the country, you need to know how to navigate the city. Have your kids take extended leaves of absence from school and go live with other families somewhere else. If you can, figure out how to do multigenerational living with family compounds or other places you can return to. Give kids the thickness of a community of cousins, aunts, uncles and other relatives. We live in the richest time and place in human history. Yet today’s young people are the first generation since we’ve had polling that has thought the future is going to be worse than the past. They also believe they’ve lived through more economic hardship than any of the previous three generations. This is nonsense, yet they believe it. The fault is ours. Character, whether of an individual or of a nation, is molded by habits and by time. This republic requires men and women to do long-form deliberation, serious thinking, honest humility and daily striving. What good is it to gain the whole world if we forfeit the souls that we’re supposed to form? We can’t expect to remain free without being virtuous, we can’t be bold without being rooted, we can’t be great without aiming first to be good. To stave off Huxley’s dystopia, we must deliberately shape our children’s souls so that they can be creators, doers and thinkers embracing the next frontier. Mr. Sasse is a columnist for the Journal and for WSJ Opinion’s Free Expression newsletter. He served as a U.S. senator from Nebraska, 2015-23. This article is adapted from his speech accepting the Manhattan Institute’s Alexander Hamilton Award on May 6.

When Rudy Giuliani Made New York Great Again



CROSS COUNTRY
By Myron Magnet

His mayoralty also offers today’s floundering New York the fundamental lesson that good government can make a city flourish, while bad government impairs it. Reigning wisdom when Mr. Giuliani took office in 1994 was that the problem-ridden city was “ungovernable.” Crime had skyrocketed in the preceding decades, with murders doubling in the 1960s and doubling once more over the next two decades before reaching 2,154 in 1991—one every four hours, roughly. Dope dealers hustled on the street alongside pushy panhandlers and prostitutes. Derelicts slept alongside graffiti-smearing buildings. An epidemic of car break-ins led owners to post “No Radio” signs in their windows, and auto alarms blared indignantly at all hours. Businesses fled: The 116 major corporate headquarters in Gotham in 1971 had dwindled to 49 by 1995. Small-business owners buzzed customers in through locked doors and, at closing time, rolled down metal security gates, luring graffiti vandals. Mr. Giuliani, a former federal prosecutor, ignored the cliché that you could cut crime only by addressing so-called root causes, poverty and racism. He instinctively grasped the theory of social scientists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling that stopping small crimes would prevent more serious crimes, just as replacing a broken window halts more window-breaking by showing that somebody watches and acts. He had seen this theory

proven in the subways in the two years before his election, when Robert Kiley, head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, kept subway trains and stations hosed clean of graffiti and transit police chief William Bratton started arresting turnstile jumpers and graffiti vandals. Crime in the subways began to fall. When Mr. Giuliani entered City Hall, he named Mr. Bratton the city’s police commissioner. His recent successors failed to learn the lessons of the great reformist mayoralty of the 1990s.

With the mayor’s vocal support, Mr. Bratton put broken-windows policing to work, arresting “squeegee men” who smeared dirty rags across motorists’ windshields, holding them hostage for a “contribution.” Even minor crime, he showed, had no place in Mr. Giuliani’s New York—a lesson he amplified by arresting graffiti taggers and public urinators. Police stopped, questioned and frisked those suspected of carrying weapons or casing a business, dissuading the ill-intentioned from packing guns while reducing shootings. Mr. Bratton made computer maps of crime hot spots and concentrated cops where thugs operated. City Hall’s revolutionary idea was that cops should prevent crime, not solve it after it happened. The results were spectacular. Murders fell 20% to 1,561 the first year and a further 58% to 649 in 2001, Mr. Giuliani’s last year in office. With newly safe streets and subways, New York roared back to life. As the mayor cleared sex and smut businesses out of Times Square, he enticed Disney to restore a stately vacant theater as that area’s anchor. A visionary private

effort had turned Bryant Park from a dope dealers’ den into a green oasis, and that district now thronged with tourists and office workers. Restaurants and theaters boomed. Old businesses grew, and new ones opened, including even a tech Silicon Alley. Columbia and New York University became hot schools once parents stopped fearing urban crime. With opportunity burgeoning and the city’s rich inheritance of museums, concert halls, and landmark buildings safe to use, property values skyrocketed. Global tycoons looked to city real estate as a glamorous safe haven for money. New development proliferated, and construction workers, service staff and luxury retailers all profited. New York became once more the capital of the world. Policy can change culture, Mr. Giuliani showed. It wasn’t the legacy of slavery that had created the disproportionately black urban underclass, he understood, but the

message of victimhood and helplessness sent by framing crime as an inevitable response to oppression and welfare as deserved reparations. Criminals, not society, were to blame for crime, and welfare recipients were also citizens with agency who were responsible for their own fates. Seizing on the 1996 welfare reform act, the Giuliani administration started an ambitious welfare program. Welfare offices became “job centers” and set welfare recipients to painting park benches, raking leaves and cleaning courtrooms. Recipients learned discipline and gained self-respect. Many moved into conventional jobs and, as in the nation as a whole, caseloads dropped dramatically. A remarkable dividend of the new approaches to crime and welfare, one with only anecdotal rather than social-science evidence, was a dramatic thaw in race relations, as fear and resentment

abated. But it didn’t last. Beginning with the De Blasio administration in 2014, the Giuliani reforms slipped away while Amazon and then Covid and Zoom sharply challenged New York’s economic model of retail stores and office towers. As it holds on to old economic engines and searches for new ones, the city urgently needs the culture of personal agency and public safety that Mr. Giuliani fostered. Mayor Zohran Mamdani evidently believes that legacy businesses and institutions are inexhaustible wealth-generators that, even as low-tax states beckon, will enable him to cultivate the tax-eaters and punish the taxpayers. That will prove a costly and tragic mistake. Mr. Magnet is author of “The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties’ Legacy to the Underclass” and “Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution.” He was editor of City Journal, 1994-2006. Ms. Hochul is only the second Democrat to opt a state in, after Colorado’s Gov. Jared Polis, but she won’t be the last. That she did so in New York suggests that the politics of school choice have shifted and that even union-dominated states can’t ignore the coalition of parents demanding options. The teachers unions are among the most politically powerful groups in the country, regularly keeping politicians in line. Unions certainly speak loudly in Albany. But in America’s 250th year, parent voices are getting louder. And some Democratic leaders are finally listening. Mr. Schultz is CEO of the American Federation for Children.

A+ for School Choice in New York

By Tommy Schultz

School choice will expand massively in New York. Finally. For a generation, the teachers unions held Albany in an iron grip. But on Thursday night that grip loosened as Gov. Kathy Hochul announced at a private gathering that she would opt in to the Education Freedom Tax Credit, making New York the 30th state to do so. Her office confirmed the news soon after. Passed as part of last year’s federal tax package, this landmark provision creates a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for people who contribute to support K-12 scholarships. Each donor can receive the tax credit on contributions up to \$1,700. It’s a model that has worked

successfully in many red states across the country. Now it can be adopted in states like New York, where opportunity has been locked out. Ms. Hochul has clearly digested that an estimated \$5 billion could be raised from New Yorkers. The decision is a no-brainer. Opting in shouldn’t be controversial. A majority of Americans support school choice, and a poll last fall found that nearly two-thirds of voters nationwide favor opting into the tax credit, compared to 18% who oppose it. That includes 70% of Republicans, 60% of independents and 58% of Democrats. New York state spends more per pupil than any other state in the nation, and it produces below-average test scores and an ever-widening

achievement gap that have voters demanding better. Ms. Hochul is only the second Democrat to opt a state in, after Colorado’s Gov. Jared Polis, but she won’t be the last. That she did so in New York suggests that the politics of school choice have shifted and that even union-dominated states can’t ignore the coalition of parents demanding options. The teachers unions are among the most politically powerful groups in the country, regularly keeping politicians in line. Unions certainly speak loudly in Albany. But in America’s 250th year, parent voices are getting louder. And some Democratic leaders are finally listening. Mr. Schultz is CEO of the American Federation for Children.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Virginia’s Gerrymander Loses in Court

The left is wailing and the right rejoicing, after Virginia’s highest court on Friday threw out a 10-1 Democratic gerrymander that voters approved in an April referendum. The partisan implications are real, because the GOP might come out ahead now in the 2026 House redistricting wars. Noteworthy, too, is that the rule of law lives in Virginia.

