



Doublespeak

India is finding the Trump administration increasingly unreliable

Weeks after calling off the visit of trade negotiators to Delhi, the U.S. administration says it has invited Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and the Indian trade team to Washington to resume talks for the India-U.S. FTA. The announcement came days after U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi signalled, through public comments and social media posts, a halt to tensions of the last four months. On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Mr. Trump’s Ambassador-designate to India Sergio Gor also said they expect ties to be smooth, a trade deal to be announced shortly, and a Quad Summit later this year. Despite the U.S.’s punitive actions against India on trade, visas, deportations, and Mr. Trump’s comments on Operation Sindoor, the ceasefire and his dealings with Pakistan, New Delhi has appeared prepared to move forward as well, with Mr. Goyal and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar confirming India’s active engagement with the U.S. However, other comments by the Trump administration on India’s import of Russian oil could throw a spanner in the works. Mr. Gor has said that stopping the imports by India remains the U.S.’s “top priority”, while Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has said that India has “got to stop” buying Russian oil for a U.S. trade deal. Meanwhile, reports suggest that Mr. Trump has personally asked the European Union to slap “100% sanctions” on India and China to make Russia stop the Ukraine conflict.

The U.S.’s doublespeak will disappoint many in government and industry circles who had expressed relief over the Modi-Trump détente, and the resumption of trade talks. At 50%, India and Brazil face the highest U.S. tariffs, and Indian textile exporters have begun to see orders being cancelled. According to the Chief Economic Adviser, V. Anantha Nageswaran, the tariffs could mean a loss of half a per cent from India’s GDP, and job losses will be a concern as well. In theory, the government could consider the U.S.’s demands on reducing Russian oil if they had not been served as an ultimatum. However, even if New Delhi was so inclined, Washington is making the choice much harder with its crudely worded diktats. While the Modi government did accept the U.S. demands to stop the imports of Iranian and Venezuelan oil earlier, repeating that in 2025 with Russia is more complex. While the costs of oil sanctions and high tariffs can be absorbed, the costs of caving in now and the resultant reputational damage may seem greater in the balance.

Scam space

Social media platforms should proactively remove fraudulent content

Policing the digital economy requires what might seem disproportionate resources, and a recent case in Hyderabad illustrates why. A retired doctor was persuaded to invest more than ₹20 lakh after viewing a video on Instagram, in which Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman appeared to endorse an investment scheme. The video was a deepfake. Similar videos have been in circulation, featuring other public figures, to lend credibility to fraudulent cryptocurrency platforms. Such scams exploit the limited technical literacy of the wider population, regulatory gaps in cryptocurrency trading, the new use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated deepfakes, and the limited response of social media platforms. Despite wide smartphone penetration, many users are still unable to identify online manipulation, and are further motivated by the promise of rapid profits and fabricated evidence of gains. Complaints often arise only after attempts to withdraw returns are blocked. Public awareness campaigns remain uneven and often general, leaving many people vulnerable to scams that use increasingly sophisticated forms of deception. Most countries, including India, also do not yet classify them with the same clarity as conventional securities, creating an environment where fraudsters operate with impunity. Many are hosted abroad, operate through complex chains of wallets, and can disappear overnight. While police units have developed capacity, their reach stops at national borders.

Social media platforms, which serve as the principal channel for these scams, often respond passively. While companies such as Instagram publish advisories on avoiding scams and offer reporting mechanisms, fraudulent videos and accounts remain accessible until removed. The policies of platforms emphasise user self-protection rather than proactive detection. This means that scams circulate long enough to entrap victims before takedown requests are processed. The scale of global content slows manual review while automated moderation systems remain limited in detecting manipulated videos. As they are private entities profiting from user engagement, platforms prefer to avoid sustained monitoring that would involve intrusive scrutiny of user uploads. The result is that deepfake scams are treated as individual incidents rather than systemic vulnerabilities. Three measures are necessary. First, governments must define standards for registration, disclosure, and cross-border cooperation to limit the space in which fraudulent schemes operate. Second, technical literacy must be treated as a public policy priority. Awareness efforts should be continuous and supported by educational institutions, rather than limited to periodic campaigns by police units. Third, social media platforms should be required to remove fraudulent content proactively. Without these, such scams will entail huge human and material costs.

The Right to Information (RTI) Act is founded on the principle that in a democracy, which is defined as “rule of the people, by the people, for the people”, all information held by the government inherently belongs to the citizens. The government acts as a custodian of this information on behalf of the populace. Citizens legitimise their representatives by electing them, who in turn legitimise the bureaucracy. Therefore, the default mode under the RTI is that all information must be shared with citizens.

However, the Act always included specific exemptions to protect certain interests, such as national sovereignty. One crucial exemption is the Act’s Section 8(1)(j), which is on “personal information”.

The original Section 8(1)(j) was a detailed provision designed to balance the right to information with individual privacy. It stipulated that personal information could be denied if it had no connection to public activity or constituted an “unwarranted invasion on the privacy of an individual”, unless there was a larger public interest in its disclosure.

A key aspect of this original provision was a proviso which is an acid test. It said: “provided that the information which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person”. This meant that if information could not be denied to Parliament or a State Legislature it could also not be denied to an ordinary citizen.

The intent was to guide public information officers (PIOs) in discerning what constituted public activity, private activity, or an invasion of privacy, especially given the difficulty in definitively defining “privacy” (even *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd) vs Union Of India* acknowledged that it would evolve on a case-to-case basis). The government routinely collects information from an individual in the normal course of its duties, and such information is generally not considered to be an invasion of privacy and should, therefore, be shared. However, if it invades his privacy, it must not be taken routinely. Restrictions on the fundamental right to information should be within the limits set by Article 19(1)(2) of the Constitution. Here, there are only two words relating to privacy: ‘decency’ or ‘morality’. If disclosure violates decency or morality, it should be denied to Parliament and citizens.

The ambiguity of ‘personal information’
The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act – a drastic alteration of Section 8(1)(j) that reduces its length to six words. This significant abbreviation makes it easy for most information to be denied. The core concern revolves around the interpretation of “personal information” itself.



Shailesh Gandhi

is a former Central Information Commissioner

Citizens and the media need to challenge the Digital Personal Data Protection Act’s amendment of Section 8(1)(j) of the Right to Information (RTI) Act

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of a clear and consistent definition of “personal information” under the amended RTI Act, especially in its relationship with the new Data Protection Law. There are two conflicting views: the first is Natural Person Interpretation: One view holds that “person” should be understood in its general sense, referring to a “normal person” or natural person. The second is the DPDP Bill Definition. The other, equally valid view, interprets “person” as defined in the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Bill. The DPDP Bill’s definition is expansive, including a “Hindu undivided family, a firm, a company, [and] any association of individuals and the State”.

If the latter definition is adopted, “almost everything is personal information”. A significant amount of information can be shown to be related to some person. Thus the law gives a handle to deny most information. The RTI is transformed into a Right to Deny information. It becomes an ‘RDI’. This broad interpretation poses a fundamental threat to the spirit of transparency. Adding to the complexity, the DPDP Bill contains a provision that overrides all other laws in cases of conflict. This is alarming because the DPDP Bill specifies strong penalties for violations which can be as high as ₹250 crore.

This creates an untenable situation for PIOs. As much of the government information is now digital, PIOs are apprehensive that a mistake in disclosing information could lead to severe financial penalties. This fear will incentivise PIOs to err on the side of information denial rather than disclosure, effectively creating a “right to deny information”. The DPDP Act must not override the RTI Act, though it might be acceptable for it to override other Acts.

Facilitating corruption

The practical implications of these amendments are dire for public accountability and the fight against corruption. Transparency is a crucial tool in this battle, especially when other anti-corruption mechanisms have proven to be ineffective.

The first is the loss of public monitoring. Citizens are the best monitors against corruption. If information is denied, this vital monitoring mechanism is severely hampered. India’s multilayered government agencies such as vigilance departments, anti-corruption bureaus and the Lokpal, have abjectly failed to curb corruption.

The second is denial of essential information. The broadened scope of “personal information” means that even mundane yet crucial documents could be withheld – a citizen’s own corrected marksheets could be denied as “personal”. The example of Rajasthan sharing details of pension beneficiaries to combat “ghost employees” and “ghost cards” will cease. Even a simple order

signed by an official could be denied as “personal information”. It can result in over 90% of information being denied.

The third is unfettered corruption. The amendment “makes it the easy thing to be corrupt”. Information relating to ghost employees or corruption charges falls under “personal information”. It will be hidden, allowing corruption to ‘flourish and continue unhindered’.

While the “larger public interest” clause still exists in the RTI Act (in Section 8(2)), its practical application is extremely rare and difficult. Citizens should not have to demonstrate “larger public interest” to access information as it is their fundamental right. This requirement only applies if information is already exempt.

There will be less than 1% orders where an exemption is accepted, but disclosure is based on larger public interest. This is because it is an incredibly challenging decision for any officer to make, weighing potential harm to an individual against the broader public benefit of disclosure. Therefore, relying on this clause to ensure transparency after the amendment is largely futile.

Apathy and a call to action

Despite the gravity of these amendments, there has been a notable lack of public and media outcry when compared to previous RTI changes, such as those concerning Commissioner’s salaries and tenures. This apathy may be due to the amendment being “under the guise of data protection”, making it seem less threatening to the average citizen. There is also a common sentiment that an individual’s own information should not be shared, regardless of its relevance, leading to an ‘ego takes over’ mentality.

Sections 8(2) and 44(3) of the DPDP Bill constitute a “very fundamental regression on our democracy” and a “very fundamental attack on our fundamental rights”.

There needs to be a focus on four issues. First, media and citizen engagement – there must be widespread public discussion across the country. Second, political accountability – citizens should demand assurances from political parties in their election manifestos that these amendments will be reversed. Third, public opinion – it is crucial to build strong public opinion with the support of the media. Fourth, recognition of gravity – this issue deserves as much attention as any other critical national debate, as the fundamental right to information is being compromised.

If citizens continue to remain silent, they will imperil their freedom and democracy. Collective action can lead to these changes being reversed. The future of transparency and accountability in India hinges on whether citizens and media can push back and protect the integrity of the RTI Act.

Property rights, tribals and the gender parity gap

It is over a month since International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples was observed on August 9, but it is still not late to ponder over the rights of India’s indigenous population. The proposition becomes all the more topical following a judgment of the Supreme Court of India on July 17, 2025. In *Ram Charan and Ors. vs Sukhram and Ors.*, the Bench of Justice Sanjay Karol and Justice Joymalya Bagchi equated the exclusion of daughters in ancestral property to be a negation of their fundamental right to equality. Thus, looking at the issue of a tribal woman’s property rights through the lens of gender equality becomes significant. It is a matter of deep gender injustice that most tribal women (except in the north-east where there is matriliney in some tribes) do not have pieces of legislation giving them statutory rights in ancestral property.

Plea of equal share

In this case, the appellant-plaintiffs were the legal heirs of Dhaiya, a Scheduled Tribe (ST) woman in Sarguja district, Chhattisgarh, who sought partition of a property that belonged to their maternal grandfather, Bhajju alias Bhajan Gond. Their mother (one of the six children – five sons and a daughter), they claimed, was entitled to an equal share. The cause of action arose in October 1992 when the defendant refused to make a partition. The appellant-plaintiffs approached the trial court seeking a declaration of title and partition of the suit property, which was dismissed on the ground that no such custom existed in the Gond tribe where female heirs are given rights in ancestral property.

After being rejected by the first Appellate court and Trial court, the plea then came before the



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It is a matter of deep gender injustice that most tribal women do not have statutory rights in ancestral property

Chhattisgarh High Court. In so far as the argument of the appellant-plaintiff that they had adopted Hindu traditions and so be granted such rights according to the Hindu Succession Act, it was held that since there was no evidence on record, the Trial Court and the First Appellate Court had rejected this contention. However, it granted Dahiya’s legal heirs an equal share in the property stating that denying the female heir a right in property under the garb of customs only exacerbated gender discrimination – which the law should weed out.

In *Madhu Kishwar and Ors. vs State Of Bihar and Ors.* (1996), a petition had raised the issue of parity between female and male tribal members in the matter of intestate succession. This pertained to customary laws excluding women from inheritance of land or property. The majority judgment of the Supreme Court refused to strike down the provisions as violative of the right to equality, stating that this would cause chaos in the existing law.

Laws in Scheduled Five Area States

In matters of marriage, succession and adoption, tribals in Scheduled Areas are governed by their customary laws. Despite women contributing more in farms than the men, none of the tribal customary laws prevalent in the Scheduled Five Area States (which also includes Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha) give land inheritance parity to females in ancestral properties. The All India Report on Agriculture Census 2015-16 shows that 16.7% of ST women possess land when compared to ST men (83.3%).

It is also argued that in tribal society, land is a communitarian property, where there cannot be an individual owner. But, it rarely happens that

money received against the sale or acquisition of tribal lands goes to the gram sabha of villages. The fear of tribal women marrying non-tribal men, leading to land alienation, is another reason for denying women land inheritance rights. The fact that the nature of land remains indigenous despite its transfer to non-tribal as it happens in forest land is to be understood before any such denial.

Any custom must pass the test of parameters such as antiquity, certainty, continuity, reasonableness and conformity with public policy in order to be transformed into a law. A court of law can verify the legality of a custom based on these. A similar situation arose in *Prabha Minz Daughter Of Late Saran Linda vs (A) Martha Ekka Wife Of Late Ajit Ekka* (2022), where the Jharkhand High Court historically decided in favour of property rights of women of the Oraon tribe in the State as the defendant failed to prove that there was any custom in the Oraon community of Jharkhand where daughters have been continually deprived of inheritance rights in paternal property.

A case for a separate act

The Supreme Court took an affirmative stand on tribal women’s property rights, in *Kamala Neti (Dead) Thr. Lrs. vs Special Land Acquisition Officer*, on December 9, 2022, which was one of the first steps towards celebrating the beginning of gender parity in property rights among the tribal women. If Section 2(2) of the Hindu Succession Act, 2005 excludes tribal women from its purview, why not have a separate Tribal Succession Act made for tribals? Codification of tribal laws on the lines of Hindus and Christians can also help resolve the issue substantially.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Nepal

Nepal is facing possibly its worst political turmoil. Following the youth-led protests, curfews and disrupted services reflect the fragile situation. India must act with careful diplomacy by supporting peace, democracy and early elections, taking care to avoid any perception of interference. Stability in Nepal is vital.

Hammad Noori,
Mumbai

India must be wary of the

developments in Nepal — in fact, the neighbourhood. New Delhi must extend all the aid it possibly can. Nepal must be represented by a democratic government. The Army is no entity to settle the issues in the current scenario.

Manas Agarwal,
Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh

The protests, led by ‘Gen Z’, signal a restless generation demanding accountability. While it is uncertain whether it will see success, the movement is not

insignificant. It has shown the power of youth in demanding a future in which they can have faith. It is crucial that this type of ‘energy’ is nurtured.

Vaibhav Kochar,
Ludhiana, Punjab

The protests were led by ‘Gen Z’, the generation of ‘digital natives’ who have grown up with the Internet, smartphones and social media. A dismissive, complacent and even somnambulant regime will get its wake-up call sooner

rather than later. When avenues of protest are closed or stonewalled, the populace will let off steam — only in an explosion.

R. Thomas Paul,
Bengaluru

Break this link

It is ironic that Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who promptly nominated Israel’s strong backer U.S. President Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize, has ensured that Mr. Trump’s ‘Nobel goal’ may be dashed

following Israel’s attack on Qatar. This could create a new headache for America by fuelling yet another crisis of confidence among Arab states on the U.S.’s ability to play a meaningful role in West Asia. It is clear that deleterious tendencies that have crept into democracies linking domestic political exigencies to foreign policy actions. This needs to end.

Girija Kumar,
Chennai

‘Made of Madras’
I have been following the

‘Made of Chennai’ column — on the nostalgic memories of celebrities and achievers in different fields. But one of the most important pillars of *The Hindu* since its founding is its readers, who have been steadfast in their support. Perhaps the daily can feature readers and their memories about the evolution of Madras.

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

GROUND ZERO



Helping hands: Rescue work in progress at Kanwan Wali Village, in Fazilka. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

After the disaster

Punjab's floods have taken 55 lives and left thousands of people homeless. Vikas Vasudeva reports on the anxiety around the loss of farm produce and jobs. People in relief camps wonder when they can return home and worry about the condition of their houses and belongings collected over years of work and struggle

The dark monsoon clouds that hung over Fazilka have given way to sunlight that filters through the eucalyptus trees surrounding the government middle school at Salem Shah village. Kirna Rani, 22, cannot enjoy it. She sits on the floor of the corridor, gently stirring a saucepan of water and a flour-jaggery mixture over a shared mini-gas-cylinder stove.

These are emergency rations, given to those who were forced out of their homes in Punjab's floods that killed 55 and left thousands homeless. Heavy rains put the Sutlej, Ravi, and Beas rivers in spate, and they soon overflowed their banks inundating low-lying areas and farmland.

Rani and her family of four, along with a dozen other people from her village, who had been at the school that was transformed into a camp overnight, feel the weight of uncertainty. "The water started to rise in the Sutlej close to our village, somewhere in early August. Initially, it was rising slowly and we didn't anticipate that it would suddenly swell," she remembers.

The night after Raksha Bandhan, on August 10, when women tie threads on their brothers' wrists for protection, she says water gushed into their three-room house in Dona Sakandri village in Fazilka district. They waded through knee-deep water, most of their belongings destroyed, yet clinging to the hope that the water would recede. "For a few days, we stayed inside the house. We climbed on tables and tried to survive," she says. They realised their paddy crop, planted across 5-6 acres had been submerged and destroyed.

The Army rescued families by boat, taking them to Kawan Wali Pattan village across the Sutlej. Dona Sakandri and about a dozen other villages lie between the Sutlej and the Pakistan border. A bridge connects them to the rest of India, but the river raged over it. This strip of land was impacted during Operation Sindoor, in May, when schools were closed and villages underwent safety drills.

Rani's two children, three-year-old Tavanjot and Harsimrat Kaur, who is still a baby, huddle close to her hoping to get their favourite meal soon.

"It's difficult to stay in the camp for long, but there's no other option. We don't know how long we will have to stay here. I don't know whether our house is even intact. Nothing will be the same as before," she says, hoping the government will compensate them.

The relief camp at the school building is one of 111, sheltering 4,600 people, set up in the flood-affected areas of Punjab, the country's grain bowl. Besides Fazilka, Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Ferozepur, were all impacted.

People still remember the floods of 1988, when several hundreds died here, a part of devastation across several States in north India. This time, according to the State government, al-



As the water level has started to go down, the sight of destruction is slowly revealing itself.

BALWANT SINGH
Sarpanch of Jhangar Bhaini

most 4 lakh people have been affected in about 2,200 villages across Punjab.

Boats and bridges

Sham Singh, 36, from Rete Wali Bhaini village, doesn't own land and works as a daily wage labourer on farms. "My house has been badly damaged by the floodwater. With most farmland under water, I have no work. For the past couple of weeks, my family (of five) has been here at the camp, but I am worried about how I will sustain them once the camps are closed," says Singh, the sole breadwinner.

Balwant Singh, 65, a farm labourer from Teja Ruhela village, says, "A big problem for most of us living in the village is that land is not registered in our name. Most families settled here after the Partition (India-Pakistan in 1947). Many of us will not get financial relief as we do not have any documents. Where do we go? What do we do?"

Punjab received 253.7 mm of rain in August, which was 74% in excess of normal, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD). Now, the floodwaters recede with the retreating monsoon, but people's lives are not returning to what they were used to.

Chand Singh, 65, from Ram Singh Bhaini village, gauges the current of the water flow before he takes a call to walk over the bridge from Kawan Wali Pattan village. Chand says, "For the first time in years, I have seen water flowing over this bridge. The water has receded now, but the current is still strong, so I'll take a boat." He has

been able to stay, because water didn't enter his house. He crossed the river in the morning to get a few medicines and rations.

His neighbour, Sukhvinder Singh, 30, rues that while the administration has provided manually operated boats, villagers have to row the boats by themselves. Most are not trained to do this, which puts their lives at risk, he says. "There's also a shortage of safety jackets," says Sukhvinder, a daily wage. He has come with Chand to replenish fodder and cattle medicine stocks.

"Relocating cattle to dry, high ground has been challenging. Teams of veterinarians have been paying visits, but the situation requires more attention. Also, there's a shortage of cooking gas cylinders now, forcing many to share the limited supplies," he says.

Survival through the storm

As relief efforts continue, the residents face the dual challenge of immediate displacement and long-term livelihood loss. Mukhtiar Singh, 50, a school cab driver, is anxious about his family's sustenance amid the crisis. "I have a family of eight to support and our meagre savings are nearly depleted. The floods have submerged my village and surrounding areas. I can't drive my school cab, and with no work available for my two sons, who are daily wagers, our situation is dire," he says.

Balwant Singh, the Sarpanch (village head) of Jhangar Bhaini, feels that the miseries have in fact just begun. "As the water level has started to go down, the sight of destruction is slowly revealing itself. In my village, there are around 270 houses and almost all of them have suffered damage, completely or partially and the entire crop has been lost. Animal carcasses can be seen at some places, the stench is unbearable and there is a growing fear of disease outbreak." He says the administration is working hard to provide relief though.

Fazilka's Deputy Commissioner Amarpreet Kaur Sandhu points out that of 30 relief camps immediately set up in the district, 14 remain active, sheltering 2,946 people. "Till September 9, about 12,539 ration kits have been given to affected families. Additionally, 6,190 bags of cattle feed have been distributed for livestock," she says. Many people have brought their cattle to the relief camps, and the government is supplying green fodder for their feed.

Fields of water

In Gurdaspur, another flood-ravaged district, which accounts for the bulk of agricultural losses,

the water levels in the Ravi have gradually gone down. However, farmers like Gurinderpal Singh, 48, from Kalanaur village are worried about the next season's losses. The rice crop and the investment has sunk, and he says the ground will be too wet to plant the winter wheat crop.

"My paddy crop was under 3-4 feet of floodwater for days, leaving it completely ruined. We usually sow wheat in late October and early November here, but it will be difficult this time. Late sowing will result in low yield, which again means loss," says Gurinderpal, who had sown paddy in around 70 acres of land on lease. This year, crops have been damaged on at least 1.91 lakh hectares spread over 18 of the 23 districts of the State, the government says.

The Punjab monsoon season, welcomed after the dry summer of May and June, when temperatures soar into the 40-degrees, gives the State 75% of its annual rainfall. A State government assessment points out Punjab's vulnerability to recurring floods, seen in 2023, 2019, 2013, 2010, 2008, and 2004.

Devinderjeet Singh, 51, a farmer in Manawalan Kalan village of Amritsar district, explains that heavy rains and gusty winds have adversely impacted his Basmati, the aromatic, long-grain rice crop. The cost of harvesting has also shot up. "As the rain spells continued till the first week of September, the harvesting of whatever crop is left has also been delayed. I usually harvest Basmati in the last week of July," Devinderjeet says.

He is now using combine machines with chains, designed for harvesting on moist land, which has increased his farming cost. "I have to shell out ₹6,000 per acre for using these machines. Otherwise it would have been ₹2,000 an acre," says Devinderjeet, who has sown rice in around 75 acres of land.

Politics in a crisis

Amid the flood catastrophe, political parties continue to point fingers at each other. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who on September 9 travelled to Punjab, announced financial assistance package of ₹1,600 crore for the State. Soon after, the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) termed the amount as "meagre and insufficient".

Punjab Cabinet Minister and AAP president Aman Arora accused the Prime Minister of delivering a "cruel joke" in the name of the relief package to the people of Punjab instead of the meaningful national response they had hoped for, noting the State was staring at losses exceeding ₹20,000 crore. Punjab Congress president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring described the relief package as "miserably meagre", similar to "a drop in the ocean".

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), urged the Prime Minister to enhance the financial assistance, while questioning the AAP about the ₹12,000 crore available to the State government under the State Disaster Management Fund (SDRF). "Punjabis want to know the whereabouts of the ₹12,000 crore referred to by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to flood-affected areas. This money was to be used to provide speedy aid to the flood affected, but now the State is asserting that it does not have this money," noted senior SAD leader Daljit Singh Cheema.

Blaming the AAP for "squandering away ₹12,000 crore of SDRF received from Centre, on publicity stunts and other purposes," Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) State president Sunil Jakhar said, "The money has not been utilised for flood mitigation efforts."

Reacting to the charges, Punjab Cabinet Minister Harpal Singh Cheema has accused the BJP of deliberately misleading the public on disaster relief funds. "BJP leaders have been shamelessly peddling lies to defame the AAP government. The truth is before the people, and every single rupee received and spent from SDRF is in the public domain," he said, in a statement.



Residents of Salem Shah at a relief camp, in Fazilka, Punjab, after the floods. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Exceptional record

India’s external debt metrics sound, with a few chinks

After a close brush with a balance of payments crisis in 1991 and a run on the rupee during the 2013 taper tantrum, India has had reason to be extra-cautious with its external debt obligations. The latest status report by the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) showcases the massive improvement in its external debt metrics since those episodes. India’s external debt-to-GDP ratio at 19 per cent in FY25 has halved from 39 per cent in FY92 and 24 per cent in FY14.

Its foreign exchange reserves, which barely covered 10 per cent of its external borrowings in FY92 have been assiduously built up to 91 per cent by FY25; debt servicing costs are at just 6.6 per cent of export earnings. Much of this improvement is attributable to the government ruthlessly cutting back on its foreign borrowings and pivoting to domestic sources for deficit funding. Foreign borrowings now make up a minuscule 4.4 per cent of Indian government debt compared to 26 per cent in FY91. This puts India at negligible risk of sovereign default even in a phase of global bond turbulence. India has also kept a tight leash on its debt metrics in the post-Covid era, when many advanced and emerging economies have slipped. Despite an increase in absolute debt from \$573 billion to \$736 billion in the last five years, India’s external debt is just 0.5 per cent of the global stock of \$140 trillion. Its external debt-to-GDP ratio of 19 per cent is well below the average 24 per cent for low-and-middle-income countries. Its forex buffers of 90-100 per cent are far superior to other emerging economies at 40-70 per cent. Therefore, the DEA’s assessment that India’s debt vulnerability indicators are benign is not an over-statement. Credit for this should go to successive governments from both sides of the political spectrum.

While headline numbers on India’s external debt are clearly under control, its composition reveals some vulnerabilities. One, while the government has reduced its foreign borrowings, India Inc has not. Overseas commercial borrowings have surged 32 per cent in just the last two years to make up 40 per cent of external debt in FY25. Indian companies have a history of leaving their dollar debt unhedged. They need to be nudged to take cover. Two, about 41 per cent of the external debt in FY25 was repayable within a year. Commercial trade credit and NRI deposits made up the bulk of this. The latter may flow out in a crisis. Three, efforts to diversify away from US dollar-denominated debt to rupee debt have not made much headway, with dollar debt making up 54 per cent of external obligations in FY25.

The opening up of India’s government bond (g-sec) markets to foreign investors has brought in \$43.9 billion in FY25. But this has not moved the needle much on rupee borrowings and is a volatile source. Overall, India seems to be sitting pretty on its external debt position at a time when unsustainable borrowings are triggering bond market scares in advanced economies.

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LOKESHWARRI SK

It was a dark overcast winter night. Nervousness was writ large on the faces of the group of people gathered in one of the smaller meeting rooms of Taj Mahal Palace, Colaba. Payne Sweet, who headed a large foreign fund with investments across the world, wondered why he had been summoned urgently from New York. Ambar Advani tried to put on an I-don’t-care-a-hoot attitude, slumped on the sofa staring at his mobile phone. But he knew that the the consistent losses he had been making in futures and options had made him the focus of all attention. Alfie Patel paced up and down, having an animated discussion with a mutual fund chairman. Surabi Saxena was trying her best not to look irritated at being called away from work. She had to put finishing touches to the Board Meeting agenda which included some new interesting ways to trouble stockbrokers. . Silence fell on the room as Hercules Tarot, the famous detective, rose to speak. “Excusez-moi madame et messieurs, for dragging you all here at this hour. But le Finance Secretary has assigned me a very important job. Over the last many months, a strange madness appears to have gripped Indian stock market. Stock prices are going up and up, but companies are reporting dismal revenue and profit numbers. Investors do not seem to care about earnings, the risk from the madman in America, the higher tariff or slowing demand,” said Tarot gesticulating with his hands.

Silence fell on the room as Hercules Tarot, the famous detective, rose to speak. “Excusez-moi madame et messieurs, for dragging you all here at this hour. But le Finance Secretary has assigned me a very important job. Over the last many months, a strange madness appears to have gripped Indian stock market. Stock prices are going up and up, but companies are reporting dismal revenue and profit numbers. Investors do not seem to care about earnings, the risk from the madman in America, the higher tariff or slowing demand,” said Tarot gesticulating with his hands.

SANITY GOES MISSING “Someone is continuing to buy these stocks at such absurd prices. *Mademoiselle* Sanity, who makes sure that investors link fundamentals with stock prices before buying, was found dead in one of the alleys of Dalal Street last month. I have been investigating this murder, and I am sorry to say that the murderer is one among you.” Everyone looked stunned at this announcement. Payne Sweet jumped up from his seat indignantly, “Look here *Monsieur* Tarot, you cannot fling accusations like this at foreign investors. We have been the most rational in this silly bull-run. Why would we buy Indian stocks when Chinese stocks are available at much lower price earning multiple?” “*C’est vrai*,” said Tarot nodding his head slowly. “The needle of suspicion was on you first since you lot are unscrupulous about pushing up prices without any fundamental basis and are quite capable of strangling *Mademoiselle* Sanity ruthlessly. But foreign portfolio investors have been continuously selling Indian stocks since last October, net



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

selling over \$15 billion so far in 2025. You have, surprisingly, been protecting *Mademoiselle* this time.” Payne Sweet heaved a sigh of relief. “*Monsieur* Ambar Advani is also guilty of being stupid in listening to people on YouTube or WhatsApp groups and blindly buying stocks and hurting *Mademoiselle* Sanity often,” continued Tarot. Ambar looked up from his mobile phone with a what-now look. “I investigated *Monsieur* Advani and his friends and I have concluded that though they are capable of the murder, they have not done it this time,” continued Tarot. “The market correction in the first quarter of 2025 seems to have scared them. They have net purchased only ₹10,521 crore of stocks between January and July 2025, which is low compared to the purchase of ₹1,65,810 crore of stocks in 2024. The murder of *Mademoiselle* Sanity was not done by him.” “How long do we have to stay here and listen to this drivel?” exclaimed Surabi Saxena. “Just a little longer Madame,” continued Tarot. “A look at the turnover in cash market shows that Payne Sweet

The new MF approvals and the continuing SIP flows are preventing the stock market from correcting. That has killed poor Mademoiselle Sanity and Indian stock market has become the butt of all jokes

and co. were net sellers in 2025 and Ambar and his friends purchased very few stocks. But domestic institutional investors were the largest buyers this year, net purchasing stocks worth ₹4,18,514 crore till July. They bought over ₹5 lakh crore in 2024 too.” “*Monsieur* Alfie Patel,” Tarot continued. “Your friends, the mutual funds are largely to blame for this blind purchasing of stocks. You have a hand in the murder of *Mademoiselle* Sanity. Do you agree?” Alfie Patel became quite agitated at this. “What can I do *Monsiuer*, it is not as if I do not know that *Mademoiselle* Sanity is at risk if we buy at this time. But the SIP (systematic investment plan) inflows keep coming. Average monthly SIP inflow amount was ₹27,463 crore in FY26 so far, much higher than the inflows of ₹24,112 crore in FY25.” “But why are the fund-houses advertising so heavily? Shouldn’t they shut up when valuations are rich and *Mademoiselle* Sanity is at risk?” asked Tarot sternly.

THE CULPRIT “Blame it on BEBI, *Monsieur*,” said Alfie almost close to bursting into tears. “The market watchdog has been doling out mutual fund approvals freely in the recent past. Almost every brokerage, PMS or AIF wants to launch a mutual fund now, mostly passive funds. MF folios have shot up over 30 per cent in the last one year and so have SIP inflows.” “Aha, and with that, we finally have our culprit,” said Tarot with a tweak to his waxed moustache. “*Madame* Surabi,

you and your organisation are behind the killing of *Mademoiselle* Sanity. You are making poor investors enter the stock market through new mutual funds at peak valuation.” “Heavens!” said Surabi Saxena rolling her eyes. “So, it has all come down to me. I was only trying to improve stock market penetration. Mutual fund route is the safest, so we are encouraging more of them. You cannot arrest me for that.” “*Vrai Madame*,” said Tarot, “but surely you acknowledge that the new MF approvals and the continuing SIPs are preventing the stock market from correcting. That has killed poor *Mademoiselle* Sanity and Indian stock market has become the butt of all jokes.” “What do you propose I do?” asked Surabi with a haughty look. “You much stop doling out new MF licences and ask new mutual funds, who haven’t commenced operations to postpone the launch by six months,” said Tarot. Turning to Alfie, he said, “Along with mutual fund *sahi hai* campaign, you must also run campaigns on when to stop SIPs, when to cash in and when to switch. This one-directional campaign is doing more damage than good.” “Does that mean we can go now,” asked Ambar, looking up from the mobile. “*Oui*,” said Tarot. “*Mademoiselle* Sanity’s killing has been accidental and due to misguided actions of Alfie Patel and Surabi Saxena. Once they make amends; *Mademoiselle* Rationality can be asked to come to Indian stock market and restore balance. *Au Revoir Madame et Messieurs*, thank you for your time.”

Sergio Gor ticks the right boxes

The US Ambassador-designate to India has raised hopes of a trade deal and a mending of ties

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Those who were expecting another round of acrimony at the nomination hearing of India’s Ambassador-designate, Sergio Gor, at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, are bound to be either relieved or disappointed. In fact the introductory remarks of Secretary of State, Mario Rubio, the statements of Gor and his interactions with Senators gave the impression that there was nothing wrong in bilateral ties or that critics and detractors on both sides were making a mountain out of a molehill, of the perceived differences. In ways more than one, the nomination hearing of Gor is itself a positive indication of the things to come. US President Donald Trump officially nominated Gor on August 22 and for the Senate to move so quickly to hold a hearing is significant. Add to this the fact that the Secretary of State himself came to the Dirksen Building to introduce the nominee. This is seen in many quarters as the

importance the White House attaches to this nomination, and by extension to India and the region. Observers cannot recall the last time a Secretary of State came down for this purpose.

POSITIVE SIGNS India is “one of the top relationships the United States has in the world today in terms of the future of what the world’s going to look like”, Secretary Rubio said in his remarks. “In the 21st century, the story is going to be written in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, it is so important that we’ve actually changed the name of the combatant command to the Indo-Pacific. India is at the core of that,” he said. The top person at Foggy Bottom also made the point that when Gor speaks, he does not only for the State Department but also for Trump, reminding many of the depth of the incoming envoy’s White House connection. The Ambassador-designate could not be expected to deviate from the administration’s policy on Russian oil revenues and the sanctions slapped on India. “President Trump has made it



SERGIO GOR. Raising expectations REUTERS

crystal clear that India must stop buying Russian oil”, said. Gor. On why India was sanctioned on Russian oil purchases while China was given a free pass, he said, “We hold our friends to different standards. Frankly we expect more from India than we do sometimes from other nations. I do think it will get resolved over the next few weeks”. A positive sign on the vexatious trade deal is a statement that negotiators would be back on the job and that Washington and New Delhi are not “that

far apart” and despite recent hiccups both countries are “on track” to resolving them. Also at a time when questions had been raised on Trump’s visit to India later this year for the Leaders meeting of the Quad, there was perhaps the first clear hint that Air Force One might be heading this way, perhaps in November. “... the President is fully committed to meeting leaders of Quad... there have already been talks on a trip for the next Quad meeting... The QUAD is vitally important”, Gor remarked. All indications are that the Senate will be on a fast track to confirm Gor as the next occupant of the Roosevelt House in New Delhi. The time has come for the two nations to make the most out of the emerging scenario keeping in mind the new envoy’s proximity to the White House and in the personal equations of the two leaders. “Our President has a deep friendship with Modi. That is something that is unique,” Gor characterised.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and UN

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to ‘Letters to the Editor’, The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

HIRE hurdle The introduction of the HIRE Act, which proposes taxing companies that hire foreign workers over Americans and barring firms from claiming outsourcing payments as tax-deductible expenses by US Republican Senator Bernie Moreno, could not have come at a worse time for India’s IT sector, which is now struggling with weak revenue growth in its mainstay US market as clients defer non-essential tech spending amid inflationary pressure and tariff uncertainty. The HIRE Act would probably face backlash from US companies that rely heavily on outsourcing and affect their global capability centres, which have now become high-value innovation hubs that support operations, finance, research, and

development. Moreover, the shortage of skilled manpower in the US can be addressed in the near future only through outsourcing. **M Jeyaram** Sholavandan (TN)

UN losing steam Apropos, ‘Why has the UN lost relevance’ (September 12). The United Nations, once envisioned as the guardian of global peace, has steadily lost its relevance. Its overdependence on powerful funders, particularly the US and China, has crippled its independence and ability to act decisively. Whenever crises involve these superpowers or their allies, the UN becomes a mere bystander, unable to voice strong opposition.

The Security Council, dominated by veto powers, blocks meaningful resolutions, turning humanitarian tragedies into political chess games. Amid raging wars, refugee crises, and human rights violations, the UN’s silence is deafening. Instead of enforcing peace and accountability, it has been reduced to symbolic statements, eroding credibility. The world needs a truly impartial, empowered global body — not one held hostage by its financiers. **N Sadhasiva Reddy** Bengaluru

An alternative UN The article ‘Why has the UN lost relevance?’ (September 12), raises relevant points to ponder on and address.

Happiness through work I read the article ‘7 ways to make your life happier’ (September 12) with profound interest. All the seven ways articulated therein to bring more happiness into our everyday life are practicable. What I have realised over the years is that if we start liking the work we do, and are passionate about it, then we will by all means be happy. Happiness, of course, should be the ultimate end of any effort. But it is imperative that we enjoy the process of attaining it. There may be twists and turns making the process challenging. Life is all about “mind winning over matter”, isn’t it? **S Ramakrishnasayee** Chennai

● CLEARING THE AIR

Chief Justice of India BR Gavai

If citizens in NCR are entitled to pollution-free air, why not citizens in the rest of the country? Just because this is the Capital city or the Supreme Court is situated in this area, it should have a pollution-free air, but not the other citizens of the country!

Slipping on E20

The govt’s ethanol blending drive is well-intentioned but many are seeing the transition as a leap of faith

THE CONTROVERSY OVER E20 ethanol-blended petrol has intensified, with Nitin Gadkari, road transport and highways minister, terming the social media criticism and pushback a “paid campaign” and politically motivated exercise to malign him personally and the government at large. The minister also termed it as “propaganda” sponsored by the “rich and strong” petrol lobby. This sharp assertion, made at two separate auto industry body conventions over the last two days, follows the Supreme Court’s recent dismissal of a public interest litigation challenging the roll-out of E20 and demanding a halt or alternatives at petrol pumps. While the apex court made it clear that the government’s policy stands, it also added that consumers should be sufficiently informed about the compatibility of their vehicles with the blended fuel.

Certainly, there is no doubting the positive intention behind the government’s ethanol blending drive. The logic for E20, which was rolled out nationwide since April this year, is rooted in the objective of cutting down the dependence on imported oil and also providing a new stream of income for farmers cultivating maize and sugarcane. Ethanol blending’s economic rationale is fine as the country spends nearly ₹13.5 lakh crore annually on crude imports and remains vulnerable to global price swings. Yet, the manner in which this transition has unfolded leaves much to be desired. In that context, Gadkari’s broad-brush dismissal of all criticism as “paid” and “politically motivated” is disappointing. The government should address the legitimate anxieties of ordinary citizens through public consultation, issuing clear FAQs and explaining the science, the safeguards in place, and contingency steps for legacy vehicles. This will do more to foster trust than any political statement ever can.

For example, while the government has billed its ambitious push for E20 petrol as a green leap forward, many car owners, especially those driving older models, feel the transition is a leap of faith instead, amid growing concerns around falling mileage and potential engine damage. The roll-out has appeared rushed indeed. Blends such as E5 and E10 have disappeared from fuel pumps, leaving consumers with no choice. Information flow, especially on compatibility, maintenance, and mileage implications, has not kept pace with public concern. Industry’s response has, if anything, only deepened the ambiguity. Leading car companies and the auto industry’s apex body Siam have confirmed that vehicles manufactured April 2023 onwards are E20-compliant. However, the reassurance peters out for car owners with older models. Manufacturers acknowledge that these older vehicles may experience a drop in fuel mileage by 2–4% and need replacement of parts like rubber and gaskets to adapt to the change, without specifying the cost. The assurance of warranty coverage does not cover most of the fleet, given that warranties rarely last beyond a few years and older cars dominate the roads.

Thus, what becomes clear on a closer look is that while the harms of E20 for most cars may not be as grave as the most vocal critics claim, the all-clear sounds are equally over-optimistic. Communication from the government has been opaque, with answers to consumer questions appearing piecemeal or absent altogether. The government has the right to defend its policies and call out misinformation. But to inspire real confidence, and silence the rumours more effectively, it should do more. Policy, after all, is for the public, and information is its first essential. Further, there’s no harm in offering consumers sufficient transition time where the choice of E5 and E10 is also available.