When Democrats in Richmond advanced the gerrymander, they were racing to answer Republican efforts in Texas and elsewhere, urged by President Trump. But Virginia’s constitution gives redistricting to a bipartisan commission. It also says proposed amendments have to go through the Legislature twice, with an election in between, giving voters another chance to be heard on constitutional rewrites.

In this case, state lawmakers first approved the gerrymandering amendment last Oct. 31, shortly before Election Day. “By that date,” Justice D. Arthur Kelsey writes for the 4-3 majority, “over 1.3 million votes had been cast,” which was “approximately 40% of the total vote for that election cycle.” The idea that this satisfied the requirement for an intervening election “appears to be wholly unprecedented.”

Under this theory, Justice Kelsey continues, Virginians who cast early ballots in 2025 “unknowingly forfeited their constitutionally protected opportunity to vote for or against delegates who favor or disfavor amending the Constitution.” That makes no sense, which is why the court rules instead that the gerrymandering amendment wasn’t properly proposed, and the April referendum is void.

State justices void the Democrats’ 10-1 map, rightly and bravely.

It’s a gutsy decision, two weeks after 3.1 million Virginians voted to adopt the gerrymander, 51.7% to 48.3%. But don’t blame the court for this timing. All along, Justice Kelsey says, the state “insisted that we cannot lawfully decide this case prior to the referendum.” Democrats were betting that if the amendment won at the ballot box, the court would flinch at countermanding the will of the people.

Yet as the majority rightly holds, if the state Supreme Court can’t decide the constitutionality of the amendment before the vote, then it has to make the legal call afterward, unless Virginia is going to give up on judicial review. The upshot is that Virginia’s midterms will be held under the old House map, which is split 6-5 in favor of Democrats, more or less fairly reflecting the state’s purple politics.

Throw in Tennessee’s new 9-0 map, and the gerrymander scoreboard suggests Republicans are ahead. Yet November could still surprise. The risk of spreading out the GOP’s voters is that they might turn out to be too thin in some places to deliver all the wins Mr. Trump imagines. Swing districts could swing one way. Then after 2026, Virginia Democrats might try again, along with who knows what other states.

None of this is healthy for competitive two-party politics. Politicians will choose their voters, rather than vice versa. Primaries may still be competitive, but the candidates will play to the partisan extremes.

Yet even gerrymanderers have to follow the law, and under high partisan pressure the Virginia Supreme Court got this one right.

Marty Makary’s Fatal Mistakes

Press reports say President Trump is planning to sack Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Marty Makary. That would be great news for patients who have been denied access to life-saving therapies on his watch.

We wrote approvingly in 2025 about Dr. Makary’s appointment in hopes that he’d restore credibility to an agency damaged by the Biden team’s Covid blunders. He talked about improving regulatory flexibility and increasing transparency. But once in office he and the deputies he hired, especially Vinay Prasad, did the opposite.

Drs. Makary and Prasad criticized the Biden FDA with good reason for rushing approval of Covid vaccines for children. Covid presented little risk for children. Green-lighting the shots based on results from antibody studies with little safety follow-up fueled a broader public skepticism about vaccines.

Yet Drs. Makary and Prasad didn’t seem to understand that the risk-benefit assessment for approving drugs for deadly diseases must be different. They demanded nothing short of large randomized controlled trials to prove the efficacy of medicines for debilitating diseases. This could take years, during which time patients would progress and some would die.

They also ignored that it’s unethical to give patients with fatal diseases a placebo when a treatment has shown promise in early-stage trials. Their actions ran counter to President Trump’s first-term support for a “right to try.” By moving goalposts and reversing prior agency guidance, they created enormous uncertainty that chilled drug development.

The FDA needs a leader who understands the promise of new life-saving therapies.

Why spend hundreds of millions of dollars running a clinical trial if the FDA may later decide that the protocol it had approved was no longer good enough to warrant approval and another trial was needed? That’s what has happened repeatedly under Dr. Makary.

Nor did he do his homework. At least that’s the charitable explanation for his false statements in TV interviews about drugs the agency rejected. Our sources say he also misled a GOP Senator who met with him about a rare disease drug rejection.

When agency rejections drew criticism, his political dodge was to lambaste Big Pharma—ignoring patients and doctors begging for approval. He also blamed rejections on career staff, even when Dr. Prasad overruled those who supported approval.

The FDA needs a leader who will take responsibility for the agency’s decisions and bring in others who support innovation and Mr. Trump’s right-to-try drugs mission. Instead, Dr. Makary looked on as Dr. Prasad drove out scientists who didn’t share his mission of restricting access to drugs whose benefits he didn’t think justified their costs. This is the same paternalism that destroyed the credibility of the Biden Administration’s vaccine policies.

Removing Dr. Makary is a necessary step to remedy a toxic culture that has taken hold at the FDA. Whomever Mr. Trump taps to take over will have his work cut out repairing the damage. One place to start is reversing the agency’s arbitrary and callous rejections of rare disease and cancer treatments. There’s no time to waste for patients today and tomorrow.

Iran Tests Trump’s Will to Fight

The Iran war has entered its skirmishing phase as the regime spent much of the past week firing at the United Arab Emirates and U.S. forces, who returned fire in self-defense. President Trump says the cease-fire endures, but for how much longer can that be while Iran keeps shooting?

On Thursday Iran launched missiles, drones and small boats to attack three U.S. warships as they transited the Strait of Hormuz. This was an Iranian attempt to kill U.S. troops, but it was intercepted. The U.S. destroyers exited Hormuz successfully, an important demonstration of the U.S. path through the closed Strait. “No U.S. assets were struck,” Central Command said, adding, “Centcom does not seek escalation.”

The same can’t be said for the Iranian attackers. The U.S. hit the inbound speed boats as well as military facilities responsible for the attacks, striking Iranian targets on Qeshm Island and Bandar Abbas. Iran uses these locations to terrorize commercial vessels and shut down the Strait. “They trifled with us today,” Mr. Trump said Thursday. “We blew them away.” He advised the regime to hurry up and take the U.S. offer that we reported on Wednesday. But when pressed on the U.S. strikes, the President called them “just a love tap.”

The Iranian regime called them U.S. aggression, which is rich. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Friday, “Only stupid countries don’t shoot back when you’re shot at—and we’re not a stupid country.” But when the attacks keep coming—Iran also fired missiles at U.S. warships Monday—is it smart to strike merely the direct sources of fire in reply? For now the Trump Administration is insisting on a cease-fire that Iran ignores. Or will this, too, be

The regime fires on U.S. warships in Hormuz but still enjoys a cease-fire.

blamed on rogue commanders, allowing the regime’s leaders to disclaim responsibility?