ASML-Mistral AI: It's the geopolitics, stupid

FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL Macron couldn’t have scripted it better. In a week of political dysfunction in France, Parisian tech darling Mistral AI SAS bagged a €1.3 billion (\$1.5 billion) investment from Dutch chip-machine-maker ASML. Holding NV that values the start-up at €11.7 billion. The pair also signed a strategic partnership that will deepen ties. It’s a deal that’s raising eyebrows—this is somewhat outside ASML’s core hardware business—but it has a lot going for it.

For ASML, it’s a chance to sprinkle the pixie dust of AI at a time when its business outlook is getting cloudier and its shares are treading water. ASML is in a market of one when it comes to ultra-sophisticated machines for chip manufacturing, but that market is coming under pressure from trade barriers, Sino-American tensions, and customer cutbacks. Investing in Mistral’s large-language models could give ASML more of an edge by speeding up research, smoothing out imperfections in the manufacturing process, and reducing downtime for customers. “We want to flood the entire organisation of ASML with AI,” Christophe Fouquet, ASML’s French boss, told *Bloomberg*.

For Mistral, the investment brings precious cash and clout to a start-up that’s far behind the category leaders, with revenue at a fraction of OpenAI LLC and Anthropic PBC’s and a valuation that carries a fair amount of froth. More money means more ability to invest in AI infrastructure, such as highly sought-after Nvidia Corp chips, as well as retain sought-after engineering talent to “forward deploy” to its business customers. Deeper strategic ties with ASML will also help Mistral carve out its own path in an AI race dominated by the US and China, through industrial-use cases that go beyond consumer chatbots and open-source models that aren’t trying to be the biggest.

It’s also a win for Europe’s tech ambitions. The continent is an innovation laggard, under-investing in cutting-edge research, and failing to foster deep capital markets that might stop talented entrepreneurs heading to the US. Fixing this is a geopolitical imperative as enforcing European Union (EU) rules on the likes of Alphabet Inc becomes weaponised by the Trump administration. While subsidies and an EU Chips Act have failed to move the needle, this deal is a blueprint for something better: It plays to Europe’s existing strengths, shows there are alternatives to what AI researcher Leevi Saari calls the “voracious pressures” of US venture capital, and strengthens EU suppliers. What Franco-Dutch Air France-KLM did for airlines, “Air France-LLM” could do for tech.

ASML’s Fouquet and Mistral co-founder Arthur Mensch have played down the sovereignty angle, calling it the “cherry on the cake”. But it’s a pretty big cherry. It’s hard to imagine this deal without Trump’s sabre-rattling on tech and trade. In June, Fouquet told the *New York Times* that the EU could do more to protect ASML and European chips from US-China crossfire.

There are, however, a few caveats. The first is that there is still plenty of speculative Fear Of Missing Out in this market. ASML is not alone in expanding into software, with Nvidia and Advanced Micro Devices Inc placing strategic bets across the AI value chain, but nobody knows for sure how the story ends. Generative AI has burned a lot of cash and some sceptics like Daron Acemoglu argue that the productivity benefits may be overstated. Some ASML investors may grumble this is money that could have been better spent elsewhere.

The other issue is that ASML-Mistral does not a tech ecosystem make. ASML’s customer base is overwhelmingly located in Asia, and *Bloomberg Economics*’ Michael Deng says that Europe still lacks the compute power, energy infrastructure, and large-scale players to catch up in the AI race. A lot more needs to be done. Former French finance minister Bruno Le Maire, who now advises ASML, has called for a €100-billion semiconductor plan. European industry could also do with more consolidation: The combined market value of NXP Semiconductors NV, Infineon Technologies AG, and STMicroelectronics NV is broadly equivalent to one Intel Corp.

Until then, Europe can at least take comfort that political chaos is no barrier to tech investment—a back-handed compliment to Macron if ever there was one.

● FINITE RESOURCES

CARBON CREDITS ARE INDULGENCES THAT ALLOW BIG CORPORATIONS TO KEEP GROWING WHILE BUYING ‘OFFSETS’

Focus on greed control

M MUNEER

Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor, and co-founder of Medici Institute for Innovation X: @MuneerMuh



gest that the \$100-billion annual commitment made at COP15 in 2009 remains on paper, with some funds coming as loans, not grants.

The carbon exchanges have become a tool of control. Forget emission reduction; it’s all about who gets to grow and who remains in economic chains.

The real enemy is corporate greed, not nations. MNC giants today wield wealth greater than many countries. In India, the combined market capitalisation of just a handful of conglomerates—Reliance, Adani, Tata—runs into trillions of dollars. Globally, Amazon, Apple, and Exxon-Mobil dictate supply chains, data flows, and energy choices with far-reaching consequences.

This concentration of power is dangerous. When a few entities control vast resources, they not only distort markets but also politics, policy, and even public opinion. Carbon credits in this context are mere indulgences: a way for large corporations to keep expanding while purchasing “offsets” that rarely translate into real climate action.

The real conversations should be around greed control.Unchecked corporate growth creates fragility. A handful of tech companies dominate global communication. A few energy giants influence climate policy. In India, the sudden rise of a conglomerate in the last decade across ports, airports, and power has thwarted healthy competition.

The solutions are found in history. In the early 20th century, the antitrust laws of the US were used to break up monopolies like Standard Oil, and they are still used for action against companies like Google to create smaller, more competitive enterprises. No entity should be so large that its failure can destabilise society or its influence override democratic institutions. Isn’t it time for India to take notice?

Indian regulators always play catch-up, and political-business nexuses complicate reform. If true sustainability and fairness are to be pursued, nations must learn to set speed breakers: limiting market shares, enforcing competition, and perhaps breaking down giants.

A win-win model

Is there a way to control greed while still allowing innovation and progress? The solution perhaps lies in designing the right economic models that reward distributed prosperity, not just market cap. Here are five possibilities for policymakers:

Progressive wealth caps: As I have written about before, this is like progressive taxation. Nations could experiment with capping the pace of growth of large corporations. Mandate companies that grow beyond a certain threshold to divest so that a level playing field is created for healthy competition. Remember what Gandhiji said of “trusteeship”, where wealth beyond a limit is held for society.

Competition by design: Instead of

India must take the lead in creating a greed index on the lines of GDP or emissions tracking to measure corporate concentration, income inequality, and monopoly risk

The phantom of RIC trilateral



HARSH V PANT
ALEKSEI ZAKHAROV

Respectively vice president and fellow, Russia & Eurasia, Observer Research Foundation

Even in its current non-institutionalised form, the Russia-India-China trilateral is giving India a diplomatic leverage

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION Organisation (SCO) Summit in Tianjin was marked by significant representation from the Global South, reminding that the organisation comprises 26 countries, including 10 full members, two observers, and 14 dialogue partners. Yet, one episode arguably stole the whole show. Images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Xi Jinping, and President Vladimir Putin smiling during an informal conversation have widely circulated in the media, with some outlets billing this as a “shift in global power dynamics” or a “redrawn geopolitical map”. The depth of this engagement and its geopolitical ramifications are significantly exaggerated, though one spectator, the US President Donald Trump, appears to have been spellbound.

The idea of a trilateral format dates back to the 1990s. Following its emergence in the form of foreign ministers’ consultations in 2003, it has been one of the most consistent mechanisms of interaction, gathering uninterrupted until late 2021. However, the appeal of the grouping has gradually evaporated owing to India-China divergences, eroding trust in the relationship.

The Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral covered a wide range of areas, from global and regional politics, trade, investment, and healthcare, to education. In some ways, in India’s policy calculus, RIC deliberations were seen as reiterating the outputs from the BRICS and SCO—the former’s global governance agenda and the latter’s Eurasian security focus. There were

two particular reasons why this trilateral had resonated for such a long time. First, there was much hope that the three Eurasian powers would succeed in finding common ground on critical regional issues, primarily security-related ones. Second, it provided additional leeway for hedging the bets and soft balancing against the West, while maintaining sufficient space for engagement with Western capitals.

When Russia proposed a trilateral meeting between Putin, Modi, and Xi on the sidelines of the 2018 G20 summit, India embraced the idea. At that time, mini-laterals were growing in popularity, creating a momentum for India’s active involvement in the RIC, including informal leaders’ gatherings in December 2018 and June 2019. Notably, these meetings took place concurrently with Japan-US-India summits and India’s participation in the reinvigorated Quad ministerials. All of these formats highlighted New Delhi’s ability to be part of multiple groupings with sometimes conflicting agendas, thereby serving the purpose of India’s multi-alignment.

As with many other mini-laterals, the RIC’s advantage as an informal, narrow-circle forum has also proven to be a weakness. Beyond consultations and the exchange of ideas, it has failed to produce any solutions or large-scale initiatives. Moreover, as RIC engagement has not mitiga-

ted India-China divergences at either the global or regional levels, its value for Indian diplomacy has been called into question. One exception where the three countries were able to cooperate was Afghanistan, which was often discussed within the RIC and resulted in deliverables such as the coordination of humanitarian aid to Kabul. At the same time, however, efforts to bridge differences on terrorism and radicalisation have been less productive. Despite many discussions on these matters in bilateral and trilateral settings,

China’s support for and shielding of Pakistan within international organisations has not changed much.

The twist is that the normalisation of India-China relations does not automatically incentivise New Delhi to re-engage with the troika. The feasibility of this format for Indian interests is still unclear. It would be delusional to assume that the current atmosphere of engagement in India’s dyads with China and Russia could lead to any substantial progress in a trilateral mechanism. Some proposals, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which have been backed by both Moscow and Beijing, are still unacceptable to New Delhi, as reflected in SCO discussions and joint statements.

Another issue that India may have with re-joining the troika is the lack of clarity on the kind of Eurasian security architecture Russia is pursuing. New Delhi sees

ms to have gained more from not aligning itself with Russian regional initiatives, given the challenges Moscow has faced in its neighbourhood as a result of its war in Ukraine. In Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, New Delhi has been prudently operating on its own, without relying on Russia’s or China’s backing—a tactic that has allowed it to reap dividends in partnerships across these geographies.

That said, it is still possible India, China, and Russia will feel the need to engage in some form of trilateral communication. The trilateral Track II dialogue between various institutions and universities has actually not been suspended. Many mini-laterals emerge or resurface at this level, so even if and when the RIC regains traction, its agenda will require meticulous brainstorming at an expert level.

Even in its current non-institutionalised form, the RIC is giving India a diplomatic leverage. As it turned out, a brief conversation within the former RIC proved instrumental for New Delhi’s positioning vis-à-vis the US. Following Modi’s visit to China, Trump has extended an olive branch to the PM, recalling a “strong personal bond” with him and the US’s “special relationship” with India. This paves the way for the resumption of India-US trade talks, and, reportedly, a direct Modi-Trump conversation “in the upcoming weeks”.

If the RIC phantom can pull off such diplomatic feats in dealings with Trump, India may be tempted to engage in similar chatter with Russia and China in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tax in disguise

Apropos of “A ‘silent tax’” (*FE*, September 12), the goods and services tax reform exposes structural gaps that could erode its intended benefits. While the government projects only a modest near-term revenue loss, the actual burden may quietly shift to industries placed in the lower tax slabs but deprived of meaningful input credit. This risks pushing up consumer

prices for essential goods and services, creating a silent tax in disguise. Policymakers must go beyond headline tax rate adjustments and address the inconsistencies in credit flows. Insurance, in particular, needs careful treatment—taxing gross premiums while disallowing input tax credit only inflates costs without expanding coverage. A calibrated approach that ensures zero-rating of merit goods and fair taxation of value

addition, not input structures, would safeguard both fiscal prudence and consumer welfare.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Nepal crisis and India

Nepal is facing its worst political turmoil in years. The youth protests, triggered by a social media ban and anger over corruption, unemployment, and poor governance, forced PM KP Sharma Oli to resign. Former

Chief Justice Sushila Karki is being considered as interim head, but curfews and disrupted services reflect a fragile situation. India must act with careful diplomacy—support peace, democracy, and early elections, while ensuring the safety of its citizens and avoiding any perception of interference.

—Hammad Noori, Mumbai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

America’s friends will never trust the US again



ANDREAS KLUTH

“We respectfully suggest ...,” the letter says. It was sent by a group representing more than 300 veterans of American diplomacy, intelligence and national security and addressed to the leaders of the intelligence committees in the Senate and House. For a fleeting moment, I thought — hoped? — that I was reading a Swiftian satire in the tradition of *A Modest Proposal*. Then it hit me with full force that the entreaty was dead serious and reflected what I and other observers of US foreign policy under Presi-

dent Donald Trump have been worrying about for months.

The letter asks Congress to demand a classified intelligence assessment that answers questions such as the following: Whether America’s allies believe the US remains a stable democracy; whether they regard the US as a reliable partner; whether they’re hedging their security by seeking alternative alliances without the US; and even whether they’re developing contingency plans for wars “in which they might, for the first time in generations, have to fight against US forces if America were to align with Russia against Nato or Ukraine, for example.” Let that sink in.

Such an intelligence assessment, of course, stands a snowball’s chance in hell. The relevant committees are controlled by Republicans, who are in thrall to Mr Trump. So is the so-called intelligence community that would execute the analysis. But the concerns are out there and becoming more urgent with every news cycle. Consider

those military drones that Russia just sent into Poland, where Nato jets shot them down. It appears that Russian President Vladimir Putin was testing Nato’s air defences, crisis procedures and resolve.

Or consider the Israeli bombing of Qatar, with the aim of killing Hamas leaders. Both Israel and Qatar are, in the jargon, Major Non-Nato Allies of the US. Qatar even hosts America’s largest military base in the region and recently hosted Mr Trump with lavish promises of deals and the personal gift of a luxury jet. All that was clearly irrelevant as Israel’s Prime Minister once again ignored Mr Trump, who either can’t or won’t protect the sovereignty of his Qatari allies and was reduced to grumbling that the strikes made him “very unhappy.”

If the Polish episode highlights Mr Trump’s inconstancy within Nato and the Qatari event shows his weakness toward Benjamin Netanyahu, America’s actions in Greenland point to downright malice. That semi-autonomous territory belongs to Den-

mark, one of America’s oldest and tightest allies. And yet Mr Trump keeps threatening to seize Greenland “one way or the other.” This is not friendly.

The list of friends and allies scorned, humiliated and disdained continues: Mr Trump wants to annex Canada. His intelligence director has blocked information about Russia from going to the Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing arrangement with Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada that is one of America’s most intimate and useful alliances. Mr Trump casts doubt on Aukus, a budding alliance among the US, UK and Australia, and on the Quad, a partnership among the US, Japan, Australia and India that was meant to blossom into an alliance one day. From Taiwan and the Philippines to Estonia and Germany, no American ally can be sure that Washington, in a pinch, would have its back. Mr Trump’s willful destruction of America’s alliance capital is so self-defeating that it “discombobulates us,” says Graham Allison at Harvard Univer-

sity, a doyen among international-relations scholars. It was by deepening and widening its alliances after World War II that the US was able to deter another world war for eight decades and to limit the number of nuclear powers to just nine so far, a degree of geopolitical stability that Dr Allison deems “unnatural” by historical standards. Mr Trump doesn’t get this and instead interacts with allies as if he were a Dickensian landlord squeezing his tenants or a mob boss shaking down a mark.

For the sake of argument, ignore factors such as honour, credibility, ideals and values for a moment and think only in terms of realpolitik and the looming contest with China. Even then, Mr Trump’s de facto policy of contempt for allies seems bonkers. Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, who were top foreign-affairs experts in the administration of Joe Biden, point out that China already surpasses the US in many of the metrics that matter in war, from ships and factories to patents and people. But if the US cooperated more with its allies, their combined economic and military power would dwarf China’s. The way things are going, that allied scale will remain a pipe dream.

The US’ allies are instead reacting as predicted by the “balance-of-threats” theory in international relations. They’re forming other trading and security networks, excluding the US to hedge against hostility by Mr Trump or a future president. Some Americans are aware that the current direction points toward disaster. Mr Trump “is isolating America,” said Gregory Meeks, the ranking member and former chairman on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. “He’s not leading. If you’re leading, you got to have other people following you, and he’s pushing people away. He treats our allies as if they’re adversaries.”

I asked Mr Meeks what, among all the problems in his inbox, worries him most. He pondered that for a long minute, during which my gaze drifted to the window behind his desk, which perfectly framed the Capitol in all its splendour. “What keeps me up most,” he finally answered, is “whether or not our friends and allies will ever trust the United States again.” The way I heard it, the question was rhetorical. I fear the answer is simple and sad: They won’t.

Bloomberg



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Why regimes collapse

To be truly functional and durable, even eternal, a state doesn’t just need a leader, a party, or an ideology. It needs functional and robust institutions

Against, yes, but for whom?



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

“Discord” is the social-media platform Nepal’s newest political group, GenZ, is currently using to hold consultations. Nothing could be more apt.

The paroxysm of rage that lasted 40-odd hours and spilled out countrywide earlier this week has led to the destruction of property to which no value can be put. Singha Durbar, the soaring edifice built in Baroque style in Kathmandu, for instance, was constructed in 1908 as a private residence, later repurposed as the secretariat and the Prime Minister’s office. Today, it lies virtually gutted. So do the Supreme Court; most of the Nepal Parliament; offices of chief development officers in many of Nepal’s 77 districts; private businesses like Bhat Bhateni, Nepal’s only organised retail business; the Hilton hotel; and the residences of half a dozen ministers and other structures. More than 20 are dead, the youngest among them a 13-year-old. Nepal is mourning. Yet exultant.

The destruction and killing might have continued. The reason for the suddenness with which it stopped lies in Nepal’s political economy. The median age of this country is 25. Agriculture employs 68 per cent of the population. Young people can rebel, sure. But then there are goats and cows to be

tended, fields to be watered, *bhatta* (soybean) and *makai* (corn) to be graded and sorted ...

Sujeev Shakya, who describes himself drolly as CEO (chief eternal optimist), is the founder of the Nepal Economic Forum, a Kathmandu-based, private sector-led economic policy and research institution. He says that despite challenges the economy is in fine fettle. Since 2004, its gross domestic product has increased sixfold from \$7 billion in 2004 to \$44 billion in 2024. Nepal is the third-highest globally in terms of private-sector credit growth. Remittances have soared from \$2 billion to \$11 billion in 20 years, providing household consumption and investment. Social indicators have improved, with life expectancy moving from 54.77 years in 1990 to nearly 72 in 2024. Primary-school enrolment is close to 100 per cent, and the literacy rate has increased from 59 per cent in 2000 to 76 per cent in 2024. Eighty-one per cent of the people of Nepal live in their own homes, and four out of five Nepali families have at least one member working or living abroad.

The problem lies in politics, the only route to quick enrichment. The nature of the scams that have been reported in recent times is revealing. One of the leaders affiliated with the GenZ movement was sprung from prison by a 50,000-strong mob while he was awaiting trial in at least five cases of loan default — money borrowed from cooperative banks and never returned. He became the country’s home minister. Another former home minister was arrested after he offered, for a fee, the documentation of Nepalis as fake Bhutanese refugees to facilitate resettlement in the United States. Another home minister who resigned in the

wake of the current upheavals was being investigated for his role in human trafficking. More than 400 Nepalis pass through Tribhuvan International Airport every day after getting jobs abroad. A posting as an immigration officer at the airport is controlled by the home ministry and is highly prized. It sustains a string of supporting businesses: Travel agents, passport-issuing authorities, fake-documentation experts ...

An explanation offered for the rise and development of the GenZ movement is anger against privileged nepo-babies: Entitled young people born into privilege. But it is much more complex than that. The protest is against a dysfunctional system and the targets were all those who have helped to sustain and perpetuate this system.

We know what GenZ is against. But what is it for? And who are they? Deconstructing a mob is not easy. It comprises GenZ, an amorphous NGO-like organisation; TV anchor Rabi Lamichhane’s Rashtriya Swatantra Party, which was formed in 2022 and which stormed to power in 2023, winning more than 20 seats in the parliamentary polls; supporters and admirers of Balen Shah, the controversial mayor of Kathmandu; and monarchists represented by self-styled supporter of former king Gyanendra, Durga Prasain, charged with loan default, detained, and currently out on bail. According to news filtering out of Kathmandu, when talks were on about an interim government, some members of GenZ walked out of the meeting, refusing to sit at the same table as Mr Prasain.

Managing these contradictions is a job that Nepal’s interim Prime Minister, retired chief justice Sushila Karki, has been tasked with. The road ahead is not easy.

Is there such a thing as a hard or a soft state? What if we said that any state is indeed just that, the state? It has to have it in its guts to stay together, cohesive, and orderly. That last is not my line. From whom it’s borrowed, I’ll tell you as we go along.

Take Nepal. The fall of its constitutionally elected government in just over a day of Gen Z protests in the capital is the third such in three years in the subcontinent, after Sri Lanka (Colombo, July, 2022) and Bangladesh (Dhaka, August, 2024). As we keep saying, invoking the primer of journalism, this conforms to the three-example rule. We can also note much clamour on social media, mostly from the Bharatiya Janata Party base, which includes many prominent and respected names, that this is just what the “powers that be” would want done with the Modi government in India. The regime-change toolkit, as they’d put it.

Let’s also look at exceptions. Not every government collapses under a public protest. I know this is a super-provocative example, but remember Pakistan on May 9, 2023?

Imran Khan’s supporters rioted not in one city but across many, even stormed Lahore’s Jinnah House, the Corps Commander’s home. The situation had many more ingredients for a “regime” overthrow than in Colombo, Dhaka or Kathmandu. A widely hated civilian government, the handmaiden of a then-reviled army, had jailed the most popular mass leader.

That “revolution” ended within 48 hours. The leader (Imran Khan) is still in jail, now handed a 14-year sentence, the same coalition is still in power, having been reborn through another rigged election, and all socio-economic and democratic grievances remain. More than 250 protest leaders are being tried in military courts. The state looks way stronger.

Did the Pakistan establishment survive because it is a hard state, while Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal weren’t? Definitely, even Asim Munir doesn’t think so. Or, he wouldn’t have given Pakistan a “we have to become a hard state” call in that infamous April 16 speech.

The fact is, the regime survived in Pakistan because it is still a functional state. The heart of a functional state is law and order. Functional is the key word here, not hard or soft. No state can be functional unless it’s capable of maintaining law and order. And when there is law and order, catastrophic state failures like Colombo, Dhaka, and

now Kathmandu will not take place.

Regime change can always be a democratic aspiration. But it will take more to achieve it than a few days of protests, riots and arson. It will take long months if not years of toil and struggle to build a political counter, go to the people, and create the revolution you want, through elections or mass movement.

What the collapse in Kathmandu with just one push underlines to us is that it was a non-functional state. It had an elected government, but its leaders did not have the first prerequisite for governance: Democratic patience.

The leadership trained as guerrilla fighters through their youth to middle age, and then ran cynical musical chairs through defection and alliance-switching, as elected politicians had no experience in dealing with “other” angry people. The Maoists were once heroic change agents. Once they rode that wave to power, they no longer thought the same people could also get angry with them. And when they did, they needed some negotiations to revive trust and credibility, not bullets.

Guns were an instrument of winning popularity and power. Nor had they spent any of the past 17 years since the end of the monarchy in 2008 to build and strengthen institutions of democracy. If they had, the same institutions would have protected them. If, in the end, the only institution the protesting masses trust is the army, it shows what a colossal failure the revolutionary political class in Nepal has been. They never built a functional state.

A hard state can be quite fragile. My most valuable case study is Georgia, then a Soviet republic. History has rarely seen a state harder than the USSR. It panicked when the first protests broke out in Georgia in 1988-89? It sent out the Red Army with special forces and armed KGB, who unleashed bullets and poison gas. This was a classical bull-headed hard state. It unravelled.

Its discredited party state had a broken economy, and didn’t know how to handle disagreements. Individual dissenters it could kill, or pack off to distant gulags. A mass protest wasn’t its glass of vodka.

We got a better understanding shortly afterwards as we were hosted for dinner, with my then editor, Aroon Purie, by Buta Singh, Rajiv Gandhi’s home minister. He said he had recently hosted Russian foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze (a



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Georgian) who “asked me how we handled protests by lakhs — when his army unleashed poison gas on a much smaller crowd” in Tbilisi.

“I said, your excellence,” said Buta Singh, “I can lend you a few companies of CRPF.” The lesson is that a state must maintain law and order. For this, it must have three prerequisites: The uniformed forces with the right training, negotiating skills and democratic patience or the willingness to trade spaces.

Today’s discourse confuses the absence of an Opposition for a hard-state essential. It’s the opposite. The Opposition serves as a pressure-release valve. People can vent through it rather than sack your President, Prime Minister or corps commander’s homes. All four of our neighbours banished their Opposition to different degrees.

At which point, we return to our earlier question. Could this happen in India? A regime change through any “tool-kit”? A quick way to explain why it can’t happen is to remind ourselves that constitutional democracies do not have a “regime.”

While there are a couple of dozen mutinies going on across India at any point, we have seen two serious challenges to the state from the “street” in the past 50 years. The first was Jayaprakash Narayan’s (JP) Navnirman Andolan, beginning 1974 and compounded by the George Fernandes-led railway strike that paralysed India. Yet, failed to dislodge Mrs Gandhi. It took an election.

The second was Anna Hazare’s so-called anti-corruption protests, fully backed by new TV and strong elements in the Opposition, especially the RSS, as was the case with JP’s movement. But even a government as weak as the United Progressive Alliance-2 had the strength to ride it out.

A debate on the Jan Lokpal Bill, going well past midnight, sealed the issue. It was that line from the late Sharad Yadav in response to the self-proclaimed Gandhi, Anna Hazare, pouring scorn over Parliament and elected leaders. “Think of an Indian with the name Pakauri Lal, he said, pointing to fellow MP (Samajwadi Party, Forbesganj). In this system, a man as humble as him can be here. And this is the system you’ve come to destroy?” The Anna movement was over at that moment. The parliament had risen to protect the state.

Finally, I will let you know about the “state needing to have it in its gut to stay together” observation. In 2010, when mass stoning and terror had peaked in the Valley, many mainstream voices were rising, saying, “If Kashmiris are so unhappy, why don’t we just let them go?” M K Narayanan, then national security advisor, spoke this line in a conversation, pointing his fist — where else, but at his gut. It was 15 years ago, so I hope he’d forgive me for recounting this. See where the Valley is, now. This, by the way, was the same UPA-2, now widely seen to be running a soft state.

By special arrangement with *ThePrint*

The immortal quest

EYE CULTURE
KUMAR ABISHEK

A parade in Beijing was meant to showcase steel and certainty: Columns of modern weaponry, synchronised salutes, leaders framed like statues above Tiananmen Gate. Then a hot-mic moment betrayed something softer. Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong Un leaned close — not to talk of missiles but of biotech, organs, and lifespans stretched to 150 years. The men who embody power’s permanence revealed their own unease with the inexorables of time; the clock is ticking.

The longing to outwit death has trailed humanity for millennia. In Indian mythology, *devas* and *asuras* churned the cosmic ocean to extract *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. The prize promised eternity but also provoked chaos: Who would drink first, who would rule forever? Alchemists mixed metals in search of eternity, philosophers debated its worth, novelists sketched futures where death was little more than a scheduling glitch. The seekers change — *devas*, kings, scientists, moguls — but the craving endures: To keep living.

What once belonged to epic now lives in experiment. Partial cellular reprogramming nudges cells backwards in time with Yamanaka factors (genes that reset cell identity), coaxing them into a younger state. In mice, the results border on miraculous: Tissues rejuvenated, vision restored. Push too far, though, and the cells forget who they are, tumbling into tumours. Jeff Bezos-backed Altos Labs is betting bil-

lions that this perilous dance can be choreographed into therapy, a reset of the biological clock itself. At the centre of the new creed of longevity stands Bryan Johnson, the millionaire bio-hacker who has turned his body into a testbed, a project he calls Blueprint. His pursuit of age reversal runs on relentless discipline, a strict diet, and even controversial plasma transfusions, including from his teenage son. The spectacle is equal parts fascinating and faintly mad.

Meanwhile, quieter advances hum along. Senolytic drugs aim to clear away “zombie” cells that accumulate with age, leaking inflammation and dysfunction. In animals — and early human trials — they rejuvenate hearts, brighten eyes, strengthen lungs. Aubrey de Grey’s SENS framework approaches ageing like a maintenance backlog: Repair mitochondria, sweep protein clumps, patch DNA, tidy cellular debris. The goal is not immortality but negligible senescence: Slower wear, longer vigour, decades rather than centuries.

The sober counterpart comes from a piece published in *Nature*, in which S Jay Olshansky, Bradley J Willcox, Lloyd Demetrius, and Hiram Beltrán-Sánchez argue: “Until it becomes possible to modulate the biological rate of aging... radical life extension in already long-lived national populations remains implausible in this century.”

Ageing cannot be cured by any single pill or magic bullet: Telomeres shorten, mitochondria stumble, proteins misfold. Pull one thread and others unravel. Extending a mouse’s life by 30 per cent is remarkable; stretching humans by a century is another matter entirely.

Science fiction has long rehearsed scenarios biology hasn’t yet delivered. Richard Morgan’s *Altered Carbon* imagines consciousness endlessly recycled into fresh bodies, widening gulfs between the wealthy long-lived and the expendable poor. Drew Magary’s *The Postmortal* sketches laws, marriages, and meaning collapsing when death is postponed indefinitely.

Even as labs push the boundaries of age reversal, mythology reminds us that longevity carries consequences beyond the biological. Ashwatthama, cursed to wander the earth for eternity after the Kurukshetra war, embodies the hidden cost of immortality: A witness to endless change, forever outside the world he cannot leave, a reminder that living forever is not always a gift.

The ethical dilemmas sharpen with every lab breakthrough. If longevity therapies arrive as products, who will buy them? Will society split into biological haves and have-nots? The ancients anticipated this imbalance when divine nectar threatened cosmic order. Today the risk is less mythical but just as urgent: Longevity for the few, decline for the rest.

Still, the incremental gains matter. Senolytics that ease heart disease, gene therapies that restore sight, regenerative scaffolds that keep kidneys or livers working for another decade. They may not rewrite the human condition, but they redraw the map of old age, its final chapters less punishing and more humane. The tools — CRISPR, stem cells, nanotech — are real.

Perhaps immortality will remain half-legend, half-lab report. Perhaps science delivers not forever but increments: Fragile, real, precious increments of time. For now, the ocean still churns, the lab lights still burn, and the *amrita* remains just beyond reach.

Does Vegas really need an ad campaign?



YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority last week launched a new global campaign promoting Las Vegas, the “sports and entertainment capital of the world”, as “fabulous.” A dip in tourism numbers fuelled online speculation that Las Vegas was pricing itself out of the market: Slower tourism trends resulted in a 12 per cent year-over-year decrease in visitors to Las Vegas, with the city welcoming just 3.1 million in July, setting off alarm bells. Hence an urgent need was felt to bolster numbers through stimulation by an advertising campaign.

The just released campaign plays upon the iconic “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign that greets visitors as they enter the city. The ad features an office worker wishing for a break from the usual day-to-day doldrums. She hears a siren song from Las Vegas, enticing her to break free from the monotony and enter a world of fabulousness. Sur-

rounded by the neon lights that provided inspiration for the campaign, she encounters iconic locations that have made Las Vegas famous, including Circus Circus Hotel & Casino, Fremont Street Experience, The Orleans Hotel & Casino, The Venetian Resort Las Vegas and many more. This is Vegas’ first truly large campaign in nearly two decades.

The title track of the new campaign, “Welcome to Fabulous,” comes to life through the vocals of Grammy Award-winning singer Eryn Allen Kane and has been produced by Grammy Award-nominated producer and songwriter Dave Sitek. No efforts have been spared.

Since 1959, the “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign has served as a beacon to more than 1.5 billion visitors. What began as a greeting has grown into a globally recognised motto spanning decades and transcending languages and cultures. The “fabulous” campaign is a recommitment to the extraordinary spirit of Las Vegas, intended to reaffirm that unmatched hospitality and fabulous experiences are not trends, but timeless promises that embody the city’s glamour, vitality, and sense of escape. And, “Fabulous” isn’t just a word on a sign — it’s Vegas’ DNA, its identity, and its enduring brand promise.

The famous slogan “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in

Vegas” was originally written to give a spark to the town’s “image of adult freedom” by Jason Hoff and Jeff Candido, who worked at ad agency R&R Partners. It was then slightly modified. When the “What Happens Here, Stays Here” ads for Las Vegas debuted in February 2003, they became an almost instant “cultural phenomenon.” The phrase was referenced by numerous pop culture mainstays, including *Saturday Night Live*, the Academy Awards, and the Madison Avenue Advertising Walk of Fame. In fact, two years after the campaign debuted, the then First Lady, Laura Bush, used the tagline in a discussion with Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*, making it even more famous. The slogan became the name of the 2008 American comedy *What Happens in Vegas*. It also inspired a song of the same name by Usher, as well as the film series *The Hangover*. Twenty years later, however, a refresh has been mounted on Brand Las Vegas.

According to 2024 statistics, Las Vegas had 41.7 million visitors, with about 6 million going there to attend conventions and conferences. This accounted for direct visitor spending of \$55.1 billion, making for an overall economic impact of \$87.7 billion. So, there’s a lot at stake — especially with hotel occupancy declining year-on-year by 7.6 per cent in July.

In 2018, the Sin City ran the

“Only Vegas” campaign with cultural storylines that reinforced the iconic brand’s identity as the paramount purveyor of adult freedom and encouraged visitors to embrace only-in-Vegas moments of self-truth. During the 2024 NFL Super Bowl, which Vegas was hosting, the city ran the “Excessive Celebration” campaign. The promotion’s music video was viewed an incredible 114 million times. So, constant marketing efforts have been ongoing.

The “Fabulous” campaign, meanwhile, has been facing extreme backlash on social media and is being labelled “aggressively terrible”. Las Vegas still doesn’t get it, most say. Netizens predominantly agreed with the sentiment that the campaign does not address real issues that affect how Las Vegas, as a tourism destination, is perceived: Advertising can’t overcome a product problem until it fixes the No 1 issue — out-of-control pricing on everything. Price gouging is said to be the biggest deterrent for tourists coming to Vegas.

Now to the question: “Vegas over?” Well, 10 years ago black-jack tables along the Strip shifted from a 3:2 payout to 6:5 odds. For every \$100 bet, earnings dropped from \$15 to only \$120. Vegas needs to fix that too. An ad campaign alone can’t help.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion

Waging war through whispers and gossip



PAST PARTICIPLE

MANU S PILLAI

In September 1925, C.W.E. Cotton, British representative at the court of Travancore, wrote to an acquaintance: “I am greatly excited over the prospect of getting married”. The “excitement” was probably feigned, for the 51-year-old’s sudden appetite for matrimony had more to do with reasons of the head than the heart.

After all, damaging gossip trailed him, especially with regard to his taste for (married) local women. There was a naughty Malayalam line going around—“*methayil cotton undu?*, is (Mr) Cotton in (or on) your mattress?” His bosses were scandalised, because no imperial agent could be permitted such a reputation. So, Cotton was told to settle down.

Another factor, besides, was that Travancore was ruled by an orthodox woman who balked at doing business with a bachelor of Cotton’s type. Even after he was wed, she ensured that their meetings were held in the presence of her husband. All said and done, a man might yet survive scandal; for a female, the whiff of sexual impropriety could spell ruin.

Gossip and rumour-mongering have long been among mankind’s favourite pastimes. Even the best of us delight in the former, and have been victim to the latter. Gossip spares not even gods: in the Ramayana, it is bazaar chatter that triggers Sita’s exile. In the *puranas*, divine ends are often achieved by the sly, tale-carrying proclivities of Narada. But hearsay and whispers could also be an instrument of statecraft, a way to

deliberately cut people down to size, and a weapon weaker folk might deploy against the rich and powerful.

The much-celebrated *Arthashastra*, for instance, endorses sowing rumour and falsehoods about political foes. Even today, we see the principle in play: social media platforms were abuzz recently about the health of an orange-complexioned world leader, the not-so-innocent hint being that he is unfit to rule. In prior eras, this kind of talk could be hazardous. When the Mughal emperor Shahjahan fell ill and failed to appear in public, gossip fanned out that he was dead. This set off a bloody war of succession, and by the time he showed himself, it was simply too late.

Sexual gossip, though, tends to carry a distinct sting. Queen Victoria loved her husband, and after his death wore black for the rest of her days. Yet in her widowhood she was called “Mrs Brown” in gossip columns, on account of an alleged affair—some say even a morganatic marriage—with a Scottish manservant.

Centuries before, in Delhi, Turkish nobles upset with the favour Razia Sultan showed an African slave-turned-courtier used talk of an illicit intimacy to murder the queen. Shahjahan was accused of harbouring incestuous feelings for his daughter, Jahanara. And the princess—a builder of mosques and patron of charities—was slandered in the markets as sleeping with a musician; her father apparently detected the affair and made the memorable choice of having the singer boiled to death.

There is more to these tales than titillation. Courtly writings, as the historian Harbans Mukhia observes, presented the highborn as “governed by perfect decorum”, justifying their superiority. Bazaar talk, on the other hand, humanised the same figures, using crudeness to establish that they were flawed like everybody else.



Maratha chief Yashwantrao Holkar (right) meeting with Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Gossip, in that sense, strips away the pretensions and airs of the elites, which is why sometimes journalism treads this territory. In the late 18th century, the editor and proprietor of the *Bengal Gazette*, who was waging a war in print against the British governor-general, was taken to the cleaners when he added a line that the man also suffered from erectile dysfunction.

Indian *akhbars* (newspapers) were packed with similar stories: a rather dreaded, but also often indebted, 19th-century military chief called Amir Khan was said to escape bankers by jumping out of toilet windows and hiding in women’s *zenanas*. This is

not to say that the press could not be counter-manipulated: In 1809, the Maratha chief Yashwantrao Holkar was reported to have been possessed by a deity for his “numerous offences”. The only recourse was for him to visit the Jejuri temple in the Deccan, and soon he—with his army—set out. But apparently Holkar’s secret goal was to confer with the toilet-fleeing Amir Khan; it was to avoid raising suspicions in British circles that the *akhbars* were made to push talk of a god-appeasing pilgrimage.

Gossip clearly then had political uses, though as with Razia Sultan, in unfriendly hands, it could birth

unpleasant consequences. If a king were unable to father heirs, it raised questions about his manhood, and by extension, his capacity to rule.

In the 17th century, the sultanate of Bijapur—eyed by the Mughals—was attacked, justification conveniently emerging from a whisper campaign that its sultan was illegitimate. In Golconda, meanwhile, a powerful minister was rumoured to be having an affair with the queen mother; stung by the gossip, when his boss fired him, the minister betrayed him to the Mughals.

In Britain, Queen Elizabeth I’s politically sensible refusal to marry resulted in murmurs about whether she was bio-

logically all there. Eventually this formidable lady agreed to “a semi-public gynaecological examination” to which the French embassy sent witnesses; it was the only way to stop further gossip. Her successor, James I, married but also carried on with men, resulting in his being branded “Queen James”—an “unmanly” ruler. Unkind talk in all these instances served also as a vehicle for political assault.

Given human delight in talking behind people’s backs, gossip is unlikely to perish, even in our relatively staid times. No matter what one does, there is no escaping unflattering speculation, even for consciously upright folk. For instance, in 1905 in Kerala, there was the case of Kuriyed-athu Thatri, a married Brahmin woman found in a compromising situation. When tried, she listed an impressive total of 65 lovers. So unprepared was society for this number—which challenged established ideals of female virtue as well as local Brahmins’ social airs—that some claimed the names were planted. This was a time of reformist stirrings among Brahmins, and the conservative Cochin rajah in cahoots with orthodox elders, it was said, got Thatri to name, shame and ostracise the firebrands. But the more popular version turns the tables. In this account, the increasing volume of men embroiled in the affair so agonised the pious rajah that he put an end to the trial. The case was closed and Thatri was excommunicated. This only made things worse. As enduring gossip in Kerala has it, the reason the trial was terminated was not the good ruler’s shock and pain—it was simply that the 66th name was probably the rajah’s own.

Manu S. Pillai is a historian and author, most recently, of Gods, Guns and Missionaries.

Raja Ravi Varma goes to Australia

A new exhibition of the popular Indian artist opens in Brisbane next week. What explains his enduring appeal?

Somak Ghoshal
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In his lifetime, Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was an avid traveller, who ventured beyond the boundaries of his home state Kerala to observe his subjects from close quarters, and later set up an iconic printing press in Maharashtra. His paintings, especially those that were mass-produced as affordable prints by his press, enjoyed a pan-India appeal, beloved of the rich and poor alike.

Ravi Varma’s afterlife has been no less eventful. Dismissed by artists like Nandalal Bose and historians like Ananda Coomaraswamy as a painter of kitsch, his reputation was revived by a major exhibition at New Delhi’s National Museum, curated by art expert Rupika Chawla and artist A. Ramachandran, in 1993. The artist’s fortunes have been on the rise since then among elite patrons of galleries and auction houses.