The U.S. Navy delivered a few more love taps Friday, as an F/A-18 Super Hornet disabled two Iranian tankers attempting to break the U.S. blockade. They sought to reach Iran, which needs all the floating storage it can get for the oil that can’t get out.

Iran fired another missile barrage at the U.A.E. on Friday, wounding three, and bizarrely “seized” a vessel that appears to be part of its own shadow fleet of illicit tankers and managed by a Chinese company. One of the vessels Iran hit earlier this week was also revealed to be a Chinese tanker, now damaged and its crew injured, per Chinese state media.

Iran’s regime has never held up its end of the cease-fire. Announced on April 7, it was supposed to be subject to the Strait’s reopening. Iran’s Foreign Minister acknowledged this the same night, writing that “safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz will be possible” within certain limits. Instead, tanker traffic declined.

Mr. Trump kept the cease-fire anyway, hoping for a deal on Hormuz and Iran’s nuclear program. But by signaling a deep reluctance to restart major military operations, he encouraged the Iranians to hold out for better terms. Instead of accepting 15 to 20 years of no nuclear enrichment, as U.S. negotiators had been led to believe, on April 11 the regime said five years. Vice President JD Vance had flown to Pakistan for nothing.

By keeping the cease-fire on life support even now, Mr. Trump sends the same message. But rather than wait for Iran, the U.S. could at least resume guiding commercial ships out of the Strait. The regime needs to know it is losing its leverage.

Chicago Students Get a Ferris Bueller Day Off

Your editorial “Making Public Unions More Accountable” (May 5) shows that many states make it easy for public employee unions to use taxpayer resources to advance their political agendas. That dynamic was on display last week when Chicago Public Schools caved to Mayor Brandon Johnson and the Chicago Teachers Union, allowing teachers and students to ditch school to attend socialist-backed labor rallies.

There’s never a good excuse for taxpayer-funded field trips to one-sided political rallies. In Chicago, where so many students are already missing school, it’s particularly indefensible. Roughly a quarter of Chicago high-school students missed more than a month of school in the 2023-24 school year, and chronic absenteeism has persisted. Graduation rates, meanwhile, continue to rise—even as dozens of the city’s schools have failed to educate a single student to grade-level proficiency, according to the watchdog group Wirepoints.

In a district struggling to get students into classrooms and remedy pandemic learning losses, this is an

egregious use of time—and a broader window into adults’ priorities. The union’s own messaging reflects these misplaced priorities. Roughly one-fifth of the CTU’s 300-plus posts on X so far this year have discussed Donald Trump or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Notably absent are posts seriously discussing student achievement.

Chicago’s most famous class-cutter, Ferris Bueller, had to fool Principal Ed Rooney to skip school. No longer. Today, too many adults are in on the act, diverting school time to their own priorities.

It wasn’t always this way. There was a time when reform-minded Democrats like Rahm Emanuel and Arne Duncan fought to expand instructional time and make student learning a priority. Mr. Emanuel now says America has “lost the plot” and urges Democrats to pursue fundamental education reform, while Mr. Duncan calls his party “adrift.”

One wonders whether any other Democrats are listening—Bueller? Bueller?

MICHAEL T. HARTNEY
Fellow, Hoover Institution
Palo Alto, Calif.

In Trump Term Two, No One Left to Say ‘No’

Gerard Baker asks, “What Happened to the Pragmatic Trump of the First Term?” (Editor at Large, May 5). The answer is simple: It lies in the people with whom President Trump has surrounded himself. In his first term, Mr. Trump hired or selected plenty of ideological kindred spirits such as Steve Bannon, Peter Navarro and Robert Lighthizer. But he also sprinkled in some pragmatists who had governing experience and in many cases were devoted to traditional GOP ideas regarding the role of government, foreign policy, taxation and other issues. Among them were Mike Pence, Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley. This latter group included people with the good sense and courage to express disagreement with the president and urge caution when it was merited.

In Mr. Trump’s second term, such voices weren’t welcome. Mr. Pence became a persona non grata after Jan. 6, 2021. Once elected in 2024, the president went out of his way to publicly inform Mr. Pompeo and Ms. Haley that they wouldn’t be welcome in his second administration.

The voices of reason that acted as a check on Mr. Trump’s wilder and baser instincts during his first term were replaced by voices whose most salient characteristics were their obsequious instincts and utter unwillingness to challenge Mr. Trump on anything.

The consequences of replacing judicious and seasoned advisers with sycophants should have been a surprise to no one.

MARK M. QUINN
Naperville, Ill.

The FDA, Replimune and Patients Like Me

Regarding your editorial “Oncologists vs. the FDA and RFK Jr.” (April 22): In 2022, at age 80, I was fortunate enough to be treated with Replimune RP3 for sarcoma in my right arm. I had undergone surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy following a diagnosis, and then I had been told that no further treatment was possible and that amputation was inevitable. I had four visible tumors on my arm and was gradually losing the use of my fingers. I took steps to prepare for one-armed life by using my left hand only—dressing, tying shoelaces and so on.

But thanks to my doctors’ innovative thinking, I was able to access an RP3 trial primarily intended for other cancers. Within six months of starting a two-year trial, my arm was healed. It regained 95% of its original

functionality. As a bonus, my life was possibly saved at the same time.

I’m deeply grateful to Replimune for its innovative immunotherapy, and it seems to me a travesty that melanoma patients are being denied Replimune RP1 when it has helped patients for whom existing treatments have been ineffective. The Food and Drug Administration should immediately reverse this decision to minimize the harm already caused.

JOHN JUDD
Thurlaston, England

Political Violence From Both Left and Right Is a Problem

Regarding Peggy Noonan’s “How Not to Respond to Political Violence” (Declarations, May 2): All of Ms. Noonan’s examples of recent violence were of threats against public figures on the political right or judges appointed by Republicans. She presented no examples of violence against Democrats, of which there are plenty—such as the arson attack against Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro or the two Minnesota state legislators, one gravely wounded, the other killed. Then there are the threats against blue state election officials. And don’t forget the 2022 attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

Given these omissions, it’s no wonder Ms. Noonan concluded that the left is “more likely” to act on violence. Making political violence partisan isn’t helpful.

CALVIN BELLAMY
Munster, Ind.

The Politics of Estrangement

Joe Angelastri gets it right in “Keeping a Civil Communion” (Letters, April 30). I think it’s catastrophic that so many people are choosing to go “no contact” when they disagree. There are family situations that merit going no contact, including abuse or neglect. But I have a friend who didn’t vote for Donald Trump and isn’t a Trump supporter, yet two of her daughters have gone “no contact” over her crime of not voting for Kamala Harris. I don’t understand how people can treat their family members this way over such issues.

JODY VANNESS
East Fallowfield, Pa.

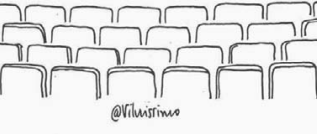
Trump’s Clumsy Diplomacy

Regarding Holman W. Jenkins Jr.’s “Where Is Trump Going in the Gulf?” (Business World, May 6): President Trump approved a battle plan for the Iran conflict that worked flawlessly in the kinetic phase. His dismay at Tehran’s recent impertinence, however, has occasioned helter-skelter statements. His ad-libbing in the post-kinetic stage isn’t his finest hour.

PAUL BLOUSTEIN
Cincinnati

Pepper ... And Salt

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OPINION

Is America Still Making Ted Turners?



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

All media this week rang with Ted Turner's achievements, and if you lived through his rise, the sound of his name brought a wistful smile. What a crazy, fabulous American man.