A Sotheby’s sale in New York in 2017 saw Ravi Varma’s untitled painting of the mythological heroine, Damayanti, fetch a whopping ₹11.09 crore, more than doubling the initial estimate. Historians and Ravi Varma enthusiasts (such as *Lounge* columnist Manu S. Pillai and lawyer-turned-collector Ganesh V. Shivaswamy) have revived interest in the artist’s life and work among a new generation of Indians. And now Ravi Varma is poised to travel to Australia, thanks to a major show of his oleographs, organised by Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), which opens on 20 September in Brisbane.

The collection, made up of 48 embroidered oleographs (which are essentially “lithographs with a coating of varnish designed to resemble oil paintings,” as conservator Kim Barrett describes them), was acquired by QAGOMA from the Henry and Amanda Bartlett Trust in 2024. Currently a beneficiary of a Maitri grant, which is disbursed by the Centre for Australia-India Relations, the project has involved extensive collaboration between experts from India and Australia to better



(above) Conservationist Kim Barrett works on a Ravi Varma Press oleograph at QAGOMA; and ‘Mohini’, printed c.1910–20 (after Ravi Varma’s painting ‘Mohini’, 1894).

understand and restore the collection. For QAGOMA, which has so far focused mostly on contemporary Indian art, it is a step into an entirely new terrain.

“You really don’t see Ravi Varma’s work in Australia, except perhaps rarely in a museum,” says Tarun Nagesh, curatorial manager of Asian and Pacific art at QAGOMA. “We wanted to share the story of this unique artist with non-Indian viewers here. Like Katsushika Hokusai, who had an incredible mainstream impact outside of his home country Japan, Ravi Varma’s story, too, deserves to be known all over the world.”

Interestingly, the collection will be shown alongside contemporary art from Asia, including paintings by Indian artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, to showcase the diverse origins of religious iconography in different cultures. “The aim is to see how

these artists craft their stories and mythologies,” says Nagesh, “and how their art becomes an expression of everyday faith.”

THE PRINCELY PAINTER

Over the last two decades, the commercial success of Indian art on the global stage has been dominated by the modernists. Members of the so-called Progressive Artists’ Group, M.F. Husain, V.S. Gaitonde, S.Z. Raza, F.N. Souza, Tyeb Mehta and their peers have fetched astronomical prices in auctions. Contemporary Indian art has become increasingly visible and influential. Yet, none of the Old Masters or their younger luminaries have had such an outsized impact on Indian public life as Ravi Varma.

How many Indian artists enjoy the “honour” of seeing their art turn into pop-cultural nuggets like Ravi Varma’s paint-



COURTESY QAGOMA

ings have? Or, for that matter, have the subjects of their art refashioned into an eclectic range of merchandise—cushion covers, coasters, mugs, and so on? (Journalist Akshaya Mukul, author of *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India*, tells me that a member of his wife’s family even had a deck of cards printed by Raja Ravi Varma’s printing press with his signature iconography.)

So, what explains the artist’s enduring appeal outside of the closed portals of academic interest or commercial enterprises like galleries and auctions?

It’s tempting to read the story of Ravi Varma’s ascent as a parable for what it means to be modern and Indian. His life and career are a bundle of contradictions. A conservative, upper-caste man, with close links to the royal family of Travancore, he took up a profession that was

considered beneath his station during his time. He then learned to paint by observing Dutch painter Thomas Jensen at work. Out of this very rudimentary “training”, he forged his own style—a unique blend of Western and Eastern practices.

Most outrageously of all, he didn’t want to cater to the wealthy alone but aspired to the kind of fame that brings what we now call “virality”. So, he opened a printing press to disseminate his work as cheap and cheerful prints.

“Contemporary artists from the Bengal School (originating in the early 20th century) believed that art had to be rarefied, it couldn’t belong to every home,” says Shivaswamy, who is writing a six-volume study of Ravi Varma, of which three are out. “But Ravi Varma held a radically different point of view. He wanted to democratise his art so that it could belong to anyone.”

Ravi Varma was the first painter to provide a unique visual template to millions of deity-worshipping Indians. As his chromolithograph prints became popular, they were plagiarised or reproduced in leading journals and magazines of the 20th century, especially after his death in 1906.

In an interview with the digital art journal *Abir Pothi* in 2023, Mukul explained, “The technology of chromolithography helped... (the) publications of Gita Press to bring gods to our homes. In

that sense, we don’t know how Ram looks, do we? We only know it through the drawings of Gita Press.”

ART AS POLITICS

Seen through the lens of our time, Ravi Varma’s art might seem to pander to the ascendant notion of reimaging the nation as a Hindu *rashtra*. He did heavily rely on Hindu myths, legends and epics for his subjects. Most of his main characters are fair-skinned women, affirming their upper-caste status. They also appear docile and exude a “coy eroticism,” as Mukul puts it. But there is more to his art than meets the eye.

“Ravi Varma’s art was always a political project,” says Deepanjana Pal, the author of *The Painter: A Life of Ravi Varma*. “He picked a medium—oil painting—that was technically barred to Indians.” Art writer Geeta Kapur also describes Ravi Varma’s flouting of tradition as “the struggle of a prodigy to steal the fire for his own people” in her critically acclaimed study, *When Was Modernism*.

Unsurprisingly, this narrative of an Indian artist’s rebellion against foreign exclusivity over a format (oil painting) was co-opted by leaders of the nationalist movement like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Kakasahib Khadilkar. As visual historian Christopher Pinney explains in *Photos of Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, such appropriation of Ravi Varma’s art was a low-hanging fruit. Even progressive thinkers like Ramananda Chatterjee considered Ravi Varma “as a protagonist in the task of nation-building,” Kapur adds.

The nationalist agenda, as the project of political modernity has repeatedly shown, can never remain untainted by supremacist impulses. “Ideologically the classical past is set against the medieval, regarded as having been corrupted by a medley of foreign influences...,” as Kapur explains. “Not only Islamic but curiously also Buddhist culture... is largely excluded when a civilisational memory of India is sought to be awakened. By deduction the touchstone for the nineteenth-century Indian renaissance is clearly Hindu civilisation.”

The long arm of this problem of appropriation continues to hold contemporary India in its thrall. If Ravi Varma’s art has entered the visual lexicon of militant Hinduism, it’s beyond anyone’s control. “Every culture starts as a cult, controlled by a few people,” as Shivaswamy puts it. “Once it enters the collective, it doesn’t belong to anyone.”

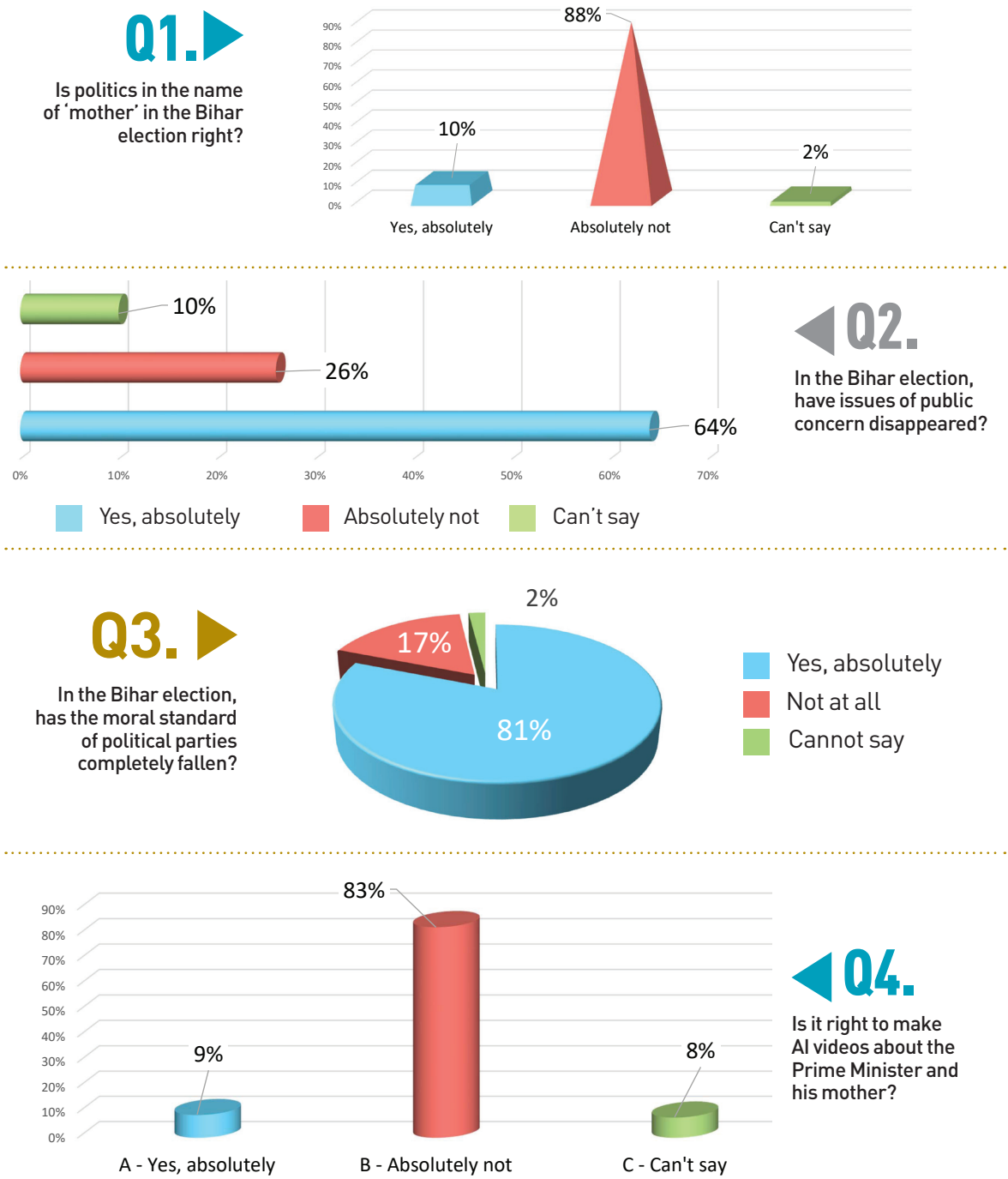
Or, rather, it belongs to everyone—from the god-fearing ordinary Indian who says a silent prayer when faced with a deity on a calendar to the gleeful mememaker on the internet, who wants to take the micky out of Ravi Varma’s “emasculated women”, who are “infantilised and objectified, reduced them to their tenderest and softest versions,” as Pal says.

Much as the artist might have hated the ‘meme-fication’ of his art, he would have loved the attention. “He would have certainly enjoyed the millions of likes on Instagram,” adds Pal. “He would have valued the virality and the public access to his art.”

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON BIHAR AI VIDEO CONTROVERSY

Morality fallen, issues eclipsed, smear politics rejected.

TDG's flash survey on September 12, 2025, captures sharp voter disapproval of smear tactics and drift in Bihar's campaign. Among 116 respondents (88% men, 12% women), 88% say politics in the name of "mother" is not right, while only 10% approve. Moral standards are seen as collapsing: 81% believe parties' ethics have "completely fallen." Public-interest issues feel sidelined, with 64% agreeing that core concerns have disappeared.



RJD, NDA leaders clash at India News 'Manchh 2025'

CONTINUED FROM P1

as reviving sugar mills—with steps taken during his 17 months as Deputy Chief Minister, including reopening the Riga sugar mill, pushing recruitment ("five lakh jobs facilitated, three lakh under process"), revising reservation limits and framing IT, tourism and sports policies. He also highlighted legacy institutions attributed to Lalu Prasad Yadav, from railway factories to university expansion, while alleging that crime had spiked and corruption flourished under the present dispensation. On the recurring "jungle raj" barb, he replied: "Murder, loot, graft, collapsed services—that is jungle raj. Those who presided over rising crime since 2005 now warn of its return. Where is the data that proves their claim?"

Pressed on reports about abusive remarks directed at the Prime Minister's mother, Yadav condemned any such language. "A mother is sacred. We oppose it strongly. Neither I nor Rahul Gandhi used such words, and whoever did has faced action," he said, before questioning what he called selective outrage. He also rejected the notion that the 2025 contest would be "Modi versus Opposition", insisting Bihar's polls "must be fought on local issues—floods, drought, jobs, law and order—where the Prime Minister does not turn up once the election ends".

VIP chief Mukesh Sahni, now aligned with the Mahagathbandhan, declared that if the alliance secured a majority, Tejashwi Yadav would be Chief Minister and he himself would

serve as Deputy Chief Minister. He contended that representation for the Nishad community—"11-12% of Bihar's vote"—was overdue and pressed the BJP to "act, not sermonise" on caste. "If the Prime Minister believes caste doesn't exist, abolish it in law. We say openly we represent Nishads and the backward. Power matters only if it delivers justice," he said, adding that the alliance expected to settle seat-sharing ahead of the NDA and announce its leadership slate in time.

Congress Rajya Sabha MP Akhilesh Prasad Singh sought to close speculation over the Opposition's face, saying RJD, as the largest partner, would naturally project Yadav. He listed unemployment, migration and agrarian distress as the decisive issues and said Bihar's rankings in education and health had sunk to the bottom among large states. "Nearly three crore youths have been forced to migrate in the past two decades. Farmers' costs have multiplied while incomes have not doubled as promised. People want a government that addresses these realities," he said, rejecting the idea of a "Modi brand" overshadowing local concerns and predicting a clear Mahagathbandhan majority.

Adding a cultural note, Bhojpuri star Ritesh Pandey, now with Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj, channelled youth sentiment through song—"Rozgaar chahiye, naya Bihar chahiye"—and pledged to end

the "triple migration" of labour, capital and talent. He argued that Bihar's banking credit-deposit imbalance bled local enterprise and promised to "stop the flight of capital" so those compelled to leave could one day "give jobs at home".

Across the sessions, familiar battlelines hardened. The NDA showcased stability, infrastructure and delivery under Nitish Kumar, insisting law and order has improved and that action follows crime. The Opposition framed the election as a referendum on two decades of stagnation, urging voters to punish what it calls unfulfilled promises and rising insecurity, and to back a youth-centred jobs push. Newer players such as Jan Suraj sought to prise open space with a governance-first pitch, even as allies wrangled over seat arithmetic.

With the Election Commission expected to finalise revised rolls and alliances moving towards seat-sharing announcements, Bihar appears set for an intensely local contest fought over employment, migration, public services and safety—issues that speakers at Manchh 2025 argued will matter more than any national halo. The only consensus was on the stakes: after years of political churn and coalition pivots, the outcome will define whether voters reward continuity under the NDA or gamble on the Mahagathbandhan's promise of a reset.

Wheels left behind, SpiceJet flight makes emergency landing

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

A SpiceJet flight from Gujarat's Kandla Airport to Mumbai made an emergency landing at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) on Friday after an outer wheel was discovered on the runway following take-off, a SpiceJet spokesperson confirmed.

The SpiceJet Q400 air-

craft reported a technical issue mid-flight, prompting the pilot to request an emergency landing as per standard operating procedure (SOP). A full emergency was declared at Mumbai Airport as a precaution.

The aircraft landed safely at 3:51 PM on Runway 27, and all passengers and crew members were reported safe. According to the airline, the aircraft taxied to the terminal under its own

power and passengers disembarked normally.

"On September 12, an outer wheel of a SpiceJet Q400 aircraft operating from Kandla to Mumbai was found on the runway after take-off. The aircraft continued its journey to Mumbai and landed safely. Following a smooth landing, it taxied to the terminal under its own power, and all passengers disembarked normally," the SpiceJet said.

Indian-origin motel manager in US

CONTINUED FROM P1

death penalty.

The Consulate General of India in Houston has expressed condolences and is in contact with the family. "We are offering all possible assistance. The accused is in

Dallas Police custody," it said in a post on X.

Known as 'Bob' to friends and family, Nagamalliah was remembered as a loving husband, devoted father, and kind soul who touched the lives of everyone he knew.

"This unimaginable trag-

edy was not only sudden but deeply traumatic," friends said. "Bob's life was taken in a brutal attack that occurred in front of his wife and son, who bravely tried to protect him. The shocking nature of this event has shaken our community."

We have Kirk's shooter in custody

CONTINUED FROM P1

on Fox News, Trump said he hoped the shooter gets death penalty.

"I think, with a high degree of certainty, we have him in custody. Essentially, somebody that was very close to him turned him in," Trump told Fox News.

"I hope he gets the death

penalty," he added.

Trump further said that Kirk was like a son to him. "[Kirk] was like a son. He started this really during what would normally be college... and it's become a movement... I've never seen young people, or any group, go to one person like they did to Charlie," he said.

Trump further told Fox News that he spoke to Kirk's family members who want to keep his nonprofit organization Turning Point USA going. "I spoke to his wife yesterday, she's devastated. But in between the devastation, they want to keep Turning Point USA going... they think they can do it," he said.

India backs UNGA resolution

CONTINUED FROM P1

have adopted the New York Declaration on the implementation of the two-State solution. Together, we are charting an irreversible path toward peace in the Middle East."

He added that France, Saudi Arabia, and their partners will actively participate in the upcoming Conference on the two-

state solution in New York. "France, Saudi Arabia, and all their partners will be in New York to bring this peace plan to fruition at the Conference on the two-State solution," Macron said.

Highlighting the vision for lasting peace, Macron further stated, "Another future is possible. Two peoples, two States: Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. It

is up to all of us to make it happen!"

Underlining the next steps to solidify this momentum, Macron noted a few days ago that France and Saudi Arabia would co-chair a high-profile conference on the Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in New York on September 22, aiming to garner broad international support for peace and security in the region.

Nepal's former CJ Karki takes oath

CONTINUED FROM P1

came Nepal's first woman Chief Justice, known for issuing strong verdicts in high-profile corruption cases.

Though she was nominated to the top court under the Nepali Congress quota, those who have worked closely with her stress that she always maintained judicial independence and never bowed to political pressure. In fact, her tenure ended in June 2017 after a controversial impeachment motion widely viewed as a political attempt to stop her verdict on

the police chief appointment was filed against her by the then Sher Bahadur Deuba-led coalition. Those who have worked with her describe Karki as courageous and possessing the highest level of integrity. She is also known for her Spartan way of life, they say. Ananda Mohan Bhattarai, former Supreme Court justice, says Karki and her husband have made significant contributions to the country's democratic movement, according to The Kathmandu Post.

PM in Manipur today; 'took long'

CONTINUED FROM P1

Former Chief Minister of Rajasthan and Congress leader Ashok Gehlot on Friday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Manipur is just a formality.

Gehlot said the PM should have visited earlier, suggesting that an earlier visit might have helped restore peace.

Speaking to the reporters, Ashok Gehlot said, "PM Modi is doing a formality. He is going for 4 hours. He

should have gone earlier...I even asked Union HM Amit Shah why he is not able to make him understand? ...Maybe if he had gone earlier, peace would have been established sooner..."

Prime Minister will visit Mizoram and lay the foundation stone and inaugurate multiple development projects worth over Rs 9000 crore at Aizawl, at around 10 AM. He will also address a public function, according to the statement.

No disrespect shown: Kherra over AI clip

CONTINUED FROM P1

thy for these things anymore. Mr Modi cannot do a 'touch me not' politics, he is in politics and he needs to take everything, even a sense of humour of the opposition properly and actually there is no humour in it, there is 'naseehat' in this," Kherra said

In an AI-generated video posted by the Bihar Congress that has gone viral, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen dreaming about his late mother, Heeraben Modi, who is lambasting him over his politics.

The party had come under fire once before, while an unknown person had gone up to the stage of Congress-led 'Voter Adhikar Yatra' in Bihar's Darbhanga and hurled abuses at PM Modi and his mother.

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Manipur, Kherra said the visit comes "too little, too late" after 864 days.

He criticised plans for a cultural performance during the visit, and said locals are too heartbroken to take part, and many are angry, sad, and pulling down hoardings in protest.

Delhi, Bombay HCs get bomb threats

CONTINUED FROM P1

that the police have asked them to vacate the court premises.

"Police told us to go out and that there is a bomb threat rumour. They told us that this is an order of the Chief Justice," he said.

A major security scare gripped the Delhi High Court after an email threat warning of a bomb in and around the court premises led to panic and disruption of proceedings.

As the alert spread, all benches of the High Court rose immediately, and lawyers, litigants, and staff were evacuated from the premises. The sudden evacuation

created scenes of chaos, with people rushing out of the court complex in fear.

Security forces, including Delhi Police and bomb disposal squads, swiftly cordoned off the area. Fire-fighter vehicles and ambulances were deployed on-site as a precautionary measure, while teams with sniffer dogs conducted a thorough search of the premises.

Sacchin Puri, Vice President of the Delhi High Court Bar Association, said: "We are cooperating with the security personnel and, as a precaution, we have asked all lawyers to evacuate the court complex. All the benches have also risen."

Senior Advocate Pramod Kumar Dubey added, "A threat mail has circulated in which it is being said that the person is from ISIS. The content of the email is unclear. Police and bomb squad have reached the spot."

Another lawyer present at the court said, "We were asked by the security officials to vacate the court. The court proceedings have been stopped."

So far, no suspicious object has been recovered. Officials confirmed that an investigation is underway to trace the origin of the threatening email and identify those behind it.

GANPATI BAPPA: THE DIVINE FORCE DRIVING INDIA'S ECONOMY AND SOCIAL HARMONY

OPINION

GOPAL GOSWAMI



Every year, as the monsoon clouds recede and the festive season dawns, millions of Indians eagerly await the arrival of Bhagwan Ganesh, the harbinger of wisdom, prosperity, and new beginnings. Ganesh Chaturthi, celebrated with grandeur across the nation, is not merely a religious festival; it is a socio-economic phenomenon that energises the economy, nurtures livelihoods, fosters unity, and reinforces India's cultural and spiritual heritage.

In 2025, the festival is projected to generate a staggering Rs 45,000 crore in economic activity, up from Rs 25,000 crore in 2024. This surge is a testament to how faith, finance, and festivity intertwine in modern India.

Ganesh Chaturthi's economic footprint extends far beyond traditional religious rituals. Its impact reverberates across multiple sectors:

- Rs 500 crore – Clay idols and eco-friendly Ganesha statues
- Rs 2,000 crore – Modak, sweets, and festive delicacies
- Rs 3,000 crore – Catering and snacks for community events
- Rs 3,000 crore – Festival merchandise and decorative items
- Rs 5,000 crore – Event management and organising committees
- Rs 10,000 crore – Local transport and spending in markets

From the bustling lanes of Mumbai to the vibrant pandals of Pune, Hyderabad, and Garur – a remote village in Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand, the festival transforms cities into economic engines, generating employment and boosting local trade.

Even Indian Railways plays a crucial role, running over hundreds special trains to manage the surge of devotees traveling to and from the Konkan region, a testament to the logistical scale of this national event.

Behind these large figures are lakhs of small dreams and stories of resilience.

- The *kaarigar* (artisan) shaping clay into intricate idols
- The *mithaiwala* (sweet-maker) crafting traditional modaks
- The caterer serving meals to volunteers and devotees
- The decorator setting up elaborate pandals and stages

For these individuals, Ganesh Chaturthi is not just a festival, it is their lifeline. It

provides a sizeable part of their annual income and sustains local economies. In a world where automation and globalisation often marginalise traditional crafts, festivals like these preserve artisanal heritage and ensure that cultural professions continue to thrive. This is economic empowerment rooted in culture.

Ganesh Chaturthi is a celebration that transcends barriers of caste, class, and community. Initiated by freedom fighter Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak during the colonial era, the public celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi was envisioned as a tool for social unity and national awakening. Even today, the festival embodies this spirit. Neighbourhoods come together to organise pandals, families work collectively to prepare offerings, and volunteers unite to manage crowds and distribute Prasad. Whether in metropolitan cities or small villages, Ganpati brings people together, reinforcing a sense of belonging and collective purpose. In times when divisive narratives threaten social fabric, this festival serves as a reminder that shared faith can foster harmony.

Ganesh Chaturthi has also evolved into a powerful marketing phenomenon. Major brands across sectors, from FMCG to automobiles, use the festive mood to launch products and campaigns.

- Retail sales peak as families buy new clothes, jewelry, and home appliances.
- Food and beverage companies innovate with modak-inspired products and festive offers.
- Automobile and electronics companies time major launches around this period, boosting quarterly sales.

- Digital platforms and fintech services experience a spike in transactions due to online donations and festive shopping.

In essence, Ganesh Chaturthi has become a festival of commerce, comparable to Diwali in its economic significance. This symbiotic relationship between culture and commerce reflects the strength of India's consumer market and the opportunities it offers for businesses. As the festival grows, so does the responsibility to protect the environment. The immersion of idols in water bodies has historically caused pollution, threatening aquatic life and ecosystems.

In recent years, there has been a significant shift towards eco-friendly celebrations:

- Clay idols replacing Plaster of Paris (PoP) statues
- Natural dyes and plant-based colours
- Artificial tanks for immersion to prevent river and sea pollution
- Awareness campaigns promoting sustainable practices

This balance between tradition and modern environmental consciousness is crucial. It shows that devotion and sustainability can coexist, setting a precedent for other festivals worldwide.

At a macroeconomic level, Ganesh Chaturthi acts as a stimulus package for the economy:

- Employment generation across multiple industries, from manufacturing to services
- Boost to SMEs and local businesses, ensuring money circulates within communities
- Infrastructure upgrades, including transport, lighting, and public utilities, driven by festival demand
- Tourism revenue, as domestic and international visitors flock to witness iconic pandals

Cities like Mumbai, Pune, and Hyderabad alone contribute Rs 7,000 crore annually to the economy during this period. This localised growth has ripple effects, enhancing state revenues and supporting national GDP.

In recent years, Ganesh Chaturthi has crossed national borders, with celebrations held in countries like the United States, Canada, UK, UAE, and Australia. These events:

- Strengthen India's cultural diplomacy
- Promote soft power on a global stage
- Provide a sense of identity and belonging for the Indian diaspora
- Create international trade opportunities for Indian artisans and businesses

As India's global influence rises, festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi become vehicles



An artisan decorates an idol of Lord Ganesha in Mumbai. FILE PHOTO

festivity.

- Faith unites millions in devotion, fostering spiritual strength and social harmony.
- Finance drives prosperity, creating opportunities for individuals and businesses alike.
- Festivity brings colour, joy, and a sense of renewal to society.

When Bhagwan Ganesh arrives, he does not just bless homes, he blesses livelihoods and economies. His presence lights up not only the hearts of devotees but also the markets, industries, and aspirations of a billion people. As India marches towards becoming a global economic powerhouse, festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi remind us that our greatest strength lies in our cultural roots, our collective spirit, and our ability to harmonise tradition with progress.

In a rapidly changing world, where technology and globalisation reshape societies, Ganesh Chaturthi stands as a symbol of continuity and resilience. It teaches us that economic growth need not come at the expense of cultural heritage or environmental stewardship. By nurturing inclusive development, promoting sustainable practices, and strengthening social bonds, the festival embodies the vision of a New India, one where spirituality and modernity go hand in hand. Let us celebrate not just with devotion but with a commitment to building an India where every small dream matters, every artisan thrives, and every act of faith contributes to the greater good of society and the nation.

Gopal Goswami, PhD, is a researcher, columnist and social thinker

Counting the missing: Tracing quiet history of Muslim women missing from India's democracy

BOOK REVIEW

SOUMYA BHOWMICK

In *Missing from the House: Muslim Women in the Lok Sabha*, Rasheed Kidwai and Ambar Kumar Ghosh undertake a unique study—one that resists polemics in favour of patient documentation and sweeping claims in favour of close, almost archival attention. They gather the stories of every Muslim woman who has ever sat in the lower house of India's Parliament (the Lok Sabha)—eighteen in more than seventy-five years of Independence—and stitch them into a narrative that is both a lament and a ledger.

The numbers themselves feel like an indictment: in a chamber of 543 members, across nearly seven and a half decades, only eighteen Muslim women have found a place. There have been five Lok Sabhas with none at all, and never more than four at a time. Contemporary political parties are often critiqued for policies

that appear inattentive to Muslim concerns. However, if Muslim identity has always been central to India's politics—sometimes claimed as programme, sometimes cast as provocation—this book shows with quiet persistence that Muslim women have been missing across governments and across eras, regardless of who was in power.

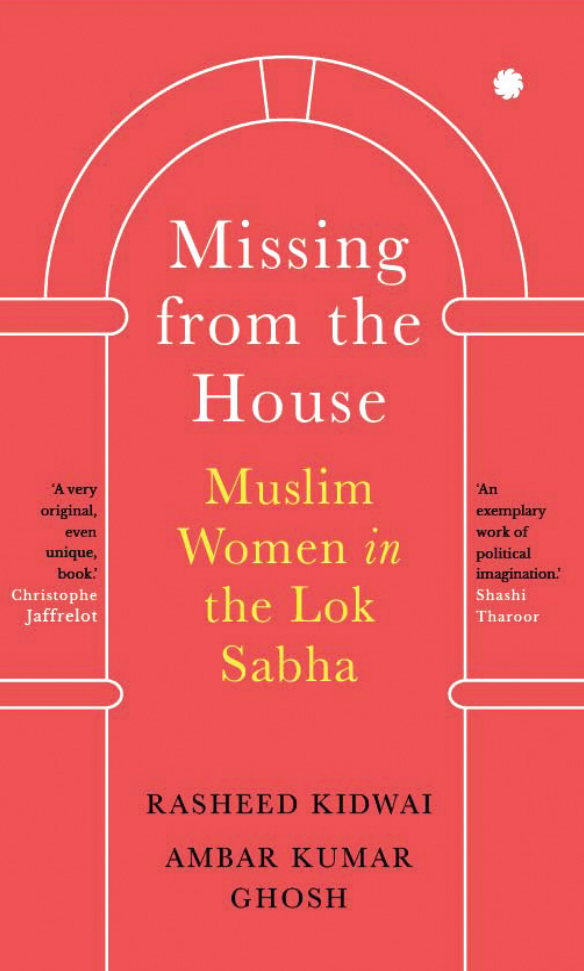
The book is distinctive not because it seeks to explain everything, but because it insists on examining a narrow field in great detail. We have studies of women in politics and of Muslims in Parliament, but this is the first sustained attempt to trace Muslim women as parliamentarians, to count their numbers, and to ask what their presence—or their absence—means.

The style of the book is sometimes formal and academic, with dense archival detail and theoretical framing; yet it also slips into a

more narrative, biographical tone when sketching the lives of the individual parliamentarians. The cumulative effect is powerful. The pattern emerges starkly: thirteen of the eighteen women were dynastic entrants, daughters, wives, or daughters-in-law of political families, a reminder that in India's democracy, dynasty often remains the surest door for women to walk through. And then, too, many careers were brief, a single term or two, with only a few making a longer mark.

Geography sharpens the point. West Bengal, Assam, and Uttar Pradesh dominate the story. In Bengal alone, in the last decade and a half, four Muslim women—Mausam Benazir Noor, Mamta Sanghamita, Sajda Ahmed, and Nusrat Jahan—have been elected, more than from any other state in that period. Meanwhile, the southern states, with their higher literacy rates and better gender indices, have never sent a Muslim woman to the Lok Sabha.

The portraits themselves give the book its life. Mofida Ahmed of Assam, elected in 1957, was the first, and during her term, raised hundreds of questions on



tea prices, railway accidents, and even the naming of a bridge, before fading from public life. Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah, the 'matriarch of Kashmir', carried both dynastic authority and a welfare-oriented politics. Mohsina

Kidwai, perhaps the most durable of them all, became a Union minister and spoke of India's plural heritage with conviction: "...Muslims are an inalienable part of this matrix...Islam has had significant religious, artistic, philosophical, cultural, social and

political influences... traders, mystics, preachers and invaders have shaped and influenced the Indian subcontinent for thirteen centuries..."

Later figures reveal other paths. Mehbooba Mufti began as an "accidental politician" before becoming the face of the People's Democratic Party and Jammu and Kashmir's first woman chief minister. Tabassum Hasan defended her family legacy and returned to Parliament after a by-election. Raneer Narah, a former cricketer from Assam, survived a near-fatal plane crash and returned to politics undeterred. And Nusrat Jahan, a film star turned MP, navigated glamour, controversy, and social outreach, embodying the contradictions of contemporary celebrity politics. The youngest, Iqra Hasan, arrived in 2024 as the first-time MP in the eighteenth Lok Sabha. Others—Abida Ahmed, Noor Bano, Sajda Ahmed, Mausam Noor—appear distinctively, their stories adding texture to the ledger.

Because the book spans close to a century, the contexts change—Partition's shadow in the early years, the turbulence of the Emergency, the churn of Mandal politics, and the new

challenging turns of the present. Yet the obstacles repeat with depressing familiarity. Parties hesitate to nominate women, patriarchal attitudes persist, and many women who do get in are confined by dynasty or expected to play supporting roles. As the authors observe, "...despite family privilege, Muslim women in politics had to confront unenviable challenges, shoulder the real burden of socio-cultural obligations, and face notorious political rivals...in order to establish themselves as 'successful leaders' in their own right."

The book's shortcoming is that it does not push deeper into the reasons. The regional disparity—Bengal's recent surge, the South's silence—deserves a fuller exploration of party strategies, social contexts, and nomination pipelines. Nor does the book venture too far into prescriptions, beyond gesturing to the Women's Reservation Act as a possible turning point. Yet perhaps that restraint is intentional. This is not a book of manifestos; it is a record. It leaves the reader with the evidence and trusts them to feel the weight.

And the weight is heavy. In the present House, Iqra Hasan and Sajda Ahmed

stands as the only two Muslim woman MPs in a chamber of 543. Parliament, the mirror of the nation, continues to exclude the very women who are most often debated in the abstract—on family law, on hijab, on personal freedoms—without hearing their own voices. As journalist Rama Lakshmi, who endorses the book, reminds us: "...where are the Muslim women representatives? They should be saying: 'Nothing about us without us.'"

At its core, *Missing from the House* is not just about eighteen women. It is about a nation's unfinished promise that reminds us that the world's largest democracy remains incomplete when such a vital group is absent from its central institution. And it does so without rancour or ornament, simply by naming the women who made it in, and by counting the many who did not. Finally, this book will be essential reading for scholars of Indian politics, gender studies, and minority representation, as well as for policymakers, journalists, and citizens who are committed to the inclusivity of Indian democracy.

The author is a policy researcher and columnist based in India

KAKORI AT 100: MARTYRS' LAST WISH

As legendary freedom fighter Bhagat Singh noted in an essay after Kakori, Bismil implored that if people truly mourned their martyrdom, they should honor it by ensuring communal amity: “with whatever means, they must establish Hindu-Muslim unity; that was our last wish and only this can be our memorial”.

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

August 2025 marked the centenary of the Kakori Conspiracy (also known as the Kakori Train Action), a pivotal revolutionary episode in India's anti-colonial struggle. A hundred years on, India is revisiting the Kakori incident through exhibitions, tributes, and educational events, casting new light on its heroes across community lines and reflecting on how their martyrdom informs citizenship today. This article retraces the dramatic 1925 train robbery led by Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqulla Khan, examines their legacy as martyrs transcending religious boundaries, and analyzes how commemorating them in 2025 is shaping public memory and patriotism.

THE KAKORI CONSPIRACY OF 1925

On 9 August 1925, a group of young Indian revolutionaries from the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) carried out one of the most daring acts of the Indian freedom movement – the Kakori train robbery. Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Chandrashekhar Azad, Rajendra Nath Lahiri, Thakur Roshan Singh and others stopped the 8-Down Saharanpur–Lucknow passenger train near Kakori (a village near Lucknow) and looted the British government treasury it was carrying. The aim was twofold: to acquire funds for their armed struggle against British rule, and to send a defiant political message against colonial exploitation. The audacity of this act “shook the foundations of British rule,” as later tributes would note, by showing that Indian patriots could directly challenge the Raj's economic

stronghold.

British authorities responded with a massive crackdown. In the ensuing Kakori Conspiracy case, more than 40 people were arrested and tried for their involvement. The trial culminated in severe sentences: Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Rajendra Lahiri, and Roshan Singh were sentenced to death and executed by the end of 1927, while others received long prison terms. (Chandrashekhar Azad evaded capture and continued the fight until his death in 1931.) The British Raj had hoped to label the Kakori revolutionaries as mere criminals, but the Indian public came to revere them as nationalist heroes, seeing the robbery not as a crime but as a bold protest against unjust colonial policies. Indeed, the Kakori action highlighted the deep popular resentment against colonial rule, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi observed a century later – people were “angry at the manner in which people's money was being used to further colonial rule, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi observed a century later – people were “angry at the manner in which people's money was being used to further colonial rule.” The episode galvanized anti-colonial sentiment and inspired other revolutionaries; historians note that it emboldened the revolutionary movement that would soon adopt a more socialist outlook, eventually leading to the reorganization of HRA into the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in 1928.

REVOLUTIONARIES ACROSS COMMUNITY LINES

One remarkable aspect of the Kakori saga was the camaraderie between revolutionaries of different religions, especially the friendship of Pandit Ram Prasad Bismil (a devout Hindu) and Ashfaqulla Khan (a devout Muslim). In an era when

the British often employed “divide and rule” tactics to pit communities against each other, the Kakori plot stood as a powerful counter-narrative of Hindu-Muslim unity. The sight of a staunch Arya Samaji like Bismil and a pious Muslim like Ashfaqulla working hand-in-hand for India's freedom sent a message far greater than the train robbery itself. “The Kakori Train Action not only shook the British Raj but also brought into limelight the camaraderie between a staunch Hindu and a dutiful Muslim,” writes one historian, noting how their “pious bond” trumped the Raj's communal divide.

Both men were keenly aware of the symbolic importance of their friendship. While awaiting execution, Bismil penned a heartfelt letter urging his countrymen to uphold Hindu-Muslim unity, explicitly framing it as the true homage to their sacrifice. He pointed out that even the colonial government acknowledged Ashfaqulla as “Ram Prasad's right hand.” If a Muslim like Ashfaq could become the closest comrade of a Hindu like Bismil, “why can't Hindus and Muslims unite for the cause of freedom?” Bismil asked. He proudly asserted that Ashfaqulla's exemplary loyalty had disproved the notion that “Muslims aren't trustworthy”, and that no one should dare say Hindus and Muslims cannot trust each other in the fight for India's liberty. This sentiment was not just personal but strategic – the revolutionaries saw national unity as essential to defeating colonialism.

In fact, Bismil's “last wish” was the establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity throughout India. As legendary freedom fighter Bhagat Singh noted in an

essay after Kakori, Bismil implored that if people truly mourned their martyrdom, they should honor it by ensuring communal amity: “with whatever means, they must establish Hindu-Muslim unity; that was our last wish and only this can be our memorial”. He stressed that Ashfaqulla Khan fully shared this view, making it clear that both martyrs wanted their deaths to inspire national integration over sectarian strife. Such statements, along with other letters smuggled out of prison, show that Kakori's heroes consciously projected an image of shared martyrdom beyond religious lines. They understood that for a subjugated nation of Hindus, Muslims, and others to become free, it first had to stand united as one Indian people.

FROM DARING ACT TO MARTYRDOM

The execution of Bismil, Ashfaqulla, Lahiri and Roshan Singh in December 1927 immediately transformed them into martyrs (shaheed) in the eyes of the Indian public. These men were all young (the eldest was 35 and the youngest just 26) and went to the gallows with remarkable courage. Their hanging provoked nationwide sorrow but also pride – their sacrifice became a rallying point for the freedom movement. Folk songs and poems celebrated their bravery; indeed, Ram Prasad Bismil was himself a talented poet who had written patriotic verses. The famous Urdu poem “Sarfarooshi ki Tamanna” (“The desire for revolution/sacrifice”), often associated with Bismil, echoed through rallies and continues to inspire today (though penned by another poet, Bismil's ardent recitation made it iconic). The martyrs' pho-

tographs were circulated as icons of resistance, and their biographies – including Bismil's autobiography and Ashfaqulla's writings – were read by aspiring young revolutionaries. The Hindustan Socialist Republican Association formed by Bhagat Singh's generation explicitly hailed the Kakori heroes' vision; their sacrifice pushed the struggle further leftward towards the goal of an egalitarian, secular India.

After Independence in 1947, the Republic of India officially honored the Kakori martyrs as freedom fighters. Their names found a place in history textbooks, and their hometowns saw memorials erected in their memory. In Uttar Pradesh (the state where Kakori is located), the Kakori Shaheed Smarak (Martyrs' Memorial) was built as a tribute “to the brave revolutionaries of the Kakori Conspiracy”. The memorial features cenotaphs for Bismil, Ashfaqulla and their comrades, and serves as a site for annual homage on August 9 (Kakori Day) and December 19 (Martyrdom Day). Over the decades, various commemorations kept their legacy alive: for instance, in 1997 (the 70th anniversary of their execution), India Post issued a commemorative postage stamp honoring Ram Prasad Bismil and the Kakori uprising. Many schools, roads and institutions have been named after the Kakori heroes across Uttar Pradesh and India – from Ram Prasad Bismil Memorial Degree College in Lucknow to Shaheed Ashfaqulla Khan zoological garden in Gorakhpur. Such gestures integrate the martyrs' names into daily civic life, quietly reminding citizens of their stories.