He bought MGM's library of films and invented Turner Classic Movies to play them; he bought the Atlanta Braves, put them on his superstation and called them America's Team. He flirted with bankruptcy, placed big bets, took big swings, captained the winning yacht in the 1977 America's Cup and, at the end, was too drunk to finish his victory speech on live TV. The man was epic.

He told Ben Mankiewicz of TCM that he wasn't a maverick. "I just thought a lot. I was smart enough to . . . think things through." He knew people would want 24-hour movies, great ones, classics, but silly ones too, because silly is part of life. "People like old stuff."

Rising tides of populism and progressivism may put a damper on tomorrow's renegades and visionaries.

Every thought worth uttering, everything that is true, can be said in plain, clear words, and often quickly. Ted Turner spoke as if he knew that.

But it was 1980 and CNN, which he invented out of nothing, was his great achievement. His stated philosophy: The news is the star. He believed this for two reasons. One was the news was, literally, what he was selling—24/7 TV news from all over the place. The other is that the idea of a 24-hour all-news television channel was so stupid—there was no proof people wanted this!—that the only people who would work for him were guys who had crashed out of the broadcast networks, kids nobody

heard of, and people who were good but hadn't hit stardom. He didn't have stars and made a virtue of it.

Eleven years in came the indelible event, the Gulf War. Everyone wanted to know what was happening, and CNN was on the ground in Iraq with reporters, cameras, sound crew, a bureau. The night sky, the fiery explosions in the distance, the satellite feeds straight from Baghdad, the world watching a war, live. And the correspondents—Peter Arnett, Bernard Shaw, who said, "The skies over Baghdad have been illuminated." It moves you, the memory of the excellence of it.

They were stars now. For a long time after that, when something big happened, you'd call your friends and you didn't say, "Put on the TV," you said, "Put on CNN."

Turner's death has me thinking about the world in which he rose. He was born into a political and economic context that simply allowed him to be him. That was good because we need renegades, brigands and pirates, we want their visions and breakthroughs, we want their spirit—go for broke, trust your brain, be wild, insist, announce you are here. (How many jobs—live-lihoods that allow a family to be stable and continue through time—did Ted Turner create?)

America is going to be making its decisions the next two, four and 10 years on what economic direction it wishes to go. I continue to sense a departing from past assumptions about the efficacy of economic freedom and free markets. I see a rising tide of progressive economic thought and a coming together, to some degree, of populist right and populist left. Inflation erodes confidence in the future; the psychic blow of 2008 still reverberates; young voters, especially millennials, remember those days of anxiety. Capitalism sure didn't look good and had very few regular, articulate and com-



Ted Turner in 2010

peating defenders. What I see coming is a rising thirst for safety and a kicking away from the world that made Ted Turner possible.

Things happen like this in history, countries take turns, sometimes gradual, sometimes abrupt. "The system" readjusts itself so it can always work in some rough way. Right now we should concentrate on making sure the fundamentals survive.

Here are two things that would help.

There was a legitimate and timely argument rising earlier this century that was accidentally killed off by the important person who voiced it. "If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen," said Barack Obama, campaigning for re-election in 2012. He was pilloried. It would have been political malpractice for Republicans not to pillory him. He sounded a lot like someone whose hidden resentments had found expression in sophomoric ideologies! But what he meant, it is fair to infer from the text, was that nobody builds alone.

And that is true: No one who makes it in America does it alone. Every billionaire who invented something in the garage traveled on roads the lowest-salaried taxpayers contributed to. They paid for the schools that taught that Silicon Valley work force. Taxpayers gave the tech titans an economic and political system that allowed their flourishing. That system was, literally, won and protected with the blood, sweat and valor of tens of millions of soldiers. The Mark Zuckerbergs and Bill Gateses did it with help.

And what they owe those who made them possible is loyalty. If you become Andrew Carnegie, you fill the nation with libraries so that poor kids can read. Free-market capitalism can continue only if those who have won show allegiance to their fellow citizens. Do our tech titans show this? Are you feeling the love?

Second, if you are a mighty figure in politics as opposed to business, you shouldn't besmirch the reputation of economic freedom with crony

capitalism. You make a great thing look dirty when you're dirty.

All the winners need to clean up their act. We have to continue an economic system in which there is plenty of space for vitality, for animal spirits and wild creativity, for investments of money that are actually an investment in the future because they're made on the assumption it will exist and be bright.

Freedom is messy and ugly, but it's the only thing that works. It is the only condition that creates beauty. It creates the wealth that lets us push our way past our constant failures of personal compassion, sympathy and encouragement, so that those who don't win are fed and housed and can live.

A word about this moment. Its mood is poor. We've gotten sodden and heavy in our thinking about our world—we live in late-stage capitalism in the postliberal order in an ever-falling Rome. Populist intellectuals have fallen half in love with death. Nukes, pandemics—we're all just holding on. Only the greediest dullards seem to have kept their focus.

It makes everything feel sad, defeated. As a way of thinking it is understandable, but it doesn't help us. And it's unworthy of life.

We have to proceed with spirit, with energy, in spite of everything, an energy that amounts to a kind of love. "The lift of a driving dream," Richard Nixon called it. We aren't truly ourselves without it.

Once in a Playbill before seeing "Long Day's Journey Into Night," I read that Eugene O'Neill believed tragedy brought "an urge toward life and even more life." Yes. Let the horror leave you hungry. Buy that team, man that station, win that race and get so drunk you can barely grip the champagne bottle to wave it in the air. It's the only way to go, to be.

Write to peggy.noonan@wsj.com.

How Imperfect People Form a More Perfect Union

By Neil Gorsuch

The Declaration of Independence is a short document, not much longer than this essay. Even so, it contains three ideas that shocked the world in 1776: Each of us is born equal; God grants us all inviolable rights, including the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and "We the People" have the right to govern ourselves.

Those three ideas represent America's creed. When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration in rooms he rented from a Philadelphia bricklayer, few in Europe believed in them. More than that, many considered them a threat to the existing social and political order. But to the patriots who fought in the long and brutal years of the American Revolution, those three ideas were worth the sacrifice of "our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

The Declaration's three great ideas still speak to us. Really, the Declaration serves as our nation's report card. At any point in history, the American people can assess how well we are living up to the Declaration's promises—and what challenges remain. In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues at Seneca Falls, N.Y., reminded the American people that men and women are created equal. Years later, Abraham Lincoln called on the country to live up to the Declaration's promises in the face of slavery, secession, and a bloody Civil War. Martin Luther King Jr.—standing before the Lincoln Memorial in 1963—challenged Jim Crow and called on the country to redeem the Declaration's "promissory note" for all Americans. Our nation will always be a work in progress, but the Declaration stands as a constant reminder of who we aspire to be.

Nor should our nation's imperfections blind us to the tremendous in-

heritance we have received. Even a quick glance through history and around our world today confirms how rare it is for a nation to be founded on the hope of realizing equality, liberty and self-government for its citizens. As Daniel Webster observed, it took thousands of years of human history for a nation devoted to the Declaration's three great ideas to arise, and "miracles" like that "do not cluster."

The legacy of the Declaration, though, owes only a partial debt to the genius of the document and those who wrote it. Its real guardian, and its hope for the future, lies in the hearts of the American people. Equality, liberty and self-government became the nation's creed because Americans in generation after generation chose them. And the survival of those ideas depends on each passing generation learning about them anew, engaging with the history that

gave rise to them, and choosing them all over again.

Yes, we have our differences. But that was true even at our nation's founding. Americans hotly debated whether to part ways with Britain.

Think of the Declaration of Independence as the nation's report card. How well do we live up to it?

The first vote on the Declaration of Independence split the colonies. Federalists and Anti-Federalists disagreed over whether to ratify the Constitution. Today Americans disagree strongly about important matters, as they always have and perhaps always will. But that, in many ways, is our nation's greatest

strength. By allowing everyone to speak and vote, we seek to harness the ideas of not only one ruler or group of elites; we seek to tap the full wisdom of the American people. In the face of disagreement, we speak and listen, debate and compromise, vote and then chart our way forward together. All of that is exactly what the Declaration hoped for us, and all of it lies at the core of the great American experiment.

The American story is like no other, and this year we celebrate a milestone like no other: the founding of the longest-living republic in the world. I look forward to the celebrations—the parades and picnics, the speeches and fireworks. But I also hope that all Americans will spend some time reflecting on the Declaration and recommitting to its creed. I hope, too, that each of us takes this opportunity to learn more about some of the ordinary people who

sacrificed so much to make America possible: those who fought a revolution against the most powerful empire on earth, who began our improbable experiment in self-government, who challenged the nation to live up to the Declaration's promises throughout our history, and who in every generation have given their lives for the cause of liberty, equality, and self-government. To them we owe a debt beyond repayment, and thanks to them we have the opportunity to continue the work of forming "a more perfect Union."

Justice Gorsuch is an honorary co-chairman of the National Constitution Center. This article is adapted from the National Constitution Center's anthology "The Promise of America: Reflections on Our Enduring Ideals," forthcoming from Simon & Schuster May 12.

Tim Cook, Apple's Gold Mine Manager



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

When will a small flat rectangle of electronics stop being the preferred form factor for the computers 5.8 billion humans carry around with them? Possibly never. Elon Musk's company Neuralink may create a datalink to your brain, but long into the future it will be useful to lug around additional computing, signal processing and display that can be accommodated in a separate, pocket-sized package.

To the constantly asked question about Apple's next act after the iPhone, then, the answer may be: the iPhone.

To Steve Jobs, they will build shrines; to his outgoing successor Tim Cook, they will dedicate case studies. Mr. Cook famously created the three-million-strong supply chain that builds Apple's iconic product mostly in China, giving a birth to heavy-breathing book jackets, blaming him for the rise of China. (China would have risen if Apple had never been born.)

Mr. Cook's other claim to fame was unavoidable but required some iconoclasm. Jobs had opposed returning cash to shareholders as if they might ever have better uses for the money than he did. Yet Mr. Cook would have been insane to do otherwise.

Apple, since 2012, has returned \$1.02 trillion in iPhone winnings to investors in the form of dividends and share buybacks. This sum, had it stayed on Apple's books, would easily be 20 times the cash Apple actually carries today, headed to infinity. Apple's share price would become a register mainly of doubts about whether management could ever use this giant and growing pile wisely. To politicians, the cash hoard would become an enticement to every kind of demagoguery and share-the-wealth mau-mauing. Apple would have made itself class warfare's Public Enemy No. 1.

Demystification is in order. Steve Jobs didn't pull rabbits out of hats. He executed wonderfully on the possibilities of technology and the commercial environment, even so stumbling into a gold mine to trump all gold mines, the iPhone.

I doubt Mr. Cook saw his own job

as anything other than consolidating the gold mine. I doubt his named successor, John Ternus, does either.

Apple's foray into services, its constant striving to anticipate any features and peripherals that might let another rectangle maker steal a march on the iPhone, are all about defending the gold mine.

There may never be another iPhone. There may never be a substitute for the device either.

The message inside the company: Generating cash—lots of it—for shareholders is how we defend the share price, not by investing in pie-in-the-sky as other highly valued tech firms do.

Mr. Ternus is 50 and a hardware engineer. Huh? Doesn't Apple know it's falling behind in the trillion-dollar race to build artificial superintelligence? Apparently not. Apple recently farmed out to Google's Gemini the backroom for a forthcoming "Apple Intelligence." Those who are constantly predicting an Apple pratfall see the company selling out its future to Google. Those who smell an antitrust rat see a cartel of the two dominant software makers for smartphones.

A better explanation: Apple will keep control of customer data and thus expects to be able in the future to play commoditized providers of AI off each other. Meanwhile, Apple

will continue to be absurdly profitable thanks to a level of customer lock-in that means a typical user is today on his sixth iPhone.

The bigger threat is a rival rectangle to solve the frustrations inherent in the rectangle: charging, typing, swiping around in search of apps. But an engineering truth will still likely prevail. No matter how much capability can be crammed into a wristwatch or eyewear or computer chip under your skin, customers will value the additional capability contained in a package that slips in your pocket.

After all, today's iPhone 17 is heavier, wider and longer than the 2007 original despite shrinking electronics. (The one thing it isn't is fatter—a stylistic signal Apple designers obviously strive for.) In the distant future, who won't still want a screen big enough for friends or family to crowd around for a funny video? The iPhone might be with us until the end of time, or until we ourselves become androids.

In a final observation, Steve Jobs begat Elon Musk. Jobs had to realize his gold mine before the market would credit Apple with a gold mine. With the image of Steve Jobs firmly lodged in their heads, Mr. Musk's investors are willing to give him credit in advance. At a stretch, you might even say Jobs found Mr. Musk the capital to build out Tesla and SpaceX. You can also say the world may have seen its last Elon Musk if there isn't a Tim Cook in the wings to deliver the gold mine at the end of the Musk rainbow.

N

Opinion

The New York Times

COLUMNIST | MICHELLE GOLDBERG

The Bad-Faith Effort to Brand Platner a Nazi

I HAVE A CONFESSION: I would not have recognized the skull that the Democratic Maine Senate candidate Graham Platner had tattooed on his chest as a Nazi symbol. I knew that a skull and crossbones formed part of the insignia for the Nazi SS, but had never really clocked the image's particularities — its three-quarter profile, the bones at the side of the skull instead of underneath — that gave it meaning even when stripped of all other Nazi context. So when Platner insists that he and his military buddies, drunk on shore leave, picked it off a tattoo parlor wall without recognizing it, it's easy for me to believe him.

I also can't quite blame those who detest Platner's left-wing politics for refusing to give him the benefit of the doubt. They have an easy line of attack, and naturally they're going to use it. Still, it's worth drawing a distinction between what is true and what makes an easy political narrative.

Platner's haters are embracing a distorted conception of him — and his following — built on a fundamental misunderstanding of his appeal. Some, appalled by Platner's rise, have convinced themselves that many voters are drawn to him because of his supposed antisemitism, and that anyone who denies this is being mendacious. Platner, wrote Philip Klein in National Review, “had one thing going for him, which is that he gained attention for his antisemitism. That is a ticket to success in the modern Democratic Party.”

This argument is premised on a deliberate misreading of both Platner and his progressive fans. We know about many of the outré and occasionally disturbing views Platner once held because years of his Reddit posts have come to light. He's apologized for some of them, saying that he made them at a time in his life when he was lost, deeply angry and suffering from PTSD from his military service in Iraq and Afghanistan. But aside from a single post, written when he was a bartender, suggesting that Black people were bad tipppers, there is nothing in these messages that indicates an interest in racial hierarchies or anti-Jewish conspiracy theories.

On the contrary, he is consistently, militantly antifascist. If people “expect to fight fascism without a good semiautomatic rifle, they ought to do some reading of history,” he wrote in 2018. In another, he wrote that since leaving the military, he'd become a “vegetable growing, psychedelic taking socialist,” but added, “Still got the guns though, I don't trust the fascists to act politely.” He referred to himself, jokingly, as an “antifa supersoldier,” and was involved with the Socialist Rifle Association, a left-wing alternative to the National Rifle Association. He lionized the men who volunteered to fight fascists in the Spanish Civil War.