Yet, memory can fade if not tended. Some historical treasures related to Ka-

kori languish in obscurity. Notably, a small museum at Kakori railway station houses artifacts from the 1925 robbery – including the cast-iron safe that the revolutionaries looted, a British-made station bell, and documents from the trial – but it sees shockingly few visitors (sometimes only 20–30 in an entire year). Many local residents are unaware it even exists, and it typically opens only when a handful of people request a visit around the August or December anniversaries. By contrast, the outdoor Kakori Shaheed Smarak about 2 km away draws more footfall (perhaps 50–100 visitors daily, often college students). Even so, caretakers say the memorial, spread over several acres with gardens, an open-air theatre and even a “temple of revolutionaries,” struggles with maintenance and needs greater support and awareness. These observations suggest that while the legend of the Kakori martyrs remains potent, there is a continuing challenge to effectively educate the broader public – especially the younger generation – about their story in engaging ways.

HONORING UNITY AND RENAMING THE NARRATIVE

In an interesting symbolic move, officials have taken care to frame Kakori in respectful terms. The term “Kakori Kand” (Kakori incident) – long used in his-

tory books – was officially replaced with “Kakori Train Action,” since “Kand” in Hindi can imply a scandal or misdeed. By renaming it, the government emphasized that this was a proud act of courage and resistance, not a mere criminal incident. This change, first made in 2021, was highlighted again during the centenary as an honor to the martyrs' legacy. It reflects how language in public discourse is being consciously shaped to valorize freedom fighters in the national narrative.

At the national level too, leaders across India's political spectrum paid homage to the Kakori heroes on the centenary. From President to Prime Minister to local officials, messages recounted the story and saluted the martyrs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted on social media (X) to mark 100 years since Kakori, stating: “On this day, a hundred years ago, the courage shown by patriotic Indians at Kakori highlighted the resentment among people against colonial rule... Their valour will always be remembered by the people of India. We will keep working to fulfil their dreams for a strong and prosperous India.”. This message, echoed in a formal statement, linked the historical sacrifice to a modern pledge – that today's government seeks to realize the dream of a strong, developed India, which is the ultimate tribute to those martyrs.

Other leaders struck similar notes. Union Home Minister Amit Shah described the Kakori Train Action as “a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and patriotism in the Indian freedom struggle.” He recounted how “brave heroes like Ram Prasad Bismil ji, Chandrashekhar Azad ji, and Ashfaqulla Khan ji ignited the torch of revolution against British looting, shaking the foundations of the British Empire”. Shah emphasized that the nation will always remain indebted to their bravery, highlighting the debt of gratitude citizens owe to freedom fighters. Meanwhile in Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath tweeted his “heartfelt tributes to all the immortal revolutionaries on the anniversary of the Kakori Rail Action that shook the foundations of British rule!” He hailed the saga of Kakori as “a beacon of inspiration” whose “sacrifice, courage, and patriotism will forever inspire us to work with the spirit of ‘Nation First’”. Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya likewise extolled the event's significance for India's independence. These sentiments from prominent leaders, especially from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, show a concerted effort to celebrate revolutionary patriots as national icons. By invoking Kakori's heroes, they also seek to instill values of patriotism and unity in today's citizens, aligning with their broader nationalist discourse.



Kakori martyrs Lahiri, Ashfaqulla, Bismil, Roshan—centenary tributes, Lucknow, August 2025.



Kakori Shaheed Smarak, obelisk honoring 1925 martyrs, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.



Kakori station, site of 1925 train action, Lucknow, August 2025.

Who wants to be a deity?



B.K. SHEILU

There is a popular television game show franchise called Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. Participants in the quiz answer a series of multiple-choice questions while attempting to win large cash prizes. The shows are popular the world over largely due to the money on offer - the top prize is usually a million units of the local currency. Most people are quick to see the opportunity to get rich fast.

However, few people see the opportunity to change their lives meaningfully and become something more than an ordinary person, especially when such transformation involves working on oneself. Such an opportunity comes along just once, when the world is passing from one age to another, as the wheel of time turns inexorably.

Time brings major changes, slowly but surely. The process is often imper-



ceptible to us even as we play a part in it, because it stretches over a long period of time. It becomes apparent only when its ultimate results manifest themselves, as is happening with climate change.

A time comes when the world undergoes renewal, and the decrepit old order is replaced by a new, divine one. This is part of the cyclic progression of time, whereby the world goes from new to old, is rejuvenated, and again becomes old before another renewal, in a pro-

cess that repeats endlessly.

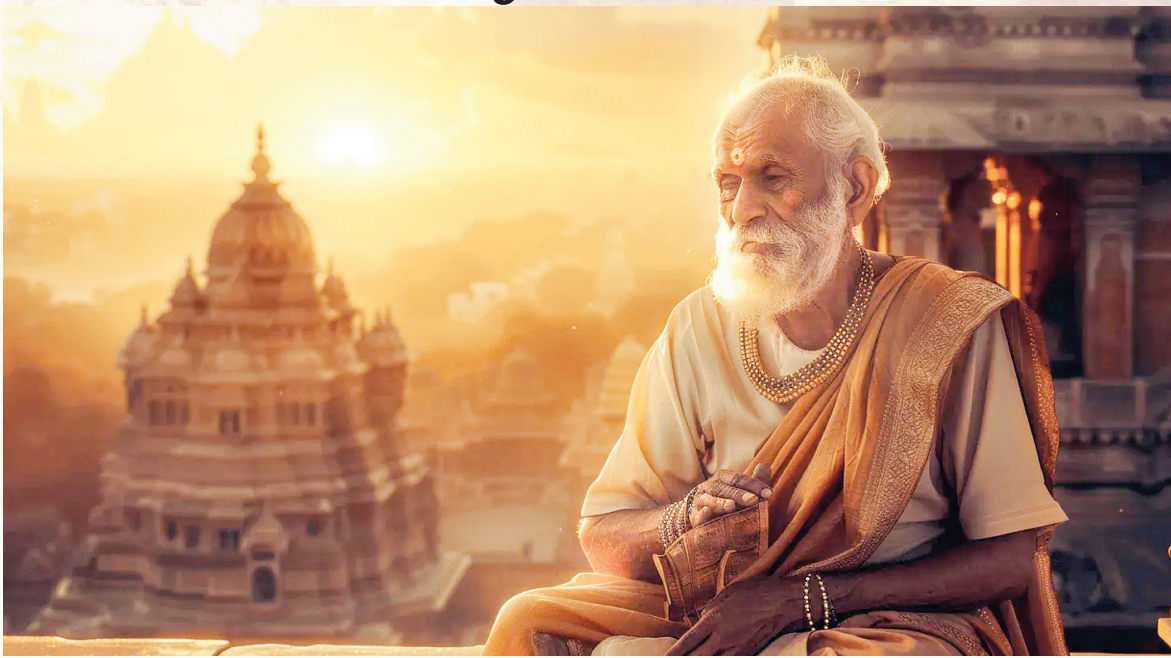
The present time is one of such transformation. It is referred to in religious and spiritual lexicon as the transition from the Iron Age to the Golden Age, which occurs at the beginning of each cycle of time.

The Golden Age is a time when all souls as well as the elements of nature are in their pristine state, and consequently there is spiritual as well as material abundance. The souls - whom we now revere as deities - were free from vices, which

are the root cause of sorrow. Consequently, there is complete peace and happiness during that period.

Many people assume that when the Iron Age - also called hell because of the hellish conditions that prevail - ends with the passage of time, and the Golden Age dawns, they will get to live in that new age.

That is not the case. When the world transitions from the Golden Age to the, Silver, Copper, and Iron Ages, there is a gradual decline in the



quality of souls, and of life in general. There is material progress, but souls increasingly become distanced from purity, peace,

and true love because they have forgotten the fact that they are souls, and that these qualities are a part of their original nature. By the Iron Age, souls are ignorant of the truth about their own identity, and vainly seek fulfilment in objects, places, and other people. The shift from the Iron Age to the Golden Age involves a complete renewal, which is both physical and spiritual.

Nothing of the Iron Age remains: the harmful ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that

turn the world into hell are all swept away.

What remains is all that is pure and divine. Only souls with divine qualities exist in the Golden Age. These are the souls who have qualified for the Golden Age by discarding the damaging ways of the Iron Age and embodying virtues such as purity, peace, love, and truth.

Living in the Golden Age is a prize worth much more than a million dollars. All the wealth of a millionaire in today's world cannot save him or her from physical illness or emotional pain, nor can it shield them completely from the fears, anxiety, and stress

that are now commonplace. The Golden Age, in contrast, is free from all kinds of negativity because at that time, weaknesses such as lust, anger, greed, and ego, which give rise to all suffering, are unknown to human minds.

Souls can attain such a state only by connecting with the eternal source of power and purity, the Supreme Soul. When we remember the Supreme, we receive His power and virtues through the mental link, which recharges and cleanses the soul. Gradually, the impurities accumulated during the course of the soul's sojourn in this world are washed away, and its innate quali-

ties of peace, love, purity, and truth shine through its actions. It is such purified souls, or deities, who live in the Golden Age, where happiness is the natural state of being.

The spiritual effort required for this is simple, though it calls for patience, fortitude, and constant attention on the self. The reward is great - it is something no millionaire or billionaire can hope to get in today's world. So, who wants to be a deity?

B.K. Sheilu is a Rajyoga teacher at the Brahma Kumaris headquarters in Mount Abu, Rajasthan.

The spiritual foundations of security



B.K. DEEPA

Security is one of our most fundamental needs. Without physical security, our very survival is at risk. But security is not just about protection from physical harm. It is linked to nearly every aspect of our life, from finances to health, to relationships, and beyond. Without a sense of security, we feel vulnerable, anxious, and even paralysed. It is only when we are secure that we can focus on personal growth, creativity, relationships, and problem-

solving.

How do we get security? People seek financial stability in order to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing, and to plan for the future. Having a network of relationships - family, friends, colleagues - provides emotional security and a sense of belonging. The feeling of being emotionally safe and having the mental and emotional resources to deal with challenges gives us mental stability and confidence.

But the external factors we depend on for security - a house, a job or business, savings, a social network, and stable social, economic, and political conditions - are variable and impermanent. An accident, a natural disaster, political or economic upheavals, and soured relationships can upend our world.

So, how do we ensure our security?

Spiritual knowledge reveals truths which bring the realisation that we are more secure than we knew, and that we have inner resources to ensure our long-

term security.

Recognising the fact that we are immortal souls, not perishable bodies, helps to free us from the fear of death. The soul never dies - it merely leaves one body to take birth in another, to



Being virtuous and kind builds trust in relationships, which is a key element of security.

Being upright and honest also leads to a clear conscience. Acting with integrity saves us from the emotional and psychological turmoil caused by deceit, guilt, and dishonesty.

play a new role, just as an actor changes costumes to play different roles. Being immortal sounds great, but how do we ensure a happy life while playing our roles? Immortality certainly does not guarantee happiness, but it does clarify another spiritual truth - the law of karma - which helps us build a happy future. The law of karma teaches that we get what we give. Our experiences in life are determined by the quality of our thoughts and behaviour. The consequences of our actions may be mani-

fested immediately or later - sometimes after several lifetimes. Death does not nullify karmic accounts. The immortal soul carries the accounts with it and gets the fruit of its deeds sooner or later. Understanding this encourages us to take responsibility for our actions, and shows us a way to create a better, more secure future.

The human soul is originally pure, peaceful, truthful, and loving. When we act in line with these virtues, the karmic results can only be good. Being virtuous and

kind builds trust in our relationships. Trust is one of the foundational elements of security, especially social security. If people trust us, they are more likely to offer their support in times of need, whether it is emotional, financial, or other types of assistance. In turn, we feel more secure because we know we have reliable people around us.

Being upright and honest also leads to a clear conscience. Acting with integrity saves us from the emotional and psychological turmoil caused by deceit, guilt, and dishonesty. It is much easier to feel secure when we do not have to worry about keeping up appearances or fearing that someone will discover a lie or hidden truth.

In addition, kind and charitable people tend to create environments of reciprocity.

When we contribute to the well-being of others, we increase the chances that they will be there for us when we need them. There is also a ripple effect of charity and kindness: sometimes, helping others puts us in touch with opportunities or people who, in return, help us. It is like investing in the security of our future by planting seeds of goodwill.

So, while being virtuous may not immediately solve our external problems, such as financial or physical insecurity, it is the foundation of good karma, which leads to inner peace, strong relationships, and emotional resilience, all of which contribute significantly to a secure, stable, and fulfilling life.

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You cannot die



JIM RYAN

Research says that the biggest fears of human beings are the fear of heights, and of public speaking. Yet it is the fear of the unknown, and of death, that are deeply embedded in the human psyche. Most belief systems and cultures have created a perspective on life with the attitude that each life, though precious, is either just a one-off experience or a means to determine a particular future reward in some better existence; but to achieve it, one has to die.

The fear of death is based on the fear of loss - the pre-eminent base cause of any fear; loss of possessions, loved ones, awareness of



The soul is a sentient energy. Energy may adopt various physical forms, but it can never be destroyed.

being alive. Death means all of this is no more. However, you cannot die - it is impossible. The body clearly can die; there is evidence would not of this all around us, but I, the soul, cannot die. Energy is eternal. Energy cannot be created or destroyed. I, the soul, am consciousness and an immense energy that may adopt different physical forms, but can never, ever be destroyed. New research is coming around to the con-

clusion that consciousness and spirit are woven into the very laws of physics.

Each soul is an eternal energy. A sentient point of light that uses matter to play a series of roles, a sequence of parts, like billions of other souls in life's great drama. The occurrences called dying and death are not endings but changes. The soul or energy does not dissipate; instead, it moves on to other roles and loca-

tions. It is a continuation and reconnection within the drama of relationships and situations. We do not die. We are not permitted to do so; new scenarios and new circumstances quickly tug and pull us into their awaiting drama.

It is like a dance, with its continual interplay of differing partners, tunes, and styles. Although separate beings, we are all connected at some level and our indi-



vidual stories are interwoven with others to make an intricate and awe-inspiring tapestry of existence.

And what of God, you may ask, what is His part in these ever-changing scenes and roles? He alone is the one who helps, guides, and orchestrates. It is when the energy of each soul becomes depleted after playing role after role, when all entities become exhausted and cause chaos, when the light

within the soul becomes increasingly dim and so souls cannot see the way forward, when all become confused and weary, that He acts. God, who is the outside force, the Supreme Light, the one energy that never loses power or light, regenerates and restores once again the momentum, resilience and joy. He rejuvenates each soul and inspires the return of a pristine world order.

That is the reason He is so loved and revered, so praised and honoured by numerous festivals and ceremonies, whatever the religion, by all the actors and dancers in this great, eternal drama, the dance of the universe.

Jim Ryan has a background in education. He is an author and a Brahma Kumaris Rajyoga teacher, based at the Global Retreat Centre, Oxford, UK.

A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

A dancer stands in front of a mirror to self-correct. Tiny adjustments, made day after day, result in a perfect form and create movement that is beautiful to watch. In the same way, this exquisite accuracy is used in spiritual practice. Many times each day, I can check my consciousness and reset it to peace, self-respect, and love. I self-correct by adjusting my attitude and intentions to their purest expression. Today let me self-correct in little steps and dance with life.



The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

HOLDING BACK

Economy is in a sweet spot, and yet private sector is not picking up baton by investing and spending more

THE INDIAN ECONOMY, at one level, is in a sweet spot. The Narendra Modi government has done well to significantly reduce and rationalise goods and services tax rates this month. That was on top of exempting individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually from paying any income tax in the 2025-26 Union Budget and slashing corporate tax rates in September 2019. In addition, the Centre's own capital expenditure on public infrastructure and other investment has more than trebled from Rs 3,35,726 crore in 2019-20 to a budgeted Rs 11,21,090 crore in the current fiscal. And its flagship Production Linked Incentive Scheme and the India Semiconductor Mission have attracted investments, notably in mobile phone manufacturing by the likes of Apple and Samsung (exports alone were worth \$24.1 billion in 2024-25, albeit with only limited domestic value addition) and the half-a-dozen chip fabrication, assembly, testing and packaging projects in various stages of execution.

It's not just the government. Indian corporates, which underwent a painful process of de-leveraging through the 2010s and beyond, have comfortable or low debt service and debt-equity ratios with sizeable cash buffers today. At the same time, the gross and net non-performing asset ratios of commercial banks have declined to multi-decadal lows. In other words, the twin balance sheet problem, which was a major drag on India's growth not too long ago, is now history. Add to these the low levels of consumer price inflation — 2.1 per cent overall year-on-year and minus 0.7 per cent for food in August — and the environment of soft interest rates with enhanced credit availability, things cannot be better for fueling a virtuous cycle of investment, jobs, incomes and spending. A recent Reserve Bank of India study of envisaged capital investments by private corporates, based on both bank and non-bank financing sources, shows the total cost of such projects to have risen from Rs 1,96,580 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 3,51,351 crore, Rs 5,47,734 crore and Rs 4,97,235 crore in the following three fiscals.

But somehow, all these intentions don't seem to be translating into concrete execution on the ground. At the end of the day, the government is the one that has done the heavy lifting, whether through policy or actual spending. There are limits to how much more it can do. For some reason, the private sector — be it companies or even households — is not picking up the baton by investing and spending more. What is holding them back? It could be general uncertainty (over demand, in the case of the former) and insecurity (over jobs, for the latter), compounded by the Trump tariffs and ongoing geopolitical disruptions. The result is flagging animal spirits, for which policy stability and staying the course, not quick-fixes, are the answer.

AN OUTRAGEOUS ARREST

Using Public Safety Act to jail an MLA threatens to turn back the clock on democratic promises in Kashmir

THE 2024 ASSEMBLY polls in Jammu and Kashmir promised a new beginning. The first election after the abrogation of Article 370 signalled the return of the political process to the erstwhile state and raised hopes that the people would once again speak and be heard through their elected representatives. The optimism of that moment was not unmixed, however, it carried an underlying apprehension: After all, the Lieutenant-Governor, an appointee of the Centre, continues to hold vast powers, raising concerns over the circumscribing of the elected chief minister's room for manoeuvre. The arrest of the sole Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLA, Mehraj Malik, this week under the draconian Public Safety Act (PSA) underlines those fears and raises spectres of the clock being turned back in Kashmir.

Malik has been charged with "disturbing public order" by the police, which reports to the L-G's office, not the Omar Abdullah government. The Doda MLA is known to be outspoken in demanding public services and agitating for them, using social media to amplify his voice. Before his arrest, a video emerged of Malik arguing with and allegedly abusing Doda's Deputy Commissioner over the shifting of a health sub-centre. In arresting him, however, the J&K authorities show a wilful ignorance of the basics of democratic governance. An MLA, any elected representative, wears many hats. They are not just lawmakers — they must, in different circumstances, be advocates for their constituents and even, on their behalf, become "activists". This is part of the negotiation and thrust and parry of democratic politics and in a society governed by the rule of law, the space for it must be expanded and protected. Using preventive detention under the PSA to jail an elected representative who is doing his job speaks of grave state over-reach.

Malik is the first sitting MLA in J&K's history to be jailed under the PSA. His arrest sends a chilling message to the political class and broader society in Kashmir on the limits on the freedom of expression and the space allowed to the political opposition. The arrest also raises a fundamental question: Who speaks for the "public" for whose purported "safety" the MLA has been jailed? Almost the entire political class in the Valley, including Omar Abdullah, has condemned Malik's arrest, even though Malik has been a loud critic of the National Conference and the state government. There have also been several protests in Doda over his detention. The record turnout in the 2024 polls showed people's faith in democratic processes in Kashmir. Those hard-won gains must not be jeopardised by a strong-armed state.

GO ON, LOCK IN

Work on that work-out plan, go out and make more friends, have your cake and plan to eat it too

TOMORROW, HE WAS longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in himself should make him reject it." That which pulls human beings from one day to the next in a universe marked by absurdity is, as Albert Camus put it in The Myth of Sisyphus, meaning. Or, simply, human beings need something to look forward to. A recent social media trend would likely gain Camus's approval then: The "great lock in" or the "September reset" is aimed at taking stock and making changes to improve the quality of one's life. Google Trends says search for the term has surged by 1367 per cent this month. As the year rolls towards its end, the trend is aimed at taking stock of where one stands and making changes. The idea is to reboot one's life in pursuit of goals, new and old.

The pursuit is not entirely new. That purpose and structure drive contentment has been known to many. The earliest iteration of New Year's resolutions today can be traced back to the ancient Babylonians some 4,000 years ago. They made promises to their gods to return all borrowed items and pay off their debts. Romans too, prayed to the two-faced god Janus (after whom January is named), whom they believed could look simultaneously into the previous year and the coming one, and made promises of good behaviour. An entry from January 2, 1671, in writer Anne Halkett's diary, reads: "I will not offend any more". The page is titled "Resolutions".

In a world engulfed by chaos, working on the self, striving for change, are the contemporary equivalents of rolling up the Sisyphian boulder in the pursuit of control. So work on that work-out plan, go out and make more friends, have your cake and plan to eat it too. Remember, what makes for a happy life is not how things fall in place but how one strives to ensure that they do.



WARISHA FARASAT

THE YOUTH UPRISING in Nepal has an uncanny resemblance to the Arab Spring. While the immediate trigger for the Nepal protests appear to be the shutting down of social media by the government, the actual cause for this mass uprising is deeper and complex and can only be understood by scanning through the recent history of this Himalayan nation. Similarly, while the immediate trigger for the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011 was the uprising in Tunisia, the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak was aided by multiple factors. For one, the progressive and democratic forces in the country had been pushing for a freer society for years. Then the simmering economic crisis in the country escalated with an exponential increase in the IMF debt and a dismantling of the public sector, which was replaced by a private sector controlled by Mubarak, his son, and their cronies. This enraged the Egyptian army leadership who had supported Mubarak unconditionally. They were particularly irritated by Mubarak's efforts to install his own son Gamal as his replacement as the head of the state. Mubarak's wife was reviled by the public for her lavish lifestyle funded by the proceeds of blatant corruption and her role in the theft of precious Egyptian archaeological and cultural artefacts.

Not long ago, Nepal, too, witnessed a bloody conflict by the Maoists who challenged not only the monarchy but also the entrenched feudal structures within the Nepali society. This conflict started in 1996 when the Maoists launched a nationwide insurgency to overthrow the monarchy and turn the Himalayan kingdom into a people's republic. It eventually turned into a full-fledged civil war that ravaged Nepali society for a decade.

I remember listening to UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet in Kathmandu where she addressed a full house after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in November 2006 between the Maoists and the government of Nepal, bringing an end to the 10-year long conflict. Indeed, it was a historic moment, and we were sitting in a room full of hope for peace and justice.

I remember listening to UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet in Kathmandu where she addressed a full house after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in November 2006 between the Maoists and the government of Nepal, bringing an end to the 10-year long conflict. Indeed, it was a historic moment, and we were sitting in a room full of hope for peace and justice.



PRASHANT BHUSHAN

JAGDEEP S CHHOKAR, co-founder of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), and an incisive, indefatigable, and fearless champion of democracy, passed away at the age of 80 on September 12. He is survived by his wife Kiran, who remembers fondly the 50 wonderful years they had together, as also his relentless pursuit of socio-political causes that formed their way of life. Those who were not in regular touch with him were not aware that he was suffering from respiratory problems, especially after Covid, when he was hospitalised for pneumonia. He never complained about ill health nor let it come in the way of his commitment to the public causes he was engaged in. Before he founded ADR, Jagdeep was a railway officer of the mechanical engineering service. He resigned after many years, pursued a doctorate, and then joined the IIM-Ahmedabad as a professor. He is reverentially remembered by his colleagues in the Railways and his students and co-faculty at IIM for his intellect and commitment to public good.

Under his leadership, ADR achieved many milestones in making our democratic polity more robust, transparent, and accountable. I had the privilege of a long association with Jagdeep, as we were co-travellers in many of ADR's cases and causes. ADR was instrumental in securing the landmark Supreme Court judgment that mandated candidates of political parties to furnish affidavits regarding their criminal antecedents, assets and liabilities, and educational qualifications. Before every election, ADR's team

CHAMPION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Jagdeep S Chhokar's work helped voters make informed decisions

Jagdeep closely monitored the submissions made by ADR before the court. After the last hearing, when the Election Commission issued instructions regarding the acceptance of Aadhaar cards as proof of identity, pursuant to the Supreme Court's direction, Jagdeep wrote to a colleague: 'Isn't it ridiculous how much has to be done by how many, to achieve so little! And how much more is still left to be done, to make the slightest difference.'

would scour affidavits filed by candidates of state assemblies and Parliament and publish reports informing the people about the percentage of candidates with criminal antecedents, the political parties and their candidates with the largest assets. This was an invaluable service to help voters make informed decisions.

More recently, ADR secured another victory when the Supreme Court quashed the anonymous Electoral Bonds Scheme and directed the State Bank to disclose who had purchased the bonds and given them to which party. This opened the floodgates of information and analysis on how most electoral bonds were given to parties by way of bribes as quid pro quo. Thereafter, ADR challenged the law brought in by the government for the selection of election commissioners, which removed the Chief Justice from the selection committee and replaced it with another minister alongside the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, that challenge remains pending, with the government having a free hand in such appointments. ADR has also challenged the amendments to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, made in 2016 and 2018, which have effectively allowed political parties to accept foreign funding. It also filed a petition to make political parties answerable under the Right to Information Act. This was because, despite an order of the Central Information Commission, political parties were not complying. Unfortunately, these two petitions also re-

main pending in the Supreme Court.

ADR has also been at the forefront of challenging the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by the Election Commission, and especially the hurried implementation in Bihar. The case has succeeded in securing some degree of transparency in the process, but there are still many problems with SIR that need to be addressed.

Jagdeep closely monitored the submissions made by ADR before the court. After the last hearing, when the Election Commission issued instructions regarding the acceptance of Aadhaar cards as proof of identity, pursuant to the Supreme Court's direction, Jagdeep wrote to a colleague: 'Isn't it ridiculous how much has to be done by how many, to achieve so little. And how much more is still left to be done, to make the slightest difference. I know we should all be happy. But I feel like saying, what a sad situation we and our country are in'.

Jagdeep was fearlessly outspoken and raised his voice against the ills plaguing our country and against the ruling establishment. Many of his activist friends were emboldened to speak out because of the example he set. With his passing, India has lost a true champion of democracy and a significant voice for public causes at a critical juncture in our country's social and political life.

The writer is a public interest advocate and has been counsel for ADR in many of its cases before the High Court and Supreme Court



SEPTEMBER 13, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

BENGAL PARALYSED

A ONE-DAY INDUSTRIAL strike called by eight central leftist trade unions paralysed life in West Bengal, with railways stations, airlines, and other transport services and government offices suspending their operations. The strike, called to press for a 13-point charter of demands, was backed by the ruling Left Front, the Janata Party and some other organisations. The Bengal Provincial National Trade Union Congress, which had pulled out of the strike on the directive of its central body, didn't oppose it.

RBI'S WARNING

THE RESERVE BANK of India (RBI) has warned of dark days in the Seventh Plan period, if ade-

quate steps were not taken to attract more savings from the public and to enhance the country's exports. The bank's annual report for the year ended June 1985, submitted to the Centre recently says that apart from the infrastructural limitation like inadequate availability of power for economic growth "resource constraints are emerging as a serious factor as is reflected in the increasing fiscal deficits."

NEW DOWRY ACT

THE AMENDED DOWRY Prohibition Act, which provides stringent punishment for dowry offences, will come into force from October 2 this year. The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984, provides for a minimum imprisonment

of six months which was not included in the earlier act. The penalty for giving or taking dowry too has been increased from six months to two years. The fine has been raised from Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000.

CHLORINE LEAK

AS MANY AS 16 persons fell unconscious in Zakhira when they inhaled chlorine gas leaking out of a 100 kilo cylinder loaded in a truck parked outside the Nitco Roadways Transport Company. The injured were given treatment at the ESI Hospital in Raja Garden and discharged by evening. According to the fire-brigade, the cylinder, which was the source of the leakage, was lifted and thrown out into a nullah.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Ease of doing science

India must attract global talent at a time when external factors have created a glut of highly trained researchers seeking opportunities. Without credible pathways, these scientists will be absorbed elsewhere



KRIS GOPALAKRISHNAN AND ASHISH DHAWAN

CRITICAL TECHNOLOGIES ARE redefining global power, but India's research profile reveals a telling imbalance. India accounts for only 2.5 per cent of the most highly cited papers and only 2 per cent of scientists in the global top 2 per cent of most-cited researchers (Stanford–Elsevier report). China not only dominates 37 of 44 critical technologies (ASPI) but also converts this into sovereign strength through aggressive talent recruitment.

India ranks in the top five in 29 technologies but lacks the ecosystem to deliver consistent global breakthroughs. This has been coupled with explicit and implicit restrictions on high-technology exports and transfers from the US and China. The gap for India lies not in numbers or talent, but in quality, driven by a strategy to attract, embed, and retain top-tier researchers.

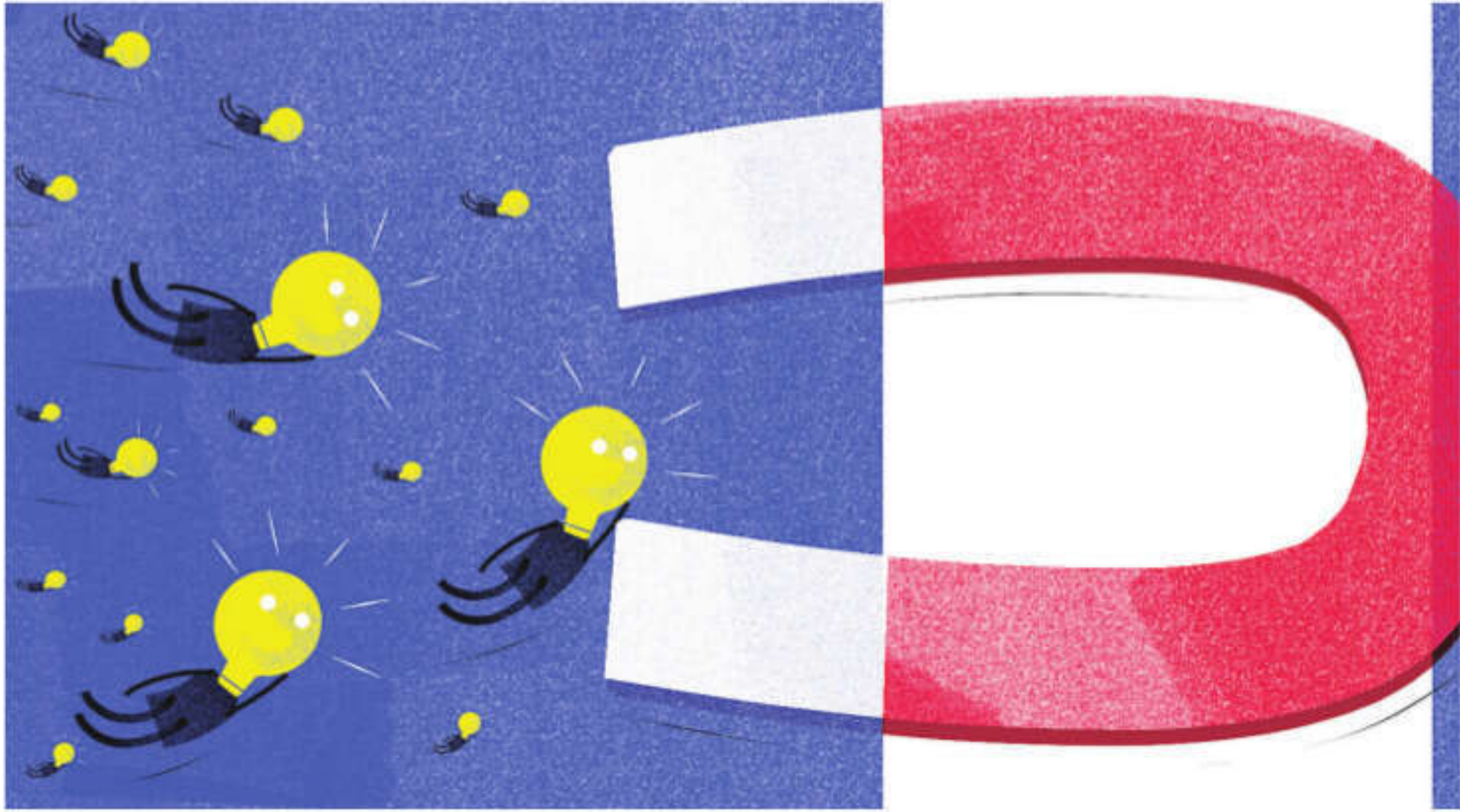
Global dynamics have created a narrow window of opportunity. The Trump administration has announced budget cuts upwards of 50 per cent for federal science grant-making bodies such as the National Science Foundation and NASA. In the US, only 15 per cent of STEM PhDs secure tenure track jobs within five years, down from 25 per cent two decades ago. Tightened visa regimes have left many Indian-origin PhDs and postdoctoral fellows stranded.

Some of them have been working in critical technology areas. Global powers are acting fast to make the most of the opportunity. The “Choose Europe for Science” conference at the Sorbonne underscored Europe’s intent to attract global researchers, with President Emmanuel Macron announcing a €100 million France 2030 fund.

China offers a striking precedent. Through its Young Thousand Talents Program (2011–17), it recruited 3,500 early-career scientists with substantial incentives, contributing to its rise from housing one to eight of the world’s top 10 institutions in the Nature Index by 2024. In advanced aircraft engines, including hypersonics, China now produces four times more high-impact research than the US, with seven of the world’s top 10 institutes.

Thus, India must urgently attract global talent in critical technologies, especially at a time when external factors have created a glut of highly trained researchers seeking opportunities. If credible pathways are not offered soon, these scientists will be absorbed elsewhere. Scientific careers are inherently time-sensitive, and a delay would mean losing an entire cohort capable of driving breakthroughs in semiconductors, propulsion, synthetic biology, and quantum communication — domains that will define strategic autonomy in the decades ahead.

The good news is that through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the Rs 1 lakh crore Research and Development Innovation Fund, the government has, for the first time in decades, com-



C R Sasikumar

mitted large-scale, mission-oriented investments in science. This has been coupled with rapid Ease of Doing Science measures. The only significant missing piece is to attract top talent and get maximum bang for the buck.

Despite multiple fellowship schemes, India has not been very successful in attracting and retaining global academic talent. Compensation remains uncompetitive compared to global benchmarks, world-class laboratories and sustained research grants are often absent, and there are no clear pathways for long-term absorption or career progression. Most importantly, recruitment has not been tied to mission-oriented research streams in areas where India must develop sovereign capability, leaving efforts fragmented. This time, we must not make the mistakes of the past.

A viable solution is the establishment of a limited number of Focused Research Organisations (FROs) — like India Urban Data Exchange at the Indian Institute of Science — in frontier domains where India must build sovereign capabilities, strategically embedded within Institutes of National Importance that already possess demonstrable expertise in the relevant technology verticals. This model should aim to attract at least 500 top class researchers in the next five years to build critical mass.

Much of the talent must be early career (postdocs and incoming professors), who will be easier to attract and create a long-term pipeline of excellence. Provisions must allow existing Indian academics with proven track records in the relevant domain to be integrated into these FROs, either through joint appointments, rotational leadership roles or competitive project-based entry.

To ensure both technological depth and translational outcomes, these FROs should be structured as Section 8 companies with at least 51 per cent participation from industry, creating a true public–private–academy partnership. Crucially, they must be designed as permanent institutional structures rather than ad hoc schemes, providing long-term continuity, predictable funding, and clear pathways for global talent absorption, thereby embed-

The good news is that through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the Rs 1 lakh crore Research and Development Innovation Fund, the government has, for the first time in decades, committed large-scale, mission-oriented investments in science. This has been coupled with rapid Ease of Doing Science measures. The only significant missing piece is to attract top talent and get maximum bang for the buck.

ding them firmly into India’s strategic research and innovation architecture.

For instance, IIT Delhi — having recently, in collaboration with DRDO, achieved a milestone in quantum entanglement-based free-space quantum secure communication over distances exceeding 1 km — stands out as a natural anchor for a national FRO on quantum communication. This model has four distinct design principles.

First, it resolves the issue of inadequate compensation for globally attracted faculty by pooling industry resources with state support, thereby ensuring internationally competitive salaries and sustained research funding. Second, it embeds strategic direction. Rather than spreading efforts thinly across institutions and domains, FROs create laser-sharp focus in select areas where sovereign capability is critical. Third, it fosters a hybrid ecosystem where global expertise, indigenous knowledge, and industry resources converge, ensuring that the FROs serve as enduring nodes of sovereign capability-building rather than isolated enclaves of imported talent. Finally, by establishing permanent, mission-driven structures with long-term continuity, FROs overcome the short-termism of ad hoc schemes and provide a predictable, credible pathway for talent absorption, innovation, and eventual translation into sovereign technological strength.

Delays in building such institutional mechanisms carry irreversible costs. Our calculations indicate that state investment in such an initiative will be very modest but lead to outsized impact. Without timely intervention, India risks ceding ground in domains that will shape future strategic autonomy and economic competitiveness. The choice, therefore, is not between acting now or later, but between creating pathways for sovereign capability and reconciling with long-term dependence.

Gopalakrishnan is co-founder, Infosys, and chair, IISc Council, and Dhawan is founder-CEO of The Convergence Foundation and co-founder of Foundation for Advancing Science and Technology

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Israel is gradually losing legitimacy around the world, being placed in a group that includes other reviled pariah states. Even its oldest, most loyal friends are finding it increasingly uncomfortable to be associated with it.”

— HAARETZ, ISRAEL

Doha strike and the day after

Israel’s isolation has sharpened. The critical question is not what role US played, but what options Qatar and Arab states have



ANJU GUPTA

ON SEPTEMBER 9, Israel mounted aerial strikes on a residential complex in a diplomatic area of Doha, the capital of Qatar. The complex housed the political office of Hamas where a meeting was in progress to discuss the US proposal on Gaza. The Hamas negotiators and leaders were not in the building which was targeted, but a few functionaries and a Qatari security officer were killed. Qatar affirmed that the Hamas office was functioning on the American request to facilitate dialogue. The next day, accusing Qatar of providing money and safe harbour to Hamas, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned of more strikes against Hamas’s “safe haven” in Qatar and elsewhere. Amid hostilities between two of the US’s closest allies in the region, the critical question is not what role the US played, but what options Qatar and the Arab states have.

After the expulsion of Hamas from Jordan around 1999, Syria accommodated the political office of Hamas in Damascus. As the Syrian revolution began to unfold in 2011, Hamas leaders started siding with Sunni rebels against the Assad regime. Under pressure, the political leaders of Hamas moved to Qatar and Egypt. Qatar publicly declared that on the US’s request, it had allowed the Hamas political office in Doha to keep channels of communication open. Qatar also accepted a US request to host Taliban representatives to facilitate intra-Afghan reconciliation and permitted the Taliban to open a political office in Doha in 2013. A trusted US ally, Qatar has visibly played a facilitator for talks with the Taliban and a mediator with Hamas for the release of Israeli hostages and a ceasefire in Gaza.

Qatar is home to the largest American military base in the region. A nerve centre of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), the Al Udeid base oversees and defends US interests and that of allies in the region, including in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The over-the-horizon US counter-terrorism capability resides here too. Qatar is an indispensable logistical base for CENTCOM operations and in turn, a beneficiary of the US security umbrella. Any violation of Qatari air space would be a prime security concern for CENTCOM.

US officials have explained that the American military informed the White House about the strikes shortly before they happened, and this was conveyed to Qatar. In a call to the Qatari Emir, condemning the strikes and claiming no prior knowledge, Trump assured that there would be no repetition. However, by threatening Qatar the very next day, Netanyahu has publicly negated the assurance.

The Sunni Arab leadership, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE have strongly condemned the attacks. Most of these states also host US bases or troops. They have all more or less lived under the US security umbrella since Iraq’s invasion of

Kuwait in 1990. The top question for them must be whether the American protective umbrella was only against “potential” Iranian aggression. Will the Sunni Arab states rescind the Abraham Accords and similar instruments with Israel? With Israel playing a regional “super cop”, it remains to be seen how the Sunni Arab states can come together to force the US to contain Israeli aggression and/or look for other options over the mid- to long-term.

In sharp contrast, Iran went to war when it was attacked by Israel in June. The conflict lasted only 12 days and ended unconditionally. The US did pitch in to target three Iranian nuclear sites to destroy enriched uranium and facilities, a claim yet to be verified. However, Iran carried on with the war with Israel without taking any military help from its “proxies” like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Politically, the global condemnation of genocide in Gaza and the role played by Russia and China have nudged the Sunni Arab states and Iran to restore ties. The hostilities between the Saudi-led Arab states and Qatar too have melted in the last few years. The Israeli action is likely to further unite the region and may result in greater political and economic alignment with the Russia-China duo.