Conservatives are angry that liberals call them fascists. Now they're turning the tables.



MARK PETERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

These views appear consistent through much of his life. In high school, he was voted “most likely to start a revolution,” and his yearbook picture shows him holding a sign that says, “Free Kosovo Chechnya Kashmir Palestine Kurdistan Tibet.”

It's worth pausing on the inclusion of “Palestine” here. Israel's defenders often accuse pro-Palestinian activists of singling Israel out and ignoring human rights abuses elsewhere. But Platner, from a young age, seems to have seen the Palestinians as one oppressed people among many. His condemnation of Israel, unlike that of some of the country's right-wing enemies, has nothing to do with its Jewish character, but with its killing and dispossession of a subject population, a stance shared by many left-wing Jews.

Israel's champions may not want to hear it, but there's a difference between those who revile Israel because it's Jewish, and those who oppose it because they believe states should grant equal rights and liberties to all those under their dominion. People in the second camp are usually reliable champions of the multiracial democracy

that has allowed Jews to thrive in America.

For some conservatives, there's no contradiction between seeing Platner as both a leftist and a Nazi, since they think that Nazis were socialists. That's mostly a canard, but even if you believe it, virtually no left-wing person does. In other words, the notion of a socialist antifa Nazi might make sense if you don't take Platner's politics seriously. But Platner appears to take them very seriously indeed.

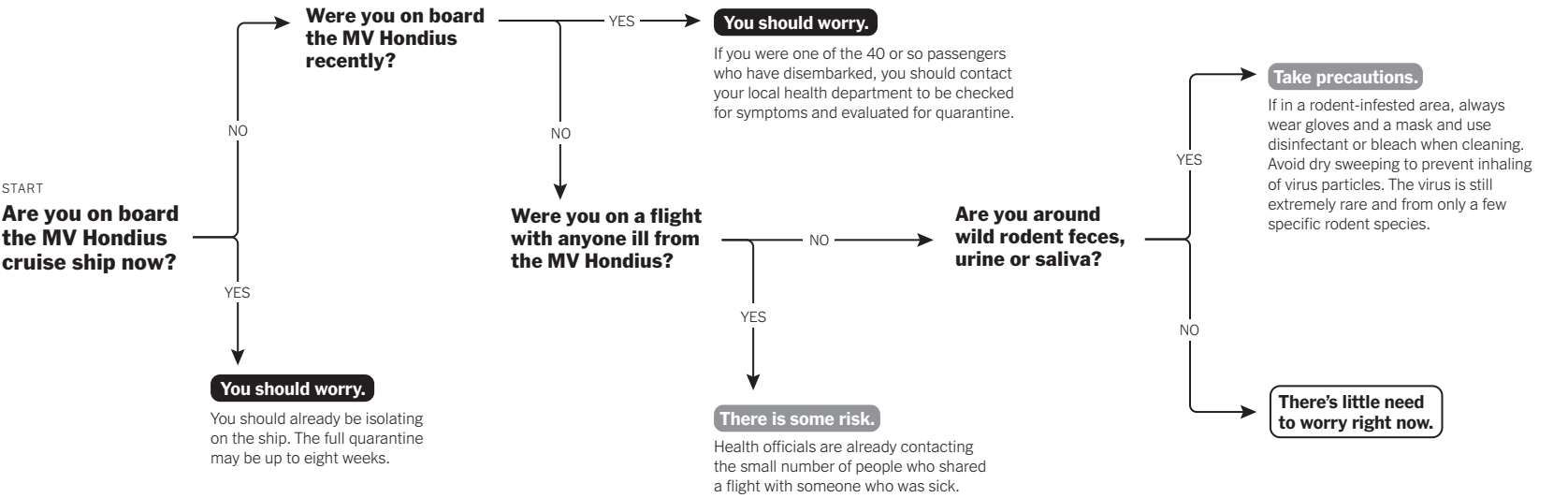
I'll admit I find it hard to believe that Platner didn't know what his tattoo represented before last fall, when he had it covered up. An anonymous acquaintance told journalists that he jokingly called it “my Totenkopf,” and his former political director has said that Platner told her it could be “problematic.” My best guess about what happened is that he got the tattoo, later learned what it resembled, and didn't take it seriously enough until it became a political liability. You might argue that alone is disqualifying. But to suggest that Platner harbors secret Nazi sympathies is to misjudge not just him, but his voters, many of whom are gravitating to him precisely because they see him as someone willing to fight fascism.

Of course, some of the right's Platner discourse is simple trolling. Conservatives are angry at liberals who call people on the right Nazis and are relishing the chance to turn the tables. Attacking liberal Platner defenders on X, the writer Matt Shapiro was admirably frank about this. It's absurd, he wrote, for liberals to “expect their right-wing opponents to be honest” about Platner's tattoo given that “they have an entire industry” that levels “accusations of racism and Nazism in order to destroy the lives of their ideological opponents.”

As an illustration, he cites progressives who accused Elon Musk of giving a Nazi salute at Donald Trump's inauguration rally. This seems to me an odd example, given the unending stream of white nationalist slop that Musk posts online. Still, I appreciate the acknowledgment that much of this debate is premised on dishonesty and revenge. Conservatives think they've been treated unfairly and are now seizing the opportunity to do the same to their foes.

It's unfortunate that Platner gives them this opportunity. That, not any covert affection for Hitler, is the biggest problem with his candidacy.

How Freaked Out Should You Be About the Hantavirus?



Caitlin Rivers

An epidemiologist and the author of “Crisis Averted: The Hidden Science of Fighting Outbreaks.”

OF THE roughly 150 passengers and crew members who boarded the MV Hondius, a luxury cruise ship, originally destined for Antarctica, three are now dead from a rare infectious disease: infection by a strain of hantavirus known as Andes virus. Three more people were evacuated to hospitals on Wednesday after developing symptoms like fever and shortness of breath. Some other passengers who might have been infected disembarked before the outbreak was recognized, raising fears among health officials that the infection, which can have a mortality rate up to 30 to 40 percent, could spread more widely.

The current outbreak is notable to me as an epidemiologist who studies infectious diseases because hantaviruses, a family of viruses spread by wild rodents that can cause lung and kidney diseases, don't cause many outbreaks, despite being found all over the world. In fact, person-to-person transmission is exceedingly rare. If it is confirmed in this case, as I suspect it will be, it

will make this event remarkable.

Despite the unsettling parallels to the early days of Covid-19, when cruise ships were among the first sites to be hit, the risks from this virus are quite different. Most hantaviruses infect only people who come into direct contact with infected rodent droppings, urine or saliva. Even the Andes virus, a strain that has been confirmed to pass between people, is a relatively poor spreader.

In previous outbreaks of hantavirus infection, person-to-person transmission required sustained exposure, such as prolonged, close contact with a sick person, which is why the Andes virus strain, despite causing severe illness, is unlikely to cause an epidemic.

The close quarters of the people on the cruise might have given the hantavirus an unusual opportunity to spread through close contact in shared spaces. Based on what we currently know, only people who were aboard the cruise ship and their close contacts are at risk.

Still, it's unwise to be too trusting when it comes to outbreaks. Viruses are wily. In the days and weeks ahead, there are a few developments I will be watching for that would change my level of concern.

Right now, all eight people with confirmed or suspected cases were passengers on the Hondius. If a case is found in someone who was not on board, I will grow more concerned about the potential for community spread. But even if more infections are found, the details will matter.

A new case with a direct connection to a passenger — for instance, the spouse of someone who was aboard — is explainable. Disease investigators can still hope to have a firm handle on chains of transmission. What would be more concerning is if an infection is found in someone with no obvious connection to the Hondius. Unlinked cases mean loose ends that investigators cannot see or manage.

It would also concern me if cases are found in health care workers. Outbreaks of viruses with characteristics similar to the Andes virus took root in hospitals. A 2015 outbreak of MERS in South Korea comes to mind, in which a sick person visited at least two hospitals and a clinic, inadvertently touching off chains of transmission that led to 186 confirmed cases and 38 deaths. Cases in health care settings signal an escalating situation.

Another wild card is viral evolution. As the many Covid variants have demonstrat-

The outbreak on MV Hondius is unlikely to lead to an epidemic.

ed, viruses are always changing and adapting, and sometimes those changes lead to an increased ability to pass from person to person. Scientists will be closely examining samples from sick passengers from the Hondius to assess whether a new variant that spreads more easily is in play.

These scenarios are possible but remote. In all likelihood, this outbreak will quickly come under control. But beyond monitoring for new developments, I will also be watching the effectiveness of the response. The demands of the Covid pandemic and subsequent political backlash have depleted public health programs, leaving us less prepared to mount a strong response.

Whatever its final form, the hantavirus event is yet another exercise of our ability to stop outbreaks. The public should expect clear communication, transparency about what is known and unknown, thorough scientific investigation and operational excellence. Nailing those elements could turn this unusual cluster into a lasting contribution to the science of outbreak response. If investigators do their jobs well and share what they find, the world will be better prepared not just for hantaviruses but also for whatever comes next.



ELEANOR DAVIS

You Can't Be Born Here. You Can Only Die Here.

Jessica Grose
An Opinion writer for The Times, covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

WHEN Bonner General Health stopped providing labor and delivery services in 2023, the families of Sandpoint, Idaho, were devastated. Jen Jackson Quintano told me that back in 2014 she had planned on a home birth, but it was not progressing, and her midwife took her to Bonner General, where she had a C-section. It went so well, she became friends with her obstetrician.

If you're a pregnant woman in Bonner County, in the northern panhandle of the state, your options for receiving prenatal and postpartum care and giving birth are quite limited. If you want to get an ultrasound, you are probably driving nearly an hour to Coeur d'Alene, or over an hour to Spokane, Wash. That's in good weather. But try navigating a bumpy dirt road and mountain passes, which sometimes close, in an ice storm, while in labor.

As a result, many pregnant women in the area are either opting for planned home births with midwives, or, if it's possible, they are booking short-term rentals or staying with family near hospitals with obstetric units. If a planned home birth goes sideways, fast, some of these women may end up in Bonner's emergency room, which no longer has obstetricians nor pediatricians to manage neonatal resuscitations. Some of them are buying helicopter insurance in case they need to be airlifted.

Ms. Quintano, who is a progressive activist, gathered birthing stories from other community members when Bonner closed its labor and delivery unit three years ago. Without having Bonner's obstetric care available, "I likely never would have tried to start a family knowing that all my prenatal appointments were over an hour away" a woman named Jonell said as part of the collected stories.

The closure of rural labor and delivery units is not just a northern Idaho problem. According to a 2024 report on maternity care deserts from the March of Dimes, "In 1,104 U.S. counties, there is not a single birthing facility or obstetric clinician." This is also not solely a recent problem, though it will be worsened by cuts to Medicaid by the Trump administration. The federal Rural Health Fund, which seeks to modernize ailing country hospitals, among other improvements, will not offset these cuts by much.

I'd describe it more as a slow-rolling disaster that is picking up speed across the country.

Over 130 rural labor and delivery units have closed since 2020, per the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform, a nonpartisan policy organization. Women who live in rural areas (that are not adjacent

to urban areas) without hospital-based obstetric care are more likely to have preterm births and less likely to receive adequate prenatal care, according to a 2018 investigation published in The Journal of the American Medical Association. They are more likely to give birth in emergency rooms that are not set up for obstetric emergencies.

I have now heard stories from across the country of women giving birth on the side of the road or in their cars because they did not make the long journey to the hospital in time.

The existential pain of losing birth services

As I was reporting this article, I heard from mothers, physicians, nurses, midwives and doulas living in rural areas from Maine to Oregon. They described the same interwoven set of dynamics making it hard to keep rural labor and delivery units open. The first issue is the aging population of rural America, which means fewer babies, and less revenue. Rural hospital administrators say that if a labor and delivery unit drops below 200 births a year, its financial viability is endangered, and it may no longer be able to guarantee the safety of its maternity care.

Maternity care tends to be a financial loser at urban hospitals, too, because insurance reimbursement rates for it are not great. But higher-volume procedures compensate for the losses. And if a city hospital ends labor and delivery services, a prospective patient's travel time to another hospital tends to be far shorter and less perilous.

Still, when any hospital loses obstetric services, it puts pressure on the closest hospitals. Patients now wait longer to see providers, and I heard anecdotes about women having to give birth in the hallways of hospitals because there was no bed for them.

Dr. Richard Leidinger is the medical director of surgical specialists at Northern Light Health in Presque Isle, Maine, part of Aroostook County. Half of the county's obstetrics departments have closed in the past 10 years. So Dr. Leidinger's hospital, which has one of the two remaining units in a county larger than Connecticut, is seeing women who "have had no prenatal care and arrive in active labor on our doorstep with no warning."

Keeping staff at rural hospitals is a huge problem in many medical specialties, because doctors and nurses often prefer to be closer to the amenities of more populous areas. Elizabeth Khan, a primary care physician who was formerly based in sparsely populated Mendocino County, Calif., and also gave birth while living there, said that the closest obstetrician to her hospital "was an hour-and-a-half drive through the mountains from us" while some of her patients have to drive four hours to San Francisco, where she now lives, to see a neurologist.

Dr. Katy Backes Kozhimannil, a director of the Rural Health Research Center at the University of Minnesota, told me that when a community loses its labor and delivery unit, that loss is about so much more than just some medical procedures — it becomes existential. We all have a story of where we were born, she told me.

"What does it mean to live a good life in a place?" Dr. Kozhimannil mused. "It feels like there is a deep loss in a community if you can't be born there — you can only die."

Cutting red tape, increasing reimbursements

The good news is that there are many common-sense, bipartisan policy solutions to this problem, and there is both state and federal legislation in the works aimed at some of the obstacles to rural women's getting quality care.

"The simplest solution is for health insurance plans (both commercial insurance and Medicaid) to pay adequately for labor and delivery services. 'Adequately' means enough to cover the lowest feasible cost of delivering high-quality care in that community, not some amount that might be adequate, on average, for large hospitals," said Harold Miller, the president and chief executive of the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform. Because there are fewer deliveries at small hospitals, there needs to be a higher payment per delivery to keep them afloat.

Mr. Miller also explained that ideally hospitals should be receiving what's called a standby capacity payment from each health insurance plan, a payment that would "support the minimum fixed costs of maintaining labor and delivery staffing in that community regardless of how many births there are." After all, he said, we don't fund fire departments based on how many fires there are every year.

There is a bill sitting in Congress called the Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act that would provide grants to rural hospitals for equipment and emergency obstetric training for physicians. I heard from many family medicine doctors who said that it would be useful to have additional obstetrics training, since they are providing cradle-to-grave care in many hospitals in rural America. This doesn't fix the problem of keeping staff in rural areas, but it's something.