The international pressure on halting the war in Gaza and pursuing a two-state solution has never been as high on Israel as it is now. Following the recognition of the State of Palestine by several countries in the middle of the war in 2024, seven western countries, namely the UK, Australia, France, Belgium, Malta, Canada and Portugal, have pledged to do the same at the UN General Assembly in September. The UK too has set a few conditions. The US and Israel have condemned such pledges, but if actualised, they would lead to a near total political isolation of Israel and the US on Palestine.

A day after the Doha strikes, in a speech to the European Parliament, EU President Ursula von der Leyen spoke about proposals that would include sanctions against “extremist” Israeli ministers and partial suspension of trade-related matters with Israel. In 2024, the EU emerged as the biggest trading partner of Israel with trade in goods worth over €40 billion. The proposal would require the support of at least 15 members, which is not easy, but it would be a huge headache for Israel. The EU President also announced that a “Palestine Donor Group” will be set up next month, including an “instrument for Gaza reconstruction”. This is a signal that the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza is not acceptable to Europeans.

The question is whether Israel sabotaged the ceasefire and hostage negotiation to shift the focus of global actors and Sunni Arab states away from Gaza to managing Israel-Arab tensions. Or was it a maximum-pressure tactic to show Hamas that it would not be allowed “overground” existence if it did not accept Trump’s latest proposal? Or could it simply be a big miscalculation? The answer might emerge in the coming weeks and months amidst greater turbulence in the Middle East, with repercussions for global security and trade.

The writer is a security analyst and former director general of police



RAM RAJA BY RAM MADHAV

The critic is at sea

Great Nicobar Project is a crucial peg in the Viksit Bharat vision

SENIOR CONGRESS LEADER Sonia Gandhi penned an article in a prestigious English daily recently, criticising the Great Nicobar Island Development Project being undertaken by the Narendra Modi government. All modern development projects entail environmental concerns, like the displacement of local communities and the harm caused to flora and fauna. The Rs 81,000-crore mega project conceived by the NITI Aayog and implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) is no exception.

Great Nicobar Island is the largest among the main islands in the Nicobar Islands. Campbell Bay and Indira Point are known tourist places. Indira Point, originally called Pygmalion Point, but renamed after the former prime minister who visited that place in 1984, is the southernmost point of India. It is just 145 km (about 80 nautical miles) from the Aceh Province of Indonesia.

The proposed mega development project is expected to come up in the southern part. It includes the development of an international container terminal, an international greenfield airport, a solar power plant and two greenfield cities. Once completed, it has the potential to compete with port cities like Singapore. Sonia Gandhi has accused the government of causing severe environmental harm to trees and turtles, besides destroying abodes of around 1,200 aboriginal people belonging to two tribes —

the Nicobarese and the Shompen — in the name of this project.

It is important to understand why such a mega project is being contemplated by the government. India’s dependence on the Indian Ocean for its developmental and security needs cannot be overstated. Almost 80 per cent of its external trade and 100 per cent of energy imports happen through this region. Moreover, the Indian Ocean Region has emerged as the most influential sea route for global commerce and connectivity. Home to some of the world’s most populous countries and fastest growing economies, along with massive militaries, this region has emerged as the “21st century global power axis”.

American naval officer and historian, Admiral Alfred T Mahan, insisted a century ago that “whoever attains maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be a prominent player on the international scene”. Diplomat and historian KM Panikkar, too, warned, “It should be remembered that the peninsular character of the country and the essential dependence of its trade on maritime traffic give the sea a preponderant influence on its destiny.”

Yet, successive governments after Independence neglected enhancing India’s maritime capability. While Panikkar called for understanding India’s “peninsular character”, governments remained prisoners of a “continental mindset”. For several decades, the Indian Navy remained a “brown water

navy” capable only of tackling littoral challenges. In the early 2000s, there was finally the realisation that power projection in the IOR is critical to our future as well as for maintaining peace in the region.

The Indian Ocean neighbourhood is a crowded space today with vessels from all major countries crisscrossing its waters. Next-generation undersea cable communication networks proliferate. India is expected to face maritime challenges not only from other navies but also from piracy, seaborne terrorism, climate challenges, human and contraband trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, arms running, poaching, and humanitarian challenges like evacuations and disaster management and relief. Nearby are security hotspots like Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan and maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait and Sunda Strait.

The Nicobar Islands are an important linchpin in this region. Developing maritime infrastructure is critical to India’s security and development, something that the Congress leadership refuses to acknowledge. Sonia Gandhi went to Indira Point in 2009 to install a statue of Indira Gandhi on acquired forest land. Concerns were raised at that time about the environmental impact of the statue project. Those objections were overruled. It is hypocritical today for her to cite the same reasons to criticise the Modi government’s project, which certainly has much greater implications for India’s secu-

urity and development than a statue.

This is not to suggest that the environmental concerns raised by her are not relevant. However, the government took all those aspects into consideration before announcing the project. It involved not just government agencies but also academic ones like IIT, NIOT, NCCR and NIO for assessing the environmental impact and suggesting remedies. Only 166 sq km has been allocated for the project. While a couple of villages will be relocated, not a single habitation of the tribes will be touched. For the remaining acquired land, “compensatory afforestation” is being adopted by choosing the Aravalli mountain range ecosystem, the oldest in India but also among the most degraded. New conservation plans are prepared for the Nicobar megapodes, crocodiles and corals.

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project is a crucial peg in our Viksit Bharat vision. Besides providing jobs to the people in Andaman and Nicobar and outside, it will also catapult India into the league of major maritime powers in the Indian Ocean Region, all this while taking all necessary pre-emptive and prospective measures for environmental preservation.

Is there something more sinister in the opposition to the project than just environmental concerns?

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A precarious moment’ (IE, September 12). Nepal is witnessing political uncertainty as Gen-Z protesters, lacking organised leadership, recently met the Army Chief in search of direction. With clashes erupting among the youth factions themselves, the situation risks sliding into chaos. The Army holds the reins, but the future of the country remains uncertain. Among the frontrunners are Kulman Ghising, known for his administrative acumen, and Balen Shah, a popular youth figure, while former Chief Justice Sushila Karki is seen as too old to lead. Reportedly, however, she is the next pick.

RS Narula, Patiala

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A precarious moment’ (IE, September 12). The editorial correctly highlights the political turmoil in Nepal as a critical challenge not just for the Nepali people but also for India. The lack of a clear, coherent agenda among the protesting Gen-Z leadership, as noted in the editorial, creates an unpredictable environment that is highly susceptible to exploitation by rogue elements. The broader implications for India cannot be overstated. India’s decades-old policy of non-interference in Nepal’s domestic affairs is a cornerstone of our relationship.

Krishan Kumar Chug, New Delhi

INDIA AND NEPAL

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘India must reset Nepal policy’ (IE, September 12). It draws attention to a pivotal moment in India–Nepal relations. Nepal’s ongoing political transition gives India an opportunity to move beyond Kathmandu-centric diplomacy and cultivate ties with provincial leaders, youth constituencies and federal institutions. Stability in Nepal is not only in India’s strategic interest but also essential to managing migration, trade and security along our open border with Bihar.

Muskan Kumari, via email

DEMOCRACY CRISIS

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘A sense of drift’ (IE, September 12). The recent fallout in Nepal highlights the inherent defects modern democracies are facing today, including the weakening of institutions and checks-and-balances. Unchecked executive overreach and dismantling of democratic systems, political polarisation, and false information campaigns undermine public trust and make citizens vulnerable to manipulation and corruption. This creates a democratic deficit contributing to exclusion, inequity and erosion of the rule of law.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

As Modi visits Manipur, 5 key issues in conflict-torn state

SUKRITA BARUAH
GUWAHATI, SEPTEMBER 12

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi will fly to Manipur on Saturday, and interact with internally displaced people in Churachandpur and Imphal. Ahead of this trip, his first to the state since ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities began in May 2023, here are five key issues facing Manipur, and where they stand today.

Rehabilitating the displaced

Some 57,000 internally displaced people are living in more than 280 relief camps across the state. Broadly, there are two categories of displaced persons in Manipur.

■ Those who lived in areas where the other community is in majority. Thousands of Kuki-Zo people have been displaced from Imphal and other valley towns, whereas Meiteis have been displaced from hill towns such as Moreh, Kangpokpi and Churachandpur.

■ Those who lived in “fringe areas” at the frontier of the Meitei-majority valley and Kuki-Zo-majority hills, close to settlements of the other community. These people were displaced due to attacks by the other community, or fled in apprehension of such attacks.

In July, then Chief Secretary PK Singh announced an ambitious three-phase resettlement plan aimed at winding down all the relief camps by the end of the year. Officials say some 5,000 people had already returned to their homes before this plan was announced, but progress has been limited on this front.

Free movement

Due to the conflict, the boundaries between valley and hill districts have hardened. These boundaries separating Kuki-Zo and Meitei areas are heavily manned by security personnel, and have come to be called “buffer zones”.

Today, neither community can cross these buffer zones. As a result, Meiteis are unable to leave the state’s central valley and do not have access to the highways, while

the Kuki-Zo do not have access to Imphal, including the airport there.

After President’s Rule was imposed in February this year, the Centre had announced that it would enforce “free movement” through the state’s highways. But this backfired on the first day itself: one person

died and many others were injured in Kangpokpi district on March 8 in clashes between Kuki-Zo activists and security forces escorting a Manipur State Transport bus from Imphal.

Ahead of the PM’s visit, Kuki-Zo groups have largely agreed to allow the movement of essential goods to the valley through the highways, but refused to let Meiteis across the buffer zones. The government has not reached a similar arrangement with Meiteis for safe movement of Kuki-Zo people in the valley.

Inter-community dialogue

For over one-and-a-half years, Manipur experienced deadly ethnic violence in which

more than 250 lives were lost. While this violence has ebbed since last November, security officials warn that the “peace” is tenuous.

Not only are Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo heavily armed, there has not been any dialogue between the communities during the conflict. Currently, the Ministry of Home

Affairs is engaging in talks with groups on both sides separately.

Last week, it renewed a Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups. A crucial clause in the SoO pact includes honouring the “territorial integrity of Manipur,” seemingly contrary to the primary demand from Kuki-Zo representatives for a “separate administration”. The reactions to this pact reflect the hurdles to establishing amity between both communities.

Meitei groups objected to the pact for extending “overwhelming legitimacy” to armed Kuki-Zo groups it describes as “narcoterrorists”, Kuki-Zo groups have clarified that the clause notwithstanding, they will con-

tinue to push for a Union Territory with a legislature. This, they argue, has been necessitated due to the partisan conduct of the state government under former Chief Minister N Biren Singh, including patronage to Meitei armed groups like Arambai Tenggol.

Government formation

After 21 months at the helm of the state during the conflict, Biren resigned as CM in February. Within days, President’s Rule was imposed, which has continued since.

Biren’s resignation was largely received well on both sides of the ethnic divide: it had long been a central demand of the Kuki-Zo community, and even a large section of Meiteis had been critical of Biren’s functioning.

But since about two months after Biren’s departure, there has been a growing push from valley-based and Naga NDA MLAs for the restoration of a popular government in the state citing “public demand” and “pressure.” The Centre, however, has indicated no inclination to lift President’s Rule yet.

Border situation

The state’s porous international border with Myanmar has been a prickly issue in context of the conflict. Meiteis have alleged that unregulated illegal immigration of Chin people from Myanmar — who share a common ethnicity with the Kuki-Zo — has been a major cause for volatility in the state.

Last year, the Centre scrapped the Free Movement Regime with Myanmar — which allowed tribes living along the border on either side to travel up to 16 km in the other country without a visa, and stay for up to two weeks — and announced that the border will be fenced. This is an emotive issue for the Kuki-Zo and the Nagas who share close ethnic and economic relationships with people on the other side of the border.

Ahead of the PM’s visit, the United Naga Council, the apex group for Manipur’s Naga communities, had imposed a “trade embargo” blocking all the routes through which goods enter the state to protest against fencing. The embargo has been temporarily suspended.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

BRAZIL’S BOLSONARO CONVICTED OF COUP ATTEMPT: WHAT TO KNOW

BRAZIL’S FORMER President Jair Bolsonaro has been convicted of attempting a coup to stay in office after losing his reelection bid in 2022. He is the first former president found guilty of trying to overturn an election in the country with the largest economy in Latin America.

While Bolsonaro has always denied wrongdoing, four of the five justices on the Supreme Court panel voted to convict him Thursday and sentenced him to 27 years and three months in prison.

The charges

Prosecutors charged him with five crimes, including attempting a coup after losing the 2022 race to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, participating in an armed criminal organisation, and attempting violent abolition of the democratic rule of law.

According to the evidence presented by the attorney general, Bolsonaro gathered Cabinet and military officials to discuss an emergency decree that would have suspended the election results to investigate unproven electoral fraud claims. Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who oversaw the case, said Bolsonaro carried out a series of acts from 2021 through Jan. 8, 2023, that constituted the attempted coup.

Prison prospects

Bolsonaro won’t go to prison now, but he will remain under house arrest. The court panel has up to 60 days to publish the ruling, and once it does, Bolsonaro’s attorneys have five days to file motions for clarification. His lawyers have said that they will try to appeal both the conviction and sentence before the full Supreme Court of 11 justices, although some experts think it’s unlikely to be accepted.

“It’s unlikely, but not impossible, that there will be appeals to the full Supreme Court,” said Rafael Mafei, lawyer and law professor at University of São Paulo and ESPM University. The Supreme Court’s press office told *The Associated Press* that, according to the court’s jurisprudence, the full court can accept an appeal only if there are at least two dissenting votes in a ruling. Here, only one of the five jus-



Students with an inflatable doll of Bolsonaro in Brasilia, Friday. AP

tices disagreed and called for Bolsonaro’s acquittal.

Once there’s a firm sentence, Bolsonaro could go to prison, but it is unlikely he would be transferred to a regular prison as a former president.

Possible US tariffs

Bolsonaro’s trial got renewed attention after US President Donald Trump linked a 50% tariff on imported Brazilian goods to his ally’s legal situation, calling it a “witch hunt.” Observers think the US might announce new sanctions now.

Trump said he was “very unhappy” with the conviction, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on his X account that the government “will respond accordingly to this witch hunt.” Government officials or Supreme Court justices could be sanctioned, like de Moraes already was in late July, said Oliver Stuenkel, a professor of international relations at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a think tank and university.

Despite his legal woes, Bolsonaro remains a powerful political player in Brazil. The conviction could add pressure on him to pick a political heir to possibly challenge Lula in the general elections next year. Bolsonaro was previously barred from running for office until 2030 in a separate case. AP

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 12

“...I THINK IT’S worth it...to have a cost of...some gun deaths every single year, so that we can have the Second Amendment to protect our other God-given rights...”, Charlie Kirk said in April 2023.

On Wednesday, the 31-year-old “Youth Whisperer of the American Right”, as *The New York Times* described Kirk, was killed by a single shot to his neck by a sniper in Utah.

Kirk’s death spotlights, once again, America’s absurd obsession with guns, and the polarising debate on the question that a *CNBC* commentator said in 2018 was “tearing the fabric of our civil society apart”.

Uniquely American problem

There are more guns than there are people in the United States.

A comprehensive global study published in 2018 reported more than 1.2 guns per capita in the US, more than double that in war-torn Yemen, the next country on the list.

The US is home to less than 5% of the world’s population, but Americans hold more than 45% of all civilian-owned guns on the planet, the study, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia, found.

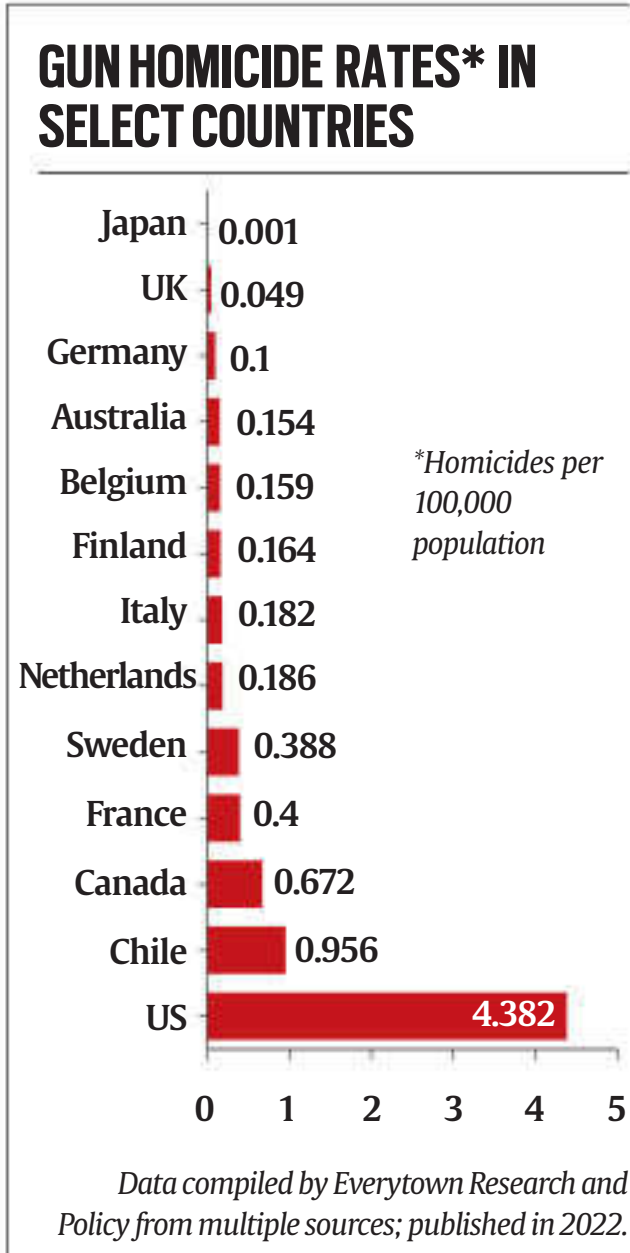
The towering rate of gun-ownership, and the ease with which military-grade firearms can be obtained, “comes with a price”, Kirk had said in his 2023 comments quoted above.

Indeed, there were 46,728 gun-related deaths in the US in 2023, data compiled by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show. That’s 128 gun deaths every day, and 14 gun deaths per 100,000 population. More than half these deaths were suicides.

The gun homicide rate in the US is 4.38 per 100,000 population — 26 times that of other high-income countries, a 2022 analysis by the gun-control advocacy group Everytown Research & Policy (ERP) showed. The gun homicide rate in the UK is less than 0.05, and in Japan, 0.001 — zero, for all practical purposes.

In the name of ‘freedom’

In an essay published in 1970, conservative historian Richard Hofstadter wrote: “Many otherwise intelligent Americans cling with pathetic stubbornness to the notion that the people’s right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy.”



(‘America as a Gun Culture’ in *American Heritage* magazine).

This, Hofstadter said, had to do with the “American historical mythology about the protective value of guns” as “an important counterpoise to tyranny”. The gun had levelled the field in the American Revolution (1775-83), allowing rag tag militiamen to take on the might of the British Crown; it had subsequently facilitated the conquest of the Wild West.

The right to bear firearms was protected by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which was ratified in 1791. It reads: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”

James Madison, the Founding Father who went on to become the fourth President of the US (1809-17), wrote that European monarchies were “afraid to trust the people with arms”; if they did, “every tyranny in Europe would be speedily overturned in spite of the legions which surround it” (*The Federalist Papers: No. 46, 1788*).

Hofstadter noted in 1970 that Americans saw “an armed people [as] the only possible



solution to the perennial conflict between militarism and freedom”. Kirk, in his 2023 comments, argued that the Second Amendment was key to “defend[ing] yourself against a tyrannical government”.

Making of Gun Country

A Department of Justice (DoJ) report submitted to President Lyndon B Johnson in 1969 noted that in the postwar years from 1945 to 1969, the population of the US had increased by less than 50%, but the number of guns, which was around 45 million in 1945, had doubled.

By 2018, the number of guns was 10 times that of 1945; the population of the US had grown by less than two and a half times in this period.

What explains the modern gun culture of the US? One answer lies in America’s history with racism.

“American gun culture...is the story of a Constitution captured and travestied by a culture of violence. The first of these traditions is slavery...”, historian Dominic Erdosain wrote in *One Nation Under Gun* (2024).

Firearms were essential for White slave owners to subjugate Black slaves in the plan-

tations. After the Civil War (1861-65), when slavery was abolished in the South, the fear of Black retribution drove gun-ownership among Whites, and gave rise to forces such as the Ku Klux Klan.

In the 20th century, gun ownership continued to skyrocket, stoked by fears about crime, lawlessness, and the political empowerment of the historical Other. Immigration and anti-communist fear-mongering during the Cold War further fuelled these fears.

This demand was met by an abundant supply of guns at the end of World War II. “Europe’s weapons of war, the production of a half century of continental bloodletting, flooded the US market at rock-bottom prices,” historian Andrew C McKevitt wrote in *Gun Country* (2023). Soon, “gun capitalists [had] built a mass gun market”.

An American romance

Today, American gun capitalism, its wheels greased by powerful advocacy groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), makes the reality of a gun-filled US seem inevitable, almost innate. Guns have been imbued with meanings that go far beyond their basic material parts.

In Marxian terms, this is “commodity fetishism”, a process by which social relations of production, and the context of the production, are obscured by the ‘magic’ that the commodity in question is imbued with.

Indeed, the gun capitalists of the 19th century who sold “the magic of guns to American consumers” knew that “selling guns meant selling stories about guns and thus imbuing the guns with cultural meaning”, McKevitt wrote in an article in *Time Magazine*.

The continued fetishizing of firearms has fundamentally distorted the gun debate in the US, even as countries around the world have, through common sense measures, reduced both gun ownership and gun violence.

After a spate of shootings in the 1980s and early 1990s, Australia got serious about gun control — as a result, total gun deaths fell from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1996 to just 0.88 per 100,000 in 2018, data from the Australian Gun Safety Alliance show.

The US went the other way — not only failing to act on gun control but actively loosening rules. In 2008, the Supreme Court struck down a ban on handguns in Washington DC, and affirmed an individual’s right to bear arms for self-defence (*Columbia v. Heller*), opening the floodgates for legal challenges to allegedly “restrictive” laws on gun ownership.

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Nepal’s ‘nepo babies’: Why nepotism is focus of so many public debates

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 12

“NO MORE Nepo Babies — We Demand Fair Opportunities!” read a banner at Nepal’s youth-led protests, which morphed into violent anti-establishment anger this week. Young people were angry at the manifest inequality in Nepali society, including between themselves and the wards of entrenched political leaders.

“Nepo kids” in India — and “nepo babies” in the United States — have been targets of jeers for several years now. According to Google Trends, which gives information on Google’s search queries, global interest in the term “nepo baby” spiked in December 2022.

In India, the first instance of people googling “nepotism” on a significant scale was in early 2017, peaking in May 2020.

Origins in papal power

The word originated in the mid-17th century from older European words — the French *népotisme* and the Italian *nepotismo*, which came from the Latin *niptote*, meaning ‘nephew’.

Charles Sumner, a 19th-century US Senator, wrote that in Rome, the word “served to designate the authority and influence exercised by the nephews, or more generally, the family of a Pope”. There was enough attention on nepotism in the 1600s for it to become the subject of the book *Il Nipotismo di Roma*, “which [was] full of...warning” against the pitfalls of putting familial connections above merit.

Notably, many leaders of the Catholic Church who had children despite having taken vows of celibacy would introduce them to the world as their “nephews”.

The word has equivalents across languages, such as *bhai-bhatijawaad* in Hindi —



Gen-Z protesters in Kathmandu. PTI

literally, ‘rule of the brother and nephew’. The availability of limited resources in pre-modern societies meant that those who got power did their best to retain it for their families.

Showbiz connection

Discussing ‘nepotism’ became a thing in India in early 2017 after Bollywood actor

(and now BJP MP) Kangana Ranaut described director Karan Johar as a “flagbearer of nepotism” who was allegedly dismissive of film industry ‘outsiders’ like herself.

The comment seemed to contain more than a kernel of truth for audiences used to seeing the children of celebrities walk into films with ease while talented ‘outsiders’ struggled indefinitely.

The death by suicide of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput in 2020 revived the discourse. Rajput did not have a film background, and many on social media blamed the death, with little evidence, on nepotistic power groups in the industry.

In December 2022, a *New York* magazine report said the Covid-19 pandemic had “supercharged the backlash against celebrities”. Many “nepo babies” documented themselves on social media relaxing with their families, the report noted, even as less privileged people faced layoffs and financial uncertainty.

The article cited author Fran Lebowitz,

who once wrote that “getting in the door” was “pretty much the entire game, especially in movie acting, which is, after all, hardly a profession notable for its rigor”.

Over the years, ‘nepotism’ has been the norm in many spheres of Indian society. In business, politics or the bureaucracy, people in power have long promoted their kin in direct and indirect ways. The BJP has attacked “political dynasties” in the country, even though several of its own leaders have been promoting their offspring in politics.

In an Oped written for *The Indian Express* in August 2020, filmmaker Kabir Khan and public policy analyst Rohan Sandhu flagged broad entrenched inequalities that also affected the film industry.

They also pointed to the peculiar economics of filmmaking, with its high costs and low success rates. “Inevitably, formulaic films with known names are both easier to finance and distribute. Producers start viewing ‘star kids’ as financially more viable compared to rank

newcomers. Even before they are launched in their first films, they have millions of followers on social media...,” they wrote.

Modern global pattern

Like in Nepal, there is anger against the children of politicians in the Philippines too, albeit at a smaller scale. Allegations that billions of pesos were diverted from flood control projects over the years have led to on-line criticism targeting the luxurious lifestyles of “nepo babies” — the children of contractors and public officials who allegedly profited from the corruption.

Analyses of public discontent in multiple countries have pointed to the role played by rising wealth inequalities, and the platforming of frustrations on social media. As the example of Nepal — and before that Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — shows, the continued prevalence of power skewing towards a few groups can have explosive consequences.

{ OUR TAKE }

Signs of thaw, ties on mend

New Delhi must be receptive to Washington's reconciliatory overtures, but also should continue with strategic autonomy

Sergio Gor, US President Donald Trump's nominee for ambassador to India has, in his confirmatory hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, acknowledged "hiccups" in bilateral relations but said that Washington and New Delhi are on track to resolve issues that have strained ties over the past few months. Gor appeared upbeat about the relationship, saying the two countries are "not far apart" on trade and tariff issues and that President Donald Trump has invited the Indian commerce minister to Washington for a meeting with US trade representative Jamieson Greer.

Gor's remarks came after positive exchanges on social media between Trump and Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. On Wednesday, PM Modi, in response to President Trump's remarks that he was looking forward to speaking with "my very good friend, Prime Minister Modi" and that the two countries were "continuing negotiations to address the Trade Barriers...", said Indian and US teams are working to conclude discussions on a trade deal that will unlock the potential of the bilateral partnership. Goyal's subsequent statement that the first tranche of a bilateral trade agreement is set to be finalised by November needs to be read against this backdrop. All of these point to a thaw in bilateral relations after a period when Trump personally targeted New Delhi numerous times over its purchases of Russian energy and defence hardware and accused India of helping sustain Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Even when key figures in the US administration targeted India over Russian oil purchases, New Delhi and Washington maintained contacts under several institutionalised arrangements, such as the 2+2 mechanism that brings together the defence and foreign ministries of the two sides, and visits of Congressional delegations. A US delegation is expected in New Delhi next week for discussions on selling India six more long-range surveillance aircraft in a deal expected to be worth billions of dollars. This is part of India's efforts to keep key aspects of the bilateral relationship built over the past two decades moving forward.

There is little doubt that Modi's recent visit to China for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit and his engagements with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin are factors that would have weighed with those in Trump's inner circle. This was a signal that India would retain its strategic autonomy and focus on protecting its national interests at a time when Trump's trade policies have roiled the global economy. But India also displayed restraint in not responding to every statement from members of Trump's cabinet, ensuring that the exchange did not descend into a slanging match. Still, as it re-engages with the Trump administration, India should be cautious in not plugging into the binary framework that Washington now seems to offer — with the US and against China and Russia. India has rightly stood its ground on its national interests and persisted with multipolarity in Asia and on the global stage in its foreign policy. Russia is a legacy ally and an important source for energy. China is an immediate neighbour and central to India's growth plans as a major supplier of goods despite the shadow cast by the unresolved border dispute and Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour in the region. At a time of major global churn, New Delhi must stick to its policy of strategic neutrality and steer clear of invites to join camps while focusing on measures that protect its interests.

Trade deal as the grammar for closer India-Europe ties

The case for an FTA between New Delhi and Brussels has never been so strong

When economic warfare and weaponisation of trade are in vogue, what is the recourse for affected players? The commonsense strategy is to diversify and reduce overdependence on any one partner to offset vulnerabilities. Fresh rounds of proactive economic diplomacy between the European Union (EU) and India for speeding up the conclusion of the long-delayed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can be understood in this context. Given the market turmoil and unpredictability unleashed by the trade wars of the United States (US), Brussels and New Delhi are jogging with renewed determination to deepen their economic integration for stable, steady and mutually beneficial gains. Studies estimate that the EU-India FTA could raise India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 1.3% annually while the EU will enjoy a booster shot of 0.14% to its annual economic growth.

Freer trade with the EU can turbocharge India's economy to gallop at above 8% per annum. Despite conciliatory messaging from US President Donald Trump regarding an impending trade deal to settle the row with India, in the worst-case scenario of maximal American tariffs of 50% on India remaining in place and shaving off 0.5% to 0.6% of India's GDP, the FTA with the EU can cushion the blow.

Lately, rhetoric has been heard about Russia and China being alternatives to the US for India. But the reality is that neither of these two countries can absorb Indian exports and drive India's economic growth the way the EU can. Russia and China run humongous trade surpluses with India worth \$59 billion and \$100 billion respectively. Even if Moscow and Beijing open their markets with zero tariffs and non-tariff barriers to Indian exports, the prospect of these two nations compensating for the lucra-

tive US market is just a chimera.

The EU, on the other hand, is a legitimate claimant to being an equal of the US as a destination for Indian exports. As of 2024, the EU's 27 countries cumulatively absorbed 17.4% of India's total global exports, second only to the US.

With a market consisting of 450 million people, high purchasing power, and advanced technological and financial capabilities, the EU presents a window of opportunity for India to secure its economic future. India's other new FTAs with Australia, the UAE, the UK, and the four-member European Free Trade Association (EFTA), are already reaping dividends. Clinching the FTA with the EU will be the crowning glory of a new era of economic openness and pragmatism in India's diplomacy.

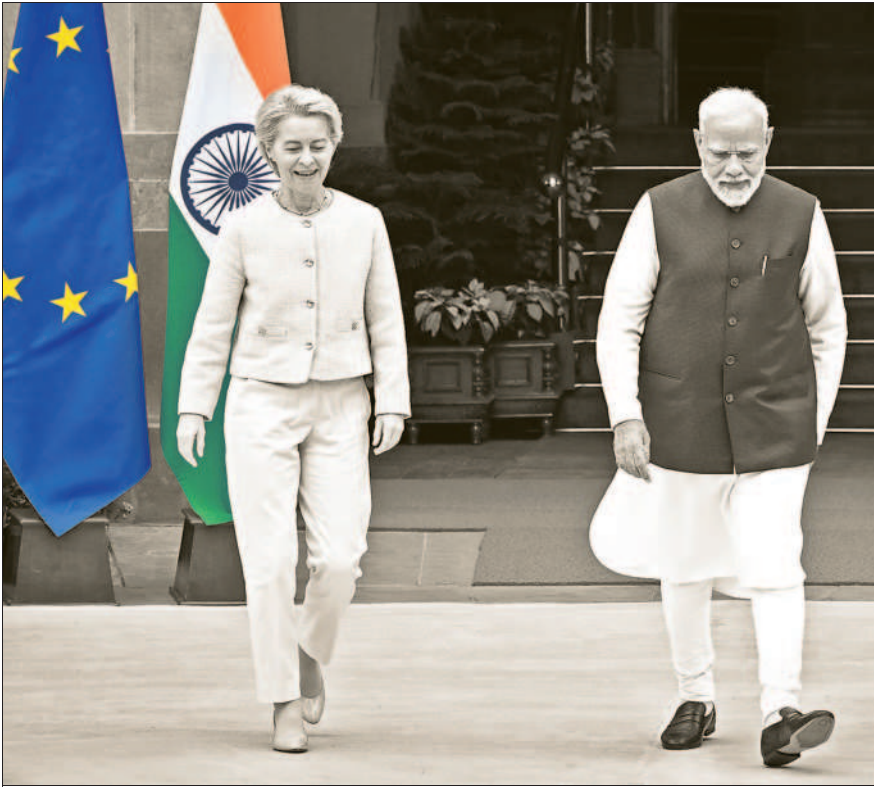
If one views the scenario from Brussels, although India currently accounts for less than 3% of the EU's total trade in goods, the trend of sluggish economic growth in Europe and fears of declining European competitiveness mean that unlocking a vast new market such as India is an imperative for the EU to sustain its long-term economic vitality and influence.

It is noteworthy that the EU had to bow to American pressure and sign a trade deal with the Trump administration that could cause a dent of 0.5% in Europe's annual GDP growth. The other principal trade partner of the EU, China, has become so dominant in many industries that the Europeans are now recoiling from their own "China shock" and are imposing tariffs to stem the deluge of cheap State-subsidised Chinese exports. The ongoing tit-for-tat EU-China trade war on electric vehicles and meat products shows the limits of the old European reliance on the US and China as the twin pillar for commerce.

In light of these developments, it is apt for the EU and India to inch closer to their landmark FTA. Going forward, what will be required to bring the long-drawn-out negotiations to a happy ending is flexibility to concede here and there for the sake of expanding the larger pie. India's concerns about environmental conditionalities through the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which



Sreeram Chaulia



The EU and India are currently at a juncture where their respective strategic autonomies are at stake. Hence, they need to be bolder and prioritise long-term win-win cooperation over haggling cussedly about specific sectors.

HT ARCHIVE

THE ONGOING TIT-FOR-TAT EU-CHINA TRADE WAR ON ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND MEAT PRODUCTS SHOWS THE LIMITS OF THE OLD EUROPEAN RELIANCE ON THE US AND CHINA AS THE TWIN PILLARS FOR COMMERCE

could disrupt Indian exports in cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity, and hydrogen, need to be accommodated creatively by the EU.

The fact that the EU could concede to the US "to provide additional flexibilities in the CBAM implementation" in order to sustain the overall trans-Atlantic alliance means the EU could also devise some workaround with India. On the other hand, India could weigh the pros and cons and consider meeting the Europeans halfway on financial services, shipping, wines and spirits.

The EU and India are currently at a juncture where their respective strategic autonomies are at stake. Hence, they need to be bolder and prioritise long-term win-win cooperation over haggling cussedly about specific sectors. India's

external affairs minister S Jaishankar remarked recently while hosting the German foreign minister Johann Wadephul that "a multipolar world with strategic autonomy" and "stronger cooperation among key member States" is necessary to tackle the "twin challenges of economic volatility and political uncertainty."

With both the Europeans and the Indians singing the same tune of strategic autonomy in the backdrop of Trump's topsy-turvy assault on the economic interests and political sensibilities of allies and partners, bilateral congruence is high and it should ultimately propel the marathon trade negotiations to a fruitful closure. Any possible American pressure on the Europeans to slap secondary sanctions on India over Indian purchases of Russian oil must be resisted by Brussels for its own good.

If the EU-India FTA crosses the finishing line, it will be not just a boon for businesses and workers on both sides but also a concrete testament to the will in Brussels and New Delhi to usher in a multipolar world by demonstrating that they are two genuinely independent poles shaping a new international order.

Sreeram Chaulia is professor and dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs. The views expressed are personal

A need to address the science education crisis in schools

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly envisaged a transformation of the schooling experience, to ensure a scientifically literate student population. It identified some of the important challenges the existing schooling system faces in providing science education. Lack of resources for advanced science education, including lab equipment, technology, and specialised materials, has been pointed out as a major challenge. The document talked of difficulties in finding and training good teachers in specialised science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics.

Five years after the implementation of NEP 2020, its concerns about science education remain unaddressed. The recently published PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) 2024 survey report, has highlighted significant learning gaps among students in different grades in all subjects, including science. The average scores of class 9 students were only 40% in science and 37% in maths. The scores are even lower in government and government-aided schools at 37% and 33%.

The problem takes on a different dimension in the higher secondary stage, where students must opt for subjects of their choice. While visiting a well-functioning higher secondary school in Rajasthan as part of our work on the Public Report on Secondary Education (PROSE), we found that though students scored high in their 10th board exams, most transferred to other schools at the higher secondary stage, primarily

because they could not study subjects of their choice. Only four subjects from the arts stream, which included Hindi Literature and Sanskrit, were offered. The school did not offer any science subjects. One of the important reasons behind the limited subject choice is the inability of the state teacher recruitment system to hire qualified teachers. A similar situation was seen in some other schools we visited. Even where schools did offer science subjects, some students left the school as they were not sure if the quality of science teaching was good enough to guarantee admission to their preferred universities/colleges.

Studying science is a major problem for students in other parts of India as well. The results data from around 52 State and National Boards compiled by the ministry of education showed that in 2024, only 47% of those who passed higher secondary board exams were from the science stream — 38% were from arts, and the remaining were from commerce and vocational streams. The average conceals wide inter-state variations. The state board results underline the dismal science teaching scene in certain States. At one end, around 80% of those who passed higher secondary in Andhra Pradesh were from the science stream; this was 65% for Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Manipur. At the other, 20% or fewer of those who passed senior secondary in Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, West Bengal and most

northeastern states were from the science stream. For students in the latter group of states, studying science is likely to be a major challenge.

The available data says little about the socio-economic background of science students. But the gender composition shows that the stereotype of fewer girls choosing science compared to boys is limited to only a few boards — mainly in the northern and eastern states, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and Indian School Certificate (ISC). In other boards, the gender differences are minor. In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Chhattisgarh, it is the reverse. It is important to understand what drives state level variations.

Could the lopsided showing be partly demand-driven? That students do not want to study science. This is unlikely. The Unified District Information System of Education (UDISE) data on enrolment of students in different streams in higher secondary schools indicates that while only 37% of students in government schools were studying science in 2023, the proportion is around half in private aided schools and two-thirds in private unaided schools. This trend holds in all states and indicates a high demand for science education.

There is perhaps an unseen barrier in the mindset of government schools in several states — that the science curriculum is difficult and only high-scoring students should opt for it. That could explain why, even though more than half the government schools offer science subjects, enrolment in the stream is only 37%.

Supply-side constraints play a key role, too. At the higher secondary level, stream/subject choice is limited and mostly dependent on availability of

resources and teachers. The problem is not confined to only science subjects. In 41% of higher secondary schools, only one stream is offered. The data shows that a high proportion of government schools offer only arts.

The evidence from UDISE data shows that these challenges exist not only for advanced courses but even basic ones. Our school visits showed that several schools had very limited scientific equipment and materials, and even these were stored away, indicating irregular use. Data on laboratory facilities in all schools is not available at present. There is an extreme shortage of maths and science teachers. In the last academic year, 19% of secondary and higher secondary schools did not have a single maths teacher; and 18% of secondary schools and 13% of higher secondary schools did not have a single science teacher. Teacher shortage is a problem in all states.

The challenges of scarce resources and teacher shortage is likely to be greater in states with low per child school education expenditure. Remote areas face exacerbated challenges. So, while, in many states the proportion of students studying science is increasing over the years, such a trend is not observed in the states at the lower end for income. Appropriate policy measures and resource allocation is urgently required, both by the Centre and the states. The science stream needs to be offered in more government schools. Students from under-served areas will likely miss out on jobs/entrepreneurship opportunities if they have less access to STEM education. This is likely to have an inter-generational effect as well, as with fewer science graduates, the teacher shortage will continue. Inclusive India needs to address this key gap identified.

Anuradha De and Amarjeet Sinha are part of the PROSE team. The views expressed are personal

Trump and politicising of policing in America's cities

US President Donald Trump's latest "war on crime in cities" will likely win the hearts of many in the country's urban population, who are exercised over the high rates of street crime. Gun control is mainly on paper, and firearms account for a substantial number of homicides.

Trump's resolve to make US cities safer is, on the face, laudable. The average white American seems to feel unsafe and impotent without a gun in possession for self-defence. But Trump's campaign comes at a time when crime is reportedly declining in some cities, such as Washington DC and Chicago. This is why his "war on crime" is raising eyebrows.

Some observers see Trump's move to take over policing in the larger cities, especially Democrat-run ones — albeit statutorily for a maximum of 90 days at a time — as soaked in

politics. Crime control in the US is a state/city subject, and the federal government has only a marginal say. Federal agencies such as the FBI, Secret Service, department of homeland security may all perform partial police functions, but are not charged with handling routine crime.

Trump, in his second term, first took the National Guards (NG) to Washington DC, pushing a slew of questionable measures to bring down crime. He has cast aside constitutional propriety to do this. NG, an armed contingent, is a kind of reserve force jointly constituted by the federal government and the states, available to either of them to meet any contingency, including natural calamities. It is jointly managed by the US president and state governors.



RK Raghavan

It has been deployed during several past civil disturbances and natural calamities. But this is possibly the first time that it has been deployed to combat crime such as homicide and rape. Initial reports point to a slight drop in such crime after the NG troops were posted for patrol duty in the US capital. The point is such decline is likely not sustainable.

Democrat mayors rightly resent such blatant interference in their exclusive domain. The US has nearly 18,000 stand-alone police departments, each under an elected mayor. The police chief (variously titled in the different forces) is appointed by the mayor and remains in office under the latter's pleasure.

However invidious it may be, the temptation to compare our own capital's crime problem with that of Washington DC is irresistible. The 90,000+ strong Delhi Police has a geographical area (42 sq kms) to cover and a 26 million population to protect. The Washington DC Police Department has much smaller manpower (4,000), polices 176 sq. kms, and has little more than half a million

people to service.

Both capitals have a nagging crime problem. Delhi reported 504 murders last year and 2,076 rapes. Washington DC reported 186 homicides in 2024, a significant drop from 265 in 2023. Sexual offences showed a 45% drop. Interestingly, the White House recently claimed that Washington had a much higher homicide rate than Delhi, Islamabad, Paris and London. This comparison is theatrical. A few discerning criminal justice watchers have rebutted the statement saying that the world over, violent crime has shown a downward trend and Washington DC is no exception.

Crime and its handling have become highly politicised. Statistics reveal only a part of the picture. There is always the suspicion that figures have been massaged with the connivance of those in authority. This perception of a lack of ethics on the part of public officials is compounded by the non-reporting of crime by some victims, especially women. This is a societal problem hard to reverse.

RK Raghavan is a former CBI director. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

KATHMANDU CALLING

In Nepal, protests by youth groups this week forced Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to resign. Violent street protests erupted ahead of an anti-graft rally and immediately after a ban on certain social media apps. With the entire political class discredited, the wait for the next PM continues. The outcome will have implications for India-Nepal relations.

This week, we recommend *Kathmandu Dilemma: Resetting India-Nepal Ties* by Ranjit Rae, who served as India's ambassador to Kathmandu. The book covers the first two decades of the new millennium and Nepal's socio-political transformation from a monarchy to a republic. It examines the Maoist insurgency, the end of the monarchy, and the establishment of a secular federal democratic republic, even as political stability remained elusive. The book is partly a memoir examining India's perspective on these developments against the backdrop of changing geopolitics and the India-China play vis-à-vis Nepal.



Kathmandu Dilemma: Ranjit Rae
Year: 2021



A thought for today

Assassins and presidents invite the same basic question: Just who do you think you are?

SARAH VOWELL

Argue, Don't Shoot

Political violence, unchecked, can upend governance

Charlie Kirk's killing is troubling at two levels. There's the private tragedy of a young life cut short and a family bereaved. It affects all decent people, even those who disagreed with Kirk. Then there's the public tragedy of a political assassination, which shows we haven't changed much in the 3,849 years since a prince of Thuringia in Germany was knifed to death by a relative or bodyguard. It's the earliest *known* assassination, but by no means the first.

Compared with pharaohs, emperors, samrats and sultans, contemporary premiers seem almost immune to assassins, but this is an illusion. Records show 298 publicly reported assassination attempts on national leaders in the 129 years from 1875 to 2004, of which 59 succeeded. One of these started WW-1. Another attempt – Hitler; 1939, failed because he left early to catch a train – could have prevented WW-2. Consider yourself complicit if you agree with the previous sentence. Because, while the would-be assassins of Hitler and, say, Jacques Chirac may be poles apart ideologically, their actions are indistinguishable under the lens of philosophy.

Killing an individual to oppose their ideas and actions is a mark of intolerance, despotism, cowardice – and hopelessness. Thomas Crooks, who took a shot at candidate Trump last year, and Tyler Robinson, who killed Kirk on Wednesday, were perhaps acting on their convictions, but with the belief that all counterintuitive need to be silenced. It's an ends-justify-means approach to politics that Gandhi opposed.

Tolerance is a quality acquired with great civilisational effort. There should be no place for bullets when bullet points will do. But in a polarised US, attempts to kill Trump and several other opinion makers over the past year, signal trouble. It's a country with an institutionalised gun culture, so a few more vigilantes could start a return to the Wild West days. India also has pockets of political violence where guns and crude bombs settle disputes. So far, it has not become a contagion, but the state must remain alert.

Bot Mantri? Honestly?

Albania's AI minister opens a whole new can of worms

Tiny Albania is fully focused on seeing its 2.8mn people join EU by 2030. For membership, EU set the Balkan state that's used for laundering money from global trafficking of drugs and weapons an apparently humanly impossible criterion – zero graft. Undeterred, Albania's four-term PM simply turned away from man to machine. His new cabinet includes a non-human as minister for public procurement – Diella, meaning sun. The made-in-Albania Diella was incubated by the Agency for Information Society (AKSHI) as a virtual assistant and launched in Jan to help citizens on its e-governance platform, 95% services digitised.

Diella's folksy costume and pretty doll features mask a lean mean AI-powered bot that not only holds the record of being world's first bot mantri but it's also the rapidest promotion ever from efficient clerk to govt cabinet. Is the lesson here honesty helps get to the political top? That's laughable if you're a human, right? But as bot, efficiency & transparency can take you places. What is Diella's legal standing is not known. In the event of a graft case, who would be held accountable? Albanians aren't all impressed. Local chatter is that the 'system' is efficient enough to turn Diella 'corrupt'. Who'd have thought the world's newest war would be a Crooked System vs Ethical Machine battle? And if the machine wins, is it really good news?

Confessions Of A Food & Sex Addict

A female chef airs her worklife & lovelife secrets

On Instagram *Slutty Chef* dishes out food and sex stories, as if one were not possible without the other. It's thus predictable that no sooner is her first book *Tart: Misadventures of an Anonymous Chef* out that a TV adaptation is in the works. One way to think about this memoir is to imagine that *Bridget Jones's Diary* procreated with *The Bear* with the "chaos and delinquency" of Anthony Bourdain.

The twenty-something female chef who takes you into London's hot, intense, exhausting kitchens by day and its urine-drenched streets by night, relishes the super highs in both her worklife and lovelife, each lavishly soaked in ciggy breaks like these never went out of fashion. Through it all, her go-go inner monologue has the reader sort of feeling the ketamine she recreationally partakes.

But like Carmy in *The Bear*, as high as she hits, it's never too long before anxiety swings her super low. In this phase, her job feels monotonous and its hard labour thankless. She's either up or down, all or nothing.

And lots of her co-workers seem to feel the same. A fellow twenty-something chef Finn says at one of their post-service drunkathons, "We work in kitchens because it's never boring. You love it then you hate it then you love it again. It's like a proper good romance."

There's a scene in which Cheff is rush-slicing some red onion for the pickles to go with pâté and slices her thumb right next to a scar that just healed over. She whacks on plaster and a blue plastic glove, which floods with blood within seconds. This little nick will mean weeks of her modifying every single movement to avoid

the pain of lemon juice dripping into the cut. She thinks about how special this is, using her hurt to make nice things that bring pleasure to both herself and complete strangers.

It's possible that only in anonymity is this female chef able to write with the earthiness of male authors. Like she describes sizzling a roux for béchamel sauce, heavily distracted by sex flashbacks that feel like a Hollywood-produced trailer of her recent, broad daylight booty call.

One major prism through which this book is being discussed is what distinct female perspective it brings to the traditionally male-dominated narrative of kitchen culture. Cheff is found working mostly with men. A few do turn out to be pervs. But most are driven by a passion for their craft just like her, working for the "check monster" beyond exhaustion, with razor-thin margins for error; struggling with anxiety and addiction.

One bitterness about the London restaurant scene is how its socialite chef circles are elitist, exclusive and often about *who* you know, not *what* you cook.

Slutty Cheff has main character energy. Her book agrees with the dramas starring men that chefs have a special power, there is so much passion and so many thrills in this service that it makes sense for people to be drawn to its leading actors. When she starts out, unsure if she belongs among the men, she wonders if women chefs have the same appeal. Yes they do, the book shows the reader.

But also yes, it 'shows' lots of lovely, lovely food. Like a Negroni, described as, "Oranges, booze, sticky lips, pink cheeks, bright lights, and warm pavements."

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Photo credit: @sluttycheff

India Vs Pak: Wickets & Wounds

Every time the two play, as they will on Sunday in Asia Cup, the past loosens its grip for a moment. This doesn't mean the question – should India play Pakistan at all – is answered. That question must endure

Partha Sinha

Some questions arrive dressed as cricket. Others wear the cloak of diplomacy. But one returns every tournament season like a cough that won't quit – raspy, uncomfortable and deeply familiar: Should India play Pakistan?

It's not a query. It's a mirror. One that reflects everything we are – and everything we try to hide.

This time, the question wasn't triggered by a bomb or a backslap. It was triggered by a calendar. ICC slotted India vs Pakistan in the Asia Cup, and what once looked like an innocuous date on a spreadsheet has now hardened into fact. The Cup is underway, players are warming up, the match will be played. Yet the debate rages as if the toss were still in Schrödinger's box – both happening and not happening until a TV anchor declares it so. Even BCCI's press notes read less like policy and more like a nervous defence lawyer's brief, delivered against the backdrop of a nation that refuses to calm down.

When the fixtures first dropped, news TV studios erupted like volcanoes on demand, while social media resembled the debris field of a small nuclear exchange. Now, with the contest unavoidable, the noise hasn't subsided; it has simply been choreographed. The montages are back in muscle memory – Babar adjusting his gloves in slow motion, Bumrah chewing his lip like it were strategy, two flags flapping in soft-focus defiance. Only this time, while the broadcast hums with nostalgia and adrenaline, Kashmir lingers off-screen – less breaking news than a wound that refuses to scab over. We've only just stepped off the battlefield. The war that started in May is paused, not ended – the actors still squared off, waiting for the next round. And memories of Kashmir are still raw.

Here lies the art our republic has perfected – converting grief into graphics, mourning into montage. A widow's face framed just so, tricolour in the background and crawling below in neon fonts: *India vs Pakistan, Sunday 8pm*. The match, inevitably, begins first inside our conscience – with highlights cut by heartbreak.

Sport has never been immune to politics. In 1980, the United States boycotted the Moscow Olympics. In 1984, the Soviets boycotted Los Angeles. Medals were lost, statements made, little resolved. Norbert Elias called sport a "civilised rehearsal of war." Nowhere is that truer than here. When India plays Pakistan, the pitch is not neutral ground. It is a stage where shared trauma and unshared mourning compete for space.

India has refused bilateral cricket with Pakistan for more than a decade. And yet, ICC calendars – World

memory of it. Each match is a re-enactment of Partition, this time with boundary ropes and better costumes. And yet, the theatre occasionally forgets its lines. A smile exchanged between rivals. Kohli embracing Babar. A Lahore boy admiring Rohit Sharma's cover drive on YouTube. For a fleeting second, the stage gives way to something disarmingly human.

Critics argue, with reason, that playing Pakistan normalises what should never be normal – violence, provocation, impunity. That cricket cannot be business-as-usual when blood still dries in the Valley. But here's the harder truth. Not playing hasn't softened anything either. A decade of silence has healed no wounds, built no bridges. The only arena where India and Pakistan still share breath without barbed wire is a cricket field.

Let's not romanticise. The game is more about logos than leg-glances. BCCI's coffers could bankroll small economies. Pakistani players remain barred from IPL. ICC postures as neutral while reading from diplomatic cue cards. And yet, within this noise, cricket retains a stubborn purity. A yorker doesn't carry a passport. An edge to slip doesn't demand a visa. Sometimes a match offers a moment – unprompted, unsponsored – of grace.

This is not an argument for sentimentality. The dead deserve memory, not tokenism. But the living deserve more than performance vengeance. Boycotts may be protests, but they can also become excuses for paralysis. Cricket, at its most elemental, is still a language. To play, then, is not to endorse. It is to engage. To leave ajar, if only slightly, a door through which memory or mercy might slip.

It will not 'solve' Kashmir. It will not dissolve history. But perhaps it will plant a gesture. A pause. A reminder that even bruised nations must sometimes breathe.

Some will say absolutely not. Not while coffins still arrive. Others will say yes – because life, like cricket, must carry on between wickets and wounds. And both, inconveniently, will be right.

Which is why the question must remain. Because even when the match ends, and the crowd quiets, the hand is extended. The handshake happens. The camera zooms in. And for one flickering moment, the past loosens its grip. Whether that moment deserves repeating – that, as always, is up to us.

The writer is a senior advisory professional



File Photo

A yorker doesn't carry a passport. An edge to slip doesn't demand a visa. Sometimes a match offers a moment – unprompted, unsponsored – of grace

Cups, Champions Trophies and now the Asia Cup – keep this rivalry alive in high-definition and prime time. Every six carries baggage, every dropped catch a metaphor, every handshake a coded message.

Ashis Nandy once observed that cricket in the subcontinent is not just a substitute for war, but a

Why Separate Bedrooms Make For Stronger Marriage

Tired from long workdays, both wife and husband can benefit from some Me time. One can watch a movie, the other read a book. He can turn down the AC, she can turn it up. Then they reunite refreshed

Bikram Vohra

If we couples slept in different rooms, how many of us would be self-conscious about admitting this publicly? Would we feel shame or embarrassment? The very idea of being married and sleeping separately, stigma and sniggering aside, stridently signposts failure of sufficient magnitude to arouse the rumour mill.

As a result, in a world where space is at a premium and humankind spends its waking hours sharing it in multiples, our prejudices and childhood brainwashing deprive us of the curative powers of some healthy Me time.

We all need it and one of the biggest stress factors is the ease with which we undermine it. You can be lonely together and you can flourish in solitude. But we are so wed at the hip that any effort to revel in being in one's own company is seen negatively.

Don't jump the gun on this premise. There is nothing wrong in sleeping side by side and loving it for years. If that intimacy floats your boat, good for you. But for many, once the novelty of marriage fades and Cupid breaks a wing, maintaining the liaison is hard work, for both husband and wife. Running out of stamina often comes with the territory.

And when this happens, separate bedrooms can bring tangible relief and other great benefits. We all have our quirks after all, and these are at our most dramatic in the last couple of hours before Hypnos engulfs you in his arms.

In some fashion or the other, irritation does seep into the equation. She wants to watch a movie, he wants to read a book. It's too cold for him, too hot for her. He wants the camouflage of darkness. Her nightly cosmetic

routine drives him nuts. She cannot stand his snoring. He is a kicker, hogs the covers. She has friends to chat with. He escapes occasionally from the room by pretending he has homework. Elects to sleep on the floor with a convenient bad back, just to get away. Collective resentment bounces like a tennis ball across a net



Image AI

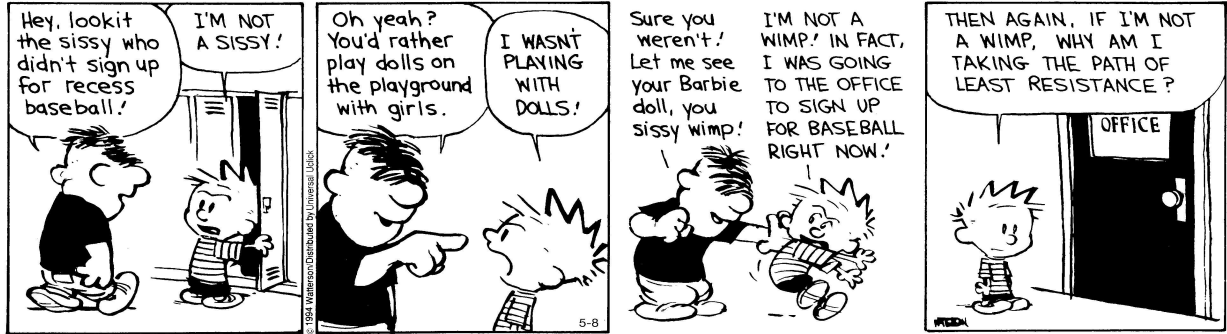
Separate bedrooms are not a retreat from intimacy; they are a deliberate design to rejuvenate it, a sophisticated architecture that can sustain a marriage, by honouring the individual sanctuaries required to nourish the shared whole. Better than sleeping back to back.

While among the more liberated there is a better understanding these days of the need to 'get away to come closer', it is still in its infancy. Surely something must be wrong if she swans off on a holiday by herself. Why not? Couples do not have to stalk each other. Don't ask who she talked to on the phone or where she is having lunch. And she does not have to know where you are every moment of the day. Like do not pry and never check each other's mobile phones. These are all manifestations of the separate bedrooms syndrome. Give each other breathing space. And trust.

Yes, not everyone can afford the luxuries of owning so much living space. But if there is a viable option, no misplaced sense of shame should keep you from trying it. Also, it is a specific mindset rather than a brick and mortar thing. This decision to 'see ya in the morning' should not be seen as rejection; it is restoration. Feeling drained and encroached upon, one visits their private sanctuary, then returns to the shared space reenergized, full of fresh energy and perspective to offer the partnership. And it does not stop you snuggling and staying over every now and then, with mutual consent.

For those who find love has shriveled and are now peering dolefully at the abyss of divorce, this distancing may even save your marriage. Swallowed resentment, that silent foe of love, feeds on petty morsels of ill-concealed, even if quiet, despair. When a shared bed is a mandate, physical closeness can become routine, a habit rather than a destination. Separation is an arrangement for those secure enough in their foundation to not need constant physical proximity as proof of its strength.

Calvin & Hobbes



Narayani Ganesh

US President Donald Trump recently approved the process to rename the US Defense Department. It will go back to the earlier, post-World War II nomenclature: Department of War, "as it sounds better". The New York Times reports that "this measure has been expected for some time, and it underscores Mr Trump's efforts to reshape the military to align with his goals of projecting a more aggressive image by showcasing war-fighting capabilities".

Intention is what eventually gets translated into action. If the intention is aggression, then war cannot be far behind. If the intention is peace, then there is a good chance that wars could be averted and peace, attained. UNESCO in the Preamble to its Constitution states: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."

If Donald Trump as President of the United States is stating his intention to operate from a space of aggression and force, what hope could there be for even a glimmer of peace? War-fighting capabilities are taking precedence over peace-building capabilities.

When going to war or aggression is your baseline, then there is little chance of exploring peaceful options that could avert war and bloodshed, avoid loss of lives and livelihoods. War-mongering encourages negative emotions like anger and revenge; they spread feelings of hatred, of division and isolation rather than nurturing feelings of love and togetherness, unity and connectedness. "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be

taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite," said Nelson Mandela.

Former chairperson of Bennett, Coleman and Company, Indu Jain, an ardent advocate of peace, would often say that woman power is often invoked as both Shakti and Shanti. These two aspects may be perceived as being diametric opposites, but they in fact, complement one another. For, power is not only the power to destroy; it is also power to create and nurture peace. As embodiments of both these qualities, women are spiritual lifelines in society; they are normally never instigators of violence and war; she would say.

Muscle power and aggression may invoke fear and thereby create the illusion of power; aggressors are indeed powerful but their power is short-lived and destructive. Love and understanding



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacred space

The trouble with most of us, is we hardly ever dwell on the happy experiences that we have had in the past. Most of us seem to harbour a permanent love affair with sorrow, regrets and past failures.

Dada JP Vaswani

Department Of War, Defence Or Peace?

create more lasting relationships and these could be so powerful that they become formidable, even invincible. When the foundation of a relationship is respect and love, the superstructure stays strong, no matter how grave the challenges are; but when the foundation is made with aggression, hatred and suspicion, the superstructure could crumble and get destroyed in seconds.

A Facebook page titled 'US Department of Peace', seems to have been created by peace lovers to promote the concept of peaceful coexistence. The introduction says, "Official page for a national movement advocating for peacebuilding policies and for the prevention of violence to be held as a national priority." *PeaceAlliance.org* – their website seeks to promote peace and amity. But until such time as our daily diet of violence and hatred gets replaced by a healthy diet of love and pacifism, a peaceful world will remain a chimera.

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Pan-India SIR

Takeaways from Bihar exercise can be helpful

THE Election Commission of India (ECI) is planning to carry out Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls across the country. It will be an onerous task, considering the political storm triggered by the ongoing exercise in Bihar. The SIR in the poll-bound state continues to be under judicial scrutiny, with the Supreme Court directing the poll panel earlier this week that Aadhaar card must be recognised as a voter's proof of identity. The onus is on the ECI to ensure that no eligible citizen is deprived of his/her right to vote, even as the final poll rolls in Bihar are scheduled to be published by the month-end.

A clean-up of voter lists on a pan-India basis is vital to remove errors as well as discrepancies and weed out illegal immigrants. However, the procedure has to be fair, transparent and simple, prioritising the interests and concerns of genuine citizens. The SIR is expected to face resistance in Opposition-ruled states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, which are going to the polls next year. DMK minister Durai Murugan has already remarked that the 'tricks' used in Bihar won't work in Tamil Nadu as its people are politically aware and can't be misled. The ECI needs to bring all stakeholders on board to bridge the trust deficit and strongly dispel the notion that it is favouring the BJP in any way. The perceived absence of a level playing field can undermine the sanctity and integrity of electoral democracy.

Lessons from the Bihar SIR should guide the poll panel as it prepares a roadmap for a similar exercise in other states. It is significant that the apex court's intervention has prompted the ECI to do introspection and course correction midway. This has happened largely due to the relentless efforts of petitioners such as the Association for Democratic Reforms, whose co-founder Jagdeep Chhokar passed away on Friday. Chhokar was a passionate votary of clean elections. His crusade must continue to serve as a bulwark against attempts to vitiate the poll process.

Ethanol mission

Intent not in doubt, lack of clarity a concern

ANY government programme that helps reduce emissions and lowers the fuel import bill is worth implementing with full gusto. What's critical is gaining consumer confidence and a gradual switchover — focusing on transparency about the mission, and having enough space to cater to concerns. So, when Nitin Gadkari asserts that the criticism against the E20 fuel programme is a "paid politically-motivated social media campaign", it does not help the cause from the consumer's point of view. According to the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways, all sorts of tests have confirmed that there are no issues with the rollout of 20 per cent ethanol-blended (E20) petrol. All recent fears over engine damage and warranty issues, he claims, have been proven false. He may be absolutely right, but then, perhaps not. Doubts still linger. The consumer deserves a more informed engagement.

The benefits of the ethanol blending programme for the farming sector have also been highlighted. The intent is not being questioned, the lack of clarity is. For a government adept at sound messaging, the adoption of green fuel should have involved a sustained campaign to educate the consumer, and answer all sorts of queries. That must be the road ahead as plans are afoot to ramp up blending diesel with isobutanol, and not ethanol, since the diesel-ethanol mix has not been successful. Take the consumer on board and value the feedback, it will only make the sustainable development journey more productive. Go in for policy tweaks, if that appears to be a more prudent strategy going forward.

Gadkari, who has championed vehicle scrap-page, has again asked automakers to incentivise retiring of old vehicles with bonuses and discounts. An intensive approach involving all the stakeholders is still a work in progress.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1925

Official sophistry

WE have now before us the official report of the debate which took place in the Legislative Assembly on the constitution of the Royal Currency Commission. We invite the reader who can procure a copy of this report to go through it carefully, for it will give him an insight into the methods by which, in utter defiance of logic, of fairness, of common sense itself, the spokesmen for the Government in the House sometimes attempt to mislead it in regard to matters of great public importance, though not always with success. The issue before the House was perfectly plain. MA Jinnah had brought forward a motion, which was in effect and in intention a motion of censure upon the Government for the unsatisfactory constitution and composition of the Commission. The main ground of his attack was that, in constituting the Commission as it had done, the Government had deliberately defied the Assembly which had asked that the majority of the Commission's members should be Indians and that its Chairman should also be an Indian, and had even failed to carry out its own undertaking to the House that the Indian representation would be adequate and effective. It was impossible in a debate of this kind to entirely exclude all reference to the persons actually appointed to the Commission, but so far as the principal speakers were concerned, this reference was both brief and couched in proper language. And yet, in the debate that followed, both the official spokesmen, and especially Sir Basil Blackett, not only did everything in their power to evade the real issue, but actually tried to make it appear as if Jinnah's sole object was to attack Indian members of the Commission.

OPINION

Nepal upheaval has lessons for India

South Asia must return to being both front and centre of New Delhi's attention



THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

THE revolution in Nepal earlier this week was so sudden, so swift and so dramatic, that even India was caught flat-footed. As former Nepali Prime Minister KP Oli's armed police shot young student protestors in cold blood, including children in school uniform, Indian officials realised quickly that the *ancien regime* was collapsing. They had been preparing for Oli's visit to India, beginning September 16. They were gobsmacked that the dam had burst on its eve.

Thing about the India-Nepal relationship is that it is so intimate, so deep-seated, so profound that it is like no other tie that India has. Former External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj brought this "*roti-beti rishta*", between the Terai and India's northern borderlands, to the startled attention of Delhi's elite some years ago, but the phrase is as true for the rest of Nepal and India. The Nepali elite as well as the proletariat — the 'Bahun' and 'Chhetris', Brahmins and Kshatriyas in the hills, as well as people of other castes in the lowlands and the plains — marry, live and work in India and vice-versa. Ties of kinship reinvent the generations. If you drive from Patna to Janakpur, no one looks twice when you cross the open border.

You could argue that this is true for every neighbour of India, that ethnicity, religion and culture transcend both geography and sovereignty. Certainly, this is especially true for each of the three nations whose people have asserted their will in the face of democratic capture these last few years — Sri Lanka in 2022, Bangladesh in 2024 and



REVOLUTION: People of Nepal have asserted their will in the face of democratic capture. REUTERS

now Nepal. Despite the small and big differences in each of these revolutions, the fundamental similarity is inescapable. The people rose because they were simply fed up of being led by the noose, by people they had voted in and who were now treating them like so much cattle.

In Kathmandu things have moved fast. Nepal's former Chief Justice Sushila Karki has been sworn in as the country's interim Prime Minister and Parliament has been dissolved. Still, the power tussle is not over. There are signs that Nepali Army chief Ashok Raj Sigdel — who, because of the aforesaid special India-Nepal tie, was awarded the honorary rank of a "brother general" in the Indian Army by the President of India last December — wants to assert himself and may be leaning in favour of the pro-monarchist politicians. Never forget that for decades when the King of Nepal was on top of the heap, the erstwhile Royal Nepal Army's first slogan every morning was, "*Shri Panch ko sarkar jai jai ho!*"

The pushback has come from the most unusual of quarters. It is said that the Army chief wanted President Ram Chandra

Fortunately, the India-Nepal glue is so tight that the relationship is still safe. But if the disinterest continues, some of the glue may start to come unstuck.

Poudel to resign to pave the way for a Naya Nepal, but Poudel responded, in words to the effect, that "you can shoot me, but I won't stop being a democrat." Along with other political leaders like former PMs KP Oli and Sher Bahadur Deuba, Poudel was taken under Army protection for some days, but he has since been returned to Sheetal Niwas, his official home. Then there are the nameless, faceless Gen Z leaders, whose factions may have been squabbling among each other these last few days, but they have held firm on the most important next step: No return to monarchy. And that

the Constitution of Nepal, forged in the aftermath of a previous revolution, the *jana andolan* of 2006, which finally came into being in 2015 — cannot be gutted.

Equally significant is what India and China, Nepal's two most important neighbours, are thinking. China hasn't said a word so far. India's Ministry of External Affairs has said it is "closely monitoring" the situation and PM Modi has described the violence that wracked Kathmandu as "heart-wrenching." Note, though, the silence from any other political outfit in Delhi — they have all been told to keep quiet, which is as it should be. India is playing this hugely important moment in the region very carefully.

Word is, that India will continue to back the progressive, secular and constitutional forces in Nepal, as it has always done in the past. During the 2006 *jana andolan* as well, India's then Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran — and a columnist with *The Tribune* — broke from traditional policy to announce that India would support the egalitarian protest that had gone on for 19 long days and nights. That midnight in April 2006, I witnessed the incredible joy on the streets

of Kathmandu as India made the right choice. It spelt the end of Nepal's monarchy that had held Nepal and itself together since 1768 when Prithvi Narayan Shah united the warring kingdoms.

Another such moment is upon us today and we must learn several lessons from the past to deal with the present. First, the upheaval in Nepal must remind New Delhi of the importance of being even closer in touch with its neighbours. Second, India's elite foreign service may prefer the watering holes of the West, but there's nothing like the waters of the Bagmati or the Kosi and Mahakali from which to drink deep and imbibe both knowledge and culture.

And third, as the largest democracy not just in the region but in the world, India is a role model — Sushila Karki, the interim PM, like many other Nepali politicians before her, has studied at Banaras Hindu University — and must continue to be seen as such.

Nepal as well as the rest of South Asia must return to being both front and centre of India's attention. It doesn't matter if India is the fourth largest economy in the world and that these far smaller nations are small or smaller than India's provinces. The simple truth is that India must return to the "all boats must rise" maxim and connect with these sovereign nations as equals, who have much to give as well as to get.

There is a fourth reason. India's political class has also forgotten South Asia. There was a time when people like former PM Chandra Shekhar, Congress leaders like DP Tripathi and Left leaders like Sitaram Yechury and Prakash Karat together put their weight behind the democratic polity in Nepal. Today's politicians, though, would rather look elsewhere.

Fortunately, the India-Nepal glue is so tight that the relationship is still safe. But if the disinterest continues, as it sometimes threatens to do, the danger is that some of the glue may start to come unstuck.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A great revolution is never the fault of the people, but of the government. — Goethe

Thermocouples blow hot and cold

SOURABH DUTTA

THERE is no escape from the Law of Mismatched Temperature Perception among Married Couples. In essence, all couples disagree on whether their surroundings are too hot, too cold or just right. Irreconcilable differences regarding ambient temperature are a near-prerequisite for marriage. No ideal matching of horoscopes or claims of perfect chemistry can gloss over the thermostat war.

This phenomenon intensifies during the changeover of seasons. At the faintest hint of winter, the better (or colder?) half digs out a light blanket, dons a sleeveless sweater, turns fans to their lowest speed and shuts windows to keep out imaginary draughts of air. Unfailingly, the lesser half makes uncharitable remarks about weak constitutions and propensity to catch viruses. The mirror image of this predictable script plays itself out when winter wanes and summer waxes. In our house, the most serious battle of the sexes centres around controlling the bedroom AC remote. I am a 24°C fellow, while my wife's preference is 28°C — and this trivial difference in degrees snowballs into exaggerated degrees of differences. No sooner do I set the temperature at 24°C than she stealthily increases it in imperceptible increments. I retaliate by returning it to the baseline as soon as I presume that she has fallen asleep — only to realise later that she has restored the sauna-like conditions and hidden the remote under her pillow.

Towards the end of last summer, I hatched a diabolical plan. What if I tinkered with the air-conditioner so that the display falsely showed 28°C even as it blasted air at 24°C? It would psychologically satisfy my wife, and peace would prevail. After a few discreet enquiries, I found a top-notch AC technician in the neighbourhood, to whom I explained my unusual requirement.

"It will be done," he replied confidently.

"But how?" I asked.

"You would not know, but inside the AC, two wires of different metals — called a thermocouple — are joined together. When heated, they generate voltage which controls the thermostat," he explained condescendingly, as if physics was my weakest subject (it was). "I'll change the thermocouple" he declared.

"Okay," I added guiltily, "but you must come when my wife is not at home."

While jotting down my address, he asked, rather bewildered, "Why do you want to change the thermocouple again?"

"Eh?" I retorted, "I've never done it before".

"No," he replied emphatically. "There was a similar request from this address at the beginning of the summer. To make the display show 24°C when the actual temperature was 28°C. I think it was a lady..."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Modi's Manipur visit too late

Apropos of 'Ailing Manipur needs healing touch'; Prem Dhawan's lyrics '*Sab kuch luta ke hosh mein aaye to kya kia*' fits well with PM Modi's delayed visit to Manipur. The trouble-torn state had a 'double engine *sarkar*', so the responsibility to restore peace was on the Centre and the state government, but both failed miserably. For over two years now, there has been huge loss of life and property. The displacement of many people could have been avoided had the PM intervened earlier. His visit today has come when all the boats are burned. For the warring tribal groups in the state, an Urdu couplet sums it up, '*Khoon ke darya to jab chaho baha sakte ho, mohabbaton ke gulshan saja kar bhi kabhi dekho*'.

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

Keep surveillance over agents

Refer to 'Russian tangle'; to curb the allurements of unsuspecting Indians into the war zone in Russia, there is a pressing need for strict surveillance over recruiting agents. No individual or agency should be allowed to send youth abroad without obtaining a prior permit from the government authorities concerned, clearly mentioning job details, country of placement and safety verification. All licensed agents must be told to submit annual reports to the government. Besides, awareness drives must be conducted to educate the common man against falling prey to dubious overseas job offers. Unless backed by stringent monitoring, penalties and transparency, such rackets will continue to ruin the lives of young citizens.

AMARJIT SINGH, MOHALI

Lured by immigration agents

Refer to 'Russian tangle'; Russia has never been an attractive choice for Indians in comparison to England, Australia, Canada and the US. Those Indians who have gone to Russia have reached there only because of unscrupulous immigration agents. Unemployed youth are being lured with monetary benefits by agents, who have a large network in Punjab and earn handsome commission from their 'bosses' who are experts in this dirty business.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Antibiotics for animals harmful

Apropos of 'Antibiotics misuse'; people are largely unaware of this silent health emergency. It is true that antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and the consequent emergence of super bugs has become a global problem, particularly in India. This is due to the easy clinical availability of antibiotics. In addition to the wide misuse, massive veterinary use of antibiotics is also causing environmental pollution due to the presence of 'unmetabolised' antibiotics released through animal excreta. There is also a great need to adopt 'cleaner' processes for the treatment of wastewater released from factories making antibiotics.

SP SINGH, KURUKSHETRA

Public awareness necessary

The editorial 'Antibiotics misuse' has rightly highlighted antibiotic misuse and rising antimicrobial resistance in India. Public awareness is the best way to control this but it will take a long time. It is a difficult task to accomplish in a huge and diverse country like ours. PM's outreach programme like *Mann ki Baat* can be of great help. Over-the-counter sale of antibiotics without a doctor's prescription should be made an offence. Doctors prescribing antibiotics without a rationale should also be held liable.

DEEPAK KAPOOR, BY MAIL

Don't succumb to US demands

The US is sticking to the Russia oil rider, even though Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal is claiming progress in trade talks. India should not stop its purchases from Russia under US pressure. On the contrary, India should increase the prices of goods which are essential exports to the US, like pharma products, including syringes, syrups and medicines; electronics, petroleum products, certain passenger vehicles and cargo vans. India can also impose a limit on their quantities being sent to the US. Indian expatriates are contributing 5-6% to the US income tax kitty. Also, the tariff hike has been declared illegal by a US court and the day is not far when Trump will have to take the enhanced tariffs back. India should scout for other markets like the UK, which it has already entered into an FTA.

NPS SOHAL, BY MAIL

Democracy without dissent is like a bonsai



MANOJ KUMAR JHA
RAJYA SABHA MP,
RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL

THE protests led by young people in Nepal serve as a reminder that democracy cannot be reduced to the whims of insular regimes. In silencing dissent, manipulating institutions or treating citizens as passive subjects, elected governments hollow out the very essence of democratic life.

The youth are reclaiming the promise of democracy itself, asserting that people's will, not authoritarian impulses, must remain at the core of governance. They are not merely demanding this thing or that, but expressing their deep discontent with their government.

High unemployment, glaring income inequality, political corruption and the conspicuous consumption of super elites have long plagued governments across the world.

Social media makes opacity unsustainable. Information spreads fast and citizens organise with remarkable speed.

Much like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh before it, Nepal has witnessed an eruption of frustration from the young and jobless, who increasingly see little stake in the promises of the political class. The anger is real and rooted. But the descent into violence is tragic as it usually gives the establishment an opportunity for brutal crackdowns.

The death count in Nepal has touched 51. A report in the *Himal South Asian* contextualises the figure by noting that "during the second *jana andolan* in 2006, which wrested the country back from the absolutist claws of the monarchy, 18 people were killed over 19 days of protest."

But the responsibility for the violence on the streets must be shared by the establishment. When the pressure valves of democracy are screwed tight, there is little to stop it from imploding.

Experiences show that democracy is not sustained merely by the ritual of periodic elections or the existence of formal institutions. Its true lifeblood is dissent —



REAL ANGER: Youth unrest in Nepal echoes a global democratic crisis. REUTERS

the spaces and opportunities to question, to disagree and to challenge authority.

The essence of democracy lies in its openness, in its ability to absorb dissent, to spread its roots deep into the soil of society and to branch out in directions that reflect the will of the people. To restrict it or to confine it to the shape desired by those in power is to turn it into a bonsai — decorative, miniature and lifeless beyond its appearance.

Unfortunately, in recent times, dissent is too often misunderstood as disruption. Yet, history tells us otherwise: dissent is what has expanded

To brand dissent as 'anti-national' is to confuse obedience with patriotism, a dangerous lie that weakens the republic.

rights, corrected wrongs and deepened freedoms. Every democratic advance has been rooted in the refusal to accept silence as consent.

It is the questioning voice that prevents complacency, the alternative vision that enriches debate and the restless spirit that ensures that freedom does not wither into conformity. Democracy grows in the soil of dissent. To erode that soil is to risk uprooting the very tree.

Though India's roots in democracy are far more entrenched than those of many of its neighbours, even here, the soil of dissent is being steadily eroded. The

ritual of elections continues, but democracy cannot be reduced to numbers alone.

Governments may celebrate majorities, yet true democracy also requires respect for minority voices, for uncomfortable questions, for sharp criticism. To brand dissent as "anti-national" is to confuse obedience with patriotism. It is a dangerous lie that weakens the republic.

Our own freedom struggle was born out of dissent — against the British empire, against exploitation, against injustice. If dissent was treason, then the makers of our freedom were all traitors. Instead, they became the architects of the world's largest democracy. Yet today, writers, journalists, students, activists and even ordinary citizens face intimidation for speaking truth to power. Many are jailed as a result of a judiciary loath to apply the law strictly and consistently.

Parliament, once a sanctuary for robust debate, is too often reduced to a stage-managed performance where uncomfortable questions are drowned out. The media, which should be the mirror of democracy, has almost become its heavy curtain. And the citizen, whose

right it is to question, is told to watch in silence.


Looking at the range of institutions the young people in Nepal expressed their ire against, it is easy to understand how deep and pervasive their discontent against all parts of the establishment runs. Protesters stormed and torched party offices, parliament, the judiciary and media headquarters.

The democratic backsliding visible across continents should alarm us as well. In Turkey, dissenters are branded enemies of the nation. When older, established democratic traditions face such crises, the fragility of democracy in newer or struggling states becomes even more evident.

By our conduct, we must send a message to our neighbours and to the world: a democracy without dissent is like a tree denied sunlight, air and water. It may retain the image of a tree, but it is a bonsai in essence.

To prune democracy into a bonsai, ornamental and controlled, may please those in power, but it robs the people of shade, fruit and shelter. The world deserves a democracy that grows like a full tree that offers shelter, shade and sustenance for generations.

It's time for proactive climate insurance



BHUPINDER SINGH HOODA
FORMER CHIEF MINISTER OF HARYANA

FLOODS in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Haryana are not "freak" events. They show that climate change is the reality for millions of people. The loss of lives, destruction of crops, damage to infrastructure and mass displacement over the past few weeks tell a grim truth: government policies on climate disasters are unprepared, ineffective and unaccountable.

The Himalayan area has a fragile ecology. It is exacerbated by indiscriminate construction and inadequate disaster preparedness. The floods have destroyed crops, roads and houses, revealing how poorly ecological and climate concerns are incorporated into development.

Climate insurance is vital under such circumstances. Well-designed, it can guarantee that recovery funds are paid out promptly, transparently and based on need while helping advance climate-resilient practices. Insurers are already making a difference globally by reducing premiums and influencing climate behaviour, but climate insurance in India is still restricted to crop insurance.

With 65 crore farmers battling uncertain monsoons, floods, droughts and pest infestations, crop insurance is the most critical component of climate insurance. The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana insures only four crore farmers. Importantly, Punjab is not covered under the scheme.

However, payment delays, contested estimates, poorly defined processes and widespread farmer scepticism have eroded the scheme's credibility. Farmers wait months to receive payments, at times getting cheques too low to pay even the most basic expenses. That negates the intent of insurance as a risk management tool.

Climate risk extends beyond agriculture and affects the overall economy. Horticulture in Uttarakhand and HP has suffered significantly. Yet, no insurance mechanism exists for perennial crops of this kind. Paddy, maize and cotton fields

in Punjab and Haryana lie submerged, with apprehensions of huge losses and mounting debt. The collapse of infrastructure, like washed-out roads and homes, shows that even state investments lack climate-risk insurance coverage.

Early intervention can be three and a half times more effective than delayed relief. Why do we stick to a reactive disaster relief model instead of having a proactive, climate-linked insurance?

The government must implement climate insurance with parametric products, enabling instant payment as per pre-defined conditions such as rainfall, thereby bypassing the need for exhaustive evaluations. Micro-insurance for small farmers and low-income groups can provide coverage for produce, livestock, property and healthcare.

Sovereign insurance, in which state and Central governments employ financial instruments to cover large-scale risks, can help mobilise resources rapidly. Rainfall-, temperature- or soil-moisture-indexed insurance can cut administrative expenses and facilitate quicker payouts. These concepts have to be backed by robust regulation.