Another policy solution, which some states have already taken steps to institute, is unbundling Medicaid payments for prenatal, birth and postpartum care. In many states, Medicaid reimbursement is a one-time payment for everything. In practice this can result in a delay in reimbursement or in hospitals potentially seeing no money at all if someone receives prenatal care from their

The closure of labor and delivery units is a disaster for rural women.

obstetricians but delivers in another setting. By reimbursing on a fee-for-service plan, small rural hospitals can see more funding for what they are providing.

There also needs to be better reimbursement for and easier access to midwives and doulas, who are providing essential care to rural women. I spoke to Sara Fichtenbauer, who is planning a home birth for her third child in Chippewa Falls, Wis. She told me she is paying \$6,000 out of pocket for midwife care, and she isn't sure she's going to get reimbursed — she's still filling out paperwork. California recently passed a law that cut some of the red tape for midwife-run birthing centers to help ease the burden of maternity deserts. This isn't a cure-all, though, because midwives cannot perform C-sections, and sometimes infants really need a NICU, and fast.

The babies are going to keep coming whether there's a labor and delivery unit to care for them. There is no shortage of ideas, nor of passion for fixing this problem. The issue is the political will and the slow pace of legislative solutions.

Dr. Leidinger, the hospital medical director in Presque Isle, told me that he served at a combat surgical hospital in Iraq, and he also treated patients in rural Guatemala. What he is seeing now in Maine makes him think that we're headed in the direction of those levels of medical care.

This shouldn't happen in the richest country in the world, Dr. Leidinger said. And I couldn't agree more.

LETTERS

What to Do for the Elderly? Stop Badgering!

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "My Parents Are in Their Mid-80s. Why Won't They Prepare for the End?," by Jessica Nutik Zitter (Opinion guest essay, May 5):

My first comment is: Stop badgering your parents!

Unless they are incapacitated, they can make decisions on their own. They don't need to be treated like children. I am 91. I am what is called a solo ager. I am living alone in my home with my dogs, and intend to stay here until I die.

I am part of a very large group of other solo agers, many of whom I know only on Zoom. We share concerns and talk about solutions to our problems. And we have presentations by many professionals who understand health care, finances, elder law and other issues we face.

We are connected to an organization called Positive Aging, which provides numerous resources for us online. If anything happens to me, I have already made detailed instructions for the care of my dogs, and have another notebook full of instructions and contacts for my family.

I make use of "crutches," like the daily notification system of Snug Safety and the fall warning system of my Apple Watch. I have done all of this without the help of my children, who, thank God, are not bugging me. I am a professional woman with a Ph.D. and am perfectly

capable of making my own plans.

I am a cranky old lady, and it really annoys me when younger generations decide they know what is best for us old people when we are perfectly capable of making those decisions ourselves. Our children and grandchildren have better things to do.

BARBARA OSGOOD, FAIRFAX, VA.

TO THE EDITOR:

I am 89 and know that planning for passing is important, as is social policy for aging, but urging your parents to plan for every potential medical disaster may lead them to a life of anxious preoccupation with death. Another view is to live to live, not live to die.

I'm already anxious about dying, and to counter it I memorize a new piece for the piano by Beethoven, finish writing another book chapter, reread "Moby-Dick" and travel to Mexico. As I watch aging colleagues, those who diligently plan for the worst are proud of their conscientious preparation, but they seem confused about how to enjoy living.

My liberal arts education didn't help me much in getting a first job, but it has been indispensable in helping me live my allotted last years with creativity, accomplishment and meaning. It may be just as important to plan for joy as to anticipate disaster as we prepare for the end.

JIM DAVIS, LAKEWOOD, COLO.

Antisemitism Online

TO THE EDITOR:

"Many U.S. Jews Say Vigilance Is Now a Constant Companion" (front page, May 5) powerfully captures how antisemitism is reshaping daily Jewish life — from scanning for exits to hiding visible symbols of Jewish identity.

But fear does not begin at the synagogue door. It is also cultivated online.

As a rabbi and Jewish content creator, I have seen a marked increase in antisemitism in recent months — comments targeting my nose, my children and my Jewish identity that echo longstanding antisemitic caricatures. When I report them, I am often told they "do not violate community standards."

The Anti-Defamation League has shown that this is not incidental. A recent report found that harmful and even extremist antisemitic content frequently remains online after being reported, allowing it to spread and normalize.

That normalization matters. The same tropes that appear in comment sections — collective blame and dehumanizing stereotypes — are the ones that underpin the fear described in the article. We should not be surprised that vigilance has become constant when the rhetoric that fuels it is allowed to spread unchecked.

This moment calls not only for awareness, but also for accountability — especially from platforms that allow such content to persist.

Yael Buechler, Bronx

Trump the Destroyer

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Easily the Worst President in U.S. History," by Thomas B. Edsall (Opinion guest essay, nytimes.com, April 21):

Thank you for publishing Mr. Edsall's excellent essay about the destructiveness of the Trump administration. This piece should be required reading for all Americans, but particularly for the 77 million people who voted for Donald Trump in 2024.

I love this country, and I am scared about its future because of Mr. Trump's malicious actions. I'm an old guy (73) and may not be around for the long-term damage, but I have children and grandchildren. I care enormously about their future. I hope this country has learned that having a businessman who knows nothing about government is a terrible idea.

MARC CHAFETZ, WASHINGTON

TO THE EDITOR:

We cannot forget the complicity of our elected Republican senators and representatives, who could have put a stop to much of the damage at multiple times, yet chose to allow unqualified people to rise to positions of power, compounding the damage.

CAROL E. BARNWELL, HOUSTON

TO THE EDITOR:

Dr. Jessica Nutik Zitter rightly bemoans that her parents, who are over 80, are not taking the practical precautions she would prefer. Of course, she's right, but I know what her fortunate parents are thinking: I'm a few months shy of 82. Just finished a fifth novel. Trekking to Alaska in two weeks. Spin with people a quarter of my age twice a week.

Those older than 80, like the good doctor's parents and me, who have that type of good luck are not old or elderly. Rather, the sobriquet might be O.M.A. — Older Middle-Aged!

ROBERT KORNHISER, BROOKLYN

TO THE EDITOR:

Lack of planning is only part of the problem for the elderly. Fear of the dreaded old people's home is very common among those who are determined to die in their own homes. What is needed is a more positive view of the options for us seniors.

Developing attractive, safe, affordable, well-supervised living places, such as continuing care retirement communities, is a far better option than sitting in a chair watching TV, waiting for the Meals on Wheels delivery.

I moved to a C.C.R.C. from a private home, where I had no close neighbors and no public transportation. Here I have my own space, friends, activities, meals, transportation and access to help in emergencies.

Which is better?

BARBARA T. BETTIGOLE
SLEEPY HOLLOW, N.Y.

2 Kinds of Dreaming

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "The Mind-Altering Power of Lucid Dreaming," by Cody Delistraty (Opinion guest essay, April 26):

Mr. Delistraty's article about lucid dreaming cites some of the advantages of this particular dream experience. While lucid dreaming may have certain advantages over regular dreaming (for example, the dreamer's partial control over the dream narrative), I would suggest that normal dreaming during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep also offers us meaningful information.

For example, during the latter we may be reminded of significant past events (deaths, anniversaries, etc.) or derive insight into current conflicts, impending decisions or difficult relationships.

Moreover, REM sleep dreaming transforms conscious information (including thoughts and feelings) into unconscious information, in order to facilitate learning and problem solving.

In effect, nonlucid dreaming is essential for our mental functioning.

MYRON L. GLUCKSMAN
WILTON, CONN.

The writer is a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College and the author of "Dreaming: An Opportunity for Change."