Insurance coverage in India is also lacking in accountability. Public policies need to align with climate requirements, be transparent and enforceable. The Congress' strategy for farm reform emphasises the role of autonomous monitoring, direct benefit transfers and online tracking systems to ensure that each insured farmer receives timely payments. The party's resolution on these reforms underscores that insurance must be farmer-centric, transparent and technologically enabled. As head of the Indian National Congress Committee on Agriculture and Welfare of Farmers, I had suggested that new ways to shield our farmers and economy from climate tragedies be found.

Without structural reforms, crop insurance risks becoming a bureaucratic formality rather than a real safety net. Our economy cannot absorb the shocks of a shifting environment.

It is time to shift from rhetoric to reality. The way ahead is to develop a national climate insurance policy that clearly defines tools, accountability and coverage norms. Crop insurance must be practical and adequate, not cosmetic. Also, no construction project should be approved without a climate-risk assessment and obligatory insurance. Satellite imagery, AI-based yield estimation and blockchain-enabled claim processing must be utilised to cut inefficiencies.

Climate insurance is not just about paying out losses; it is about investing in resilience.



The Tribune

TWO VIEWS

FLOODS IN NORTH INDIA



Without effective insurance, floods will keep drowning farmers in debt and despair.

Drones can shift reactive relief to precision flood management.

Drones can lift flood relief and agriculture



SS SEKHON
EX-PROFESSOR, GNDU, AMRITSAR

THE low-altitude economy is an emerging ecosystem with the potential to transform logistics, agriculture, surveillance and healthcare, all operating below 1,000 metres above ground level. It is driven by advances in drone technology and advanced air mobility. Imagine drones mapping flooded crops, spraying fields with precision, delivering medicines or enabling electric air taxis skipping traffic, all coordinated by AI. The question is: how can Punjab harness this frontier to tackle its most pressing challenges?

Punjab is reeling under the worst floods since 1988. Almost every monsoon, swollen rivers and breached canals inundate villages and crops, marooning families. Traditional ground assessments worsen the ordeal; by the time officials arrive, damage has mounted.

Drones can change this dramatically. Within hours, they can map submerged fields, breached embankments and damaged canals, guide relief teams, and identify safe drop points for food and medicines. They can show which fields remain cultivable, generate reliable insurance evidence and later monitor repaired embankments and drainage networks.

If systematically deployed in Punjab, drones could shift reactive relief to precision flood management: reducing losses, speeding recovery and building resilience. The Patiala authorities have already deployed drones to map natural water flows, producing inundation maps that guide better drainage and

flood-resilient infrastructure.

With shrinking groundwater, rising chemical dependence, erratic weather and labour shortages during peak seasons, costs keep climbing even as farm incomes stagnate. What if the solutions are not buried in the soil, but floating just above our heads? This is where the low-altitude economy is a game-changer. Drones can spray pesticides with accuracy and protect farmers' health. Soil and moisture mapping can guide irrigation and fertiliser use, cutting costs and conserving water. They can detect pests and nutrient deficiencies early, and help manage Punjab's burning headache of stubble.

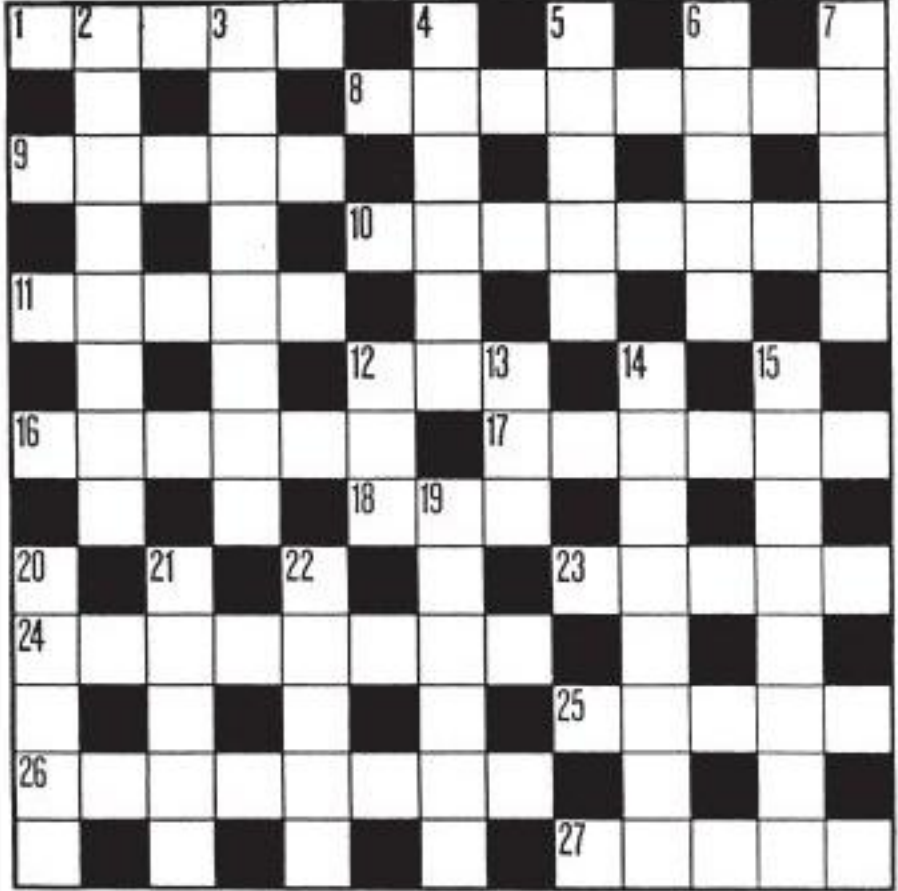
Punjab should launch a Low-Altitude Mission anchored on four pillars: policy (clearances with safety protocols), infrastructure (drone pads and state fleets), industry support (manufacturing incentives and local supply chains) and demand aggregation (state contracts that help start-ups scale).

Punjab Agricultural University could design crop-specific spraying protocols and water-saving advisories. Engineering institutes could innovate AI systems, sensors and cold-chain delivery methods. Labs in select districts could demonstrate drone farming from sowing to harvest. Training programmes could certify youth as drone pilots, repair technicians and data operators, turning brain drain into brain gain. Initiatives like "Drone Didis" in Bathinda, where women farmers are providing drone spraying services and PAU's new DGCA-approved drone training centre, point the way forward.

Globally, China leads drone innovation, while Europe and the US test the dedicated 'drone corridors'. India has begun with Digital Sky and local manufacturing, and Punjab is well-placed to take the lead.

The vision is practical: saving water, reducing pesticide use, protecting crops, accelerating flood relief and creating livelihoods. Drones can't stop floods, but they can help turn disaster into recovery and hope.

QUICK CROSSWORD



1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8
9
10
11
12 13 14 15
16
17
18 19
20 21 22 23
24
25
26
27

ACROSS

1 Make suitable (5)
8 Conceive as possibility (8)
9 Before time expected (5)
10 Share something equally (2,6)
11 World-weary (5)
12 Scatter seed (3)
16 Tense and restless (2,4)
17 In conflict (2,4)
18 Playing (3)
23 A savoury jelly (5)
24 Advantage in a situation (4,4)
25 Unanimous (5)
26 Clarity of expression (8)
27 Mendacity (5)

DOWN


2 Time-limit for completion (8)
3 Defensive fence of stakes (8)
4 Altogether (2,4)
5 Seem to be as good as (5)
6 Relinquish voluntarily (5)
7 Meaning (5)
12 Appoint (3)
13 Manner of behaving (3)
14 Pathetic tale of woe (3,5)
15 Supplement (8)
19 Distinguished (2,4)
20 Grow bigger (5)
21 Subsequently (5)
22 Disreputable (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Tumbledown, 6 Mass, 10 Admit, 11 Misbehave, 12 Inferior, 13 Sylph, 15 Booming, 17 Long ago, 19 Restore, 21 Calling, 22 Volga, 24 Anathema, 27 Aspersions, 28 Vital, 29 Ewer, 30 Well placed.

Down: 1 Trap, 2 Momentous, 3 Litre, 4 Damning, 5 Wastrel, 7 At all, 8 See through, 9 Personal, 14 Abbreviate, 16 Idolatry, 18 Axiomatic, 20 Evasive, 21 Channel, 23 Lapse, 25 Hovel, 26 Plod.

SU DO KU



5 1 4 8 2 9
6 9 3 5 4
7 2 8 5 6
6 2 9

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

4	9	8	5	1	3	7	6	2
5	1	7	8	6	2	9	4	3
3	6	2	9	4	7	8	1	5
9	3	4	1	2	5	6	7	8
6	2	1	7	3	8	5	9	4
8	7	5	6	9	4	3	2	1
1	5	3	2	7	9	4	8	6
7	8	6	4	5	1	2	3	9
2	4	9	3	8	6	1	5	7

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 13, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Bhadrapad Shaka 22
- Bhadrapad Purnimite 29
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 7:24 am
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 7, up to 5:05 am
- Harshana Yoga up to 10:33 am
- Kritika Nakshatra up to 10:12 am
- Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	18:30 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:06 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	25
New Delhi	33	25
Amritsar	33	26
Bathinda	36	25
Jalandhar	33	26
Ludhiana	34	26
Bhiwani	36	27
Hisar	36	25
Sirsa	36	26
Dharamsala	27	19
Manali	25	18
Shimla	22	17
Srinagar	32	18
Jammu	33	26
Kargil	28	10
Leh	24	08
Dehradun	31	24
Mussoorie	24	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

‘Our agility makes us unique’

Latika Kundu is a widely acknowledged industry expert in setting up, launching and managing exchanges. She has more than 25 years of experience across leading global multi-asset exchanges and global investment banks – National Stock Exchange of India (NSE), Lehman Brothers, MCX Stock Exchange (now MSE), Singapore Mercantile Exchange (SMX), Macquarie Singapore and S Singapore Diamond Investment Exchange (SDiX).

She now serves as the MD and CEO of Metropolitan Stock Exchange (MSE). In an interview with The Statesman, Kundu throws light on her 30-year-old career and what sets MSE apart from the National Stock Exchange (NSE) and Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE).

Q: What is the Metropolitan Stock Exchange, and what sets it apart?

A: The Metropolitan Stock Exchange (MSE) is the third stock exchange, similar to NSE and BSE. It has licenses across the equity, equity derivatives, currency derivatives and debt segments. Licensed by SEBI, MSE provides a transparent platform for investors to buy and sell financial products, much like other exchanges. What makes us unique is our agility as the youngest player, allowing us to innovate and focus on investor-centric solutions, enhancing access and competition in the market.

Q: With NSE and BSE dominating the market, why is there a need for a third stock exchange?

A: India's economy is growing rapidly, and as the world's largest democracy with a young population — averaging under 30 years old — we need robust capital markets to drive wealth creation. Globally, countries and regions have multiple exchanges to de-risk concentration, foster innovation, and lower costs through competition. In India, each state is like a country, with diverse economic needs. A third exchange like MSE ensures diversity, transparency, and more options for investors and companies. Competition drives better services, lower costs, and innovation,

ultimately benefiting the end investor. A monopolistic or duopolistic market limits choice, whereas multiple platforms empower investors and support capital formation for India's growth.

Q: Most companies are listed on BSE or NSE. How does MSE plan to attract larger companies to list on its platform?

A: Attracting companies both established and new, is a key focus. For existing companies, listing on MSE offers their investors one more avenue in terms of trading platform, improving liquidity and access to information. The regulatory framework is the same across exchanges, so there is no additional compliance burden. It is about giving investors seamless access to trade. MSE further aims to simplify listing processes and reduce costs, leveraging competition to make capital raising more efficient. By offering a platform that's less burdened than larger exchanges, we provide flexibility and choice, ensuring companies and investors benefit from a diversified market.

Q: MSE recently raised Rs 1,000 crore in funding. How will this enhance services and market liquidity?

A: While our services are already operational, what we are looking at is enhancing our infrastructure and expanding the services. Our immediate focus is on the equity cash segment, which provides the foundation for spot prices, followed by the derivatives market in the coming months, boosting liquidity and investor engagement.

Q: Can you share MSE's journey, its challenges, and your revival strategy? Who are your key investors?

A: We are the youngest exchange, we are proud of that because that keeps us agile. We started in 2008 only with the currency segment and we did very well. Like any organization, we have also faced various challenges - market upheavals and competitive pressures - but these have strengthened our resolve. Since I joined as CEO in 2020, we've focused on building a

solid foundation, addressing challenges and preparing for growth. Our recent Rs 1,000 crore funding reflects strong confidence in MSE's potential to become a formidable player. We're committed to creating a transparent, investor-friendly platform.

Q: You refer to your team as “MSEpreneurs.” What defines MSE's work culture?

A: Our culture rests on three pillars: discipline, integrity, and respect. These are non-negotiable. We call our employees MSEpreneurs because they embody an entrepreneurial spirit, driven by the ethos of “MSE first.” This means prioritizing the institution's goals - building a robust, transparent market - while maintaining integrity and respect in all interactions, internally and externally. Our focus on long-term growth ensures we stay agile and innovative, always keeping the investor at the heart of our mission.

Q: MSE is building a state-of-the-art data center. How will this enhance your technological edge?

A: As a newer player, we have the advantage of building with cutting-edge technology. Our data center is designed with the latest infrastructure - high-capacity racks, robust power systems, and advanced connectivity - to ensure seamless, reliable services for members and market participants. This technological edge will enhance trading efficiency and support our goal of providing a world-class platform for investors.

Q: How do capital markets contribute to India's goal of becoming a USD 5 trillion economy?

A: Capital markets are critical for wealth creation and economic growth. Today around 5 per cent of Indians participate in capital markets, compared to much higher rates in developed economies. To reach \$5 trillion - and beyond, to \$10 or \$30 trillion - we need greater inclusion. This requires education to promote responsible investing and trust in the market. India's young, tech-savvy population, averaging 28-30 years old, is poised

to drive this transformation. By expanding access to diverse asset classes, and supporting entrepreneurs across tier-2 and tier-3 cities, capital markets can fuel India's economic growth.

Q: Over your 30-year career, what's the biggest change you've seen in financial markets?

A: The shift to electronic markets was a game-changer when I started at NSE as a summer intern. It revolutionized price discovery, transparency, and access. Since then, markets have evolved with new asset classes - currency, commodities etc. and regulations making our markets well regulated, responsive and transparent. The focus has always been on reaching the last mile, ensuring fairness, and building trust. There is just so much to do in this space that keeps you going.

Q: You've been reappointed as MSE's MD and CEO for another three years. What does this mean to you?

A: This role is about continuing my passion for building markets that empower investors. My goal is to elevate MSE to a competitive, formidable player, offering diverse products and asset classes. I want MSE to contribute significantly to India's financial ecosystem. It's not just about my term - it's about laying a foundation for MSE's long-term success and India's global financial leadership.

Q: As a woman leader in a male-dominated industry, what challenges have you faced?

A: Well, I consider myself lucky. Balancing personal and professional life is a universal challenge, but it's often amplified for women, especially working mothers. Early in my career, societal expectations were different, and juggling between family, children, and work required meticulous planning and inner resolve. I've been fortunate to have supportive family, friends, and colleagues, but the guilt of balancing roles is real. I encourage everyone - men and women - to share responsibilities at home and work. It's about being organized, staying



calm, and recognizing that ambition and caregiving aren't mutually exclusive.

Q: What's the biggest lesson you've learned in your 30-year journey?

A: The ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn is critical. Markets evolve constantly, and staying adaptable - embracing new technologies, regulations, and products - ensures you remain relevant. This mindset has guided me and my teams for decades.

Q: What advice would you give young professionals entering the market space?

A: Read extensively and stay updated. Your journey is personal, shaped by your financial situation, family, and goals. Don't blindly follow others' advice - do your research or consult certified professionals. Responsible investing requires knowledge and discipline. Be curious, stay informed, and chart your own path.

Q: What are your next goals – both for MSE and for yourself?

A: For MSE, I envision a transformative journey to become a strong, competitive exchange that delivers value to investors and supports India's economic ambitions. Personally, I want to see MSE reach its “win” - a defining moment of success. I believe in the power of collective effort and trust that the universe conspires to make great things happen. MSE will be a formidable player, fostering a healthy, inclusive market for all.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 13 Spetember, 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Of the reporting stations in the Bengal-Assam-Orissa area some thirty have up to date recorded deficient and twenty excessive rainfalls. Cherrapunji has done particularly badly. It has had less than 334 inches and is 41-72 in defect. Its citizens must almost feel their skins cracking. Shillong is 18 inches in defect and Cooch Bihar 20 inches. Per contra, Jagdalpur in the Central Provinces has had 37 inches more than it generally reckons to have, and Allahabad more than 27 inches. In the midst of all these extremes Calcutta, with a deficiency of about four inches, strikes a note not far from the happy medium. We have now had 47 inches and we are due to have another thirteen before the end of the year. There are, however, distinct indications that the rains are drawing to a close, and the probability is either that the thirteen inches will not materialise, or that they will be delivered in one lot.

News Items

HEALTH PROMOTION

WORK OF THE LEAGUE ORGANIZATION

Geneva, Sept.
At the Committee discussing the activities of the Health Organization of the League, Mr. Samuel (Britain) criticized the scope of the work undertaken, and warned the League not to allow the organization to outgrow its budgetary resources. Sir Atul Chatterjee (India) welcomed what the League was doing in Eastern countries, especially the establishment of a health information office at Singapore, though he thought that more attention might be paid, to the East especially, in view of the large contributions from that quarter to the cost of the League. Speaking on the system of the interchange of health officers, which was supported by the funds of the Rockefeller Institute, Mr. Chatterjee suggested that if officers of countries outside the League participated in the interchange or if such countries obtained the assistance of the health organization they should be asked to contribute to its funds. He trusted that work paid for from the grants of the Rockefeller Institute would be kept distinct from the work paid for out of League funds, in order that the League might not be committed in advance to bear the cost of the former if the Rockefeller grants were withdrawn. Sir Atul has been appointed to report to the Second Committee on the economic work of the League.—Reuter.

LADY DADIBA DALAI

INJURED IN MOTOR ACCIDENT

London, Sept.
A piece of flying glass badly injured Lady Dadiba Dalai, wife of the former High Commissioner for India, while she was motoring near Scarborough. The car in avoiding another car at a crossroad crashed into a wall.—Reuter.

CAPTAIN ARTHUR

EXTRADITION NOT TO BE PRESSED

Paris, Sept.
Captain Arthur, who has been in prison for the past eight months, appeared at the Palais de Justice, yesterday at noon. The magistrate announced that the British Government did not intend to press the charges on which they had applied for his extradition in January 1925, but the French Judicial Authorities would proceed on separate charges in connexion with the Mr. “A” case. The hearing is expected in October.—Reuter.

BANK STRIKE ENDS

FRENCH CLERKS RESUME WORK

Paris, Sept.
The bank strike has ended. The clerks will resume work tomorrow.— Reuter.

Fate of Mediation Act remains unknown

DR. P. MADHAVA RAO

The Supreme Court of India proposed a separate standalone legislation on mediation in India more than five years ago, citing the mounting caseload on Indian courts and the nature of many civil disputes that can be settled amicably without the intervention of the courts, but the fate of the Mediation Act 2023, remains unknown.

The speed with which the mediation act was passed by both houses of parliament does not clearly reveal any intention of the government to fully implement the act, despite our Union Law Minister taking every opportunity to speak about the Mahabharata, Sri Krishna, and his failed mediation attempts, as well as how India has a culture of mediation in its social value ecosystem.

In January 2020, the Supreme Court appointed a senior mediator, Mr Niranjan Bhat, to lead a commission that would write mediation legislation. It was then given to the government as a suggestion by the Supreme Court. On 5 November 2021, the government made the draft Mediation Bill available for public feedback on their website. Following that, on 20 December 2021, the Government

introduced the Mediation Bill, 2021, in the Rajya Sabha and referred it to the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law, and Justice for study and report on 22 December 2021.

The group solicited feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including government officials, attorneys, and mediation professionals. They also sought comments from the general public and a variety of mediation institutions. To gather more detailed comments, the committee published a news release and paid study visits to Chennai, Bengaluru, and Mumbai, where they spoke with important stakeholders including high court judges, bar councils, and mediation institutes. The goal of this extended outreach was to gain a thorough grasp of the bill's ramifications from a variety of angles.

Three years and eight months after the original recommendation of the Supreme Court of India, the finished bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha on 1 August 2023, and the Lok Sabha on 7 August 2023, with cabinet revisions. Finally, the Bill obtained President's approval and was published in the official Gazette on 15 September 2023, as the Mediation Act, 2023 (Act). We

thus have a mediation act available for implementation at any time, which has been collecting dust on the ministry's shelf for the past two years.

The act's purpose and intention are to encourage and facilitate mediation, particularly institutional mediation, for the resolution of civil and commercial disputes, mandatory pre-institutional mediation in commercial disputes; to enforce mediated settlement agreements; to establish a body for the registration of mediators; to encourage community mediation; to make online mediation an acceptable and cost-effective process; and to address matters related to or incidental thereto.

The court-annexed mediation facilities have gained both renown and notoriety over the years, and the courts and governments are now in the need of mediation institutions to operate at the national, subnational, and community levels. The philosophy behind the act's enactment was to attract the attention of interested national and international NGOs, societies, and law firms to establish institutional mediation service centres; however, the government's intentions behind the act's non-operationalisation even after two years of enactment

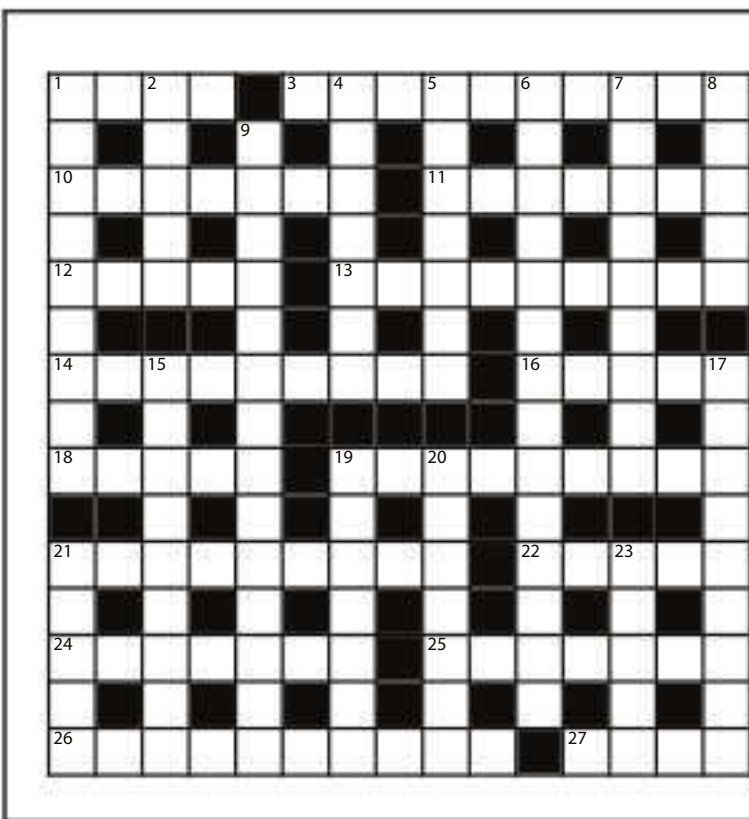


and budget releases in successive budgets are unknown.

The Mediation for the Nation, a 90-day mediation drive launched on 1 July 2025 by the Supreme Court of India's Mediation and Conciliation Project Committee (MCPC) and the National Legal Service Authority (NALSA), is ending on September 30, and no one knows what its impact and successes have been. No mediation institutions in the country, which were originally consulted for conceptualising, drafting and finalisation of the Mediation Act, 2023, engaged in the 90-day mediation drive for the simple reason that their existence must be recognised by the Mediation Council of India in order to be a mediation service provider within the meaning of the act.

The cases in court are not waiting for the government to

Crossword | No. 293233



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

BOWLING GREEN
V E T E C T B
C R E S C E N T S L A M E R
O R T E T A B A
M A R K E D T U N I S T I A N
P E R I O D I C
L E A R N T H I E L S I N K I
I C S D E N
M A T U R I T Y T U R I N G
E R P G E I
N E U R I T I S A R C H E R
T N N N B I B O
E X A M S G O I N G D O W N
D R I U L H U
M A N I P U L A T O R Y

ACROSS

- 1 Alison's associate? (4)
- 3 Needs a slap when drunk walks by the sea (10)
- 10 Shop till you drop? That's said to be soon (2,3,2)
- 11 Nameless dog at home — one who kept escaping? (7)
- 12 Ruin everything! (5)
- 13 Untouched as plant in midwinter? (9)
- 14/27 Mammals he or she so cryptically

- 16 See 19 Down
- 18 Spiced rice, alluring eastern cuisine: just having seconds? (5)
- 19 Persevere over each period before play starts (3-6)
- 21 Long drink containing peel from plump fruit (9)
- 22 Tips to help all dodging fifty per cent in tax (5)
- 24 Energy movement generates strong feeling (7)

- 25 Scene changed with sailor getting vacancy (7)
- 26 Blown away — and so is the organisation? (10)
- 27 See 14

DOWN

- 1 Clerical office and shop at Biba endlessly rebuilt (9)
- 2 Smallest stone under meadow (5)
- 4 This sly manoeuvring becomes elegant (7)

- 5 What did you say in loo about French port? (2,5)
- 6 See instruction confused medical expert (14)
- 7 Dear old American keeping one quiet, like Mary? (9)
- 8 Nick made in beginning to scissor cloth (5)
- 9 What can be included repeatedly at OU? (5,9)
- 15 Dismissing complaint after

- learner involved in smash (6,3)
- 17 ... without feeling foolish? (9)
- 19/16 Close song out when music starts to die (3,4,5)
- 20 Raise tax within European sheltered zone (7)
- 21 Religious portrait from two Athenian characters? (5)
- 23 Two-wheeler parked in Clifton Gardens (5)

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





Editor's
TAKE

From kinship to strategic partnership

Bilateral cooperation strengthens economic growth, infrastructure, and regional stability while advancing maritime governance and strategic interests

India and Mauritius share what is often described as umbilical roots, a bond that goes far beyond diplomacy and economics. At the heart of this relationship is a deep civilisational and cultural connection, nurtured over centuries through migration, shared heritage, and common values. A large majority of the Mauritian population traces its ancestry to India, carrying forward languages, traditions, cuisine, festivals, and spiritual practices that remain vibrant on the island even today.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent announcement of a \$680 million special economic package for Mauritius, coupled with in-principle agreements for redevelopment of the Port Louis harbour and surveillance of the Chagos Marine Protected Area, marks yet another milestone in this trajectory.

The contours of this package reflect India's recognition of Mauritius as family rather than merely a partner. It includes critical infrastructure projects such as the Air Traffic Control tower at the international airport, expansion of highways and ring roads, and enhanced healthcare facilities.

These developments are carefully aligned with Mauritius' own needs and priorities, ensuring that New Delhi's support nurtures long-term self-reliance.

By committing to cooperate in the development of the Chagos Marine Protected Area and signing an agreement on hydrography, India has placed Mauritius at the center of its Indian Ocean strategy. The expansion of Mauritius' Exclusive Economic Zone, following its sovereignty agreement with the UK over Chagos, has added both opportunities and responsibilities. India's offer of joint surveys, navigation charts, and hydrographic data collection directly empowers Mauritius to exercise sovereignty over its waters while bolstering regional maritime security. This is more significant as China is trying to make inroads into Indian ocean and wants to encircle indian influence. Besides, the Western presence is already there. Strategically, this cooperation is vital. The Chagos archipelago hosts Diego Garcia, a pivotal military base operated by the US and UK. India's unequivocal support for Mauritius' sovereignty over the territory while strengthening Port Louis' hand in navigating delicate geopolitical waters.

For India, Mauritius is a pillar in its "Neighbourhood First" policy and its broader "Vision Mahasagar" for the Indian Ocean. By nurturing Mauritius' maritime capacity and reinforcing its sovereignty, New Delhi cements its role as a net security provider and first responder in the region. Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam's remark that Mauritius preferred an Indian vessel over a British one to visit Chagos reflects both gratitude and trust. As global power dynamics intensify in the Indo-Pacific, the growing synergy between India and Mauritius stands as a testament to diplomacy built on respect, shared history, and mutual aspirations.

Reflections on the act of living together

If we are to live together in peace and build cohesive communities, the study of communication — in all its forms — deserves far greater attention, starting as early as childhood and extending into the highest levels of research



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Since time immemorial, there have been continuous attempts to understand human nature, human beings, their relationships, and indeed what keeps life going. A literature survey of any of these topics, singly or in togetherness, is still to be comprehensively undertaken. This makes the task of successive levels of the evolution of thought more complicated.

An example may be taken of Homo sapiens. Many definitions of what defines Homo sapiens can be found. One of the common definitions is, "man is a thinking animal." It might be asked if man is the only animal capable of thinking or if there are indeed other animals which also think? Indeed, the definition of thinking is itself vague.

There is evidence of the ability to think on the part of other beings, such as dogs, deer, and other animals. Many people believe, with some conviction, that even plants are living beings and that they respond to the environment in a manner similar to human beings and other 'animals.' One distinction, however, which marks out Homo sapiens is that they can speak to each other in a language that has meaningful words. Indeed, the study of languages has evolved quite significantly. There are different languages that have words and intonation as the core of the transparency of thought from one entity to another.

Learning institutions have language departments which have studied the growth of communication between two entities. That may be another story. Closer to the purpose, it may be useful to reflect upon how living together has as one of its major planks: Communication by language. The choice of words is an essential part of interpersonal communication, but this is not the only way two people communicate with each other. They can also communicate through touch, through their eyes, through their facial expressions, and indeed their postures. The act of living together itself assumes communication and interaction. Significant work has been done on communication through the eyes and facial expressions.

In fact, a good deal of poetry in many languages has tried to underscore that communication through the eyes is one of the central acts of communication. There is research available on how animals or people themselves convey meaning through the use of language. Be that as it may, it is important to realise that living together requires, first and foremost, peace between the entities. It also needs the ability to transmit thoughts and receive. This many a time involves communication in a structured



The Pioneer SINCE 1865

THE CAPACITY OF MISCOMMUNICATION TO MULTIPLY IS ANY DAY GREATER THAN THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF ACCURATE IDEAS BETWEEN THE TRANSMITTER AND THE LISTENERS

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way. Even if the communication is not structured, it must be able to convey itself clearly. Somehow, the act of living together involves a commonality of communication, irrespective of the medium and the mode.

Behind this communication is the frame of mind and judgement appropriate to convey the feelings and the gist of the content in a communicable manner to the other person. This assumes a certain commonality of background, which may not always be assured, let alone ensured.

Herein begins one of the tricky aspects of living together. For the message to be encoded, it is important that the recipient be at the same level as the person transmitting the communication. It would need a common vocabulary and sensitivity to understand the encoder's nuances of gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and more to convey a sentiment.

To date, relatively few elaborate scientific exercises on facial expression are universally accessible. This makes the task of communication not only risky but also confusing. The transmitter may have certain emotions in mind and may even be well-versed in converting them into words and gestures. This symbolism of the encoder's thoughts conveying a meaning may not always be shared by the listeners. Thus, the decoder may not get the full message. Indeed, there is a possibility that the decoder could understand something quite different from what would be in the encoder's mind. What gets communicated could be quite different, and the encoder may not even be aware of what has happened. This will worsen the communicability of thought, and inaccurate communication may follow. The fallout effect

of this on the recipients' and the transmitters' relationship could be deep. It would be understandable if confusion escalated from one message to the next. The capacity of miscommunication to multiply is any day greater than the effective communication of accurate ideas between the transmitter and the listeners.

Untrained people with limited self-control can and do follow up confusing words with a higher degree of breakdown in communication. This can affect relationships, friendships, intimacies, and institutions like marriages and more. Its effect in official and formal communication can have institutional implications with corrosive possibilities.

As a result, there is evidently a case for greater care and caution in studying the act of living together as a subject matter. The obvious choice would be to foresee the study of Homo sapiens as entities. Clearly, there is a case for deeper research and more scholarly insights into the entire phenomenon of living together. The sooner serious-minded people wake up to this, the better. A template for this may be a welcome beginning.

Basic grooming in verbal and non-verbal communication could serve as a foundation of learning. This could be at the preschool stage. In its own right, it would serve as a specialisation. A modest beginning may be marked by making 'basic communication' practice a grooming at the nursery stage itself.

The orientation, training, and development would need to be matched at every level of learning, going up to research level. Its effect on building cohesive societies and more robust institutions would be well worth the effort.

PIC TALK



A priest performs the 'Ganga Aarti' on the ghats of the River Ganga in Prayagraj.

PHOTO: PTI

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BRAIN DRAIN REFLECTS FLAWS IN ACADEMIC ECOSYSTEM

The persistent exodus of India's brightest minds reflects a deep malaise within the nation's academic and professional ecosystem. Intelligent students, even those nurtured in premier government-funded institutions, often perceive a vacuum of meaningful opportunities, structured career growth, and robust research avenues. This paucity propels them abroad, particularly after acquiring bachelor's degrees in STEM disciplines, in search of advanced education and lucrative careers.

The ramifications are twofold. First, the flight of talent results in brain drain, depriving India of a reservoir of capable innovators, scientists, and professionals vital for self-reliance and global competitiveness. Second, the financial outflow is staggering — billions of dollars annually are

spent on tuition and boarding in foreign universities, thereby straining India's foreign exchange reserves while enriching overseas institutions.

Such a dynamic is unsustainable for a nation aspiring to global leadership. To reverse the tide, India must create a nurturing ecosystem that offers competitive remuneration, world-class research infrastructure, and recognition for intellectual contributions. Strengthening domestic opportunities will encourage students to pursue careers at home rather than abroad.

Transforming brain drain into brain gain allows India to retain talent, drive innovation, and empower students to build a prosperous future at home.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Saving others, but struggling to save themselves



ASHA IYER KUMAR

2 THE PIONEER ND OPINION

Nothing feels more paradoxical than this — a cardiac surgeon doing his rounds, checking on patients who have come to him to mend failing hearts, hopeful of resurrection after a close brush with death. He would be assuring them that all is well, that recovery is on the way. And then, suddenly, the healer himself collapses, succumbing to the very ailment he was meant to cure with his therapeutic hands and words. The scene sounds surreal, yet it is becoming a chilling reality in India's hospitals. Doctors are falling prey to a multitude of problems they cannot circumvent, often labelled as "pressures of the medical profession."

Experts caution that doctors too need a life, offering advice on maintaining work-life balance even when one dons the mantle of lifesaver to hundreds, sometimes thou-

sands. To pin this mammoth issue under the simple banner of "stress" would be reductionist. The profession demands deeper analysis and understanding, and solutions beyond generic advice. The pressing questions are: Why are doctors unable to achieve that elusive equilibrium?

What hidden maladies afflict our healers' community? And do we, as patients, even realise that beneath the white coat and stethoscope lies a human body and a throbbing heart, prone to disorder just like ours? Why do doctors stretch themselves so thin that they tear, without being mindful of the consequences? Some are driven by sheer commitment, a sacred duty to their patients, inspired by the Hippocratic Oath. Others are held hostage by the modern trappings of life — money, prestige, reputation — that demand more than humanly possible. Then there are systemic pressures: Too few doctors for millions of patients (in 2020, India had 0.727 physicians per 1,000 people, according to World Bank data). Add to these administrative burdens, patient expectations, and the ever-present fear of legal or professional backlash, and the doctors' plates are full. On top are societal and familial expectations; and for those in teaching hospitals, the relentless duress of research, publication, and academic excellence. The result is a profession caught in a paradox — facing wellness bankruptcy in a space that prescribes health as priority. Like most of us grappling with the changing dynam-

ics of modern life, doctors too are pulled by duty, ambition, and unyielding demands of a system that rarely pauses to care for them. Commitment itself has consequences.

When a dutiful doctor consistently puts patients ahead of themselves, eating and sleep patterns collapse. It is heal over meal for them. The honour of donning the white coat does not permit complacency, even for a moment, while on duty. Constantly making life-and-death decisions, they face hazards unique to their jobs. In India, negligence and slip-ups can flare tempers and result in violent attacks. Doctors worry not only about the legal consequences of a botched procedure but also about the wrath of mobs demanding accountability in the roughest manner possible. At the end of the day, doctors have far more to accomplish than writing prescriptions. That they are deeply connected with the sacred act of healing does not insulate them from the commercial, social, and material strains of a world that measures worth in numbers and outcomes. Caught between service, success, and survival, they too, perhaps, lose sight of what truly matters — life — and will need psychosomatic support to carry on in a profession that demands their undivided self. The wake-up calls are loud — will there be a cure for the healers?

The author is a Dubai-based columnist, independent journalist, and writing coach

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Safeguarding personality rights with dignity

Personality branding is a novel concept used increasingly for personal marketing. There is no doubt that personality is nothing less than a brand in today's social system. Every individual holds a unique personality, and cherishing it with dignity is a right.

Bollywood actor Aishwarya Rai recently moved the Delhi High Court to safeguard her personality rights as an individual. Her action is welcome, as the internet is flooded with pictures, videos, and AI-generated graphics that misrepresent her real identity. AI-crafted videos mislead audiences about the values, behaviour, and attitude of renowned actors. Edited and AI-generated pornographic or intimidating visuals imposed upon her face sought to defame her personality.

It is particularly welcome that the judiciary has upheld the right to privacy and dignity. This is not only a judicial victory for Ms Rai but also for the wider feminist community. Misuse of AI and digital technology has already shamed many women. We hope this initiative by Aishwarya Rai will change social perspectives and pave the way for a safer and more respectful digital world. May every individual's personality rights be preserved from now on. Her fight is a reminder that dignity in the digital age must be defended as fiercely as identity itself.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

Political violence in America

Charlie Kirk, a prominent 31-year-old conservative activist and founder of Turning Point USA, was assassinated while speaking at Utah Valley University. A single shot — fired from a rooftop — struck him in the neck during his "Prove Me Wrong" debate on his "American Comeback Tour."

The shooter remains at large. Kirk's death highlights the growing danger of political violence in the United States. He was a strong voice in conservative youth politics — campaigning with Donald Trump, mobilising students, opposing abortion, and shaping right-wing discourse. His killing increases pressure on Trump, who condemned the violence while blaming "radical left rhetoric," sparking debate on responsibility, free speech, and gun culture. Trump has now announced that Kirk will be posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

For India, this serves as a warning: unchecked political polarisation can erupt into violence against public figures. It underscores the need for restraint in political speech, stricter regulation of firearms, and ensuring institutions protect dissent. The tragedy is not just an American concern but a lesson for all democracies seeking civility and peace in public life.

BAL GOVIND | NOIDA

Resentment breeds risks of upheaval

Drawing a parallel with Nepal's crisis, the Congress warned that unchecked public resentment can trigger political upheaval if voices are ignored. It argued that while India's democratic system has shielded it so far, unrest signals that the ground beneath those in power is unsteady. Frustration will only grow if grievances remain unresolved. Bihar, close to Nepal both geographically and politically, reflects this sentiment. The party stressed that ignoring voter concerns while engaging in "electoral theft" would deepen anger and risk instability. Nepal is witnessing widespread protests over social media restrictions and allegations of corruption, leading to Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's resignation. Congress drew a clear connection between these developments and discontent brewing in Indian states, particularly Bihar.

The remarks also compared unrest in Nepal to turmoil in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, suggesting a regional pattern of instability when governments fail to address corruption and people's demands. The warning is clear: Democracy survives not merely through elections but by genuinely addressing the concerns of citizens. Dismissing this discontent risks eroding trust and pushing society towards the brink of volatility.

BHAGWAN THADAN | MUMBAI

Before outer revolutions, we first need an inner one

The Nepali youth's courage is unquestionable. Their will to stand against corruption and misgovernance should not end in chaos that engulfs the whole nation. They have to look beyond hashtags or fleeting slogans, and strike at the root cause of the political mess to usher in lasting change



ACHARYA PRASHANT

History is littered with revolutions, and with the heartbreak that follows them. Crowds fill streets, slogans shake capitals, and for a moment it seems that the old order will finally give way. Yet when the dust settles, people discover that what they overthrew outside still lives within. Systems fall, rulers change, but the conditions of life remain largely the same.

This is the tragedy of outer revolutions: they promise new beginnings, yet too often deliver repetition. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

The Forgotten Lesson of History

Europe rose in several great revolts, and America fought a mammoth civil war. Russia removed a Tsar only to enthrone a series of autocrats. The Arab world had its spring. Bangladesh recently toppled a government, yet disillusionment soon returned. China crushed its protests in Tiananmen or Hong Kong, and we can only imagine if revolution would have saved its people. Revolts do sometimes seem to succeed to an extent, yet the question remains: what has really changed?

India has seen civil movements before and after independence. Civil Disobedience to Quit India to Sampoorna Kranti — the list is impressive. Jayaprakash Narayan's call in the 1970s shook Delhi, and so did Anna Hazare more recently, yet the inner regime of greed and fear remained untouched.

Nepal today provides another mirror. Time and again its youth have poured into the streets demanding change: against monarchy, against corruption, against restrictions. Each time there has been sacrifice. But each time, beneath the new veneer, fundamental change remained elusive. I heard a young man from Nepal recall decades of protest, summing it up starkly: "We keep beginning, but nothing begins."

Why Revolutions Break Hearts

The grievances are not imaginary. Suppression is real. Corruption is entrenched. Education is weak. Employment is scarce: nearly one in five young Nepalis remain unemployed. Ministers' children inherit positions of privilege; ordinary youth inherit queues at embassies for visas to the Gulf.



Social media adds both spark and spectacle: "Tag them, expose them, make it viral." Hashtags ignite quickly, and just as quickly fade. The cycle repeats: energy rises, leaders emerge, power shifts, disillusionment follows. People march in hope, return in silence, and many finally leave the country altogether.

When Enslaved Minds Shape Outer Power

Why does this happen? Because outer change without inner change is shallow. Governments may be corrupt, yes, but who elected the very politicians now despised? A society bound in ignorance cannot give rise to wise rulers.

In the past, rulers controlled with sword and gallows. Today, control is subtler. It is not soldiers but algorithms that decide what we see, what we desire, what we fear. At dawn the phone selects our news; at midnight it decides what will keep us awake. Artificial intelligence only sharpens the grip.

If toppling a government is easier than logging users back into TikTok or Instagram, who really holds power? The chains are no longer iron; they are made of notifications. And because the prisoner scrolls willingly, no dictator is required.

Democracy counts votes. But do we have the clarity to vote? Or are our skies clouded by prejudice, greed, and distraction? The quality of revolt cannot exceed the quality of the mind that casts the vote.

Why Outer Change Fails

This is why revolutions so often break hearts. They strike at systems, rulers, and policies while assuming: "I am fine; it is the system that is corrupt." But if the citizenry itself were awake, could such corrupt systems ever arise?

Politicians know this: if a protest fails, its leaders vanish; if it succeeds, they are absorbed into the establishment. In either case, the system survives. The true defeat of a revolutionary is his success, for once he triumphs,

he becomes what he fought against.

The Tragic Misplacement of Courage

Nepal's youth have shown real courage. Nineteen lives were lost in the latest protests. Their sacrifice deserves honour, not dismissal. Yet courage without clarity risks not achieving its fullest potential.

If lives must be laid down, let it be for causes as large as life itself. Let it be for the survival of the Earth. In America, the largest assault on the climate in history is underway. Dozens of oil and gas licences were fast-tracked in May 2025 alone, while programmes that could raise awareness were defunded. Forests are cleared, rivers poisoned, ecosystems dismantled. Scientists warn that more than 70 per cent of wildlife has been lost in the past fifty years. South Asia already loses thousands each summer to heat. And yet there are no uprisings that refuse to disperse until the planet is secured.

Anger is fuel, but fuel without direction

becomes only smoke.

The First Fire: Self-Knowledge

The true fire of revolution does not burn in buses set ablaze or highways blocked. It burns quietly in classrooms when a competent teacher awakens young minds. Dictators fear universities precisely because independent thought is the most subversive act.

Schools and colleges teach mathematics, science, and commerce, but rarely do they teach how desires and fears enslave us. Families hand down customs, but seldom the courage to question them. The absence of self-inquiry ensures conformity, not freedom. The soul's quiet proclamation outthunders a million slogans.

The Individual as the Unit of Change

The real unit of revolution is not society, for society is only an idea. The true unit is the individual. If individuals remain asleep, crowds chanting "revolution" are only theatre. True change begins when a person asks: "Who dictates my desires? Who shapes my fears? Which beliefs have I swallowed without question?" The moment such inquiry begins, chains loosen. Domination need not come by force; it comes equally through temptation and illusion.

Yes, protests and uprisings have their place. But they acquire meaning only when the individual is inwardly free. When the mind is clear, even the smallest act of defiance carries permanence.

Towards Complete Revolution

Half-finished revolutions are always crushed, and worse, they are often mistaken for success. The first revolution must be of the mind. Without it, outer revolts flare, win minor concessions, but leave the deeper bondage intact.

The Nepali youth's courage is unquestionable. The demand now is that their sacrifice should not end in repetition. The real honour to their lives lies not in hashtags or fleeting slogans, but in a revolution that strikes at the root of slavery. Every genuine revolution begins with the recognition of one's own mind. Only then can a person step into the streets as a free being, capable not just of changing governments but of transforming society itself. For freedom to last, the fire must first burn within; otherwise, every outer revolt, however grand, fades like slogans in the wind.

The urgent case for family planning and abortion awareness in tribal Rajasthan



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

The community health centre in Jhadol, Rajasthan, was recently in the news for a startling reason. It was here that Rekha Galbelia, a 55-year-old tribal woman, gave birth to her 17th child. Not only were the doctors taken aback by Galbelia's multiple pregnancies and deliveries, it led the health department to flag high fertility rates among residents of tribal villages in southern Rajasthan as the primary challenge in population stabilisation. They also pointed out that multiple pregnancies among tribal women of the region were increasing maternal and neonatal health risks.

Luckily for Galbelia, she overcame the risks associated with pregnancy at a late age. But five of the 17 children she gave birth to over the years were not so fortunate, dying shortly after their birth. At 28.8 deaths per 1,000 live births, neonatal mortality, or the proportion of children dying in their first month after birth, is higher among the tribal population than the national average of 24.9. Poor or no access to healthcare and skilled health professionals, a lack of sexual and reproductive health information, and poverty are the leading causes of mortality.

Did Galbelia or her husband Kanvara, who has taken a loan to feed his large family, have access to family planning services? Was Galbelia aware of safe abortion services she could have accessed if the pregnancy was unintended or unwanted? Did she go through the high-risk pregnancy because the couple did not have the resources to fund the costs of the procedure? Or was it also because of the stigma associated with abortion?

Studies have shown that when women are able to make an informed choice, there is a dip in maternal and neonatal health risks and mortality. This is where the media can play a crucial role. Not only can it help in busting misconceptions and stigma related to abortion, it can disseminate news that can help women make an informed choice. Importantly, it can highlight how such services can be life-saving for women. It was the media coverage of Savita Halappanavar, who died in 2012 after she was denied an abortion in Ireland despite pregnancy difficulties, that led to a public demand for a referendum on Ireland's restrictive abortion laws. This collective action helped to reform the laws and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).



Knowledge is power, and reporting on innovative campaigns raising SRHR awareness can challenge stigmatisation and normalise abortion as an integral part of reproductive rights and choice. The media can help to connect many dots by sharing good practices around the world.

Just as women and health activists in India can learn from successful advocacy and litigation strategies by PROMSEX, an NGO in Peru, to tackle abortion misconceptions, or from Colombian NGO Profamilia, on how they worked with both medical and administrative staff to address abortion stigma, activists in other countries can take inspiration from how Indian NGO Hidden Pockets Collective's understanding of local social media behaviours and music preferences resulted in the use of Bollywood-style music videos, which helped to raise awareness of the right to sexual and reproductive health services, including respectful, affordable and safe abortion. Similarly, Asia Safe Abortion Partnership in India has used an animated short film on social media channels to put a face to the sensitive issue.

The purpose of using animation was to help reduce the stigma against abortion, pregnancy and sex, and share anecdotal evidence to bust myths.

Cross-country learnings can be especially useful in the present environment where pronatalism is on the rise. Demands for women to have more children are being made not just in Europe, which is seeing declining popula-

tions, but also in India, the most populated country in the world. In this scenario, there is greater pressure on women who may not want children. Further, reduced SRHR funding and the overturning of the Roe vs Wade judgment by the US Supreme Court in 2022, restricting access to safe and legal abortion, have had domino effects all over the world. Even in India, where abortion is legal, the cacophony against abortion has grown bolder and louder. Denial of such services is leading women to resort to herbal concoctions and painful physical methods like inserting sticks in the uterus to terminate the pregnancy. Such methods are not only unsafe and ineffective but fatal at times, with women being admitted for severe internal injuries and sepsis.

Almost 67 per cent of abortions in India are unsafe, underlining why sustained media engagement on gender equality and the human right to health is imperative. In this context, the SHE (Sexual Health with Equity and Rights) media initiative launched in September last year has been doing stellar work in bringing together civil society practitioners, activists and journalists to work together to disseminate informed and accurate reports on sexual and reproductive health rights.



HEMANT SONI

The telecommunications industry stands at a pivotal moment. Revenue pressures, intensifying competition, and evolving customer expectations have exposed critical inefficiencies in traditional order-to-cash processes. What once functioned adequately in simpler market conditions now represents a significant barrier to growth and customer satisfaction.

Traditional telecom order-to-cash cycles typically span 30-45 days from initial customer enquiry to revenue recognition. This lengthy process involves multiple hand-offs between sales, provisioning, billing, and customer service teams. Each transition point creates opportunities for delays, errors, and customer frustration. More troubling, these manual processes obscure real-time visibility into pipeline health and revenue forecasting accuracy.

Consider a typical enterprise customer seeking new connectivity services. The sales representative captures requirements through multiple discovery calls, manually prepares quotes using spreadsheets, and submits orders through legacy systems that require IT validation. Service provisioning teams then interpret these requirements, often discovering missing information that triggers additional customer contact. Meanwhile, billing systems await manual configuration, and customer onboarding remains fragmented across departments. This fragmented approach creates several critical vulnerabilities. Customer experience suffers when expectations are not aligned across touchpoints.

AI-powered automation is fundamentally restructuring these processes by introducing intelligent decision-making at each stage of the revenue cycle. Modern telecom operators are implementing machine learning algorithms that analyse customer requirements, predict optimal service configurations, and automatically trigger appropriate provisioning workflows.

Predictive analytics now enable sales teams to identify high-propensity customers before they enter formal evaluation processes. Natural language processing analyses customer communications to extract technical requirements automatically, reducing discovery cycle time from weeks to days. Dynamic pricing algorithms consider competitive positioning, customer history, and market conditions to optimise proposal profitability in real time. When a customer accepts a proposal, automated workflows simultaneously initiate service provisioning, configure billing

parameters, update inventory systems, and schedule installation activities. This parallel processing approach reduces order-to-cash cycle time by 60-70 per cent while improving accuracy. Forward-thinking telecommunications providers demonstrate measurable improvements following AI implementation. Regional carriers report significant reductions in sales cycle time while achieving substantial improvements in quote accuracy. The financial impact extends beyond efficiency gains. Automated revenue recognition eliminates month-end delays that traditionally obscured financial performance. Predictive analytics identify up-selling opportunities earlier in customer relationships, substantially increasing average revenue per user. Most importantly, improved customer experience drives loyalty in an industry where switching costs continue declining.

Successful transformation requires careful attention to organisational readiness alongside technological capabilities. Cross-functional collaboration becomes essential when traditional departmental boundaries dissolve. Employee training programmes must address both technical skills and process changes. Change management initiatives should emphasise customer-centric outcomes rather than efficiency alone. Data quality emerges as a critical success factor. Organisations must invest in data governance frameworks that ensure accuracy across multiple source systems. Privacy protection remains paramount as customer information flows through automated processes.

The evolution towards fully automated order-to-cash processes continues to accelerate. Emerging technologies like conversational AI will enable customers to configure complex services through natural language interactions. Blockchain-based smart contracts may automate billing and payment processes entirely. However, the most successful implementations will balance automation with human expertise. AI excels at processing standard transactions and identifying patterns, but complex enterprise relationships still require human judgement and creativity. The future belongs to organisations that thoughtfully integrate artificial intelligence capabilities while preserving the consultative relationships that drive customer loyalty. The transformation of telecom order-to-cash processes represents more than operational improvement; it is a fundamental shift towards customer-centric business models that respond to market opportunities in real time. Organisations that embrace this evolution will discover competitive advantages that extend far beyond revenue cycle efficiency.

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DECCAN Chronicle

13 SEPTEMBER 2025

Will benefit of GST rate cuts reach all citizens?

The revised Goods and Services Tax (GST) slabs, which will come into effect from September 22, are being sold as a festive gift for households. The revised tax slabs will bring down the prices of nearly 400 items by up to 10 per cent. Many of the goods that will have lower tax incidence are everyday necessities and consumer durables. On paper, this should cheer people up during the upcoming festive season. But the real test lies not in policy but in practice — whether these benefits will reach citizens or quietly fatten corporate margins.

The government has rationalised GST slabs and income tax rates in an attempt to boost domestic consumption, which has been sagging in some product categories, especially those aimed at people belonging to the lower middle classes. The need to revive domestic consumption has assumed urgency because of the uncertain global economic outlook and the protectionist measures adopted by US President Donald Trump who raised tariffs on Indian exports by 50 per cent.

Companies are legally bound to pass on the benefit of lower rates to buyers. Yet, history shows that many find ways to dodge this obligation. Traders often claim higher operational costs to justify keeping prices unchanged. Others exploit the inventory loophole — selling stock purchased under old slabs at outdated rates, effectively charging consumers yesterday's tax. Some companies may raise base prices while cutting tax incidence, creating the illusion of compliance. For the average consumer, this trick is impossible to detect.

On its part, the Narendra Modi government has categorically conveyed to companies that the tax benefit must be passed on to consumers, as the goal of GST rationalisation was to ease the lives of ordinary citizens. It has also threatened penal action against those who fail to comply. However, the danger lies in implementation. The country has several thousand companies selling these products, and monitoring each of them is nearly impossible because of the lack of extensive enforcement mechanisms.

The government's vigilance must, therefore, be unrelenting. For an interim period of four months, it should make companies disclose pre- and post-GST prices and introduce consumer hotlines. Digital monitoring of billing, real-time reporting, and public awareness campaigns about rate changes should all be deployed aggressively. Consumer forums too must play the role of watchdogs to check profiteering.

Companies, meanwhile, have some genuine concerns over accumulated input tax credits. Whenever rates fall, companies — especially exporters or those facing inverted duty structures — end up with tax credits they cannot immediately use. Refunds are allowed but often delayed, giving firms an excuse to avoid lowering prices. The government, therefore, needs to address this issue immediately, as fast-tracking refunds is crucial to prevent manufacturers' working capital from getting stuck in bureaucratic rigmarole.

The stakes are high. At a time when household budgets are stretched, every rupee saved matters. If GST reforms are reduced to mere accounting games, public trust in the system will erode further. On the other hand, too much bureaucratic control will hurt the ease of doing business, which must also be avoided. A balanced approach, therefore, may be the key.

US gun violence turns political

A wave of political violence in the United States recently claimed a prominent victim in Charlie Kirk who founded a youth movement that played a role in swaying young voters to the Conservative right in the last election.

The chilling assassination, with a single gunshot from 185 metres into the neck of the speaker at a university campus, suggests a high level of marksmanship. As US President Donald Trump, who survived a similar attempt on his life by millimetres when he was on the campaign trail, and his deputy J.D. Vance grieve over the loss of a favoured acolyte, even as the FBI hunt for the killer may have succeeded.

The assassination says a lot about an unending cycle of violence in the US where the Second Amendment is sacred to gun owners. But it is the First Amendment, which enshrines the right to free speech, that is under attack in this very political killing. That this is happening across ideology, with members of the right, moderates and the left targeted in the last couple of years, is illustrative of a far deeper malaise in which there is growing intolerance in the political culture to different views from their own.

Not everyone may have agreed with all that Kirk stood up and argued for but, in a democracy, he had a right to say what he believed in without fearing for his life or personal safety. This killing is to be seen as a dangerous trend in which polarisation is increasingly leading to attacks on political opponents. There is a loss of humanity in the way in which such actions are leading to a diminishing of empathy in which politicians are becoming easy prey.

It is also a reflection of how society may be evolving that some opponents of Kirk's political philosophy should be suffused with schadenfreude at his demise. Clearly, such actions and reactions over targeted killings will lead to a demeaning of politics as much as it injures the right to free speech and expression.

It was Voltaire who wrote — "I wholly disapprove of what you say and will defend to the death your right to say it." Sadly, there are too few who subscribe to that line of thinking in today's conflicted world, more so in politics that is getting to be too mean for anyone's liking. And democracy stands weakened with every such act.

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Can Delhi, Beijing avoid the mistakes of the past?



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray
Reflections

An old story with which many readers must be familiar has it that at the valedictory dinner in London following an international conference, an Indian delegate turned to a Chinese sitting silently next to him and, pointing to the soup, asked somewhat condescendingly: "Likee soupe?" The Chinese merely smiled and nodded, thereby confirming the Indian's opinion of his social and linguistic inadequacy.

A little later, it was "Likee fishee?" and then, "Likee meatee?" Finally, "Likee fruittee?" The Chinese response was always an affable nod.

At the end of the dinner the conference chairman introduced the evening's guest speaker — and the Indian saw to his amazement the same Chinese gentleman invited up to the podium, from where he delivered a penetrating and witty discourse in impeccable Oxbridge English. Speech over, the speaker turned to the Indian with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and asked amidst the deafening applause: "Likee speechee?"

That tale seems apposite as members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a strategic forum of four democracies — India, Australia, Japan and the United States — prepare to meet after the curtain-raiser of a three-day high-powered defence conference aimed at promoting a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region through cooperation on maritime security, economic cooperation, and critical minerals. No doubt apocryphal, that tale encapsulating a highly simplified version of race attitudes and instant responses is relevant now as India and China seek a new dialect to resume their interrupted dialogue in a world in which Donald Trump's punitive tariffs and Xi Jinping's Global Governance Initiative have made the discourse of diplomacy almost

technical in its complexity.

One possible reason why the "Likee speechee?" story has not aged with repeated telling is that an element of verisimilitude still clings to the attitude it apparently mocks. Perhaps some Indian diplomats do still take the unknown Chinese gentleman's innocence for granted. After all, the late Zhou Enlai, for instance, thought India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the most arrogant national leaders he had ever met.

Arrogance often mingles with ignorance in society's lower reaches to create stereotype images. An English newsreader at Doordarshan would not otherwise have been so embarrassed when China's President, Xi Jinping, arrived in New Delhi for highly-publicised talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi many years ago. The Doordarshan announcer thought that the visitor's family name, Xi, stood for the Roman numeral XI, and read it out as "Eleven Jinping". Prasar Bhatti's then CEO Jawhar Sircar was quick to sack the errant broadcaster, but given Chinese sensitivity, the damage may have been done.

Such blunders can't be allowed to hold the future to ransom as India and China set out to rediscover each other after a period of coolness interspersed with violence. It was a mystery for the redoubtable Henry Kissinger, the German-born nuclear expert who dominated American politics for several decades, how India could be best friends with the relatively nearby Soviet Union while treating the distant United States as a potential adversary. Foreign policy must be forged using whatever assets are available, and India has undoubtedly noted the Chinese ambassador's recent robust defence of "the multilateral trading system" as countering Mr Trump's reported comment, "Looks like we've lost India and Russia".

Innovative engineering might still permit India to exploit the price differential of Russian oil to counter Mr Trump's punitive tariffs. The original Concert of Europe was a diplomatic system that was established by the victorious powers after the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to maintain a balance of power, preserve peace, and prevent any single nation from dominating Europe again. It involved regular consultations and congresses among the major governments — initially Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia, later joined by France — to resolve disputes through diplomacy and maintain the political status quo. While successful in preventing major conflicts for much of the 19th century, the system faced challenges from nationalism and shifting power dynamics, ultimately collapsing when the Sarajevo assassination plunged Europe into the horrors of the First World War.

Himself primarily a 19th century man deeply immersed in the European history of the period, Jawaharlal Nehru, whose signature is still discernible in many aspects of India's foreign policy, recognised that the core principle was to maintain a stable distribution of power among contending states to prevent any one of them from becoming too powerful and threatening the peace. Regular meetings and consultations were also essential.

It failed in Asia for a number of reasons, chief among which Nehru would have blamed an imbalance that owed much to external interference, exacerbated by the increasing competition among contemporary governments for raw materials, trade monopolies, preferential pacts and, after colonial dispensations ended, a whole gamut of commercial privileges clubbed together

The 10-member SCO's wholehearted condemnation of terrorism, including the Pahalgam attack, and Mr Putin's acceptance of Mr Modi's invitation to visit New Delhi in December, suggest a new dawn in multilateral diplomacy

as "neo-colonial". If so, nothing could be more obviously "neo-colonial" than China's \$120.46 billion worth of exports to India during 2024, especially when compared to imports worth a mere \$14.25 billion, representing about 3.85 per cent of India's total merchandise sold abroad. This alone may not have rankled so much if it had not been for a host of perceived grievances compounded by border and territorial clashes. To make matters worse, this is presented as a part of a bigger picture depicting China as protector and benefactor of India's local arch-rival, Pakistan, whose parity pretensions are sustained by Chinese arms, intelligence, technological skills and strategic guidance.

The scenario may be changing. The 10-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's wholehearted condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including the April 22 Pahalgam attack, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's acceptance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to visit New Delhi in December, might suggest a new dawn in multilateral diplomacy. While important as an end in itself, the SCO trip was significant because coming after a gap of seven years, it must have conveyed an additional sense of purpose if not mission and an opportunity to build for future growth and prosperity.

As that edifice rises from the flooded Gurgaon plain, India cannot afford to forget two things. First, foreign policy, like charity, begins at home. Second, diplomacy is making the best of advantages already possessed. The pressure tactics of Donald Trump's tariffs must be countered through adjustments in India's own trading pattern. As diplomacy is diversified and India reaches out to new beginnings, observers might miss the exhilaration of the quest for new targets that marked foreign policy in the post-Independence era. But with seasoned practitioners holding the cards, there is less likelihood of the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* mantra of those early years yielding so quickly to the bye-bye caricature of 1962.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS INDIA IS RIGHT

That India has asked its nationals to not to accept offers from the Russian Army to fight against Ukraine is commendable. There is no gainsaying that India has been maintaining exemplary relations with Russia for decades. But at the same time, it knows where to draw the line to ensure safety and unity of the nation. It has rightly communicated to Russia about the matter too. One hopes that Russia accepts India's diplomatic steps.

S.Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

TROUBLESOME TRUMP

Donald Trump has expressed his eagerness to speak with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the coming weeks, conveying the hope that a solution to trade barriers can be reached soon. However, in the same breath, he has urged the European Union to impose a 100% tariff on India for continuing oil imports from Russia. Trump's stance appears enigmatic, as always, but one can only hope that wiser counsel will soon dawn on DON.

S. Vaithianathan
Madurai

BRUTAL KILLING

The fatal shooting of prominent conservative activist Charlie Kirk and close ally of president Doland Trump has brought renewed attention to the climate of political violence in America. The tragic assassination has shaken the American nation and highlights some horrible phenomena manifesting in the political landscape. Kirk's death reflects a sizable increase in threats against officeholders and politicians in the US. His assassination was one of an escalating number of attacks on political figures - from the assassination of a Democratic state lawmaker and her husband in Minnesota in June this year to last summer's shooting at Trump, that have roiled America.

Md Shafiqullah
Patna

Mail your letters to
chennai@deccanmail.com

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"Some verses are 'about' and some are just 'for' And some could be read as either/or No flattery intended, it's all recollection Versified always in deepest affection. Poets needn't ever apologise for their verse Versifiers, lesser beings, suffer the curse Of forever writing doggerel and being criticised For writing the truth - as though they had lied..." — From Dil Deykey Dildo, by Bachchoo

LONDON SE

To:
No. 1 Observatory Circle
Washington DC
Dear Usha Vance:

You may never see this, though it's possible that the CIA monitors every mention of you in the international press. Even so, I feel inclined to write it on the off chance.

I've never in my short and happy life ventured to address politicians who share my Indian origin... No open letters to Rishi Sunak, Priti Patel or Suella Braverman, who are all a disgrace to the Indian race. Their opinions were not going to be affected by anything I say — they are the other side of the pale. Reading about your origins, education and past political allegiances, I feel you may be worth addressing (Or exposing? Read on!).

Now, though I am not, and never want to be, thought of as a conspiracy theorist, some notions

have occurred to me. To put it briefly, JD, inspired by your learned self (Yale, law schools, Cambridge???) contrived a liberal plot to gain power when it became apparent that the MAGA maniacs would win, but their ageing, feeble, convicted criminal, several-times-bankrupt whore-monger, and possibly paedophile mate of Jeffrey Epstein would soon be on the slippery slope to dismissal, if not hell.

Your husband JD was never a MAGA maniac. In fact, he is reputed to have opposed Donald Trump's tendencies and has even called him an idiot and "America's Hitler". Then, my conspiracy theory goes, he switched allegiance to Trump in order to gain the vice-presidential position. That's politics! It worked.

Philosophers have always said that these instrumental decisions are taken by men when they are pushed by their dear women. True in this instance? So, now you are Second Lady of the US and since Donald Ducky is on the skids with nonsensical, senile pronouncements, disastrous failures on economic, diplomatic and political fronts and the looming Epstein revelations, you may soon be First Lady.

Your JD will be President. I'd bet on it. Consequently, you'll be the rational power behind that universal throne, and that's my reason for writing this open letter.

In your joint presidency with JD, you must make America Decent and Triumphant Again (MADATA — unfortunate rhyme with Mad Hatter, but so what?)

In other words, pull back from every bit of anti-democratic, anti-constitutional, anti-global economic policy, anti-humanitarian and racist moves, initiated by the lawless orange booby.

Yes, today's Republican Party, constructed through his gerrymandering, appointment of *chamchas*, dismissal of critics from positions of influence, may not like it. But then you and JD can go back to the other party you were once proudly part of — unlikely? OK. So, more feasibly, JD could sculpt a new progressive Republicanism devoid of MAGA mania and devoted to MADATA. You are certainly aware that as a highly qualified lawyer it is your duty to serve the processes of law and order and to respect the Constitution. Strumpet is not doing either, and your reign must reestablish both.

I'm acutely aware that there are veins of commentary which say that JD would be a more disastrous President than the Trump and some opinion says that's because he changes his mind, having been anti- and now subversively pro-Trumpery — and also having converted from atheism to Catholicism.

This Catholic allegiance puts him against the MAGA lunatic evangelical majority in the Republican Party. One cheer!

Second, the present Pope is an American socialist and, as a Catholic, JD may be influenced by him. Two cheers!

And following the doctrines of Jesus Christ can't be a bad thing ... though... well OK: the Crusades, the

Inquisition and increasing global warming by burning Joan of Arc and others at the stake... Etc?

Two and a quarter cheers?

And the whole point, the dear dumbos who predict that changing his mind makes him more like and worse than Trump, is that he's done the political flip to get to be President and save America from the Make-America-Gaga drift. (Don't worry, Usha, that's not giving the game away as MAGA looms only believe their own conspiracy theories.)

And lastly, as you probably guessed, I ventured to write this open letter as one exiled person of Indian origin to another. I have always believed that you can take a Hindu out of India, but you can't take the decent Hinduism out of the person. And this, kind of, goes for non-Hindu Indians also. You recently took a family holiday in the Cotswolds. You should consider visiting the land of your ancestors — Andhra Pradesh, with its beautiful temples and resorts.

And then Usha, there's history. Apart from all the epithets I have used for the Donald, your husband once compared him to Hitler and, of course, there was the 6th January attempt to overthrow a democratic election and then the pardoning of the criminals who did it. That's how Donald will be remembered. You will, of course, see to it that JD leaves a legacy up there with George, Benjamin, Abraham, Martin, Malcolm... Barack?... JD?

Best,
Farrukh Dhondy

RUPEE RISKS LIMITED, EASE FINANCE ACCESS TO UNSHACKLE EXPORTS

THE Indian rupee hit a historic low of 88.45 a dollar on Thursday amid mounting external pressures. While punitive US tariffs on Indian goods is denting investor confidence, making the rupee one of the most vulnerable Asian currencies, foreign investors are dumping domestic debt and equities to take refuge in the greenback. However, the rupee rebounded Friday even as the dollar firmed up on expectations of a Federal Reserve rate cut. Analysts see a limited downside for the rupee from its current levels because the recent slide was caused by tariff uncertainty, and not any structural weakness. The real effective exchange rate, or the weighted average rupee rate for a basket of major currencies, stood at 100.07 at the end of July—well below its long-term average of 103.2—confirming that it is not structurally overvalued.

Still, forex traders are piling dollars amid concerns over a potential export slowdown. An anticipated \$20-30 billion fall in exports may erase 40-50 basis points off India's real GDP growth. To cushion the impact, the government lowered GST rates to boost domestic consumption, while the RBI is actively selling dollars to prevent large currency swings. What's also helping is the rising optimism due to the revival of trade talks, besides the government's strong fiscal position. All these could limit the risks to the rupee. But the real issue lies with exports. India's goods trade deficit widened sharply to \$27.35 billion in July, as exports declined to \$37.24 billion, while imports rose to \$64.59 billion. The punitive tariffs further threaten to derail India's ambitious target of \$2-trillion exports by 2030.

While the Union Budget 2025 rightly prioritised exports as the 'fourth engine of growth', much depends on rolling out strategic reforms and providing institutional finance. Exporters have little access to the traditional sources of finance, besides facing regulatory bottlenecks. Sensing the need, the government last month took measures such as setting up export hubs, but it remains silent on offering short-term liquidity or compliance reliefs to exporters. What we also need is a comprehensive export growth strategy involving policy reforms to ease trade with emerging markets, besides measures like interest subsidies on bank loans, incentives to diversify exports, and boost shipments to alternative markets like Latin America and Africa.

FEASIBILITY TESTS FOR BENGALURU SATELLITES

IT'S clear from the massive infrastructure projects announced for Bengaluru that the Karnataka government is looking to transform its capital city. The plans include futuristic, high-tech, self-sustaining suburbs designed to take the pressure off Bengaluru. KWIN City, a knowledge, wellness and innovation hub planned on 5,800 acres between Dabaspet and Doddaballapur along the northwest corridor; aims to create 80,000 jobs. The initial phase will come up on 500 acres over 18 months, with connectivity promised to major highways and the airport. The cost? A whopping ₹40,000 crore. SWIFT City—standing for startups, workspaces, innovation, finance, and technology—is to come up on 1,000 acres in Sarjapur in the south as the third IT hub after Electronics City and ITPL. It will support infrastructure like co-working spaces, residences, schools and recreational areas, and reduce the influx of IT professionals in core Bengaluru.

Quantum City, a smaller project that got off the ground with 6 acres in Hessarghatta in the north and an investment of ₹1,000 crore, aims to boost research, startups, and industry collaborations in quantum technology. The plan is to develop a \$20-billion economy in the promising segment, with clusters for hardware production and R&D. The latest announcement is of a 9,000-acre AI City, claimed as the first-of-its-kind township based on a work-live-play model. It is to come up in Bidadi on the southwest border, with over 2,000 acres reserved for AI-based industries.

The ambitious plans to attract global investors and generate lakhs of jobs in the tech space are commendable, but whether it has the financial wherewithal to execute them is debatable. Development along the city's borders entails land acquisition on a massive scale. Already, farmers are wary about their livelihoods and displacement, and there is large-scale speculation that is creating a real estate bubble. While these announcements project an image of a tech metropolis driven by a futuristic vision, the stakeholders should first focus on whether they have the resources—natural and financial—to sustain such development. Water, for example, could pose a major problem. Bengaluru's rusty infrastructure is a tell-tale sign of what the future could hold. The government, already on a tight budget thanks to its guarantee schemes, should have a watertight plan in place before it stretches itself and the city so far.

QUICK TAKE

LESSON FROM BRAZIL

DEFYING Donald Trump's intense pressure campaign to let him go, the Brazilian Supreme Court has sentenced the former paratrooper-turned-president, Jair Bolsonaro, to more than 27 years in jail for plotting a coup. Bolsonaro, 70, and a few aides were convicted of trying violently to overthrow the elected government when he lost in 2022, a year after his ally Trump tried a similar putsch in the US. It shows that Brazil, which has survived 26 years of military dictatorship and 15 years of dictatorial democracy in its 202 years since independence, has an institutional memory long enough and a spine strong enough to resist such extra-constitutional pressures. Such a framework is the best bulwark against the turbulence of this Trumpian era.

I have dealt with trade matters for 20 out of the 41 years of my career in the civil service—as an actual trader in two state government trading enterprises, as chairman of a commodity board and in the commerce ministry—both in India and abroad. I have been ambassador of India to the World Trade Organization, the premier global institution for multilateral trade tasked with setting and enforcing trade rules.

I have negotiated with the US on multiple occasions. Never have I found them offensive in any manner. Even when the US Food and Drug Administration put Indian black pepper under 'automatic detention'—which meant that all consignments had to be inspected and approved by an American laboratory after the shipments reached the US, thus adding to costs and making us less competitive in comparison with other producing countries—our delegation was received with courtesy. They still retained a strong position on the quality of the pepper we exported, but listened to us with respect.

We took this as an opportunity to raise the quality of our product, both in farmyards and in processing units and storage godowns. When a US FDA representative visited us later, we showed him all that we had done to improve quality, and the stipulation of automatic detention at American ports was lifted. The great lessons that this episode taught me were the ability of our exporters and farmers to adapt quickly, and the manner in which the US FDA responded when they were convinced we were serious in setting our own house in order.

A few years later, as India's ambassador to the WTO, I often clashed with the US representative while negotiating several components of the Doha work programme. What impressed me most about the American negotiators was their unfailing courtesy, even while they were adamantly and patiently reiterating their position endlessly. I was also impressed by the immense energy they showed in the negotiations, hour after hour, day after day, the information they possessed and their enormous negotiating skills. Indeed, the US ambassador in Geneva was one of my close friends even while we were constrained to cross swords repeatedly. At this time, too, there was a Republican President, George W Bush Jr.

It is, therefore, with consternation that I watch the present-day US negotia-

Despite the unprecedented use of coarse language on the US side, India has remained restrained. Now, the Americans need to blink. And India needs a stronger negotiating machinery

TURNING TRUMP'S TAUNTS INTO OPPORTUNITY

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*



SOURAV ROY

tors insulting India and our political leadership without remorse. After many years of dealing with India, the US knows that we have specific red lines that are impossible for us to cross. They know that we have vast hordes of indigent farmers, eking out a precarious existence, depending largely on the rain gods for their crop each year.

Where we could make compromises, we have been accommodating. Almonds, pistachios, soya beans and soya bean oil flow into the country from the US with low tariffs. After years and years of negotiation with India, they must be very clear that we cannot allow imports of rice, wheat, and other crops on which our poor farmers subsist. It is not that we are stubborn in our negotiation. No

political leadership in India can abandon our farmers to please the US or, for that matter, any other country.

It is, therefore, highly disconcerting for me to watch the deterioration in the standards always maintained in negotiations by the US. It can always be said that Trump is quixotic and can leap from one extreme to the other. We can also put up with crass remarks like Trump's statement that the countries of the world are lining up to "lick his a**". Indeed, many nations joyfully did exactly that after he made this asinine statement.

It is not only Trump who has insulted India. Trump coats all his coarse statements about India with fulsome praise for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Meanwhile, White House trade

KNOW YOUR CANDIDATE DIGITALLY

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

another KYC—know your candidate.

We have the DigiLocker model cutting across educational institutions and domains to stop the exploitation of students and job-seekers and reduce bureaucratic red tape, but progress has been slow. It needs to be adopted the way we have done with land records.

As India marks 50 years of the cult classic *Sholay*, I recall visiting Ramanagara, the film's hilly shooting site that is also a pioneering area for digitisation of farm records. I was taken on the pleasant drive outside Bengaluru by Rajeev Chawla, the IAS officer who led Karnataka's Bhoomi project, which became a case study on e-governance at Princeton University.



FILIC/CREATIVE COMMONS

It's baffling that Indian students require so many printed certificates in this digital age. The use of DigiLocker and blockchain in storing and accessing records securely should be expanded. An easier KYC is the need of the hour

Chawla showed me how digitisation, once done, meant that a farmer could get a bank loan against a printout directly verifiable with government records, and bypass corrupt local record-keepers (patwaris) who could harass them. Last year, the Union government reported that 95 percent of India's rural land records have now been digitised—after early struggles by the likes of Chawla, who had to train people, forge technology partnerships and build processes that made it all possible.

In certification, DigiLocker holds

promise as a secure, cloud-based platform allowing citizens to store, access, and share digital copies of their official documents including Aadhaar, driving licences, and educational certificates. This allows real-time document verification, secure sharing with unique document codes, and user-controlled access. The verification works through digitally signed and secure QR codes on documents so that details are authenticated against the signature and data stored by the issuer in the DigiLocker system.

People like the harassed nursing student in Andhra Pradesh should embrace this, and the government needs to loudly advertise it.

Under India's IT laws, universities must accept documents from DigiLocker National Academic Depository (NAD) as legally valid alternatives to physical copies. However, they are not mandatorily bound to join the system—and that is a loophole impeding faster adoption.

The government has been setting deadlines for institutions to join the NAD, and the University Grants Commission has also been stepping up pressure on affiliated bodies. The DigiLocker scheme was launched in 2015 and the NAD in 2017. Evidently, the pace of progress has not matched that of Aadhaar usage. Both state-level universities and private institutions need to be pressured to embrace the NAD.

The arrival of blockchain as a technology to store records in a foolproof way strengthens the system. The NAD already uses blockchain for storing degrees from many accredited institutions. Blockchain stores certificates with unique digital footprints in an immutable, decentralised ledger to prevent forgery at any level.

What we could do is not only legally and administratively push private institutions to make the DigiLocker system as ubiquitous as Aadhaar, and add digitally-signed contracts to it. This might save people from falling prey to dubious private contracts that often fail to withstand legal scrutiny.

(Views are personal)
(On X @madversity)

advisor Peter Navarro has called India "the Kremlin's laundromat" and the Russia-Ukraine conflict "Modi's war". Howard Lutnick, the US commerce secretary, has said, "In a month or two months, I think India is going to be at the table and they're going to say they're sorry and they're going to try to make a deal with Donald Trump." To ingratiate with Trump, his ministers and advisers are falling over one another to belittle India.

India has responded with impressive maturity and sobriety. Despite the imposition of an extra 25 percent tariff on India for buying crude oil from Russia, our response has been measured and calculated. We have never hit out at the US the way Brazil's President Lula da Silva did. The tariffs on Brazil, levied because Trump's friend, former President Jair Bolsonaro, was in legal trouble in a court of law, led Lula to say that he would not take orders from a "gringo". He went on to say, "In politics between two states, the will of neither should prevail. We always need to find the middle ground. This is achieved not by puffing out your chest and shouting about things you cannot deliver, nor by bowing your head and simply saying 'amen' to whatever the United States wants." He also announced a BRL 20-billion bailout package for affected exporters.

On the other hand, Modi and his ministers have been remarkably restrained, and Trump has been forced to proclaim his love for Modi every other day. India has been quietly strengthening ties with Russia and China at the SCO in Tianjin; exploring new markets; making a belated bid to leverage our real trump card, our immense domestic market through measures such as rationalising GST rates, expanding middle class spending capacity through more liberal income tax slabs and by lowering bank rates; and endeavouring to move away from dollar-denominated foreign trade through bank-led special Vostro arrangements and by working with BRICS at its forthcoming meeting.

The clock is ticking for the US. The next move has to be made by them. At the same time, the Trump tariffs are a wake-up call for India to diversify trade, work with others to strengthen multilateral institutions, separate trade from international politics and overhaul our negotiating machinery to make it as potent and as informed as the office of the US trade representative. Trump's taunt can turn into a massive opportunity for us.

(Views are personal)
(kmchandrasedkhar@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Youth fury

Ref: *India must support Nepal with empathy, embrace its youth* (Sep 12). India must be vigilant of events happening in Nepal. Insecurity due to a fragile democracy is a definite concern at the border. A youth uprising is an indication that the new generation demands freedom in all walks of life with little to no tolerance to corruption. **Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha**

AAP's disruption

Ref: *No law can be above a fair due process* (Sep 12). I appreciate your editorial on the arrest of the Aam Aadmi Party MLA. It seems that the central government considers AAP a threat in J&K's regional politics, and hence this act undermining the spirit of democracy. **VO Harindranathan, email**

Gun violence

Ref: *Dial it down* (Sep 12). Charlie Kirk's murder could be the latest of the mindless killings, but certainly not the last. Blame it on the liberal gun laws coupled with violent teenage thoughts. We need to build a firm foundation from childhood, differentiating between good and bad. **Elizabeth Koshy, Pathanamthitta**

Driving test

Ref: *Monitor road safety, set maintenance rules* (Sep 12). With registration of new vehicles soaring every year, there also lies a responsibility on riders and drivers to drive in a responsible manner. The government has to bring in a proper mechanism for issuing driving licences with stringent and efficient driving tests. **Aditya Mandalai, Hyderabad**

Global correspondence

Ref: *Open societies that fostered golden ages* (Sep 12). A borderless with shared prosperity, wisdom, culture and resources would add immense value to a kaleidoscopic constitution of this universe in no small measures. The author's advocacy of transcendental transformation over parochial preponderance in this era of wars between nations is too sensible to ignore. **Venkat Desikan, Chennai**

Undermined commitments

Ref: *Align GST rates with health goals* (Sep 12). The author's argument holds water. The proposed tax cuts undermine India's commitment to tobacco control and avoidance of sugary beverages. While bids, which are priced lower, affect lungs and cause cancer, the sugar content in juices will lead to a higher incidence of diabetes. **D Sethuraman, Chennai**

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